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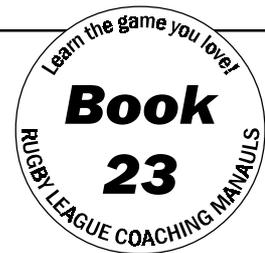
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RUGBY LEAGUE COACHING MANUALS

CONTENTS

- 2 Coach Talk**
Daniel Anderson - New Zealand Warriors Head Coach 2001
- 4 Structural Influence on Man Mangement**
Steve Anderson - Warrington Head Coach (U.K.)
- 7 Dissecting the Player-Coach Dynamic**
Brian Canavan - Sydney Roosters Football Manager
- 9 Anderson's Galvanising Formula**
Chris Anderson - Australian Rugby League Coach
- 11 Is Dropping a Player The Answer**
Brian Smith - Parramatta Eels Head Coach
- 13 Empowerment as a Coaching Approach**
Lynn Kidman
- 16 Guidelines for Objectively Assessing Player Fitness**
Rudi Meir - Southern Cross University
- 20 Combining Skills and Conditioning**
Alan Wilson - Parramatta Eels Assistant Coach
Hayden Knowles - Parramatta Eels Strength and Conditioning Coach
- 22 Passing Drills**
Digi League



Coach Talk



Daniel Anderson - New Zealand Warriors Head Coach

Written by Ashley Bradnam

Daniel Anderson has come into prominence after stepping out of the shadows of Parramatta Eels mentor Brian Smith to take over the reigns of the New Zealand Warriors. Anderson served his apprenticeship at Parramatta, coming through the ranks from being a Development Officer before the call came from across the Tasman to make his mark in the NRL. It's been a long steady journey for the former park footballer who began coaching with the under 13's at the famed rugby league nursery St Gregory's at Campbelltown on Sydney's outskirts. RLCM spoke with Daniel recently to discuss life as a Warrior.

What are your basic philosophies with coaching?

I was the development officer and development manager with Parramatta for a long time, so I think my basic philosophy for the game reflects that. I consider myself a technical coach in many regards and like to think that part of my ability is to bring a player further along the path, bettering his understanding of the game as well as his physical abilities. I don't like to smother my players though; I prefer to see them run with their own unique styles but just tweak their natural abilities by maybe tightening a few areas that might be loose or loosening a few areas that might be tight. In New Zealand at the moment we're a little undernourished as far as development is concerned – the coaches are good but they are working above the basic elements of the game. This year with the Warriors we have gone back to focussing on the basic core elements of the game; it's up to the players to advance on that, they're the ones with the flair and the skill so they teach you a little bit about what to do but if they're not holding the ball or passing correctly to begin with then they're always going to struggle.

What are your thoughts on '*man management*'?

It's very important at any club but particularly at mine with such a wide range of characters that come from cross cultural backgrounds and different religions. I don't want to inhibit anyone's personal style so for us to work as a team we all need to have a bit of empathy for one another. I'll speak to the individual to get a guide on their styles and from that work on harmonising the team. Living in Australia and watching the Warriors before I'd been offered the job I'd heard about the reputations of the Polynesian

players and their inability to go the full eighty minutes but it didn't take me long to work out that was all a myth. They are very resilient to training and to injury; they train extremely hard and often and are proud people. I don't treat them any differently to anyone else as far as structure of training is concerned.

On the basics, what have you brought to the club in terms of defence?

I have a bit of a penchant for tackle technique and have done a lot of work on it in the past. We're okay at it but a bit raw – we don't miss a lot of tackles anymore but our defensive system is at times loose and that goes back to the mental application of the players. The best sides in the competition, the Brisbane's and Parramatta's are very motivated when it comes to defence and sometimes we don't match that. Our players have embraced our system so it's now a matter of players having faith in each other so they don't get selfish and look after their own to the detriment of the team. But on the whole, I'm happy with what we've done and we're improving all the time.

How do you harness your players attacking prowess?

I don't. They have to do it themselves. It's a matter of them knowing when the time is right to try things. Once again it comes down to the core elements and in that regard we're still weak – we don't pass the ball as well as other teams or play the ball as quickly; these are the things I'm currently focussed on. As far as the rest is concerned they have a free reign to promote the football and do whatever they can that is good for the team so long as it's not outside the parameters of their own role, like a front rower attempting to put up a spiral bomb for example. I have no problems with

players putting their hands up to try things, but they have to show me they're practising it on the training paddock first. Kevin Campion for example does a bit of kicking for us but he's earned that right because he puts in the effort at training to improve the chances of it actually coming off in the game. All I ask is they don't play outside their parameters but when they get on the field, if it's on, I tell them to go for it. You've got to throw something at the opposition.

What is your approach to game plans?

We're not extravagant in any way. I'll provide information for players on opposition teams and information from our game last week. I actually try to get the players to scheme together. The boys are scheming together anyway, when they're playing cards or trying to get to the showers first so I told them they should be doing that with their football as well. So they get together and try things at training which is great because they come up with a lot of the ideas and therefore they own them. I might tell them about an opposition player who has a problem with defending an overs line and then they'll come up with a scheme to make something out of that. We've only just embraced that ideal but it's been effective so far. I mean, the thinking is they are scheming together in life anyway for fun, just trying to gee each other up, so why not use that for the betterment of the team. On the whole though we don't have a drastic change from week to week but you adjust minor things depending on what your opposition is doing.

Can you coach vision?

You can enhance it by doing things like simulations and role-play. A lot of teams are playing aggressive styles of training games in-house now to see what players have the right nerves and composure under pressure. There are some good young players that have vision but because of the hierarchy in the team they have to wait until their time comes to get the ball before they can show it. The reason so many older players are considered the visionaries in their team is because they've had to bide their time; even when Andrew Johns first came into the top grade he never got the ball as often as he does now. Time spent by the individual thinking about the game can improve vision but a lot of it is intuitive as well as trial and error.

How do mentally prepare your team to play?

It changes week in week out. Sometimes you start as underdogs and other weeks as favourites and I've found that changes the way the players approach the game. A lot of people say to me 'how come you play so well at the back end of games, in the final 20 minutes', and I think that comes down to their mental approach. Sometimes we seem to get so wound up

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and then all of a sudden we'll let in a couple of soft tries and the opposition skips 12 points clear and then we relax because the pressure is off. We need to feel comfortable within ourselves when we're still under the hammer. I don't spend long sessions with players before a game; I just sow a seed with a player early in the week and then quietly bring them along so they are ready come kick off. It's no good if they're ready on Thursday because they'll be burnt out on Sunday. The veteran players play a big role in the team's preparation as well – Stacey Jones and Kevin Campion usually take us for our final training run before a game.

What are your thoughts on ball control as opposed to field position?

There are a lot of variables in ball control and field position. Here in New Zealand the players grew up with Gilbert footballs and not Steedens, and the Gilberts are like soccer balls so the players don't hold the ball properly because they can't; it's too big. And this is why we drop simple balls sometimes; it comes down to the players' historical teachings. Weather wise, it rains a lot more in New Zealand – if we play a night game we pretty much know it's going to be wet so we have to consider this in preparing the team. As far as the field position is concerned, it depends on the possession ratio in the game; if we have a high ratio we might chance our arm but if we're in front on the scoreboard we might be a little conservative. There are countless variables that change the way you approach your thinking but you need to be able to modify rapidly even in the game depending on these conditions. But the critical element is the possession ratio.

What for you is a good finish to a set of six?

A try ultimately but outside of that I'm looking for a 40-20 or a goal line dropout. I don't mind a mid-field bomb either; basically an attacking kick as opposed to a defensive one.

Can you coach patience?

I haven't found a good method yet to teach patience so it's trial and error for me at the moment. I encourage the boys to try things away from the game, like golf and tennis for example. Good teams and individuals maintain composure and can therefore take advantage of opportunities when they arise rather than pushing for them when they're not really there. When a mistake is made I'm looking to see the player doesn't make that mistake again – if he does, to me that illustrates poor patience, poor composure. The teams leading the competition have enormous patience and composure and when the pressure is on they won't stray from their original plan. We're still looking to do that consistently at the moment.

Structural Influence on *Man Management*

Steve Anderson - Warrington Head Coach (U.K.)

Written By David Haynes

Steve Anderson was Assistant Coach with Chris Anderson at the Melbourne Storm (1998-2000), Assistant Coach with Anderson again with the Australian Kangaroos and Performance Director with the Leeds Rhinos before taking up his present role as Head Coach with Warrington.

Man management reflects the capabilities of your overall management structure where individual management is only a small portion of your approach. The system that you facilitate will ultimately influence and dictate how you manage your players and staff. Setting in place that system and its approaches is what I will be discussing.

Broadly these approaches will be discussed in three main areas:

1. Considerations in your structure
2. Macro and Micro levels and
3. Review processes.

These are what I consider instrumental in any approach to managing not only the athlete but also the environment in total.

What then are the basic principles involved in managing elite environments and what are the considerations in the implementation of those principles? Possibly the easiest way to identify and answer these questions is to draw comparisons and contrasts between two highly successful clubs, Leeds Rhinos and Melbourne Storm and discuss the various common occurrences and differences that are evident in the assessment of these principles. It must be remembered that these assessments are purely based on my observations and should not be considered the solution or 'blueprint' for handling elite sporting environments.

The key 'tools' I will use in discussing these areas are primarily professional skills I have obtained in both Social Psychology and Human Resource management fields and examples from the various cases which I have studied in the internal workings of clubs and such over my time in professional rugby league.

Rugby League Coaching Manuals

Considerations in Your Structure

I have always considered my role as a professional coach as one of a manager and mentor and have always approached players as employees within the framework of the organization's design. Design meaning the determined nature and culture of your workplace and identifying what constitutes your 'culture' is so vitally important when constructing a framework that is suitable for both player and staff member. Within this design both intent and purpose requires consideration but underlying this intent priority must be given to the system and its capability to 'self-manage'. Let me explain.

Today rugby league is very much a business-oriented environment and as such we must approach all aspects with a deliberate approach of making the 'workplace' conducive to learning but more importantly getting the desired result. At Melbourne consideration to 'result' was approached in various manners but overridden by setting in place a winning culture which was promoted by a structure that was dynamic in state but could 'self manage'.

So how did we approach this scenario at Melbourne?

The first step was to look closely at the selection of personnel both players and staff and ask the most obvious questions such as, what are their individual needs both within the workplace and in a social context? Who are the leaders and who can best fit the bill as a middle management, to name a few.

These questions aren't new but discovering new processes and applications to meet the design expectations of the structure was challenging. Basically we set in place criteria demands for both the structure and the infrastructure and were strong enough to adhere to set design processes.

Head Coach Chris Anderson was very quick to notice the credentials of his staff and what each member had to offer in terms of assessing the structure and who best fits what area in the make-up of his coaching environment. As an example, Chris applied my expertise in specific areas of the original 'setting-up' in much the same way as he approached our players in coaching terms. Suitability to positional play doesn't always mean fitting a player in to a set framework. Use the ability of the player to promote a 'change' in your framework or coaching strategy. Chris has always advocated 'you are only as good as your front office' and I don't think any organization would argue with this statement irrespective of the business nature or industry.

My role at Melbourne as Assistant Coach was really just a nametag to fit the 'norms' in general coaching circles. Although I filled the traditional role in terms of football field practice and such, we explored a whole host of areas in terms of technical and professional change for the players. The initial period of my employment was about change because of a complete overhaul of traditional coaching application, which I hesitate to suggest, 'we got it right'. The trick was to both isolate and manage the dissemination of information relevant to the individual needs which was governed by the system processes. My job initially was to identify a communication base with each player to enable the transference of this 'new' information. A large project in itself but an invaluable asset over our three years at Melbourne.

So the approach to the 'Considerations' was primarily based on a 'Needs based assessment' of both staff and the players and to identify the application processes needed to meet the findings of the assessment. Managing these 'consideration' in our coaching to meet the criteria from our initial design principles was the real challenge.

'Macro' and 'Micro' approach

A common enough phrase in rugby league 'speak' but it is primarily a conditioning term used to plan seasonal phases in our team and player preparation. When applied to managerial principles you can achieve the same outcome to redefine your overall priorities in your workplace.

What I am referring to here is the basic application of management and you must have completed some form of 'needs based assessment' first to adequately apply your approach. All environments regardless of industry are different and similar for that matter in many divergent ways. You cannot apply a common principle as an ideal consistently to all environments

because of the ever-changing factors around you and from within.

What remains consistent are what I call the 'Macro Approaches' or the broad based 'tools' you use such as yearly planning, goal setting frames, seasonal conditioning programs etc. All are planning phases or structures that you can carry and apply in any environment but what always changes are the personnel and the characteristics and capabilities that each bring to your operation. Identifying these and how they best suit your business is what counts and applies. These are what I call the 'Micro Approach to Management'.

For example at Leeds in my role as 'Performance Director' I did not come in and made wholesale changes to approaches or strategies as consideration had to be given to existing programs and the overall 'Macro Approach' to their work. Determining what constitutes a Macro level within the confines of the existing environment has to be determined as these obviously influence the Micro level areas.

Consultation with all existing staff and to their programs must be established to apply the concepts of 'Micro management principles'. Identifying the levels within your workplace provides a clear path to management application and cannot be stressed enough in terms of '*man management*' practice. This path needs to be approached from several perspectives and questioning change is the key.

Firstly, are changes required at this level and what has to be considered here in assessing this is to be total objective in view and approach. Secondly, 'micro changes' can be both subtle and all encompassing dependant upon your assessments and observations. Micro assessment areas in my approach at Leeds included all the areas that influence staff approaches to their work. For example I am currently working on 'plans' that are the 'underbelly' for any successful rugby league unit, namely communication and delivery of a coaching technique.

Management or coaching at an elite level is about refining the communication process and the delivery of your plan so understanding all the micro components within your approach becomes a priority. It should be noted that once various levels and approaches have been identified it is then your job to then further break down the individual components – it is a never-ending cycle of assessment of planning and delivery. The message for all in this area is to be completely aware of your environment by researching and making critical and constructive observations between the various determined levels of your structure.

When discussing principles in management of elite sporting environments it is the continual revision to approach and method that is and must be a priority in your approach. Micro and Macro approaches to management are vast and certainly provide method to the management of these levels. What occurs and how the approach is implemented is what will ultimately affect the management and the performance of the player.

Review Process

A key term in any manager's workplace and must be distinguished from assessment or evaluation. The term review means the periodic approach used to overhaul and amend your system in a format that is both deliberate and acceptant to change and progress.

Assessment and evaluation are both tools in the manager's kit but are used for more short-term fixes and should always be a key to managing your players and your operation on a continual basis. What I have always promoted is that your system is made up of set processes that are continually changing due to the many factors that are encountered in the workplace that can never be identified accurately in a 'single' process.

If we look at the player as a component of that system, a set review period must be allocated as a means to managing the player in terms of performance and as a process within the system?

Confused? Simply, both the system and the player have their own independent review processes which all feed into a pool of information that is to be checked and amended if needed.

Previously we spoke about the various levels within the organization and it's these levels that make up your system for review. As an example, contained in the Macro levels of management we can readily identify with the 'season plan' with all its associated phases and such. What is needed here is a check against the various cycles contained within to ensure the specificity of our work and the matching of key concepts of the various components of the program (e.g., offense strategy). The mere fact that a regular review takes place is the key to this concept.

Contained within the 'system for review' is the 'process review' which needs to be identified and documented so that a consistent approach is implemented so accurate observations can be recorded. Without consistency in observation the validity of the review is obviously questionable.

Using the 'season plan' as an example the 'process review' could be the independent checking system of the 'skills program', which is part of the 'Macro Planning'. The skills coach would have his own internal checking procedure that feeds into the overall 'system review'. This approach ensures that all components within the overall plan are regularly checked and ensures practical approaches to timeframes and such are completed without pressuring the most important part of your program- the player.

This is just an example of how review processes can assist the management of sporting environments but it also highlights the necessity for such processes. The review process is another arm in the structure which helps to manage the player and staff development which is an obvious objective in any planning at this level.

Summary

For the purpose of this article I have deliberately avoided using everyday coaching terms to ensure that a 'clean management' strain of thinking is conveyed. Too often sporting organizations both amateur and professional, adopt adhoc approaches to the management at their club and as a consequence the player and staff members suffer. Continual references have been made to terms such as structure, design, procedure etc., to reinforce the need for deliberate approaches to these areas of organizational management to meet the demands of changing environments in our selected fields.

I have attempted to convey in this article is that '*man management*' is and should be understood in terms of the ability of the environment's system and its processes and I have attempted to give an insight into how successful organizations operate and have provided some methods in approach to how systems can be managed for the purpose of ensuring players and staff are collectively part of the continual growth of the management process.

Your ability as a manager or coach can be attributed to how well the processes of planning are formulated and implemented. Effective management systems are designed to ensure staff and the players benefit in terms of performance and individual growth.

Dissecting the player-coach dynamic



Brian Canavan - Sydney Roosters Football Manager

Written By David Haynes

The player-coach dynamic has altered significantly as the NRL continues towards full-time professionalism. Unlike yesteryear, when players would hastily leave work to make afternoon training, the players and coaches are spending almost three-quarters of the year together. Never before has a good player-coach relationship been so essential to the on-field performance of a club. So how do coaches maintain a *man management* relationship with their charges? Are certain types of players destined to perform under coaches with compatible personalities? And to what extent should a coach get involved in a player's personal affairs? There have been countless

relationship and success Wayne Bennett and Allan Langer shared at the Broncos during the '90s. "We tend to put up with different personality types, as long as there is great desire in them and they comply," Canavan said. "You've got the whole range in any group situation, introverts, extraverts, great trainers and average trainers. As long as they've got plenty of desire and they're there for the common good coaches accept all personality types."

Being in such a close-knit environment for such a large portion of the year means many players now seek more than football guidance from their coach. Many look

When personal problems are affecting performance or the mood state of the players, more personal issues need to be examined in private

examples over the years of player-coach conflict inhibiting a side's on-field cohesion. While a workable relationship is paramount, the player and coach have never had to be the closest of buddies, something Sydney Roosters' football manager Brian Canavan agrees with. He says the relationship between the two parties works best if there is mutual respect. "I think there needs to be a very good rapport (between player and coach)," he said. "It doesn't have to be a friendship but it often develops. That rapport is initially like a business rapport. Our game is a people game, so communication is one of the main methods of our business interaction."

Canavan even suggests a difference in personality between a player and coach doesn't impinge on the pair's capacity to carry out team goals. He says there is no reason why a down-to-business type coach and prankster type player can't gel - just look at the great

for personal advice on matters from financial concerns to family problems. "I think any relationship that is built up over a period of time and in the pressure situation that coaches and players find themselves in, you necessarily grow together," he said. "You get to know the players and their backgrounds simply because your spending so much time with them you can't talk football all the time."

As Canavan emphasises however, coaches usually try to keep the players' football and private lives separate. He believes coaches should only intervene in players' personal lives if it is hampering their on-field capabilities. "When personal problems are affecting performance or the mood state of the players, more personal issues need to be examined in private," he said. "Coaches have to address poor performance." According to Canavan the same applies for a player

lacking appropriate self-management skills. "If players are poorly managed whether it be punctuality or behaviour, they're not going to manage their own performance at training and in games," he said. As Jack Gibson stated, 'You can't be a mug for six days a week and a hero on gameday.'

To make sure a player is not idle for the six days prior to a game, Canavan stresses the need for the coach and player to maintain a regular communication flow. If players are on the verge of being dropped, they're entitled to know what areas need to be improved. Also fringe top-graders require feedback on what is needed to take the next step. Similarly, Canavan believes a harmonious player-coach relationship is also developed by including players in club issues beyond football. "Coaches can nominate a core group of players, usually senior players, with whom they communicate on things a little bit more beyond training times, things like club policy and behaviour," he admits. "However the players have to respect and accept that at the end of the day the head coach and club management have the final responsibility, as in any organisation"

Players also have to be ready for a culture shift within their club, which comes with any new coaching appointment. Canavan says it's a new coach's delivery style, dress, discipline etc rather than personality that can alter the culture of an organisation. "The initial impression from the (new) coach is his method of delivery," he said. "The coach's personality style is always apparent, but the delivery style produces the club's culture."

For a coach looking to leave an indelible mark on a club, Canavan cites overall coaching expectations as one of the key areas of delivery. As he explains, these expectations include minor to more encompassing issues. "(The coach's expectations) can range from simple things like punctuality through to achievement of personal goals, team goals and the way the players are compliant with the club's policies."

Gone are the days where coaches at the elite level would spend as little as a couple of afternoons a week managing the preparation of their troops. Nowadays, the player-coach dynamic is an essential working partnership, relying heavily on consistent open communication exchange. A difference in personality is for the most part irrelevant, as long as the player-coach alliance is punctuated by mutual respect. If it is, positive results are bound to occur both on and off the field.

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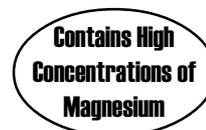
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Anderson's Galvanising Formula



Chris Anderson - Australian Rugby League Coach

Written by David Haynes

Chris Anderson, more than anyone, understands the difficulty of establishing a team unit quickly. At the end of 1997, he was given the task of building a side in Australia's AFL heartland, Melbourne. Anderson assembled a formidable team including internationals Glenn Lazarus, Stephen Kearney and Tawera Nikau and a number of talented Perth Reds and Hunter Mariners discards. There was no doubting the team's 'on paper' potential. But what stumped even the most optimistic league supporters was the phenomenal early success the Storm tasted.

on forwards than we did on backs, because it was important for us to set a good base. Our main priority was the front-row and then the halfback, they were the two important areas that suit my style of football."

History shows it was more than just the bookends, Lazarus, Robbie Kearns and Rodney Howe, and halfback Brett Kimmorley, who gained from Anderson's rugby league formula. From the outset it seemed the Storm squad adapted effortlessly to the new brand of football, something the coach worked hard to instil. "It was a new style of football for a lot

bringing them all together under the one umbrella and getting them to think the one way

Under Anderson's tutelage the club reached the semi-finals in its inaugural year. Twelve months later captain Glenn Lazarus proudly held aloft the Premiership trophy, as the Storm came from behind to beat St George-Illawarra in the 1999 competition decider. So how did Anderson mould Melbourne into a successful team unit in such a short space of time? And how big a role did *man management* play in the process?

When he was thrust the Melbourne coaching job, the former Canterbury stalwart says his first step was to identify the type of football he wanted his side to play. The collapse of the Mariners and Reds, which left talented forwards on the market, made the decision decidedly easier. "I think the important thing is that you have a script of the type of football you want to play, and then you put the style of players you want before you put names to them," he said. "We had a budget for 25 players so we had to make sure we weren't spending in the wrong areas. We had to identify the main areas that we wanted to be strong in, and make those the priority. So we spent a lot more

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of the players, I'd known it before so it was just about me imposing that style of football on them really," Anderson said. "It was bringing them all together under the one umbrella and getting them to think the one way. The thrill about going to Melbourne was that I could buy the players to suit by style of football, and we did that pretty well."

Signing the right players is one thing, but as Anderson would attest getting them to gel as a productive team unit is another. It was even more daunting for Melbourne's coaching staff because the players were coming from such diverse club cultures. Although, as the Australian mentor points out, the positive was that the players had to get on. "The good thing about Melbourne was that it was a one-team town, so the players all socialised together," he said.

Even though Anderson has gradually scaled back his evenings out with the boys, he is fully aware of the importance of a strong player-coach bond, and for the players to know their coach is unequivocally behind them. "I believe in every player who plays for me, so I've got to sell them that belief," he said. "I wouldn't

send players out on the paddock if I didn't believe in them. So to get that belief you've got to know the person pretty well. I use to go out with them socially a lot more than I do now. but you spend so much time at training, watching videos and giving feedback, that you do most of it (interaction) inside the football sphere. When you go on pre-season trips and trips away you really get to know each other."

Which is why Anderson is open and honest when discussing team selection with his players. If he drops players he strives to give them 'something positive to work with.' "If I'm not picking a player I just try and be fair dinkum with him," he said. "I say: 'you're not in the team, but these are the reasons you're not in the team and if you do this, this and this, you're a chance of getting yourself back in there.'"

Part of Melbourne's galvanising process was also to come up with a rigid, but fair disciplinary regime. "The important thing was to set some good discipline standards early," Anderson said. "I think we had a few hassles early, with a few players being a bit unruly socially, so we had to bring them into line. They come from different backgrounds and different clubs and those clubs had different standards in discipline, so I think the important thing was that we imposed a good discipline on them to start."

A useful tool Anderson used to ensure his players weren't disgruntled with the club's disciplinary standards was to give the players 'an ownership over their own discipline.' "We got a senior group of players who set all the fines (for indiscretions)," he said. "Players who did do anything that interfered with the group functioning properly had to face the senior players. Once we set some pretty strong standards in discipline and fitness, the players really took it upon themselves to uphold those things."

While Anderson says it is rare for a player not to fall into line, he admits there are times when some players through poor behaviour or attitudinal problems push the envelope. "If players have got chips on their shoulders then they're a little bit uncoachable," he confesses. "They're people who can cause a lot of distractions to the group. I think if you have those types of players at the start you work with them, and if they still don't come around then you've got to get rid of them because they will affect the group. So anyone that you have in there that has a detrimental effect on the group functioning as a unit, you give them one or two opportunities and if they don't come around you get rid of them, because they'll drag three or four other players with them."

Given his task of establishing a competitive football side in such a short space of time, Anderson recognises the role support staff play within a club. As he expresses, it is important the head coach and his support network are pulling the same way, so there is continuity in what is being said to the players. "My staff is important because you can only have one voice coming at the players, it can't be coming from different directions," he said. "There is no right or wrong direction but there has to be a direction, and the staff need to understand your (head coach's) direction and be loyal to what you're about. If you've got staff that aren't conducive to your style of football or aren't loyal to the coach it just leads to bad undertones in the club."

Anderson, who will take over from John Lang at Cronulla next season, believes senior players are also integral to the mood of a club. According to the former Kangaroo winger, if the senior players are showing a good work ethic it will filter through to the rest of the side. "When you become a senior player and you're playing for Australia, you need some extra responsibility," he said. "I think you need something more to play for. The senior players set the standards for what the club is about. They set your training standards, your habits, and your attitudes. Everything you take on the paddock is set by your senior players, so I give them that responsibility. If they're doing extra training it's easier to get the young blokes to do extra training."

In just one pre-season Melbourne was transformed from a burgeoning league entity to a competition front-runner. Sure, the 'on paper' side Anderson assembled was impressive, but as he explained that was only half the battle. The tough part was getting 25 footballers to play his 'flat attack' style of football - which they did with aplomb. Anderson's situation demonstrates that coaches at any level can stamp their mark on a club under even the tightest of time constraints.



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Is dropping a player the answer?



Brian Smith - Parramatta Eels Head Coach

Written by David Haynes

Ever had to drop a player? Ever wondered what the reaction would be? Parramatta mentor Brian Smith, a veteran of over 10 years in the coaching game, has had to do it plenty of times. It's arguably the toughest part of coaching, and relies heavily on a coaches *man management* skills.

However, the notion of dropping players has diminished somewhat at the elite level. Nowadays, a majority of a club's 25 full-time players are paid handsomely, making it difficult to justify dropping elite players down the grades when such money has

Even though Smith says it is not the coach's job to keep players in the top grade, he believes there is some onus on coaches to 'find answers' to a player's form slump. "I think it has made all of us really think about how to turn that around, to get it (improvement) by other means than dropping a player," he admits. "At the end of the day if you do have to drop him or cut him at the end of the season, that is an indictment to some extent on the coach, because he hasn't been able to find answers or help the player find answers. I would like to think I've become a bit more understanding and thoughtful about how to deal with players who are struggling."

...there is some onus on coaches to 'find answers' to a player's form slump...

been invested. Unlike yesteryear, when players with glaring defensive frailties or poor ball control would be sent back to the reserves to work on their game, the trend of current coaches is to try and communicate with their chargers. They work on the troublesome areas before contemplating the demotion of a player. According to Smith dropping a player through poor form or wrong attitude is almost your last resort.

"When you've got a small squad as all of us do nowadays, compared to the old days of having three grades and regularly seeing players go up and down the grades sometimes within a month, that doesn't happen any more," he said. "You invest a fair bit of money generally between your top 10 to 20 players, and if one of those players particularly in your top 10 doesn't come up, you've really got a wad of money being wasted. And dropping them to First Division or Queensland Cup is hardly going to be the answer in most cases."

There may be a shift in the way coaches go about relegating players, but from the players perspective little has changed. While they are more often than not their own harshest critics, very few will openly confess to being in a form rut. "It would be unusual for a player to say I'm in bad form, because that has got a bit of period in it," said Smith. "They might say that privately to me, but not very often. It is more like 'I did the wrong thing on that play' or 'I haven't played well in that game' or 'I should have done this'."

Smith will speak to a player privately if their concerns are of a greater magnitude than simply taking the wrong fifth tackle option. "Dealing with anything heavy, like they've had a really bad game or they're in really bad form, they'll (players) want to talk to me in the privacy of my office or in front of a video," he said. "Quite often they're wrong about themselves, and they're playing much better than they think they are."

What is *Empowerment* as a Coaching Approach?

Written by Lynn Kidman

Lynn Kidman is a coach educator at the Christchurch College of Education in New Zealand. Lynn has coached athletes from ages 5 to 75, in swimming, basketball, volleyball, softball, tennis and soccer. Since completing her PhD, which focused on self-reflective analysis for coaches, her main area of interest has been to determine how to enable athletes to learn best.

Coaching is a complex process. Coaches are responsible for enabling athletes to learn. Like other learners, athletes develop understanding when they are involved in solving problems for themselves, thus enhancing their learning (Butler, 1997). Important tools in the learning process are to develop new ideas, knowledge and the ability to make decisions. If experts merely present knowledge (sometimes quite forcefully) to those who are 'nonexpert' and make decisions for them, the athletes become disempowered. In other words, if athletes' needs do not influence their learning experiences, learning is minimal. The knowledge, understanding, skill and decision-making ability that athletes learn and apply can make the difference between performance success and failure.

When coaches use an empowering style of coaching, athletes gain and take ownership of knowledge, development and decision making that will help them to maximise their performance. An empowerment approach provides athletes with a chance to be part of the vision and values of sports teams.

The word *empowerment* has many meanings. An empowerment approach to coaching emphasises an athlete-centred approach rather than a traditional prescriptive (or autocratic) style of coaching. The athlete-centred approach promotes a sense of belonging, as well as giving athletes a role in decision making and a shared approach to learning.

Current Coaching Practices

To maximise athlete performance, coaches, like leaders of formal organisations, combine the power of their position with a particular leadership style. Although coaching today encompasses a wide variety of approaches, the traditional leadership style has given coaches a licence to 'exploit' their power by taking the choice and control away from the athlete. When a coach takes total control and athletes have

basically no say, the approach is called *prescriptive* or autocratic. Sometimes this style has been described, mistakenly, as an important element in coaching success.

A prescriptive coach endeavours to control athlete behaviour not only throughout training and competition, but also beyond the sport setting. A prescriptive coach tends to coach athletes as if they are on a factory assembly line. Athletes of prescriptive coaches are often 'hooked' into a limited form of learning that emphasises memorising rather than understanding or solving problems. This limited approach encourages athletes to be robotic in their actions and thinking. They do not experience themselves as having an active role in contributing to or being a part of their learning.

In the professional era, the performance objectives of many coaches depend on winning. The expectation is that coaches may be held accountable for many uncertainties beyond the coaches' control (e.g. injuries, exceptional play by the opposition, poor officiating, the weather). In reacting to this pressure on themselves, coaches tend to give athletes extraordinarily gruelling training sessions that demand more than the athletes can give; sometimes they use dehumanising practices to enforce their control (Pratt & Eitzen, 1989). Unfortunately, for coaches like these, the pressure in this professional 'must-win' environment becomes so great that coaches 'take over' in an attempt to ensure their athletes are winning. The directions become coach-centred, rather than mutual between the athletes and the coach.

This disempowering form of coach control actually contradicts why many athletes are participating in sport. It can have detrimental effects on the athletes who are controlled. The coach can also suffer when the athletes reject such control. In these controlling situations the benefits of winning can be limited. If a

team is winning, the athletes smile, but if a team loses or tires of being bossed around, generally the team environment deteriorates.

If athletes truly learn and take ownership of the direction of the team or competition, there is a better chance that success will result. Success for athletes is rarely winning; it is usually focused on achieving their goals. A prescriptive coach mistakenly assumes that athletes are there to win and seldom determines why athletes participate in sport. Conversely, as part of an empowering approach, one of the coach's first roles is to determine the reasons why each athlete is participating, and to establish a vision and direction for the season that both the athletes and the coach own.

As the above discussion indicates, the opposite of empowerment is *disempowerment*. The traditional prescriptive approach disempowers athletes, yet it is still evident in many sports. With a prescriptive style, reading the game is largely a prescription from the coach (like playing a chess game). Yet such a game can be a learning experience that encourages athletes to understand the game and choose options based on informed decisions. The need for such an approach is obvious in many sports throughout the world (e.g. rugby, rugby league, soccer, athletics) where there are often long periods when the coach is not directly involved in making decisions on the field and communication with the athletes is limited. More broadly, informed decisions by athletes are essential to performance success in every sport, as in every sport it is the athlete who competes, not the coach.

When coaching in tactics and skills at training sessions, prescriptive coaches traditionally tend to give athletes specific directions on what to 'fix' or the exact moves to perform. In some cases, coaches believe that unless they are seen to be telling athletes what to do and how to do it, they are not doing their job properly. Some coaches believe that they are expected to win and that successful coaches are (and should be) hard-nosed and discipline-oriented. Others view their role as one of promoting enjoyment and personal development (supportive, empowering coaches).

Much of the research suggests that no matter what coaching style is used, athletes respond better to supportive coaches rather than punitive coaches (Smoll and Smith, 1989). Ironically, coaches who follow the prescriptive approach often express concerns related to low athlete productivity, poor performance quality and lack of motivation and commitment by athletes (Usher, 1997). In contrast, athletes with supportive coaches show greater intrinsic

motivation, enjoy participating and competing in sport, make informed decisions more rapidly in the ever-changing game and demonstrate that trust is mutual (player-player, player-coach, coach-player, coach-coach).

Although a prescriptive approach is necessary in some instances, traditional coaches can abuse their influence. Coaches are considered the 'power' within a team and this status leads to an unquestioned acceptance of a coach's leadership style among athletes and significant others (parents, administrators, public). In this environment coaches do not and cannot listen to their athletes, as they believe that if they listen they will be perceived as losing their 'power'. Such an environment ensures that coaches do what they want regardless of the personal and collective needs of the athletes.

Such coaches make many assumptions about athletes. For example, they may assume that because athletes are participating, they want to be champions and they will pay the price required to achieve this end. Often teams with this style of coaching have short-term success at the beginning of the season, but start floundering later in the season when they are not able to make decisions.

A very different pattern may be evident with teams coached on empowerment principles. Wayne Smith (All Blacks coach) agrees that if teams can keep their cool, react to what they see, talk and guts it out and be relentless, they can get to the top every time. Wayne suggests that teams with empowering approaches often tend to be:

... middling to fair earlier, but as athletes are developing a team culture, developing a way of learning, they are actually going to be more knowledgeable and understand the game better as the season progresses.

In the changing world of sport, the 'prescriptive' approach has been rightly challenged. The book '*Developing Decision Makers*' by Lyn Kidman argues that a prescriptive coaching approach takes success away from the athlete and emphasises the coach's total domination of his or her sporting teams (and/or individual athletes). The information here supports and

TESTING:

Guidelines for objectively assessing player fitness in Rugby League

By Rudi Meir

Rudi is a lecturer within the School of Exercise Science and Sport Management at Southern Cross University. Over the past 14 years he has worked as a skills and conditioning coach with professional rugby league and rugby union teams in Australia, England, South Africa and Japan. He is a contributing coach to Digi Sport's CD-ROM titled DigiLeague.

The increased professionalism of Rugby League has seen a significant increase in the expectations of all concerned. Coaches are under ever increasing scrutiny from the media and various “experts” who all have an opinion on the way they coach their respective teams. Players are constantly under the microscope from their coach, club management, fans and the media. The clubs themselves are also constantly being subjected to scrutiny about the way they promote and run their football teams within the community by anyone that has a passing interest in the game. Much of this commentary and analysis is accompanied by a very strong element of emotion and subjectivity. This is nothing new and is a characteristic of the sporting landscape that makes it so appealing to fans and participants alike.

Similarly, it is not uncommon for selection in team sports to be based purely on the subjective analysis of player performance by the coach and/or team selectors. However, this approach is no longer considered appropriate in professional rugby league. As a result, coaches have made efforts to use more objective methods to assist them in their selection of teams. Game analysis by viewing post-match videos has become very sophisticated and is typically used to help the coach analyse individual player and team performance.

While this kind of analysis can tell you “what” a player is doing it can't tell you “why”. For example, why he missed a number of tackles, or was unable to run-down an opposing player, or successfully beat a defending player when in attack with evasive running and speed. These aspects of a game place a relatively

high premium on the player's level of specific fitness and the ability to repeatedly execute the relevant skills - there is a high degree of skill in tackling but there is also a high demand placed on the various components of player fitness. Fitness, if at the appropriate level, will contribute to a player's ability to tackle repeatedly, and therefore presumably more effectively, throughout the course of a game. As a result, the coach needs to adopt a more suitable and objective method of determining a player's level of fitness.

Why Test?

Testing helps both the players and coaching staff to identify areas of strength and weakness. It can help to identify areas needing greater attention or commitment for individual players and provide important information about the effectiveness of a training programme. Results can help to identify changes in the training programme while also acting as a source of motivation or goal setting for players. In addition it can also be used to help identify if a player is ready to return to play after an extended absence due to injury.

The first series of test results, typically recorded early in the off-season (eg November), act as a baseline from which specific goals for the individual and team can be set. This should then be followed by testing relevant milestones throughout the remainder of the season as a means of monitoring progress.

In keeping with the need to be objective when assessing team performance test results can identify if players are fit enough to play in their chosen position and/or level of participation. To this end it can act as a means of cutting through the emotion and subjectivity that often surrounds a team playing below expectations. Assuming players are producing their best effort when tested, the results will speak for themselves and when used against other accepted standards gathered previously provide an accurate indication of just how fit a player is.

Identifying Standards

As indicated above, one of the key objectives associated with testing is to determine if a player possesses those fitness qualities considered appropriate for their position and level of participation. Clearly the level of fitness needed to play in the NRL is very different to that required to play at Group level. Few if any of the professional clubs are in the habit of making their squad results common knowledge. However, if they did this it would allow for comparison of fitness levels between clubs and importantly provide for a much larger pool of data relating to the fitness characteristics of specific positions. Coaches outside the professional competition could draw comparisons with respect to the fitness status of their players with those of more professional players. Such information would also be an important measure for the large numbers of talented junior players involved in the various development and scholarship programmes offered by many of the professional clubs and the various academies of sport.

Test Selection

When developing a battery of tests a number of factors should be borne in mind. These are:

Validity - does the test measure what it is supposed to measure? To be valid the tests should measure those attributes considered important to play eg; strength, power, endurance, speed, agility, etc. and the energy systems involved.

Reliability - can the test be repeated and produce the same result ie; is it consistent? Tests need to be reliable to be valid. An unreliable test would be one that produces one score on one day and a few days later produces a totally different score (assuming that all other factors remain the same eg absence of illness and injury, etc.). For example, having different testers (eg; from one occasion to the next, etc) recording times for a 40 metre sprint test with hand held stopwatches could compromise reliability. Similarly, using inaccurate testing devices or having players produce inconsistent performances (eg; due to lack of motivation or injury, etc.) from one attempt to the next could also compromise reliability. There is a need to also standardise all tests. In other words, ensure that each test is conducted in exactly the same way (eg all players wearing the same footwear, the surface conditions are the same, testing at the same time of day, etc.). In the vast majority of NRL clubs the club strength and conditioning coach is tertiary qualified

and therefore has the necessary expertise and knowledge to ensure that all tests are appropriately controlled and administered.

Specificity - are the tests selected specific to the sport and based on observation? The closer the test is in movement, muscle action and energy utilisation to play the better. It may also be that certain positions differ and could justify the inclusion of specific tests relevant to that position eg; vertical jump test for fullbacks and wingers as a means of testing their ability to compete for high balls, etc. However, it is not likely that every position on the team differs so much that different tests should be used to accurately identify positional differences in fitness. Increasingly the modern game of rugby league requires players to be versatile. The advent of the 10 metre rule and changes in the interchange bench sees coaches wanting 17 athletes with the skill, endurance, speed, agility, strength and power to play almost any position on the field!

Administration - is the test easy to conduct and could it be used with large groups while utilising minimal equipment? There is a tendency to over complicate testing and use methods that are simply too expensive (eg gas analysis to determine endurance performance), time consuming and require a high degree of technical skill to administer and interpret. Ideally much of the testing should be able to be administered at normal training and simply form part of a scheduled session using equipment that is easily accessible and doesn't require great deals of training to use.

When to Test

In total around 4-5 test sessions should be scheduled each season with the last taking place in the second half of the competition. Testing too frequently, say every 4-6 weeks as recommended by many text books, is not warranted and may actually de-motivate players because changes are likely to be minimal. Players may also become blasé about testing if done too frequently and therefore not as committed as they should be to produce their best effort.

Logical times to test throughout the season (this is for a professional team and would be modified accordingly for semi-professional and amateur teams) are:

Early off-season (November) - test a couple of weeks after the players have returned to regular training as a means of determining their baseline scores for the tests selected eg; body weight, skinfold, strength and power tests.

Pre Christmas (Late December) - repeat the previous tests to determine the effectiveness of the training programme. Over the Christmas and New Year period players typically have some time off with family and friends, however they will still be provided with a designated training programme that they follow in their own time. They will be advised that training volume and intensity are likely to increase significantly after the New Year and that they will be tested once again upon their return to determine if they have been doing what was required of them. A couple of weeks of socialising and eating the “wrong” foods can quickly undo all the good work of the previous 2-2.5 months!

Pre-season (Early January) - complete tests to measure all fitness qualities as identified in the next section (What to Test).

Pre-competition (Late February early March) - repeat all tests as above. At this stage of the year the players will have had approximately 4-5 months of preparatory training and should be at close to their peak physical condition. Testing just prior to the commencement of the season, say 1-2 weeks out from the first game, will tell you how well everyone has responded to training and will act as a confidence booster for players and coaching staff knowing that the ground work has been completed in preparation for the forthcoming season proper.

In-season (Late June early July) - this period of testing should be done ideally during the split rounds (at State of Origin time) and are intended to tell the coaching staff if their programme has maintained the gains achieved by the players during the pre-season period.

What to Test

Ideally the development of a battery of tests for any sport would necessitate some form of time-and-motion study (see RLCM Volume 20 pages 23-29). Using this approach, it has been determined that any tests selected should measure the following broad areas of player fitness (examples of tests to measure these qualities are also provided):

1. Muscular strength, power and endurance - considered essential for such playing activities as tackling, scrummaging and sprinting, etc. Typically most professional clubs test strength using exercises such as the bench press and squat. Players are required to lift the maximum weight possible for a given number of repetitions (usually 1-3 reps max). However, it's important to stress that tests such as these, requiring near maximal loads to be used, should not be used on inexperienced players because of the potential for injury.

Muscular power is most often tested using a power clean exercise or something similar (eg hang clean; high pull, etc.). The player is required to lift the maximum load possible for a single repetition while maintaining good technique. However, once again there is a safety consideration here and this type of test is not to be used by unskilled and/or inexperienced players.

Muscular endurance can be tested in a variety of ways using tests such as the 60 second sit-up (abdominal endurance) and 30 second plyometric push-up (upper body endurance and explosive power). Players complete the maximum number of repetitions possible within the designated time while also maintaining appropriate form.

2. Acceleration, speed and agility - required for tackling and the frequent periods of sprinting and evasive running conducted over short distances throughout the course of a game. This could include a test of acceleration over 15 metres; a test of speed such as a timed run over 40 metres; a test of agility such as the L-run. There are a range of tests that could be used to measure agility but whichever one is used it should (like all tests) be relevant to the movement patterns and duration seen during play.
3. Aerobic endurance - a player has to compete for a total of 80 minutes during which time he will be involved, to varying degrees, in both maximal and submaximal periods of activity. A strong aerobic foundation is essential for the replenishment of ATP and the breakdown and removal of lactic acid thereby speeding recovery from anaerobically induced fatigue. The most common test used to measure endurance capacity is the 20 metre shuttle test or a modified version that includes tasks relevant to play. A timed run over a given distance (eg 4 kilometres) or the distance covered within a set time (eg 5 minute run) can also measure this quality very effectively.
4. Basic body composition - the inclusion of basic measurements of a player's physical characteristics (e.g. weight and skinfold measurements) will provide the club coaching staff with some indication of a player's body composition. Changes to body composition will typically reflect improvements in other measures of physical fitness (eg as endurance improves fat mass will tend to decrease). These measures might also be used to monitor appropriate eating habits in players who are found to have an unacceptably high ratio of fat mass to lean body mass. This test requires technical

expertise in the use of the calipers but is relatively easy to administer. Depending on the method being used a range of body sites is selected, usually between 4-8, and the sum of the folds determined. Alternatively, scores can be used in a formula (of which there are literally dozens and most of which producing different results!) along with the body weight of the player to determine percentage body fat.

There are any number of tests that could be used to measure the qualities identified above. The important thing is to ensure that these same tests are used in subsequent tests. Clearly some tests are not appropriate for young and/or inexperienced players and those with pre-existing injuries/illness. Further, tests such as those identified here should only be administered by someone with appropriate qualifications and expertise.

Test Order

All tests should be preceded by a suitable warm-up which is standardised for all players and utilised at all subsequent tests. Inform your players in advance when, where and what will be tested and advise them to avoid activity that might negatively impact on their ability to produce their best effort in the 24 hours before testing. They should arrive with the required footwear, etc., suitably rested, hydrated and in the right frame of mind when they arrive to be tested.

Due to the energy utilisation demands of each test and the fatigue that is accumulated from one trial to another and one test to another, it is important to sequence tests in a way that will minimise the negative impact of fatigue on performance. On this basis a logical sequence would be:

1st Do body weight and skinfold measures prior to testing and if necessary over several days;

2nd Tests of muscular strength and power should be completed on a separate day to all other physical tests and followed by 48 hours recovery prior to completing the remaining tests;

3rd Complete the agility, acceleration and speed tests; followed by

4th Tests of muscular endurance; followed by

5th The test of aerobic endurance last or possibly on a separate day.

For the test of agility, acceleration and speed players should be allowed 3 trials of each test in order to identify their "best" time for each test. A suitable period of recovery should be provided between each trial in order to facilitate complete recovery before the next

effort. This should be standardised for all players and for subsequent tests.

Feedback

Having tested, it is important to provide the players with feedback about their performance as quickly as practical. Obviously, the players will know how they have performed as soon as they complete most tests. However, it is unlikely that they will be able to recall their result from their previous test or how they rate with other players within their group (ie forwards and backs). As a result, a complete summary of results should be provided to all players for their consideration. From these results individual players can be identified that need to have their training programme modified in order to overcome areas needing improvement, etc. Similarly, a report (see example opposite) should be prepared for all members of the coaching, management and medical staff so that a complete picture of all players progress is provided and comparison with previous test results is possible.

Providing feedback to all those concerned also gives the whole process of testing meaning and serves to reinforce its importance as a tool to monitoring individual and team progress over time. It is a powerful motivational tool for players and timely delivery (within a week of completing the tests) of feedback will ensure that they approach the next test period with the required degree of motivation and commitment.

GOLD COAST SEAGULLS BACKS TEST 3 - January 1995						
NAME	WEIGHT (kg)	SKINFOLD (mm)	IRM SQUAT (kg)	IRM BENCH PRESS (kg)		
Adrian Brunker	95.3	+1.6	44.0	+0.8	206.0	+14
Russell Buisan	89.0	-0.3	41.6	+1.6	185.0	0
Craig Coleman	75.3	+0.8	40.7	+0.7	Sick	115.0
Andrew Duenemann	81.3	+1.7	34.8			

**GOLD COAST SEAGULLS
Pre-Season Test (January, 1995)**

To: Don Furner, John Harvey, Phil Economides & Kyle Connor

From: Ruth Meir

Date: 19th January, 1996

Subject: Brief report on Test No. 3 results

It was hoped that this test would identify any significant drop in physical performance measures recorded during the previous period. Given that training now focuses more on increased running activity and specific team work, combined with the reduction in weight training sessions to 3 per week, the programme is designed to maintain gains achieved previously (ie in terms of strength etc.). However, it would be anticipated that, over the period leading up to the start of the competition, some improvement in speed and agility will be recorded.

Backs Summary
Comparison with Test 2 results as a group (average)

- slight drop in body weight (-0.4 kg)
- lower skinfold (-5.4 mm)
- marginal increase in squat (+2 kg)
- marginal drop in bench press (-1 kg)

The small drop in body weight appears to be completely attributed to a reduction in body fat. This is due to the increased emphasis on running activities since returning from the Christmas break. Fortunately, this appears to have had no adverse effect on player strength.

Number: _____
Average (± S.D.) _____
Lowest _____
Highest _____
Range _____

Comparison with the same time last year
Compared with the test results from the same time last year, this group are on average

- 0.9 kg heavier
- marginally higher skinfold (+2.4 mm)
- 6 kg stronger squat
- identical bench
- 0.24 slower 40 m time
- 0.32 faster 40 m time
- slightly higher 6 minute run distance (+17 m)

This comparison suggests that the current group possess a slightly higher degree of muscle mass than at the same time last year. While there is little difference with respect to strength scores, it should be remembered that the current group has a number of scores from players who have only had limited weight training experience. In light of this fact, the strength level of players is very encouraging. This point is reinforced by the higher standard deviation (which is a measure of the variation within the group) recorded for this current group compared with last year.

Combining Skills and Conditioning



Alan Wilson - Parramatta Eels Assistant Coach
Hayden Knowles - Parramatta Eels Strength and Conditioning Coach

Written by David Haynes

It seems us ex-footballers that cried with despair each and every time our coach opted for a draining fitness session over a skill orientated one, might have to pull on the boots again. With the onset of professionalism, which has allowed trainers increased access to players, the trend is to combine conditioning and skills sessions, so players are acclimatised to using skills while fatigued. Parramatta is one side to adopt this new training philosophy - achieving impressive results. Two of the Eels' key training personnel Alan Wilson and Hayden Knowles, believe professionalism has given trainers the time to structure sessions more intricately.

give them time to recover so their next session is good quality again. The results therefore are increased a lot more."

Giving players long recovery breaks is important in today's training regiments, particularly when the players' bodies are taking a pounding week in and week out. As Knowles stresses, ample recovery time also means the players will be mentally focused when other sessions come around. "Trying to do a speed session when they're fatigued is a waste of time," he said. "Years ago they had to fit everything into two nightly sessions a week which meant by the time the speed session came around the players' bodies were

Skill is going to be part of everything we do, and we never want to change from that

"I believe with the move towards professionalism it gives you a lot more time to do a lot more things," Wilson, Parramatta's assistant coach said. "I was actually playing ten years ago, working a full-time job and coming to training for two or three hours, and you were probably a bit limited in what you could do." Nowadays though, the trainers get a lot more time to prepare sessions for players, which is why Wilson believes rugby league players are 'bigger, faster and stronger' than yesteryear's equivalent.

Knowles, Parramatta's strength and conditioning coach, says the quality of work you can now do with players is far superior to past years. "They may of have had the ideas ten years ago but trying to squeeze it all together, you don't get the quality we get now," he said. "We can get a really good quality session and

fatigued. We get more time with the players now, and subsequently our results are better than what they used to get."

Something that hasn't changed too dramatically over the years is the emphasis trainers put on skill drills. The Eels are one of a growing number of clubs who try and incorporate as much skill work as possible. "We want to put as much time into skill as we do any other facet of our game whether it be strength, speed and aerobic conditioning," admits Wilson.

"Skill is going to be part of everything we do, and we never want to change from that. Everyday we do strength, speed or conditioning we will do skill with it. We're probably limited to three or four weight sessions a week, but there is nothing really limiting us doing five or six skills sessions a week, because

they're not as physically demanding, and repetitive skill drills often tend to have the most beneficial results."

Parramatta even employ skills into their conditioning sessions, such is the value they place on certain skills in the modern game. "I would say at Parramatta we would devote 90% of our conditioning to have some sort of skills factor in it, skills under fatigue," Wilson said. "Rather than introduce the ball in January, at the very first session they turn up to at Parramatta the ball is in their hands, and we get them to do 90% of their aerobic conditioning using skill."

Knowles agrees: "We don't get them to a point of fatigue and then introduce the skill, we introduce the skill at the start, and they continue to do the skill as long as they can maintain the standard." Knowles says if the standard starts to decline he'll stop the drill. "We don't like to practise it when it's poor," he said. "We get them doing the skill in an exercise until they fatigue and once it becomes poor we stop it, because we don't want to rehearse being bad under fatigue."

While skill drills are a valuable commodity at all levels of league coaching, the problem junior coaches can encounter is relying on the same drills over and over again. As Wilson and Knowles outline repetition is a key aspect to the drills, but constant repetition more often than not leads to boredom amongst the players. "I don't know if it is a thing of coming up with new drills all the time, it is more new ways of teaching them," Wilson said. "If you've got one skill and you've only got one way to teach it you can only do it so often. When you've got one skill and 15 ways to teach it, it becomes whole new training because the players never get bored and they're happy to do it."

The invention of new ways of doing particular drills is something Wilson and his colleagues commit a large portion of time to. Not only it is keeping the players on their toes, but encourages the coaching staff to develop new ideas. "They're the same drills but we just disguise it, put it in a different suit or a different dress so the players don't recognise it straight up, but they're actually doing the same thing," Wilson said. "We've done that with our conditioning as well. Rather than doing your stock standard 200 metre, 400 metre and two kilometre runs, jazz them up in some way. Make them competitive because that way there is a bit more interest when the players turn up, they seem to have a better mental approach."

The Parramatta staff don't rest on their laurels when it comes to the gym either. "It's the same in the gym," admits Wilson. "Hayden (Knowles) has got to keep

coming up with new ways to teach the same lifts they've been teaching for thirty years. It's all about finding a new piece of equipment, putting it in a new spot every season, changing your gym around, and just making things new."

While the Eels' extensive use of skill drills may be comparable with other clubs in the NRL, their approach to training for limited interchange must be somewhat unique. Unlike other sides, who had long runs and hefty bike rides as part of their pre-season programs, the Eels felt on the main they 'had enough athletes not to warrant a major aerobic conditioning overhaul.' "I did hear some stories about some hellish long bike rides and runs, and I think with limited interchange there was this thought that we need players to play more time," laments Wilson.

"The more 80-minute footballers you could have the better. We were in a position where we had athletes such as the Hindmarsh brothers and Andrew Ryan for instance, that were 100 kilos and could play 80 minutes, and averaged in the 70 minutes last year. We didn't really see the need to get them any fitter. They were doing 75 minutes under last year's unlimited interchange, which was supposedly faster and more powerful than this year."

Even though Parramatta's trainers didn't alter the way the entire player group was conditioned, they do see some merit in gruelling fitness sessions. "I think the mental aspect of a real torturous session is good, and it does have a place," Wilson said. But as Knowles reinforces, enjoyment is perhaps the catch-cry to Parramatta's training regime. "Enjoyment is the big thing, full-time players need to enjoy training as much as young kids," Knowles said. "They have to enjoy it all the time otherwise they get bored. In the old days you did what you had to do and got out of there, but we've really got to keep them enthusiastic, and make them like coming to training."

The challenge for junior coaches, as it is for those at the NRL level, is to innovate training schedules. Just because your side needs fitness work doesn't mean game related drills should go out the window. Wilson and Knowles demonstrate that by combining the two, you can not only make your players fit but match fit. Knowles says: "In coaching kids it is even more important to do the games (game-type drills). If you flog them they won't even want to come and play footy any more. With the games, they're practising the skills all the time and enjoying it." It comes back to that trusty old adage, 'you play the way you train.'

Passing Drills

Unopposed Passing Drills to Develop Good Technique for Quick and Soft Hands

Passing is an essential skill for Rugby League however many players lack good technique. To achieve results good catching and passing techniques should be emphasised at all times as well as communication between players.

Ball control is the major factor in winning and losing games. The skills of catching and passing the football must be taught correctly and reviewed and adjusted at all levels of the game.

The message 'controlling the football wins games' should be paramount with coaches in developing these skills in players.

RLCM would like to thank Dave Ellis, Digi League, John Dixon, Brisbane Broncos, NSWRL Academy and Andrew Hill, Parramatta Eels for their assistance in compiling these drills.

Visit the **RLCM website to order Drills Handbooks**
www.rlcm.com.au

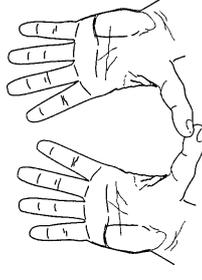
Passing Skills of Rugby League

STANDING PASS

- Grip - thumbs on top of the ball
- Extend fingers along the ball
- Weight on closest foot to receiver (front foot)
- Swing arms towards target
- Hands continue to point to target after ball is released

RUNNING PASS (see front cover)

- Grip - as for standing pass
- Weight on leg furthest from receiver ("lean away")
- Turn head and shoulders towards receiver
- Hands extend towards the target
- Aim the ball slightly in front of runner



RECEIVING & CATCHING A PASS

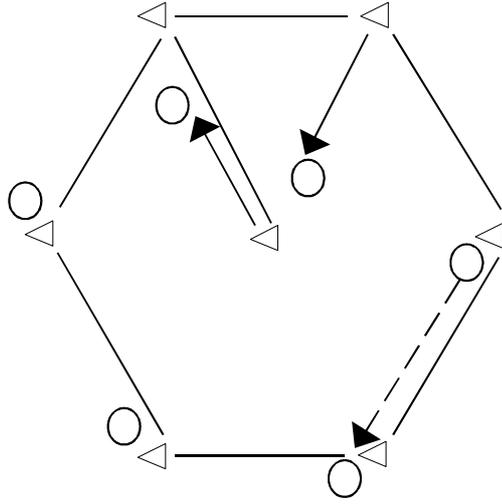
- Relax body to receive
- Hands up in front of chest with body facing towards passer
- Receive ball in hands (gridiron style as in diagram)
- Fingers to form half circle upwards and slightly bent towards passer
- Thumbs touching and resting on top of each other to the bottom
- Back of hands to face the chest
- Watch ball into hands
- Upon catching, grip ball with thumbs and hands, as per standing pass
- Thumbs on top of ball, anticipating quick release to next attacker

RUNNING IN POSSESSION (see front cover)

- Carry the ball in both hands
- In front of the body, chest height
- Transfer to one arm to allow fend/swerve
- Lean forward for balance

1. Speed Pass Wheel
2. Star Drill
3. Speed Pass Square
4. Passing Circle
5. Quick Hands
6. Traffic Pass (1)
7. Traffic Pass (2)
8. Traffic Pass (3)
9. Pass & Support
10. Keep Away Grid
11. Elimination Tag
12. Football Basketball
13. Line Passing
14. Pairs Passing

Speed Pass Wheel



Setting

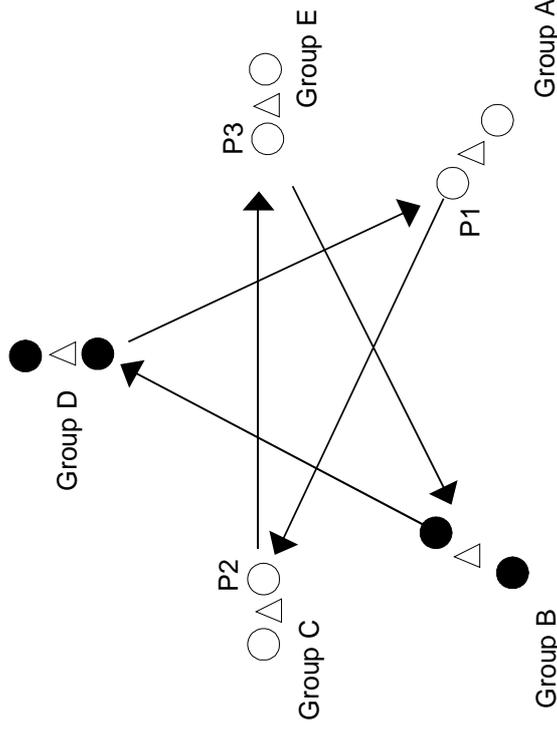
6 players, Circle Approx 8m

- Drill starts with 6 markers placed in a circle with a player positioned on each one
- Initially one player starts with the football
- On coaches command ball is passed around the circle in the direction specified, after each player has passed the ball he must run to the centre of the circle, touch the marker and return to his original position
- Progress to two footballs, an even number of players should be used and the drill starts with footballs directly opposite each other

Points

Add a competition aspect into the drill by counting passes within a selected time

Star Drill



Setting

10 or more players, 10m star shaped grid

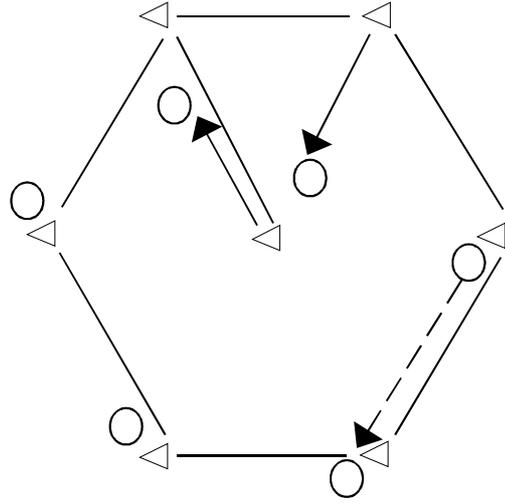
- Divide players into 5 groups and position them at markers in a 5 star shaped grid
- Group A starts with the ball
- P1 runs with the ball towards Group C and pops a pass to the first player (P2) in that group
- P2 then runs towards Group E and pops a pass to the first player in that group (P3) and the drill continues around the star

Progression

Add a second ball by having Group B start the drill with a ball and running towards Group D.

Eventually add a ball to each group so there are 5 balls being used throughout the drill.

Speed Pass Wheel



Setting

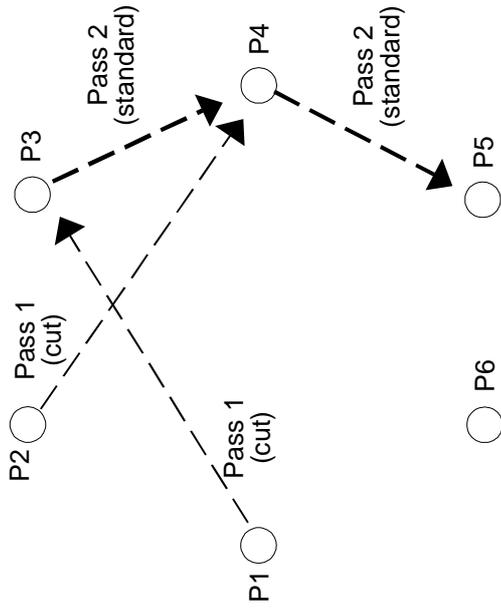
6 players, Circle Approx 8m

- Drill starts with 6 markers placed in a circle with a player positioned on each one
- Initially one player starts with the football
- On coaches command ball is passed around the circle in the direction specified, after each player has passed the ball he must run to the centre of the circle, touch the marker and return to his original position
- Progress to two footballs, an even number of players should be used and the drill starts with footballs directly opposite each other

Points

Add a competition aspect into the drill by counting passes within a selected time

Passing Circle (Cut One, Pass One)



Setting

6 players, 15m circle

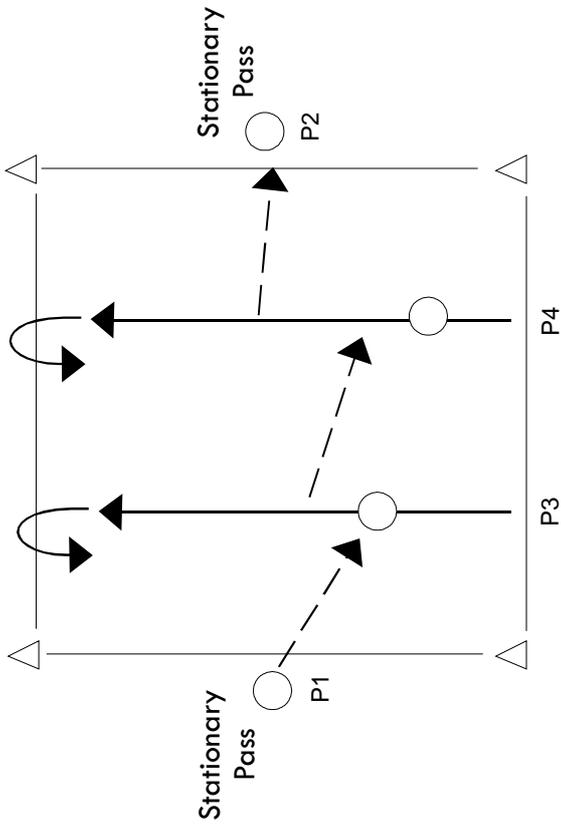
- Equally space 6 players around a circle
- The drill starts with P1 and P2 each having a football, on coaches command they each make a cut pass to their left
- The receiving players then make a standard pass to the players on their left
- The new receivers then throw a cut pass to their left and the drill continues
- P1 and P4 will have to remain very alert as they will be passing cut and standard passes
- Restart the drill with P2 and P3 originally in possession

Progression

Add and extra player so all players will have to remain alert as any player may end up with 2 balls being passed to him.

Start the drill with initial passes being in the opposite direction.

Quick Hands

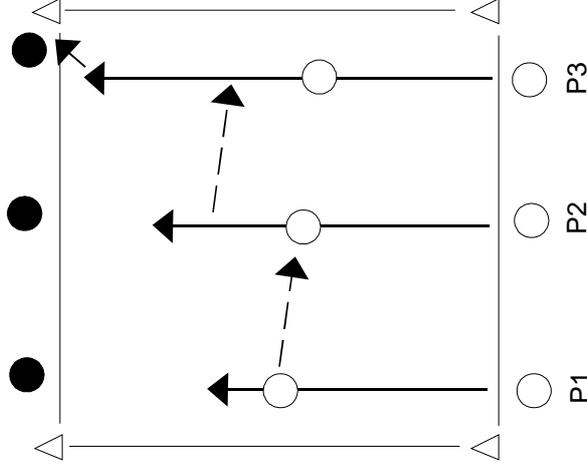


Setting

4 players, Grid 10m X 10m

- P1 & P2 make stationary passes to P3 & P4
- P3 & P4 run back and forth across the grid making and receiving quick passes

Traffic Pass (1)



Setting

Minimum 9 players, Grid 10m X 10m

- P1 passes to P2 who then passes to P3
- Drill progresses with the introduction of a second group running in the opposite direction creating player traffic
- Once players are proficient, increase the length of the grid and players running speed
- Have the group about to receive the ball run out from the line and receive the ball
- Players should rotate positions after each run through



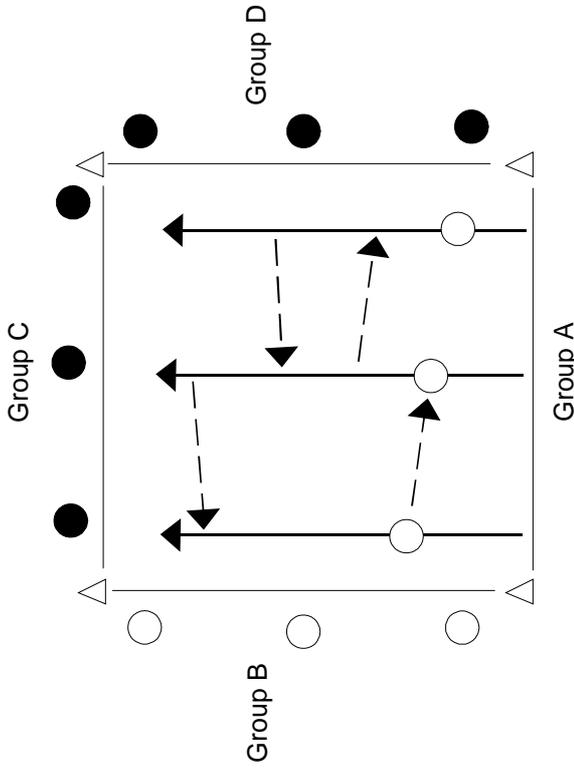
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Traffic Pass (2)

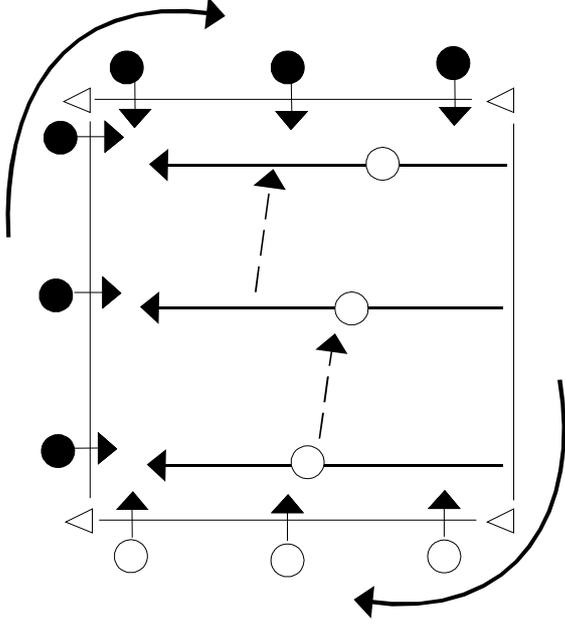


Setting

4 Groups, 3-4 players per team, Grid 15m X 15m

- This drill is broken into 3 stages
- STAGE 1: Groups run forward and back across grid making as many passes as they can. Introduce competition by counting the number of passes made in a 30 second time limit
- STAGE 2: A second group is introduced (Group B) with players performing the same drill, however they run at right angles to Group A.
- STAGE 3: Introduce 2 more groups so there is a group running from each side of the grid, players perform the same drill as described above. Continue to add competition element of drill and nominate one player from each group to count passes.
- Have players rotate positions

Traffic Pass (3) with Rotation



Setting

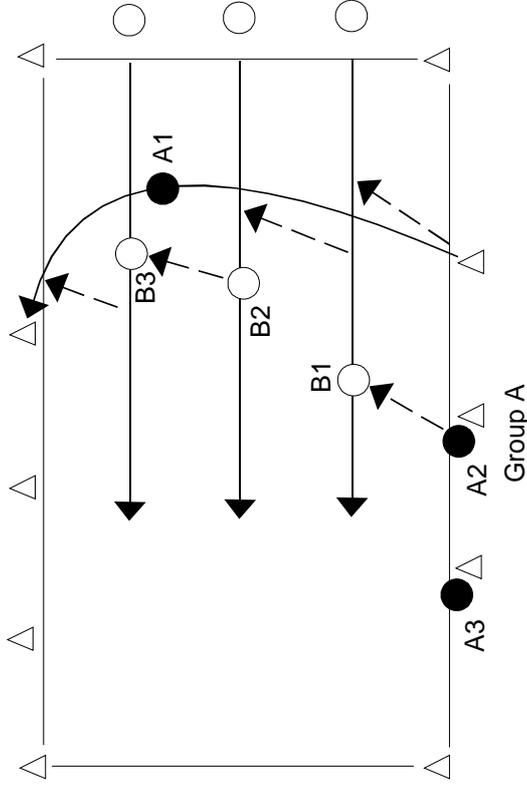
4 Groups, 3-4 players per team, Grid 15m X 15m

- This drill continues from 'Traffic Pass (2)'
- Groups evenly space themselves along the sides of the grid
- The player on the right hand side starts with the football
- On coaches command players run through to the other side of grid passing the ball down the line
- The end player then places the ball on the ground and all players move to their right and line out along the next side of the grid
- The player that placed the ball then picks up the ball that has been placed by the group before and passes the ball out and the group continues through the drill

Points

- Drill should run continuously, player picking up the ball should do so on the run.
- Communication within each group should be emphasised.

Pass & Support

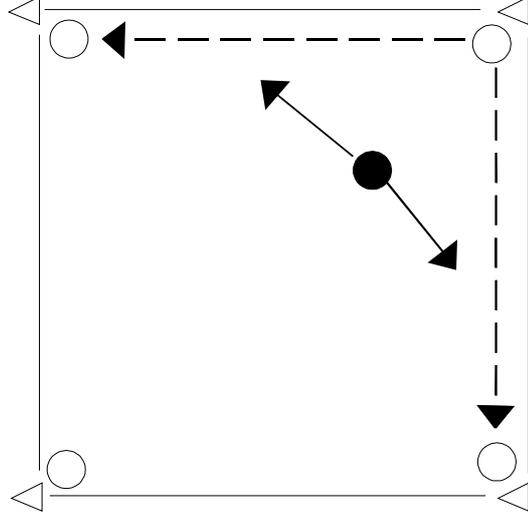


Setting

9 players minimum, 30m x 15m channel

- Divide players into Groups of 3
- Position markers on the side of the grid, note that they should not be directly opposite each other
- Group A is positioned along the side of the channel and each player is given a football
- The drill commences with Group B running down the grid with player B1 receiving a pass from A1, the ball is then passed down the line
- Player A1 backs up and receives a pass from B3 before adopting a position on the first marker on the opposite side of the channel
- The drill continues with A2 passing to B1 etc
- When Group B reaches the end of the channel, they turn and then run back down the grid receiving passes from Group A players who are now positioned on the opposite side of the grid

Keep Away Grid (1)



Setting

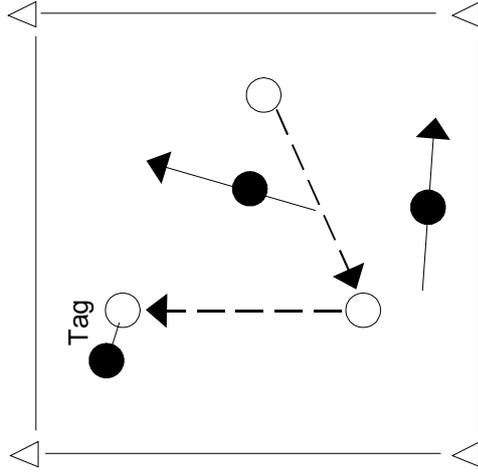
5 players, Grid 5m X 5m

- One player is positioned on each corner of the grid and another in the middle of the grid
- Players on the corners pass the football amongst themselves attempting to keep the ball away from the player in the middle
- The player in the middle must attempt to intercept or knock down the pass
- Progress to having two players in the middle of the grid

Points

Add a competition aspect into the drill by counting the amount of intercepts or knock-downs

Elimination Tag



- Team A
- Team B

Setting

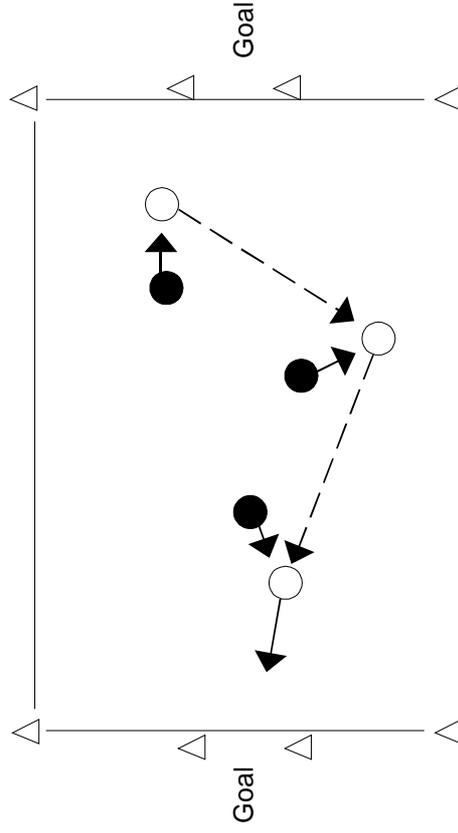
2 teams, 3 players per team, Grid 10m X 10m

- Team A players pass the ball amongst team mates and attempt to tag members of the other team when holding the ball in two hands
- The player with ball in hand can not run with it
- Once player has been tagged he is eliminated from the game
- One player may re-enter the game each time a mistake is made by the team passing the ball

Points

Communication and off the ball positioning are necessary to make the tags

Football Basketball



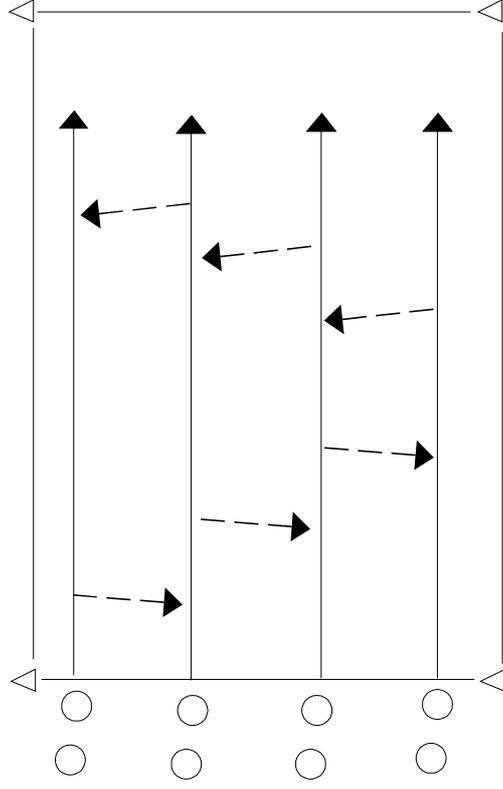
- Team A
- Team B

Setting

2 teams, 4-5 players per team, Grid 20m X 10m

- Divide players into 2 equal teams
- Team A starts with the ball
- Players can pass the ball and move in any direction in an attempt to score a try by running through the markers at each end
- Attacking gets 2/3/4 possessions in their attempt to score
- If the ball is dropped possession changes to the other side
- Having an additional player who always plays on the side of the team in possession allows for more scoring opportunities

Line Passing

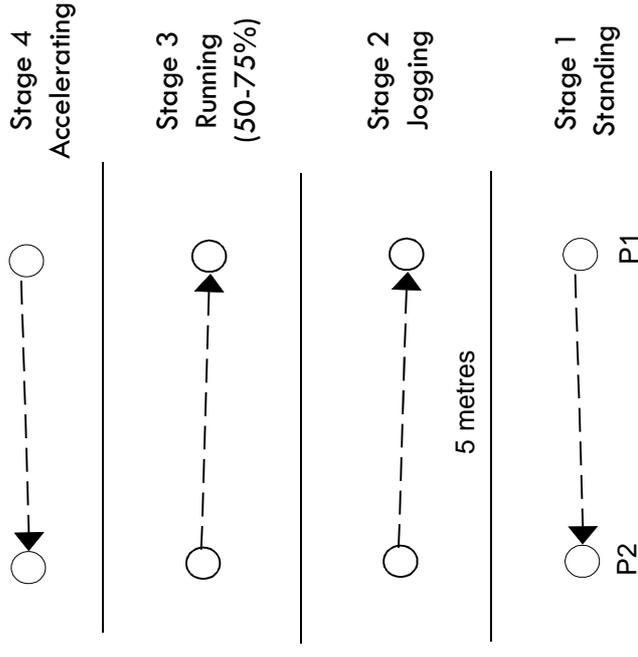


Setting

3 Groups - 4 player per group, Channel 20m X 15m

- This drill has a progression of 4 stages
- STAGE 1: In Groups of 4 players run to the end of the channel passing back and forth. When the first group has reached the end, the next group heads off. Once all teams have gone through, repeat the exercise with players returning back down the channel
- STAGE 2: As in stage 1 but players immediately return back down the channel, passing the ball through the player traffic. Players should rotate positioning in the line with each run
- STAGE 3: Teams are positioned at each end of the channel, with one football repeat drill in relay fashion running at 3/4 speed
- STAGE 4: As in stage 3 but players run at full pace, passing the ball down the line only once and popping the ball to the next group at the end

Pairs Passing



Setting

2 Players per group, Channel 5m X 15m

- This drill has a progression of 4 stages
- STAGE 1: P1 & P2 stand no more than 5 metres apart, players pass ball between themselves taking a step with their outside foot and then passing
- STAGE 2: Same as mentioned above however this time players pass while jogging back and forth along the channel
- STAGE 3: As mentioned above but players increase pace to 1/2 to 3/4 speed
- STAGE 4: From standing start players accelerate over the 15 metre distance making one pass each

Points

Emphasis for this drill is on good passing technique

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