

The Rugby League  
Coach Education Programme

# The Think Coaching E-Link



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### **Introduction**

This month's issue addresses the issues around coaching a representative side. Something many coaches aspire to do, but an environment that presents different challenges to week to week club coaching.

### **Department Move**

The Rugby League Coach Education Department has now moved its offices from West Yorkshire House in Huddersfield, to Red Hall Leeds. The full contact details are now as follows.

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# An Approach To Short Term Coaching

By Ray Unsworth

Once coaches reach a certain level or standing in Rugby League then it is quite likely they may be invited to work with a side preparing to play within a representative framework.

I might suggest that the opportunity to prepare this side in no way resembles the work you do, at Your club on a weekly, monthly or seasonal basis.

Preparation when working with a representative team can and does vary, for example you may have two or three 2-hour get togethers, a two-day camp or even meet today – play tomorrow.

Whatever the scenario, it is less than ideal. Even if you are afforded a number of sessions over a Period of time, that can also create its own set of problems for the bigger the gap between sessions, then the harder it is to attain a rhythm.

Although coaches in my experience always want more time with their players – the reality when working in rep football is that you've not got it! Therefore management of the time you have got is crucial, and from the outset you must have:

- **Clear Objectives**

Coaching in this environment as previously mentioned is not like the work done at your clubs. The planning you do at club level is of a lesser significance because the reality is that you have got everyday to improve.

Improvement in performance at club level can be gradual; it can be over a season or any given period of time. But as coach to a rep side, you need your sessions to have an immediate and:

- **Dramatic effect on performance**

And in order to achieve that, then you must be clear on the key techniques and tactics that you wish to employ, and I believe that the key to your success may well be in your ability to create an environment built on:

- **Communication with your players and mutual trust**

Every person involved in the team should know exactly what is happening, but more importantly be empowered and have a feeling of ownership for what is to become:

- **Their part in YOUR strategy**

And why, simple, because:

- **Players have to believe in what they are doing.**

And you as coach should also believe in the team. For you can do anything to shape and prepare your side, but you can't take the next step and cross the whitewash with them. In other words it's

back to **trust** again, you have got to rely on your players to deal with the job at hand.

So how is it possible as a coach, in a short space of time to create an effect?

And what is it when outlining your strategy that the players:

**Need to know?**

**Must know?** or indeed is

**Nice to know?**

In short term situations I think it is fair to say 'nice to know' is a non starter.

The information for preparation you need to impart most certainly falls into the need and must know – must do categories.

For example the last representative side I prepared involved just two training sessions, my **clear objectives** where that the first session would need to be classroom based, affording me the opportunity to meet the players, discuss football and explore a simple model within a theory session, where as coach I get the opportunity to outline ideas and from the discussions and agreed outcomes formulate areas for our game preparation.

In my experience, and in such situations, its not what you say, it's the way that you say it, and my approach to this session was to outline and broker exactly how I wanted them to play, but in doing so:

- **empower the players,**
- **give them ownership,**
- **involve them in making significant decisions** and
- **give them genuine input into the creation of any game plan we chose to adopt** (however simple that may be)

And again, in my experience short term strategies require simplicity.

Having done that, then my first objective had been met, the players had bought in and I was now More confident that our agreed principles, skills and tactics would be carried out.

When we take the field of play we would look like a football team, [how important is that to a coach] and hopefully have more than a strong chance of producing a positive result.

Theory session over – situational field practice to go, the only opportunity we have to fasten in agreed plans. It's now a matter of prioritising the areas, defensively, offensively and within our kicking strategy that need to be practised.

But overhaul its even more fundamental than that, it is really about adhering to certain principles And recognising that the modern game is all about applying pressure, and that this is achieved by adhering to what I call the five P's – six if you include the word **PRINCIPLES** because that's what they are.

- **POSSESSION** – you must control what you've got and turn it over only on your terms
- **POSITION** – is what you will achieve assuming you control the football or turn it over how and where you wanted.

- Effective use of possession and position will allow you the opportunity to apply **PRESSURE** – offensively or defensively.
- You now need **PATIENCE** because no one scores every time they get the football.
- A smart team will force the second best option – a back to back set - which means more **Possession** – more than likely in a good **Position** and an opportunity to apply more **Pressure** Which inevitably leads to **POINTS**.

Having said that, pressure is a two-edged blade as well as knowing how to apply it, you also need to know how to absorb and relieve it.

Moving on – having just explored a short term strategy, based on minimum preparation time for a one off fixture.

The next step in short term coaching is the opportunity to prepare a touring side, obviously there will be more time to prepare – let's say 6 months of periodical get together culminating in a four week tour. In order to adequately prepare this team to perform to the best of their ability certain areas of preparation must to be implemented.

They fall possibly into five categories, the Physical, Mental, Skilful, Tactical and player welfare issues. Which we can round up into the four distinct areas of:

- Tour management and logistics
- The coaching environment
- Sports science and
- Sports medicine.

And if you are fortunate and funding permits then the make up of your staff may include;

- Manager
- Head Coach
- Assistant Coaches (2)
- Doctor
- Physiotherapist
- Conditioner and
- Sports Psychologist

I might suggest that your role as Head Coach has now changed significantly, you will now need to manage and utilise the back up team, have a thorough knowledge of the roles and responsibilities of each member of staff and indeed an awareness of where some responsibilities are likely to cross over.

This team as well as the football team now become part of your everyday environment and you need to plan accordingly,

What is it that each member of your staff is responsible for?

- pre tour,
- on tour and
- post tour?

The lists of considerations are endless.

# Knitting A Junior Representative Team

**By Shane Flanagan**

Having played first grade with St George, Wests and Parramatta, Shane Flanagan comes from a more than respectable background in rugby league. Yet like many, Flanagan reckons his real education in football did not accelerate until after retirement. It was then, with an interest in coaching that he researched and finally grasped the finer points of the game. On one hand it was a case of too-little-to-late, yet on the other hand it provided him with the impetus to pass the knowledge on. Flanagan moved into junior representative coaching, eager to give young players the best foundation for their future career.

However, one facet of tutoring at the SG Ball, Harold Matthews, Jersey Flegg or Mixwell Colts level is that it is vastly removed from other styles of competition. Underneath these levels are regular underage competitions where not all coaches and players have long-term ambitions in the game. On another level, there are one-off junior representative fixtures, such as interstate or regional exhibitions. These may be played at a similar pace, but require different planning and emphasis. Then, if we are to take a step up, there are the senior grades, where training demands and structures are longer, more intensive and already established.

Flanagan, now Sydney Roosters Jersey Flegg Coach speaks about managing a junior representative program, played over a dozen or so weeks. His advice and insight is not only beneficial to those interested in the aforementioned styles of competition, but also to those in school and other specialised leagues.

It's like you start off with acres of free-roaming sheep and a vision in your head of the perfect woolen sweater. The materials are there, the inclination is there, but thinking about it is so much easier than turning it into reality. First you're going to need to select the sheep with the best fleece, protect them from pesky rustlers and herd them in a similar direction.

Better organisations may give you staff to help but then again, their taste may vary from yours. Once the sheep are corralled, you must get their full attention and develop an understanding in a short time if that fleece is to come off smoothly, without snicks and scars. Then when the wool's on the floor, there's a job to be done removing rough flaws and melding multiple fleeces into one seamless product. It's not just one sweater you're after either. You want a range, consistent, yet individually vibrant.

It may be a touch abstract, but coaching a junior representative team through a season goes a little something along these lines. Shane Flanagan believes that even prior to knowing who is among the flock, a coach should have some things already cemented in their mind. There are certain elements that every team needs, regardless of its components. Good managers and support staff are a start. A thorough understanding of the season schedule and highlighted, pivotal matches are also useful. Then there will be core skills that the coach plans to focus on, thereby maximising player development.

"When I was at Parramatta they were big on the catch, grip, carry and pass elements, so it's important for us to be across that," Flanagan says. "We did have individual skills (training), but we promoted block skills that were considered necessary and which perhaps the players haven't thought about before.

“Teaching a player how to catch at different angles is an example there. How do they catch at the six o’clock position as compared to other angles?”

Commonly, teams playing in junior representative seasons will spend more time training through the preseason than actually competing. In the Sydney-based leagues, squads may slog it out in the gym and on the training paddock for up to 18 weeks before their first game. Yet the season could be as short as 10 games.

Therefore, players are going to be spending a lot of time – not always enjoyable time either – in each other’s pockets. That’s before the team even gets to the season proper, where match pressures and injuries mount on continued conditioning. Developing and maintaining team harmony is certainly something that needs consideration and forward planning.

“I guess something that’s kind of unique to this level is that you get kids coming together who have played against each other in local junior teams for maybe nine or 10 years,” Flanagan says.

“They won’t always be dirty on each other, but there’s a fair chance they’ll at least be a bit wary. It’s important to break down those barriers. “At the very start it’s probably just as important to oversee players as it is to coach them. You want to arrive there before training and stay afterwards to see who is talking and what cliques are formed or forming.

“In a session you might even ask one of the assistants to run a drill so you can stand back and observe the interaction.”

There are myriad tricks of the trade when it comes to fostering a healthy level of morale. Changes of venues and social outings can be helpful, but a coach can also pique interest and chemistry in less obvious ways.

Training in smaller groups before Christmas is one such beneficial method. Looking forward to the season, it helps to target specific areas for specific players and increases communication and understanding in certain dynamics.

Furthermore, it keeps players from spending masses of time around each other where they are being physically and mentally punished. Eventually, players will eagerly anticipate the time when they come together as a team, much the same way they can’t wait to finish running sand dunes and pick up a football.

Through the tough pre-season months, every member of the team should face hardship if they are to physically improve. However, the introductory curve is also important to consider when accounting for team harmony. In the mid-to-late teens, not all players are accustomed to rigorous training. Similarly, not all are physically comparable. Although senior grades are usually stocked with athletes across the board, some standout junior players may have hulking physiques and appalling fitness. Others may have fantastic evasion, yet have never seriously lifted weights before.

“The days when you throw everyone in together and run long distances should be long gone,” says Flanagan.

“It was always a bit ‘sink-or-swim’ before. Chances were there was always a big kid or two lagging behind and that would sour things until they eventually lost interest and left the team.

“We have to accept that kids mature at different rates physically and mentally, not just from one to another, but within themselves. In the elite grades, we have coaching programs to suit individuals, so why not do it for kids who arguably need it more?”

“It’s funny that when it comes to skills and gym work, we make concessions for certain people depending on their position, but when it comes to conditioning we’ve usually put them all in the same basket.”

As far as supplying variety in training while maintaining fitness goes, drills and conditioning games are valuable tools. Although drills work on repetition (necessary for development), there are usually a handful of different drills that can interchange for the same skill. Emphasising pace, effort and concentration will have most children completing the tasks without being mindful of cardiovascular stress. Among the conditioning games Flanagan likes to use is offside touch football, where forward passes are allowed, but every team member must cross halfway for a score to be recorded. Another is a soccer game, using OzTag flags. Once a player has a flag ripped off they must run around a set of markers before returning to the game. They can lose their flag either with or without possession of the ball.

A third idea is to have games that reward field position. Each time players pass a certain mark, they get a bonus of some type.

When in-season, it is imperative that the coach be mindful of the precise circumstances of each player. By that stage rigorous testing and extended observation should have presented an accurate overview of players’ strengths, weaknesses and attitude. Just as valuable however, is knowledge of the commitments outside of football, which face each team member. Work, home and school will all require energy and time from the player. What separates the first two of these environments from the last is that rarely does work or home life demand further athletic exertion. Conversely, in many cases your club player will be asked to represent their school in rugby league or other sports to the point where adverse conflicts of interest may arise.

“Not only is your own draw important, but you should be aware of clashes with games and training from the kids’ schools,” says Flanagan.

“It can be a bit of a problem. Guys you have in your team might be bashing each other up twice as much in school footy. “There doesn’t seem to be a lot of sense to it and it’s been difficult to deal with in the past, but I will say the co-operation is improving.

“It’s not just the games either. Some days we’ve had kids get flogged in conditioning at school, then two hours later they show up and get flogged more by us. They may as well go home because it’s not doing them any good.”

In line with Flanagan’s theory about targeting certain games in the season and tapering schedules in accordance, players may be rested if demands get too great. Then again, with other commitments bearing down on them, players may be looking for something rare and valuable to pick them up – encouragement.

Praise can often be overlooked and undervalued, but for children in this situation it is often what they require most.

The above point leads us back to a fact, which can never be ignored at this level. Ultimately, as

a junior representative coach, you are not dealing with adults.

You are handling people who are developing at a rapid rate in all areas of their life. Therefore, Assisting development is essentially your role. As Flanagan is wont to say: "You don't measure your success on trophies at this age. Concentration should be 70 per cent on the individual and 30 per cent on the team.

Once the whistle goes, your attitude to winning can change, but the rest of the week should be about development. It's as if you're putting the building blocks in place for the skyscrapers to rise in the future."

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