

UNDERSTANDING LEAGUE RUGBY – A PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDE BY DAVID TRUEMAN

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Winning positions are created and losing positions rectified through concentration, responsibility, leadership and consistency of play.

Season 2006/7 saw Rotherham Phoenix, the amateur section of Rotherham Titans, enter competitive leagues for the first time following a highly successful season in the South Yorkshire Merit Table. The team has an average age of 22 and is a talented side that started the league campaign well organised and fit following an excellent pre-season training regime. Coaching was focused on a well organised set piece, simple plays to exploit speed of the outside backs, focus on 'creating and using space' and maintaining a high tempo.

The team's perceived weaknesses were the lack of physical size of the forward pack and few players with experience of league rugby.

The season started well with a win in the first league game, followed by victory in the national cup competition against a team from a higher division. However, things quickly faltered with a series of defeats; the reason for each was our critical errors rather than creativity by the opposition.

In each game we produced spells of rugby of genuine quality only to concede scores due to errors.

Typical Scenario:

Rotherham, playing with pace and high tempo, score a well worked try out wide.

At restart, opposition kick long. Rotherham fail to deal with ball and concede 5m lineout. Opposition scores from driving maul.

Try by opposition leads to immediate panic, causing failures in performing basic skills (kicks sliced, passes dropped, tackles missed, restart fails to go 10m).

Mistake concedes possession and field position.

Leads to increase in confidence for opposition.

Leads to second try.

Finally we regroup, but without the confidence to turn position round. We either try too hard and make further mistakes or go into our shell and play slow, predictable rugby.

No game is identical but causes for defeat are the same; failure to execute basics leading to setback leading to further panic.

The obvious answer as a coach was to practise skills in a pressurised environment during training sessions. However, players were able to demonstrate excellent skills in these training sessions. It became apparent that to turn around the position we were in would not be about how we played the game but in understanding reasons for our frailty, reducing occurrence of basic errors and maintaining patience.

First it was necessary to produce statistics to allow us to pinpoint when errors occurred. The recording of these statistics over the course of two games provided a validated insight for coach and players, which clearly showed that almost all errors occurred after breaks in play.

The highest number of errors occurred within five minutes of the following:

- Half time.
- After a try by the opposition.
- After we scored.
- After an unsatisfactory refereeing decision.
- Quick penalties by opposition.

Interestingly, where players accepted the referee's decision, they maintained concentration even when the opposition took quick penalties, whereas when players felt the referee's decision was unjust, concentration slipped considerably.

Now we had an understanding of the problem, we needed to develop strategies to prevent reoccurrence of these concentration lapses.

Although the statistics we had gathered were presented to the collective, we decided to focus on specific groups to develop preventative measures and call for leaders within the team to recognise triggers and call for heightened response.

Leadership – Captain and senior players recognise the triggers when we might lose concentration or panic and send out the message –

- Stay focussed and DO THE BASICS RIGHT.
- Call for an extra 10% effort for the next five minutes.
- Use injury stoppages to regroup and restate focus.
- Make sure we start second half at high intensity (we started to pass a ball around after drinks and discussion).
- Absolutely no criticism when mistakes are made, instead talk about collectively making up for the mistake, an extra 10% for the next five minutes?

- When extra effort is called for, the call should be supported by example from the leaders i.e. captain and senior players.

Consistency of play – Tactical Decision Makers (Half Backs in our case)

- Use first 20 minutes to understand how effective our strengths are and where the opposition weaknesses are.
- If a play or tactic delivers results, stick with it until the opposition work it out then switch tactics to exploit any change in their defence.
- If a play or tactic is not working, try something else. **DON'T GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS** (examples: don't keep kicking to their full back if he catches everything and runs it back 30 metres, don't kick for touch if their lineout is working really well).
- Be prepared to play safe at crucial times, i.e. at kick offs following tries conceded, make certain the ball goes 10 metres even if it guarantees the opposition possession.
- Take responsibility for bad ball and don't move pressure backwards.

Responsibility – Teams within teams recognise threats and communicate to ensure we have it covered.

- Back row – recognise danger of blind side and discuss before scrum, eyes up, hit behind gain line, scrum half mobilise other forwards to break and be effective.
- At ruck, late arrivers take good guard positions, cover blind side first and communicate.
- Back line communication, individual responsibility for opposite number, collective responsibility for organisation and look around rather than at the ball.
- Full back – communicate with wingers to work back for kicks, support allows attacks.
- Attack the ball in the air, don't let it bounce.
- Team responsibility to follow up kicks to negate threats.
- Collective responsibility not to give away penalties.
- Accept personal responsibility to execute individual skills correctly under pressure.

Patience

It was also necessary to let the players understand that teams can and do recover from large points deficits. In training we put together a semi-opposed session where, from a lineout on halfway, we played through three phases to score. Without informing the players why, we performed the exercise against the clock and reduced the time taken to just under twenty seconds.

Then we agreed as a group to the following statement:

"It takes less than 20 seconds to score a try. Concentration, a cool head and total commitment can, and does, deliver the desired result. Ten points behind with five

minutes to go is not a losing position for a team with leadership, concentration and responsibility”

This exercise of understanding our problem and building measures in response has had a remarkable effect on the performance of the team. The team now pre-empts any loss of concentration because players understand when it is likely to occur. Players no longer panic when they are losing and the exhortation “20 seconds” is used as a rallying cry.

Despite our early season woes, we finished fourth in Yorkshire 5 South East and have produced some remarkable performances as our confidence has grown. We have maintained our commitment to expansive rugby and, most pleasing as a coach, we have turned round games we would have previously lost. Notable instances include a 22-22 draw after being 22-0 behind and a 27-25 victory after being 20-0 behind.

I can’t wait for next season.