

Be a better youth coach

This article, from the International Rugby Technical Journal, gives you some short steps, not massive changes, to improve your youth coaching this week.

1 Think small

Children have a huge capacity to learn, they soak up enormous amounts of information, assimilate it and then promptly forget it next week. Exasperating as it may seem, the learning capacity does not automatically lead to an ability to carry out what you coach week in, week out.

So focus on achieving small changes in their skills, building up over a number of weeks. They are not being reminded every day, but once a week.

In a practice situation this might mean that a core area might be revisited every week, with reiteration on the elements that improve the execution of the skill. For instance, if you are working on rucking, the key elements might be introduced in week one, then practiced in some form every session for the next month. The whole improvement should then be observed in a month's time. So, don't "do rucking" one week and then come back to it in a month's time, hoping that the skill will be adequately replicated.

2 Talk less, say more

Most young minds lose interest quickly, whatever the message. So, spend less time talking – after sentence five you have probably lost quite a lot of the audience. The ratio of doing to talking should be in the region of 5:1. When you stop training to say something, say it, repeat it, move on.

3 Finish on time

Ignore the desire to take the practice beyond the official finish time, even if you need to cover more. Think of yourself as much as your charges – you may not possess some of their boundless energy, but remember that many will be wilting at the end of a practice anyway. 90 minutes is more than enough time to achieve all you need for that session. Short and sweet is better, leave them wanting more.

Another upside of finishing on time is you control the "taxi" service. Shorter practices encourage a prompt arrival by parents.

4 One voice, one message

Many junior teams are lucky enough to have more than one coach. Sometimes parents will take a proactive semi assistant role. But there are inherent dangers – lots of well meaning comments can confuse the overall message. Coming from different voices, most of whom have at least some implied authority, means a player can be under several influences and may even shut out the key messages.

Before each session, it is important to agree who is leading each section of the practice. Then decide who is going to talk, when and most vitally what is going to be said. The "corporate" language of how a skill or strategy is to be performed must come as a constant – even if a coach does not agree with what the others are saying.

As the session progresses, the lead coach can turn to other coaches for specific comments. Otherwise, the other coaches purely encourage or reiterate.

More difficult is the "one voice, one message" with sideline parents. It is a brave coach who faces the parents over the corporate view, especially when a particular parent is perhaps telling their sibling to perform differently. The Rugby Coach strategy is to take the practice as far away from the parents as possible!

5 Little feet, little distances

Junior matches, even up to Under 14 and Under 15 level, can take place in a small part of a larger pitch. The real distance is often covered by the big, fast player who skirts around the defence, or even through it. Most of the others progress short distances, with short passes and short kicks. Practices should reflect this – cut down the distances covered in drills to match the reality for many players.

Ten metres would be a good guide distance for most drills. Anything further creates a split between those who can keep up and those who are too slow. Keep the players working in the skill zone, rather than having too many players "chasing" the drill. 