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Moving to Game Sense - One Coach's Story



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Three months gone, and it's still not right! Moving from a traditional, instructional coaching approach to games-based coaching is hard work. New research from Australia has followed the season-long journey of one coach as he attempts to change his coaching style. It provides a useful insight into what it actually takes to change a coaching style.

Introduction

This research investigated how a community Australian football coach (let's call him Chris) adopted the 'Game Sense' approach to coaching. Australian football is described as 'a high intensity intermittent movement sport' where 'configurations of play emerge, dissolve, transform and reconfigure moment by moment'. The game is inherently variable, and adaptability among players is essential.

To Chris, what he read and was told about Game Sense fitted in to how he thought about the game. He saw this as a chance to move away from a 'traditional' approach to one that suited what he saw on the field of play.

Chris's idea of 'traditional' coaching was when techniques were progressively developed through coach demonstration/explanation followed by practice. He was breaking down technique into small parts and showing his players how to put it back together again. Such an ordered, production-line technique did not correspond with what happened during the dynamic, complex matches. Chris felt his current coaching was unable to give his players the complexity of decision making and flexibility of movement required – and Game Sense seemed to be the answer.

The Game Sense approach

In the early 1990s, the Australian hockey coach Rick Charlesworth mentioned Game Sense as a player development tool within the concept of 'designer games'. This would integrate technical, tactical and fitness training into a match-like context, with the coach acting as the facilitator who allows players to think through solutions.

As it developed in the 1990s, the differences between the more common type of coaching and Game Sense started to emerge more clearly. Rather than see player development as a linear process of 'learn technique then play', the Game Sense approach regarded these as complementary – they happened at the same time. This was especially evident in coaches' session plans where drills and instruction were replaced by game play mixed with questions and answers. This also required a change in coaching style towards more of a facilitation role, guiding players to solve problems, rather than providing the answer directly.

However, the history of Game Sense does not match the neat thinking behind the theory. Reviews in rugby league and Australian football found it has made limited impact, especially at community level. Reviews of games-based approaches (Game Sense and others such as Teaching Games for Understanding) have found the shift in practice required for coaches has made it difficult to implement. It challenges their depth of understanding, their ability to act as facilitator rather than director, and questioning skills. In addition, the planning process for sessions can be daunting and often leads to just playing games while neglecting skill development. Many of these were evident in the story of Chris as he tried to change his coaching style.

A coach's story

Chris is a coach of a high school Australian football team. After hearing about Game Sense, he felt it was a coaching approach that would be more appropriate for the type of players he wanted to develop. To help adapt his style, Chris approached a university researcher who agreed to act as a consultative facilitator; someone who would provide advice or help Chris talk through an issue.

Other ways that Chris's story was pieced together was by him keeping a reflective journal of each week, interviews with the researcher and a survey of players. In addition, the researcher attended training sessions and matches, and kept his own notes. The three main themes that emerged over the season were:

- changing session plans
- clarifying the relationship between objectives and the style of the session
- understanding that there is more to Game Sense than playing games.

'Must learn to get the balance right'

An analysis of Chris's session plans at the start of the season showed he was very much in the traditional camp – directive 'skill and drill' activities coupled with fitness and conditioning. As the season went on, the plans became more game-centred but still did not reflect Game Sense as they lacked any obvious conceptual or skill-development connection to the activities. It was only towards the end of the season (a full five months) that the plans reflected the ideas of complementary aspects of play and learning technique.

In his reflective journal, Chris acknowledged the difficulty in the planning process and wrote that he 'must get the balance right' between the game and overall session objective. There was also the need to balance when to let the games flow and when to use direct instruction to achieve the specific task objective.

One of the most interesting parts about Chris's journey, which may well explain why games-based coaching has not taken off, is that the sessions he was trying to plan were completely different to everything he had seen before – either as a coach or as a player. As such, it was difficult to understand what 'right' was as he had nothing to work from.

When to step back, when to give instruction

The most difficult part of the journey for Chris was getting the relationship right between what he was trying to achieve in a session and the activities he planned. It was about creating a consistency throughout the session, which again is in contrast to the idea that this approach is merely about playing games and seeing what happens. As he wrote in his reflective journal:

Focus concepts can't just be stated during a team meeting at the start of training, they must be reinforced through the activities and the dialogue within the practice session.

For Chris, there was a concern about balancing a session. At times, he thought he would be going into too much tactical depth and not affording enough time to the mechanics of movement or kicking etc.

This was similar to other research in junior rugby that discovered coaches take time to understand what role to play – when to step back, when to freeze play or practice to take advantage of a teachable moment, and when to give clear direction or instruction.

The word 'games' suggests something simple, but it is in fact the sophistication of games-based models such as Game Sense that gives them both their advantage and disadvantage.



A coach's story (continued)

Not just bibs and playing

On reflection, Chris has come to appreciate that Game Sense is not just about 'getting bibs on and playing each other'. In an interview, he commented on how play practices and game simulations to stimulate learning were dependent on the coach 'setting them up correctly'. In this first year, he felt he had got too caught up in running games and did not spend enough time observing players. In future, he expects to use injured players or team leaders to run the game so he can get back to the coaching element – again, the coach is facilitating skill development through games rather than facilitating games.

However, Chris also felt there was a role for drills (or more traditional styles of coaching) when tied in to the focus of the training session. He noted that while players liked the greater emphasis on game play at training, players also seemed to need the drills 'to make players feel better about their skills'.

Did the players notice a difference?

After five months of commitment and hard work from Chris, the final question is whether it was worth it. Did the players notice anything different? The answer is yes and no.

On the one hand, players noticed that training had changed, that it was more game simulated, involved greater emphasis on decision making and perhaps most interestingly included 'harder and more complicated things'. Five of eight players who assessed the season indicated that training had been better this year, and they had perceived a benefit of enhanced transfer from practice to match day.

But some players saw fewer benefits than their teammates as they wanted more emphasis on skill work and drills. It could be argued that, just as coaches are used to a certain style of coaching, so players are also used to receiving a certain kind of coaching. As the researcher concludes, some players are more comfortable with a games-based approach than others.

Learning from the research

Chris was a coach who wanted to develop a new coaching style, and he put considerable effort into achieving this. For the majority of players, he got results, but it did take a full season of planning and reflection to come to terms with the approach. His story shows that games-based coaching is not as easy as it sounds. While in theory, it makes sense, it is no game! In fact, it is a sophisticated approach that requires rebooting your sporting and coaching experience.

If there are any lessons to emerge from Chris's story, they are:

- Planning is important. This approach does not mean just playing games. Instead, it involves coordination of overall session topics and activities. It took Chris a full season to get his session plans correct.

- Learning when to sit back and when to step in is critical to running a good session.
- Try not to get bogged down as a facilitator of activities. If you can get others to organise activities, you can concentrate on developing your players.
- Not everyone will appreciate this approach. How do you manage the culture change, not only within yourself, but with your players?

If there was one final lesson to learn from this story, it is that this is difficult, and you should seek help wherever possible. Do you know of other coaches who are using a games-based style? Perhaps you can observe them, talk to them or get them to observe you.

References

If you are interested in finding out more about this area, this summary is based on the article below:

Pill, S. (2016) 'Implementing Game Sense coaching approach in Australian football through action research', *Agora for PE and Sport*, 18 (1): 1–19.

If you are interested in this subject, further reading is available in the following research summary:

sports coach UK Research Summary 24: Asking Good Questions, <http://joom.ag/VBTp>

Other interesting articles are suggested below:

Light, R. and Evans, J. (2010) 'The impact of Game Sense pedagogy on Australian rugby coaches' practice: A question of pedagogy', *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy*, 15 (2): 103–115.

Pill, S. (2012) 'Teaching Game Sense in soccer', *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 83 (3): 42–52.





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