

PART THREE: COACHING MIDI AND JUNIOR RUGBY (U11-U18)

Mission Statement

Coaching at Reigatians should enable all our players to fulfil their potential and ensure that all our teams play to the highest possible standard.

Coaching the Coaches – Encouraging Best Practice

We aim to hold three such evening sessions per month, one each focused on Mini Tag Rugby (U6-U8), Mini Rugby (U9-U10) and Midi or Junior Rugby (U11-U16). Nonetheless, all coaches are welcome to attend any of these sessions. The dates of these sessions will be added to the Fixtures List, which is kept up to date by the Fixtures Secretary (andrew.gilchrist@eu.watsonwyatt.com) and is also on the club website (www.reigatiansrufc.com).

Sessions of this nature should prove invaluable, as there is always something new to learn, even for the best of coaches. They will help to reinforce consistency of coaching within the club - probably the single most important factor when dealing with a wide range of individuals – and enable best practice to be employed. After the initial sessions it is planned to look at developing “Feedback” sessions which would involve individuals coaching for a few minutes and then inviting feedback from fellow coaches. This is not a form of appraisal but simply an opportunity for us all to benefit from each other’s differing qualities.

This is one of the most important areas of our long-term development and for it to be successful needs to be supported by all age groups. As a coaching panel it is our responsibility to generate commitment to these sessions. We are all aware of life commitments beyond coaching rugby; it is hoped that by increasing the number of active coaches within each age group it should be reasonable to expect a minimum of one coach per age group each session who will then be able to relay any information back to his colleagues.

Game Plan

The Game Plan for each of our teams will vary according to the strengths of that team and indeed its weaknesses. We do intend to establish a style of play that as players move from team to team, they can easily fit into their new team.

Essential to this should be an ability in each of our sides to adapt.

- We should be able to adapt our play according to the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition.

- We should be able to adapt our play according to the weather conditions even during the game.
- We should be able to adapt our play depending on the individual selections within our team. (1)
- We should be able to adapt our play according to the state and stage of the game.
- We should be able to adapt our play according to the expectations of the officials running the game. (2)

Summary

To summarize, our game plan will have an inbuilt flexibility but certain principles will remain as constants. Ray Williams, for the Welsh RFU, produced one of the first of the “modern” coaching manuals. What he wrote then still applies now. His four principles of how to play the game (plus one of my own!) should be central to our coaching philosophy.

The Five Principles

- 1). Go forward.
- 2). Support.
- 3). Continuity.
- 4). Pressure.
- 5). Communication.

These principles form the core of the coaching strategy.

1) Go Forward

With the obvious exception of some lateral or diagonal movement, we must encourage our teams to adopt the policy of playing parallel to the touchlines. If every player within our teams has it in his mind to attack the opposition’s try line (and not the touchlines) then all of our players know which way the ball is going. There will be an immediate improvement if we all insist on this direct approach.

2) Support

Rugby is a team game, arguably the quintessential team game. The job of all of our players is to support the player who has the ball. For example the person who has just passed the ball is directly responsible for the new ball carrier. We should remember that this support is mostly close. Supporting players, and it must always be players as this provides us with options, should be in close attendance and capable of carrying out a number of tasks. They might be needed to take a pass, to take a pop, to rip, to clear. For whatever they may be needed to do they must be close. (3)

3) Continuity

This is probably the part of the game that there is more focus on than any other. The way the game (mini-rucks etc.) is played today there is a much greater chance of keeping the ball, providing our technique is sound. We must be careful not to get isolated, not to go too far and be prepared to regroup. We should make sure that, as

many of our players as possible are comfortable on the ball. Certainly we will need to take the ball into contact. Do we take it in too often? Is this an easy option? Should we be practising taking the ball into space? We want our backs to play like forwards, what about our forwards, they should be able to play like backs.

4) Pressure

This is obviously two-sided. We must be able to exert pressure and be able to resist it. We should accept that there will be periods of the game when the opposition have the ball. Therefore we need to practice our defence. This is not simply tackling practice. When the opposition have won their first phase, we should know where we are going to defend the next phase; particularly we should aim to get beyond the ball. Our defence should be aggressive, moving up as a unit, denying them space. We are aiming to avoid that most common of dangers - only practising what we are good at. Certainly we should practice our developed skills but we should also work on the things that we are not good at, only then will we become better players. Put simply, only then does a practiced technique become a skill. Individual, unit and team practices should put pressure on our players to ensure that we can maintain our skill levels under this pressure. (4)

5) Communication

We will have decision makers on the field, captains, scrum leaders, unit leaders. We must be sure that everyone knows what is going to happen next. Backs need to know what the forwards are doing and vice versa. We need simple lineout calls, calls that can be changed, calls for forwards and backs' moves, calls for the part of the pitch that we intend to move to, the ball carrier needs to know where his support is. (5)

Footnotes

We would like to have players with similar attributes. The reality will almost always be different. We shouldn't be asking one player to replicate the performance of another; rather we should play to the strengths of each of our players.

All referees have areas of the game that they are particularly keen on. Listen to the referee, try and do what he asks. Get him on our side.

Underpinning this principle (and all of the others) is the importance of fitness. We must raise our fitness levels to be able to perform to the best of our ability.

Unopposed practice has some value, for fine-tuning as an example; we must not overestimate this value. We should be making as many of our practices as possible at least semi-opposed. This is an especially good way of building a session.

Correct decision-making is one of the key factors in a successful side. We should encourage our players to make decisions. Not perhaps always in the early years. Our sessions need to encourage correct decision-making so that under pressure our players make the right decisions. We won't always be able to make these decisions from the touchline.

The emphasis on defence is central to the coaching strategy. How we cope, as a team, when the opposition has the ball is something that, as coaches, we all need to spend time considering.

Positional Analysis

Some of what follows is relevant primarily to the 15-a-side game, in terms of certain positions; all of it has relevance to the game that we are trying to develop.

We have a firm belief that we expect our players to be capable of their primary roles above all else. If the team's most mobile prop can't actually scrummage, should we pick him? Conversely should the strongest scrummager, who offers nothing round the pitch, be selected? Ideally, of course we would like a combination of the two! We must never underestimate the importance of the primary role.

Props

All current and former props will already be exclaiming on the differences between the tighthead and the loosehead. Of course, there are huge differences, in technique required, in shape, even in temperament - look how few props are able to play both sided. This review prefers to concentrate on the similarities. No longer can a prop be secure in the set piece and then stroll to the next breakdown. This may be heresy to some but I think that the scrum has changed. As long as we can win our ball comfortably (and quickly) what we now need are mobile players with good hands. We should work on our scrummaging; you don't win too many games if the first phase isn't secure, but front row players are now required to play between the first phases as well. What about those players who lack that edge of pace or who aren't quite tall enough, can we convert them to front row players?

Hookers

The role of the hooker has increased in importance in the last few years. He is the most important person in our lineout. (Providing he is the one throwing the ball in). Front ball that we drive is of great use; tail bail that we can release to our backs is of equal importance. We must spend as much time with our hookers as is possible. This is an example of when it would be useful to bring in specialist coaches. We must expect our hookers to be comfortable as ball carriers and competent as fringe defenders.

Locks

The primary job of the lock is to win us first phase possession and to disrupt the opposition's. However, as with the rest of the front five his role has expanded. We should expect our locks to be able to take and more importantly, give a pass. Their role in defence has become critical, we want them arriving at the ruck or maul capable of making decisions. Is my participation required? Should I stay out to defend the fringes in defence? Should I stand off and offer myself as first receiver in attack? As we mentioned earlier the ability to make decisions under pressure, is of primary importance.

Flankers

We are dedicated to the system of playing a blindside and an openside flanker. In defence we expect our openside to harass the opposition back line as much as possible. We should be aiming to "get in his face" before tracking down the line, mindful of any changes in direction. In attack we expect him to be able to support the backs, this, of course means that he must know where the ball is going. The blindside is essentially a more defensive player. Most backrow/scrum half moves will come in his direction although the openside should remember his role when we are using blindside moves. We expect our "6's" to be support players, as they arrive at the breakdown, they have to make the same decisions that we expect of our locks. In most cases they will arrive there before the locks, so what

they decide to do is of even greater importance. In the lineout, we expect our blindsides to have primary or secondary role.

Number 8

The number 8 should be one of our most creative players. His primary role is to control the delivery of the ball at the scrum, this includes initiating back row moves and he should be able to offer a lineout option. In defence we will expect him to track our openside off lineouts and be the second or third tackler off the base of the scrum. (This will depend on the role of the scrum half). In attack, he must be able to arrive at the breakdown ready to receive the ball and be capable of deciding what to do with it. His role is perhaps closest to full back in that we expect him to turn up in unlikely places and be capable of being a primary ball carrier or a supporting runner.

Scrum Half

Our No 9s must be able to run and kick and above all pass. We should make sure that he can pass equally well off both hands. He is the primary link between forwards and backs and his pass must have speed, length and variety. He must be capable of interesting the opposition's primary defence and instinctively know when (and where) to pass, run or kick. The role of the scrum half in defence at the first phase depends on his and the back-row's strengths. In open play we expect a positive defensive role from our "9s". He should be capable of being a first up tackler at the same time as being able to organize the alignment of the defence at the breakdown. Most importantly he is the main communicator between the forwards and the backs. He is the player, above all, who decides what to do next.

Fly Half

He must be one of our primary decision makers. Should he pass, kick or run? What are the factors that will influence this decision? He must be able to adapt where he is going to take the ball. For example, if we want to commit the opposition 7, he must take the ball flat. (This does not mean that the rest of the back line has to lie flat). He must have variety in his game in order to keep the opposition guessing. He must know where and when to call the backs' moves. His role in defence has been transformed. We must expect our "10's" to be primary tacklers. Most sides will run the ball up the 10 channel; we must have players who are comfortable dealing with this.

Centres

We are committed to playing an inside and outside centre. Both of these players need to be strong on the ball, capable of looking after it in contact. Their defence has to be aggressive and as a unit. They need to be sure which defensive systems they are using. In attack, our inside centre tends to be more likely to take the ball up and we would expect our outside to have more pace. Crucially both players must have the ability to hold the ball up and release our strike runners. It is worth noting that a back line that is drifting in attack often does so because the centres do not straighten the fly half's natural drift. It is important that these two players also are aware of the importance of decision - making. It is crowded in midfield but opportunities do present themselves and we must have the correct response.

Wingers

This position has seen several changes in recent years. We must expect our players in this position to get involved in the game. Don't wait for the ball, go and get it. Their primary role is to finish. How they do this depends on the type of player that they are. They can use pace, power or guile or any combination of these. The back three of the team, both wingers and the fullback have become a very important unit, both in attack - for example in the counter attack - and in defence, where communication between the three of them is crucial. We must remember to practise finishing as we would every other skill. We need to make sure that our wingers are comfortable defensively both personally and positionally.

Fullback

As we mentioned right at the start we need to ensure that our players are capable of fulfilling their primary roles. Our full back must be able to tackle, catch and kick. His positional sense and his work with his two wingers are vitally important. He must be a vocal communicator - rather like a goalkeeper, for much of the game, everyone is in front of him and he should be able to give his players defensive guidance. It is in attack that this position is so exciting as he can join the line where and when he likes. Two thoughts, do we programme our 15's too much, rather than leaving them to make decisions based on what they see ahead of them? As more and more sided are kicking for position and not touch, what extra skills do we expect our 15's to exhibit?