

The Rugby League
Coach Education Programme

The Think Coaching E-Link



RFL

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RUGBY LEAGUE. It's a whole different ballgame[®]

Introduction

This issue we have a very interesting and thought provoking article from Graeme Thompson the RFL Performance Director. In addition we have information on significant developments within Coaching that affects all coaches within the UK.

UK Action Plan For Coaching

Arising from the governments sporting agenda and associated wider issues, such as health and social inclusion, and not forgetting the successful 2012 Olympic bid came the need for the development and implementation of an action plan which will look to address all of the aforementioned issues surrounding coaching and the increasing significance it will play leading up to 2012 and beyond. The importance of a UK-wide sporting and coaching legacy can not be underestimated and to this end sports coach UK, the lead national agency for coaching, was tasked with the development of The UK Action Plan for Coaching.

The UK Action Plan for Coaching will address the structure, resources and resultant outcomes of the proposed coaching system along with agreeing optimal working arrangements within all key partner and third party organisations.

The vision the Action Plan will strive for is:

A cohesive, ethical and valued coaching system where: children, players and athletes are supported by appropriately skilled coaches at all stages of their development in sport and which is number one in the world by 2016, bench-marked against international best practice.

The National Governing Bodies of Sport have been key in developing the plan leading up to an extensive consultation process which culminated at the UK Coaching Summit held on 26 and 27. The second draft of The Plan has now been finalised on the basis of the mandate arising from the Summit and sets out the goals for the UK Coaching System. The Plan can now be viewed, along with full details of the process to date, on the sports coach UK website www.sportscoachuk.org and we invite your comments and feedback on the document to (<mailto:ukapc@sportscoachuk.org>) by 28 July 2006.

UKCC News

The **Level 1 and 2** qualifications have now gone for endorsement and we will be running pilots in September and October.

Expressions of Interest

We are looking for expressions of interest from anyone who holds a D32, D33 or D34 who would be interested in helping us in the verification process of delivering our new awards. If you are interested please contact Ray Unsworth on 01484 424335 or <mailto:coaching@rfl.uk.com>

Conditioning Conference

A two day conference is being held in Northampton on July 25th / 26th featuring world renowned conditioner Istvan Javorek, alongside Nigel Ashley Jones, Simon Worsnop and Peter Harding. For further details Contact Sarah Butterworth on 0208 831 6505

Coaching Experience: Intuition v Calculation

By Graeme Thompson RFL Performance Director

After recently reading Malcolm Gladwell's book, "Blink", I considered how some of his ideas can explain how coaching experience can help to improve decision making.

Gladwell proposes that snap judgments can be far more effective than a cautious decision. The prelude to the book considers that "by trusting your instincts, he reveals, you'll never think about thinking in the same way again"!

So does this mean that you can walk straight into coaching and make all your decisions on your first instinct? No need for qualifications, no need for prior experience or reflective practice! No, it certainly does not because to get to the level of being able to trust your instinct requires numerous years of dedicated experience.

Gladwell uses a series of case studies to demonstrate this point. The first one is how the John Paul Getty museum was fooled into buying a supposedly rare Greek kouros (sculpture) at £10 million pounds. They spent 12 months studying it including texture analysis to test the supposed age of the piece and receiving 'authentic' supporting documents. However a number of external experts, with many years experience, took a first look at the piece and concluded it was fake, because it "did not seem real" and were subsequently proved right.

Another example in the book is when four cops in America wrongly pursued and shot a man. The most critical errors they made was when they thought he was bringing a gun out when in fact it was his wallet and they failed to be able to see how frightened he was, which explained his seemingly rash response to their initial approach and subsequent pursuit of. Gladwell considers the relatively young age of the cops (below 30) to being a major contributing factor. Here is how Gladwell considers how an older cop's experience in a similar scenario is critical to a better response to such situations.

"How long was this encounter? Two seconds? One and a half seconds? But look at how the officer's experience and skill allowed him to stretch out that fraction of time, to slow the situation down, to keep gathering information until the last possible moment... and all the while, even as he tracks the progress of the gun, he is also watching the kid's face, to see whether he is dangerous or simply frightened. Is there a more beautiful example of a snap judgment? This is the gift of training and expertise – the ability to extract an enormous amount of meaningful information from the very thinnest slice of experience. To a novice, that incident would have gone by in a blur. But it wasn't a blur at all. Every movement – every blink – is composed of a series of discrete moving parts, and every one of those parts offers an opportunity for intervention, for reform, and for correction."

The element of perceived slowing of thought and subsequent actions is the same as how the very top players and athletes discuss their elite performance. This is the concept of being in "the zone". Can the same not apply to coaches, who are making evaluations and decisions constantly? Game day is a fast moving situation and although the view from the stand may all some more time leeway, decisions such as substitutions need making relatively quickly especially given say an injury to a player.

Gladwell's description of the experience cop includes a reference to thin slicing, which needs considering further.

The concept of thin slicing

Gladwell's definition of this phenomenon is

“the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behaviour based on very narrow slices of experience of it”

A research example that Gladwell highlights of thin slicing in action is a study of married couples by John Gottman. Gottman had videotaped over 3000 discussions between married couples and analysed with a coding system. Gottman taught himself and staff to read every emotional nuance in people's facial expressions and how to interpret seemingly ambiguous bits of dialogues. The coding system he developed resulted in fifteen minute conversation encapsulating 900 emotion codes per person, then developed into a complex equation for a predictive outcome on the success of the marriage.

Gottman found that he could predict with 95% accuracy whether a couple would still be married 15 years later. Furthermore if he watched 15 minutes and coded it, he was 90% accurate!

So Gottman had to put a huge amount of research based on observation, analysis and evaluation to develop this acute ability.

Player management at all levels but particular at the top of the game is a key element. Imagine how helpful the ability to analysis so well the team ability, like that of a marriage team, by close observation, would be. Some coaches and other support staff talk about (sometimes with the benefit of hindsight) about the mood in the dressing room and its relation to the subsequent field performance. The positive prediction of this correlation is the same ability as Gottman's. Not as consciously or systematically developed but the similar experience allows gut instinct based on relatively curtailed information (e.g. “I walked in the dressing room and the atmosphere was spot on”) to be developed over time.

Gladwell summarised this ability by considering

“I think that this is the way that our unconscious works. When we leap to a decision or have a hunch, our unconscious is doing what Gottman does. Its sifting through the situation in front of us, throwing out all that is irrelevant while we zero in on what really matters. And the truth is that our unconscious is really good at this, to the point where thin slicing often delivers a better answer than more deliberate and exhaustive ways of thinking”

So the better coaches can hone in on the specific information they need in the midst of a game. Think of all the possible statistical information available to coaches now. How much of it is potential “red herring” information and deflects attention away from the true contributing factors to the game at that point? Even further Daniel Anderson (St. Helens) recently suggested that forget stats, it's about the attitude of the players. Therefore Daniel's experience has been honed around, like Gottman's, on acute person observation

Gladwell considers thin slicing assisting the unconscious to be “dazzling”. The use of the word dazzling is pertinent as we are all impressed by the person who seems to know instantly why a game is going right or wrong, can call the final outcome with twenty minutes to go, spot the most talented player after five minutes or diagnose the tackle technique problem of a player instantly

So it may be dazzling but rapid cognition is also “most problematic... How is it possible to gather the necessary information for a sophisticated judgment in such a short time? The answer is that when our unconscious engages in thin-slicing, what we are doing is an automated, accelerated unconscious version of what Gottman does with his videotapes and equations. Can a marriage really be understood in one sitting? Yes it can and so lots of other seemingly complex situations.”

So to apply to Rugby League coaching, how much will Peter Sharp or Brian Noble have learnt about watching their new players train and play on their recent first occasions? Or even just meeting some of the players in person for the first time. What thin slicing ability do they have? Because there are many facets to coaching a team, how do they make their decisions of were to start with their respective particular teams to add value to them?

Perhaps the next time a club appoints an “experienced coach”, they should actually refer to his ability to thin slice!

Conclusion on Coaching Experience

In the midst of a game, gut instinct on substitutions or tactics are relied upon. There can be little time for calculated moves in an environment with so many variables present. Even in non time restricted actions such as signing of players, instinct is a considerable factor as well.

However there must be an element of being able to understand your gut instinct. Constant reliance on it without reflective practice can derive constant mistakes and a lack of progression

Some of Gladwell’s examples are far more serious scenarios e.g. the cop’s shooting of an innocent person. His research case studies develop deep into the unconscious of people.

However knowing how to build up your experience and challenging your own assumptions, conscious and if possible unconscious, can only help to improve your coaching. Thin slicing can be a coaching phenomenon but requires many years of experience no doubt including learning from mistakes, repetitive practice, qualifications courses that have invoked wider and latest thinking and

Istvan Balyi, the creator of Long Term Athlete Development, considers that it takes 10000 hours to master skills. Perhaps it takes just as long to be experienced enough to work at the levels proposed by Gladwell. Certainly the different “experts” in his studies had spent many years honing their instinct.

Gladwell comments “In *Blink* you’ll meet doctors and generals and coaches and furniture designers and musicians and actors and car salesmen and countless others, all of whom are very good at what they do and all of whom owe their success, at least in part, to the steps they have taken to shape and manage and educate their unconscious reactions. The power of knowing, in that first two seconds, is not a gift given magically to a fortunate few. It is an ability that we can all cultivate for ourselves.

So when an older coach tells you that “you need to serve your time”, then consider how you will do that and how and what you want to learn to become an “expert” with a correct decision making gut instinct.

References

Blink: The power of Thinking without Thinking, Malcolm Gladwell, Penguin Books 2006

The Rugby League Coaching Magazine website has a wide variety of products that are useful for coaches. They can be contact via this link <http://www.rlcm.com.au/home.htm>

Drop us a line at haydn.walker@rfl.uk.com

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