

# GAME SENSE BY GARY TOWNSEND

The author is a Coach Development Officer for the RFU and is based in Gloucester.

The article is based on his own views and also reflects the view of the RFU Coaching

Department. These views have largely been shaped by his own experiences, but credit must

also be afforded to Lynn Kidman and her book, Athlete Centred Coaching, which has enabled

him to order and rationalise his thought processes.

### Are we coaching children too early?

What would happen if we didn't allow children to participate in any 'organised' sport? They could still come along to their local club, be given a ball, be observed and loosely supervised by adults (in these days of health and safety), but generally they'd be allowed to get on with it.

Well it's obvious - isn't it? All hell would break loose, there would be anarchy. Nothing would be organised, cheating would be rife and nothing would get done.

Hang on a moment, though, isn't this exactly what children do in the school playground? I used to marvel on my various trips to a primary school, both professionally and as a parent, and when I observed students in secondary school, how active and organised the children were. Even at an early age – from 'individual' games such as touch, chain touch, chase, "bull dogs" (although that is banned in most places, the children seem to be able to organise the odd game) and hopscotch to the more complex team games such as football, basketball, cricket, and rugby – there is organisation in what is seemingly a loose construction. There are no referees, no managers and no coaches. All we see is kids having a great time, discovering for themselves new and complex skills of evasion, team work, rules, spatial awareness – and, heaven forbid, some tactics too.

There are a few other things, apart from referees, managers and coaches, also missing. Certainly there is no warm up (after two hours of sitting in the classroom, I doubt if any teachers have observed masses of children doing twenty minutes of stretching and light exercise before embarking on a full-blooded game of footie), very little cheating, certainly no diving (no referee to react, you see) and, most importantly, no crying or obvious or prolonged disappointment at the result. In the playground, participation is success; by all means play to win, but better to play and lose than not play at all in this valuable 'free time'.

Now before I am accused of being some liberal, anti-competition idealist, let me assure you that I love winning, have always played to win, cheat when I play Monopoly and sulk when my son has beaten me, yet again, on the Playstation. I am



not advocating that we excuse ourselves from all responsibility, or that we don't guide and assist the young players to progress, but I believe that we are in danger of overcoaching our players. Furthermore, I don't agree with the view that England players don't have the skills necessary to compete at International level. I think they do, but believe they don't always know when or how to best use them, and that this comes from prescriptive, drill-based coaching when those players are younger. This is further exacerbated by the 'elite player to elite coach' cycle that we have adopted in this country "I have been coached this way, therefore this is how I will coach," seems to be the norm.

From various discussions and observations (and through my early experience as a teacher), it would appear that most children attending a rugby coaching session can expect to do a protracted warm up (often without a ball), then a variety of drills (more than likely based on last week's performance in a fixture), before being allowed to play a game at the end (if they've been good), which probably bears no resemblance to the drills they have spent the past hour practising. I realise that this may be extreme as an example and there are some excellent exceptions, but on the whole I suspect it rings some familiar bells for the vast majority of coaches in this country.

The reason for writing this article has developed from a number of events which have really supported my own view that a 'game sense' approach is the way forward. It is not meant to be a definitive article on Game Sense and certainly any potential practitioners out there would find benefit in reading far more informed and informative literature than that which follows

#### 1. Teaching.

During my many years as a Physical Education teacher, I taught a variety of sports, most of them, I suspect, badly. The one area in which I was confident was rugby. I used loads of drills, had all the rugby videos and could organise the most complicated Auckland Grid in the South West. My rugby sessions were pretty standard fare - warm up, skills/drills and game to finish.

However, it was football and hockey that shaped my present style of coaching. These were two sports with which I was not too confident. I am not a keen fan of either sport, but it was on the curriculum, so I had no choice. After some feeble attempts at some skill practices with the 'lower ability' groups, I decided to give myself what I perceived to be an easier life by having mostly games. This would take the form of a 'world' series over the five or six weeks, with the sides being picked at the first session and then staying in those teams throughout the next few weeks. What I found surprised me:

- The majority of children enjoyed the sessions and expressed that enjoyment.
- The format encouraged a sense of 'team' and, perhaps even more importantly, a sense of 'worth'. Although they were not particularly able at the sport, the children were in an environment in which their strengths were valued and could be expressed.



- Their skill level, understanding of tactical play and confidence improved.
- The level of non-participation decreased.
- Many children who had been on the fringe of being selected for the 'A' group were moved up to that group with new found confidence and tactical appreciation.
- The approach helped not only the children, but also me, to understand and appreciate more the tactical aspects of the game and the skills necessary to play the game better.
- The children were more receptive to a brief skills session the following week, based on their understanding from the previous week that to play the game better their passing required some work. The great thing for me was that they would often practise this themselves as I chased the stragglers from the changing rooms.

It could be argued that these outcomes were achieved because the children were 'streamed'. That is a fair comment, but the point is that in the mainly drill-based rugby sessions, which were also 'streamed', there was nowhere near the same level of success. That only changed when the sessions changed to a more game-based emphasis.

## 2. Africa.

In June 2005, I had the fortune to be invited to Uganda as part of the charitable organisation Tag Rugby Development Trust (TRDT), whose aim is to introduce tag rugby to underprivileged children throughout the world. TRDT are a great organisation who have performed wonders in Uganda. They have a range of volunteers, from fairly experienced coaches to people who have never played nor been involved in rugby. This was their third visit to Uganda and their second to this particular area.

Their programme basically entailed a one week programme of coaching in primary schools (Year 6, where the age seems to range from nine to fourteen). Each class had roughly between fifty and seventy children, with four or five coaches assigned to each class. After six days of coaching, squads of ten were selected to participate in an eight-team festival. TRDT do truly remarkable work, particularly as the youngsters' English is not great.

On this particular 'tour' they had worked with four schools and a further four schools from the previous year's tour were invited to the festival, but they would not receive coaching.

Unfortunately, I was only able to attend the three days of their final week's programme and, as a consequence, had very little coaching input. However, I did make the following observations:



- The children were being coached in a very drill-based way, with lines or 'waves' of passing.
- In a short period of time they had learnt to spread out, in the conventional way, and passed the ball along the line.
- The players' basic skills were quite good and, due to their lifestyle, their athleticism and evasive skills were excellent
- In the festival, the schools who had been involved the previous year, but who had not received subsequent coaching, were noticeably better.

It is this last observation that interested me most. The schools newly introduced to rugby played well, and had adapted to the game remarkably quickly, but at times they played too laterally and had a tendency to be tagged, stop and then pass - as they had been coached.

The schools that had been involved in the previous year's festival were noticeably better, even though the players had changed. The teachers had done well to keep the game going, but had done this mainly through playing games, as they had little or no coaching experience and certainly no previous experience of rugby. The players were better simply because, for twelve months, they had been allowed to play. They had sorted out that a short pass to someone coming from depth and at an angle created havoc in the defence. They had developed play to run between two defenders to take both of them out of the game and had learned that passing whilst moving, rather than stopping to pass, is far more effective for getting behind defenders. They had also developed a range of (uncoached) passes, such as one handed, behind the back and overhead, all of which were effective and which would probably have been coached out of them as a definite 'no-no' in England. I also witnessed a couple of players (both of whom were about eleven years old) make a break, slow down to draw the last defender and then execute a perfect pass (left or right handed) to a support player running from deep and wide. Many of them, and I had never seen this before in England, took the tag and immediately replaced it onto the belt whilst the attacker was still moving. This is a really difficult thing to do and actually contravenes the rules of the game, but it was fantastic to watch, as were their celebratory somersaults and flick-flacks, which were also self-taught.

How had they gained these skills? How did they develop such understanding? They had been allowed, by accident or design, to play and to discover for themselves. The teacher had given them a forum (the game) and the players had been able to explore for themselves the options available to them.

#### 3. Community Rugby Coach.

I recently had a discussion with a Community Rugby Coach with a background in teaching and who, despite his relatively young age, has a substantial experience of coaching. He had been involved in a six-week programme with fifteen and sixteen year olds at a secondary school.



There was a mix of rugby players and footballers, but as part of their PE programme the lads had to undergo a unit of rugby. The rugby players would turn up with their pads and head guards on. Invariably, during a game, they would look to take contact, go to ground and call for the drive over whilst perfectly presenting the ball a metre from the body, or call to their team mates to "set it up" and look to establish a driving maul. The footballers, however, would look to find space, endeavour to avoid contact and do their utmost to keep the ball moving. Even in contact they would look to pop the ball off to someone else. The effect was to keep the defence on the back foot and disorganised, as opposed to the often slow ball and reorganised defences of the ruck/maul. The footballers, certainly in open play and in attack, were playing a much more dynamic and interesting game.

This would seem to suggest that the rugby players had been conditioned to play in a certain way, which at the age of sixteen was going to prove to be difficult to 'unlearn'. They had skills, but used them conservatively and often did not understand when to execute them. The footballers, however, lacked some of the 'rugby' skills of their counterparts, but their awareness of space and understanding of how to utilise it was much sharper. In this case, the very fact that they had received little coaching was the key to their playing a faster attacking game.

#### 4. India.

In November 2006, I had the opportunity to go to India, again with TRDT. This time I was able to explore my theory that a 'game sense' approach would bring faster and improved results. I was able to introduce the children to the game from the very first session. I first of all asked if they all knew soccer, which they all did, and then told them we would play soccer, but there would be no kicking. They were shown how to score, how to use the tag belts and then they played. More rules were gradually introduced, until after some short time of getting used to the ball, the tags, running, passing, scoring and playing together, they were actually playing tag rugby and passing backwards. The players were never told to 'stop' when they were tagged and, therefore, some of them naturally looked to pass when still moving, which automatically took them beyond the defence. The great thing was that they were clearly and visibly enjoying the game and had quickly taken to it. Those coaches who had coached through 'drills' on previous tours were amazed at how quickly the players had adapted and were at a stage in an hour and a half which had previously taken at least five times as long.

I am aware that some of my colleagues would have children passing back immediately, which has some merit, but I used a game with which they were all familiar (football) to introduce them to a game with which they were not. I would do the same in the UK, but accept that there may be an argument against that. The underlying principle in both arguments, however, is to get the children playing games immediately.

The children were allowed to explore the game in the subsequent sessions, with all children from each class (sometimes sixty+) being involved. The children were



guided to pass effectively rather than chest pass, but were not discouraged from one handed, over the shoulder or reverse passes. The better players very quickly discovered that running onto the ball at pace and between defenders was an effective way to gain ground, and gradually, through observation and communication, they influenced others to do the same.



Eventually the best ten players (including a minimum of three girls) were selected to play from each class (with up to sixty children per class) in the festival of eight teams. This happened in Bhubeneswar and Calcutta with the following results (those in bold were game sense coached):

## Bhubeneswar participants:

**KISS Tribal School** - two classes of sixty children per class (two teams).

Ulkamani - one class of thirty five children (one team).

Patia - two classes of sixty children per class (two teams).

Tapovan - one class of sixty (two teams).

**Pada Sai -** one class of seventeen children from the smallest school (one team).

Festival winners: **KISS Tribal School** 1st (Game Sense). Runners-up: **KISS Tribal School** 2<sup>nd</sup> team (Game Sense).

Plate Winners: Pada Sai (Game Sense).





In Calcutta, of the four teams who had been coached by means of Game Sense, one won the festival cup and one the festival plate.



In both cases the festival was used as a means for players to express themselves and success was measured by performance rather than by results. It was only when writing this article that results were considered. Those results are mentioned here only to demonstrate to those who might be sceptical that a game sense can bring success in terms of results. However, it is important that those results are seen as a by-product of good performance, not as the over riding goal.

#### View from outside the profession.

Martin Hansford, Tour Leader and Chairman of TRDT, provided me with an interesting insight into the development of the coaching techniques on Tour since their first trip in 2002. He writes:

"Running the TRDT tours is a time-consuming task, particularly because of the choice of destination, and there is a never- ending list of things for the Tour Leader to sort or fix. Traditionally this meant I (Martin) spent little or no time actually



coaching, becoming involved only at the later stages for tournament preparation or refereeing.

When I did attend I always noticed the enthusiasm for the warm-up games. I also noticed, in the drills, that the neat lines of passing waves highlighted a growing level of distraction from the children not "on the ball" at that specific moment. It wouldn't be uncommon to see four of the five children from a passing wave to set off, leaving one child staring at his/her feet due to waning interest in an eight second run through every five minutes.

Reflecting on the change in approach to coaching on TRDT tours over the five years since it began, I never felt any overwhelming draw to lead coaching sessions initially.

Drill-based skills activity seemed to suit one person leading a group of up to fifty children with a few helpers here and there. However, 2006 and the introduction of game sense coaching provided an opportunity to break the classes up into smaller groups and coach "playing" with them for an hour at a time. Anyone that spends time with children will tell you this is when they are at their most engaged and engaging. As a result I did more coaching on the India 2006 Tour than any of the previous ones."





#### Summary.

I am convinced that the Game Sense approach is the way forward, but I readily admit that it also suits my style. I do see that technical and highly detailed coaching is essential for those who aspire to be elite performers, but that detail does not inspire me, which is why I do not aspire to be an elite coach. However, I will temper this with the view that we have a tendency, in this country, to coach intricate and highly detailed technicalities to the detriment of understanding, natural flair and intuition, which serves children so well but which, in far too many cases, we coach out of them.

Children are brighter than we give them credit for. Unfettered, they will discover ways that work and also make mistakes which are essential to their development and learning. With occasional intervention, guidance and support they will become more self-confident, assured and, most importantly, able to adapt.

We are confident enough to allow our own children to discover how to crawl, stand, walk and run. We accept that they will stumble, trip, fall over, bang into things and occasionally hurt themselves, but we are confident that this is a process they must follow in order to be confident and able. They learn to go round, step over or duck under objects. Occasionally we might aid their development by letting them use walking aids, removing obstacles, whilst we encourage and congratulate them. I doubt that anyone has ever attempted to coach a young child how to walk by explaining the intricate mechanics involved and then letting them have a go. However, there appears to be a 'need' to follow this process when we coach sport.

The key is having the confidence to allow players to explore, of being able to hold back and allow players to discover for themselves, to step in only occasionally to ask questions, to raise awareness or offer guidance and advice. As an inexperienced and less confident coach, I sometimes felt that I should justify my existence by actively and obviously 'coaching' through drills. It is also true to say that occasionally, when I had not bothered to think about the session, or when I was tired, I did allow the children to 'play a game' because it was easier for me. This should be exposed for the sham it is. Game sense requires careful thought and planning (what and how). Objectives should be set, changed when necessary and reviewed at the end of the session. There should be a large degree of flexibility and observational and analytical skills must be tested to the full. Patience is a virtue.

I would ask only that you consider an approach which gives opportunity for players to explore and discover solutions for themselves, to resist the temptation to give the answer, but work with them, when circumstance dictates, to explore and discover a solution together. You might be surprised at the result, not only at the solution, which may be different from the one anticipated, but at the rewards to be gained by the process of obtaining that solution. Challenge your players by challenging yourself.



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