

The Rugby League
Coach Education Programme

The Think Coaching E-Link



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Introduction

In this issue we look back at the first Best of British Rugby League Coaching Conference and its keynote speaker Bill Sweetenham from British Swimming. Bill had a big impact on the day and in this article we revisit his presentation and outline his thoughts and philosophy on coaching talented teenage athletes.

Coach Development

2007 will see a number of regional coaching conferences along with a series of bridging evenings to help facilitate coaches moving forward to the new UKCC qualifications.

Later in the year there will also be two National League / Academy Coaching Seminars, the Provisional venues being Warrington and Hull



Maximising Talent At The Teenage Level

By Bill Sweetenham (National Performance Director of British Swimming)

Mt. Isa is an unlikely location to breed swimming coaches, but the mining town in central North Queensland can lay claim to producing one of the best, in Bill Sweetenham. In November 2005, Sweetenham presented his philosophy on 'Maximising Talent at the Teenage Level' to the 'Best of British' National Rugby League Coaching Conference in Bolton, and RLCM was there to capture it. Rugby League coaches can learn much from Sweetenham on how to bring out the best in a young athlete, and these methods are not foreign to League given Sweetenham has shared many experiences with Wayne Bennett and Don Furner over the years.

Now the Performance Director of British Swimming, Sweetenham is heading up the British assault on the 2008 Beijing Olympics. This appointment was preceded by a six-year stint as the Australian youth Swimming Coach overseeing the buildup to the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Given the success Australia experienced during those glorious two weeks in September, Sweetenham reinforced why he is a valuable coaching commodity.

Sweetenham reminds us that when a new coach arrives on the scene, invariably you will hear the term, 'I'll be innovative and creative'. Commencing his talk with a basic exercise, Sweetenham asked all present to stand. He then posed general activity questions, ranging from whether the coach drove the same way to work every day, ate at the same table every night, or always shaved with the same pattern. When any coach present could answer 'Yes', they sat down. Not surprisingly after five or six questions no coach remained standing, highlighting Sweetenham's point – how can coaches be innovative and creative at training when "their home life is as boring as hell"?

What does this have to do with coaching players, and in particular maximizing their talent? Sweetenham believes coaches have the sole purpose of preparing their athletes for competition. He defines competition as: "Maintaining speed, an economy of speed through the back end of the event by not compromising technical skills under the presence of fatigue and the pressure of the environment and the opposition athletes. At the same time knowing that everyone you respect is observing you in this difficult situation and in quite often the worst set of conditions, and as an athlete you must be able to win or perform at your absolute best and optimum level."

Coaches need to ask themselves – how can I give the athlete a chance to meet this expectation? Coaches therefore need to understand the psyche of the athlete, the value of preparation, skill development, and finally some blunt coaching realities.

"Do what you love, love what you do and always give more than expected." Sweetenham emphasizes this for both athletes and coaches.

Athlete Psyche:

No matter how qualified or experienced coaches are, the commitment level of their athletes limits them.

Even the most committed coach cannot achieve success without athletes of the same frame of mind. Understanding how far your athlete will go to win is the key to being able to set an athlete on the path to victory.

Sweetenham firmly believes that athletes read coaches better than coaches read athletes, and when every coach recognises this the sooner they can get on with the job. "Twenty or thirty athletes can read you individually, but as a coach you are trying to read twenty or thirty athletes." So to stay one step ahead of the athletes each coach needs to avoid becoming predictable and stale in their techniques.

"It is not what you do as a coach, it is how you do it, and how you have your athletes do it."

Working against the coach is the home life of today's young athlete. Sweetenham says that athletes control their parents, at times simply through their mood.

Therefore, coaches need to convey the opposite relationship if they are to instill the discipline Needed at training that is lacking on the home front. "Ten years ago parents reinforced at a greater level the discipline you were handing out as a coach. Now this is not the case. Most of the time lessons learned at training are foreign to the home environment, so as coaches we are working against the tide."

"Athletes today want minimum effort for maximum return." Sweetenham calls this the era of instant gratification. How does the coach get through this barrier and turn their athlete into a success?

Sweetenham says this is all up to the athlete.

"The most important aspect of the relationship is the commitment level of the athlete and not the coach." Without that commitment, the coach cannot make a difference to the athlete's performance.

A coach once had a group of athletes who refused to train, so the next day he gave them bacon and eggs for breakfast. He asked them to tell him what they saw, 'yellow, fatty, tasty, crisp, unhealthy etc' were the responses until the coach stepped forward and told them what he saw. 'I see involvement and I see commitment' the coach said. The athletes were puzzled, and so the coach explained himself. 'You see the chicken was involved and the pig was committed'. He then asked them which of the two his athletes identified with. If they were the chicken then he suggested they think about going elsewhere for coaching because he was only after pigs. The moral here is unless each athlete was willing to commit to the coach then Sweetenham sees little point in that athlete training at the highest level and they should go back to social level sport.

Sweetenham had a couple of rebellious athletes in Britain, but once they learnt it was clearly his way or the highway, results followed. His athletes have exhibited open-mindedness and ability to adopt his style and that has led to increased success. The key reason the British swim team went from zero medals in Sydney 2000 to eight medals at the 2003 World Championships, was not the presence of Sweetenham, but the commitment level of his athletes to his methods.

Without commitment, athletes cannot reach the standard required for winning.

Value of Preparation:

"Performance isn't talent related, performance is preparation related." The one underlying message In Sweetenham's presentation is, without thorough preparation no athlete can simply walk up and succeed. "Even untalented athletes can still be the best prepared." Every athlete should not only aim to be well prepared; they should aim to be the best-prepared athlete in the world.

Without a perfect preparation, even the most talented athletes fall short in competition.

Coaches must aim to train their athlete for performance under pressure and to achieve that in preparation. Sweetenham believes to perform under pressure an athlete must train above to compete below, and live below to compete high. Sounds simple but give Sweetenham five minutes and he will convince you it is the only way to coach. His Great Britain swim team has the motto: Superior in Preparation, Invincible in Attitude, Train Above, Live Below.

Given the strides made by the British since 2000, Sweetenham's style is clearly working wonders. Sweetenham's philosophy includes the 3-2-1 Policy.

It involves:

3 - Competing three times at the athlete's standard; emphasizing continued performance at that level. Coaches should have a high level of expectation, a low tolerance for errors and focus on pushing the athlete to do the task right.

2 – Competing at two levels below the athlete's standard; putting the athlete in an easily winnable situation. Coaches should tolerate nothing less than perfect performance, be critical of the performance not the athlete, and most importantly, this should teach the athlete to win.

1 – Competing a level above their standard; putting the athlete in a position where they cannot possibly win. Coaches should deliver high praise, offer the greatest support, lift the athlete to a higher performance, and teach them performance under pressure.

All three steps pay dividends, especially when pressure mounts in competition.

The training environment must always reflect competition environments. Training low means there is no chance to compete high. Promote confidence in athletes by training high. As Sweetenham says, "the lowest training denominator is your highest competition denominator", highlighting the importance of preparation producing perfect performance.

Train above your competition so that if you fail under pressure you drop down to the level of your competition and to win you are not expecting a miracle. During the back end of the event, your best performance reflects your lowest training performance. Top performance practiced at training allows it to be replicated on the day.

Sweetenham points to some startling statistics from Olympic competition when emphasizing the value of perfect preparation. Only ten per cent of all athletes who compete at the Olympic Games deliver their best performance. That is across all sports. The Olympics, is therefore, potentially the softest competition you will face because ninety per cent of competitors will not produce their best performance when it counts.

Preparation is directly linked to commitment from the athlete. As a coach you will get the absolute best performance if the athlete has given totally, held nothing back and left nothing to chance.

Skill Development:

"Always believe you are never the best, but that you can always be the best."

Sweetenham believes that reinforcing the basic skills set is more beneficial to the athlete than trying to develop a vast array of exceptional skills. "Teach the basics exceptionally well, in preference to exceptional skills basically well. Never put skill acquisition ahead of skill perfection. If you move on all the time you will end up with an athlete with a lot of poor skills instead of an athlete with a few great skills."

A coach should have ten (10) ways to teach one skill. They should only teach that skill ten times, not spend more than ten minutes on that skill and only teach it to ten athletes at a time. This is what Sweetenham calls the 10x10x10x10 Strategy.

The aim is to keep the skill acquisition fresh. Sweetenham says this is important because constant and lengthy skill teaching methods can bore the top athletes who figure it out quickly, and turn off those athletes who have failed to grasp the skill.

When conducting a drill, do not punish those athletes who prove unable to grasp the skill set by making them repeatedly work at it. Instead, go the extra mile with those athletes who pick it up quickly and stretch them further. Sweetenham's focus is on maximizing the talent level of the best athletes in this presentation; so do not lose sight of that. Delivering basic game plans not only brings the top athletes down, it frustrates the bottom athletes even more if they cannot grasp it.

Sweetenham says you can always add fitness and skill to an efficient athlete, but you cannot add efficiency to fitness and skill.

Skill development is therefore important, but application to learning those skills on the part of the athlete is even more so.

Coaching Realities:

Sweetenham has an extensive coaching resume and mountains of experience, yet there are certain home truths in coaching that must be recognised.

- You will be unappreciated by some athletes you coach. Focus instead on the positive appreciation from others and do not dwell on the negative. Every day there will be someone who does not say thank you for something you do for him or her.
- You do not have to have a champion athlete to be a champion coach.
- You must demand perfection from those you work with in order to succeed.
- Athletes who succeed want success more than their coach and those athletes they compete against.
- Remember, every athlete you coach is an experiment of ONE.
- Today's athlete: I want it, I want it now, I want it to be fun, and I want to be paid for it. As coaches, we cannot change that society.
- Compromise is the cancer of achievement.
- Experience can only be acquired you cannot buy it.

With a track record which includes being named three times 'Australian Coach of the Year', Bill Sweetenham is quite entitled to an opinion. That opinion when the subject is trying to maximise teenage talent is:

“It is not what you do as a coach. It is how you do it and how you have your athletes do it.”

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