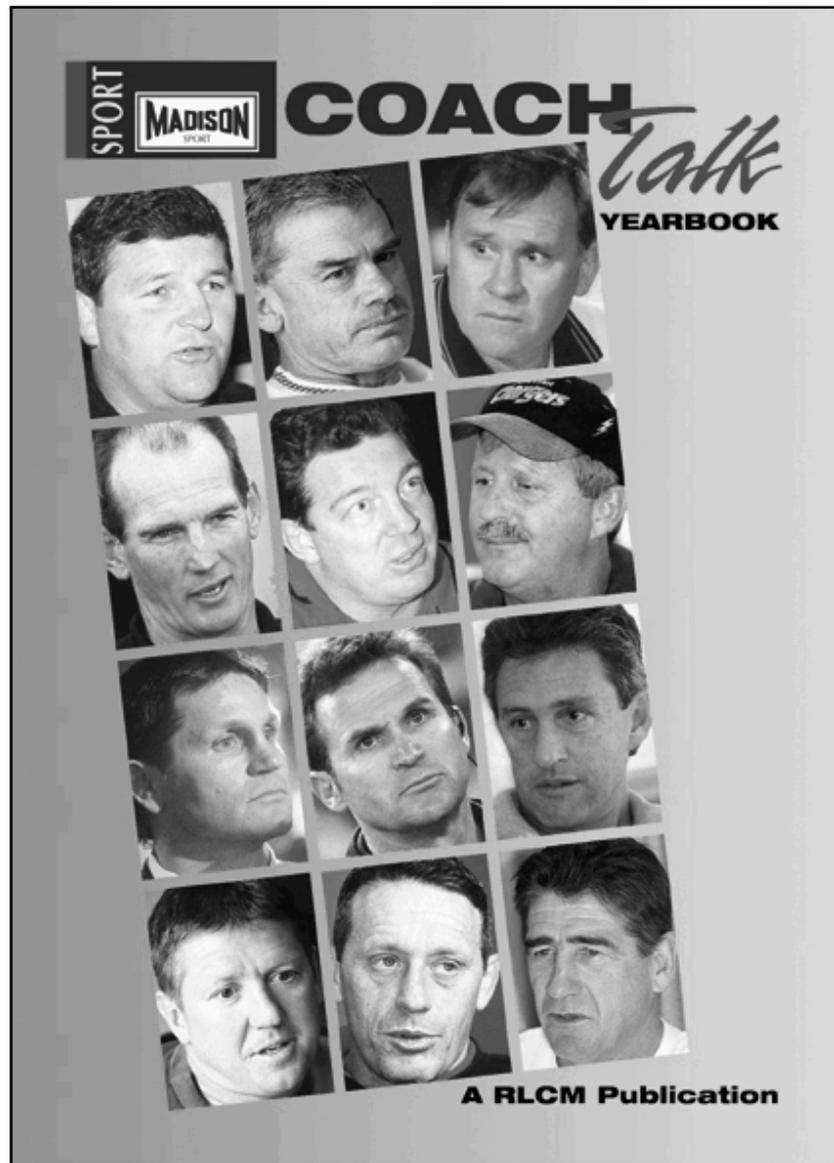

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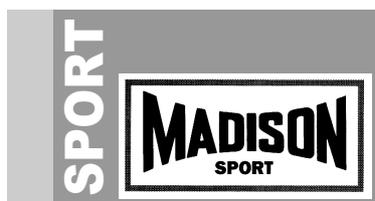


Delve into the minds of 12 experienced coaches with this up-to-date and comprehensive look at the fun, fame and frustration associated with coaching at the highest level Rugby League has to offer. In a pressure-cooker environment where situations can change in only a split second, heroes are made and yesterday's losers become tomorrow's unemployed.

With thoughts from Premiership-winning coaches, including Wayne Bennett, Chris Anderson and Phil Gould, Rugby League fans are sure to be enthralled by this sneak-peak at an exciting world that remains largely out of the public eye. Philosophies, trends, training tips and techniques - all are contained in this first ever edition of Madison Sport Coach Talk Yearbook.

Never before has such an extensive and revealing look at the world of Rugby League coaching been chronicled. Carrying the full support of all coaches interviewed, the Coach Talk Yearbook is a must-read for any serious follower of Rugby League, whether they be involved in coaching, playing or simply supporting from the stands.





COACH *Talk* YEARBOOK

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Written by Robert Rachow

A RLCM Publication

Introduction

Ongoing changes to the face of global Rugby League have not been entirely resigned to the categories of rationalisation, profitability and administrative restructuring. Those in the know say the real metamorphosis is taking place on the field, not off it. Positions are being redefined, players are becoming more intelligible and attention to detail is now at the forefront of most winning teams. More than ever before, the ability to acclimatise to change is being stamped as the hallmark of long-term sustainable success.

Bearing the brunt of this continual cycle of adaptation and re-evaluation are the coaches. Armed with their wits alone, a coach's task is to mould a forward thinking team that can adjust to, and perhaps even exploit, any rules or opposition weaknesses that may be presented. To carry off such an assignment with aplomb requires a great deal of personal experience, a capacity to learn quickly and an eye firmly planted on the future. It is not an easy task by any means and the credentials needed are suitably reflective of this.

Madison Sport Coach Talk Yearbook brings you the innermost thoughts of those who have walked, or remain walking, the ultra-thin tightrope between acclaimed genius and public failure. For the head coaches of NRL clubs around Australia and New Zealand, Rugby League is a way of life that can be both challenging and rewarding. On a stage that is mercilessly unforgiving, these men have worked tirelessly to keep abreast of the latest trends, while at the same time endeavoring to remain true to themselves. In this book, they offer advice, intuition and an indication where the game is set to head over the coming years. Their insights, while not always corresponding, form an important stepping stone towards a prosperous coaching career and provide valuable lessons in life.

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Wayne Bennett

Dynasties in Rugby League are unsurprisingly few and far between. To maintain a body contact team that is top class in all faculties of skill, fitness, desire and confidence is of the utmost difficulty and rarely has an establishment or coach been able to sustain such precision over a lengthy period of time. There have however, been the exceptional standouts - the early 1950's South Sydney team, the 1981-83 Parramatta Eels and of course the phenomenal St George team which won 11 premierships through seasons 1956 to 1966.

Lately, it has been the Brisbane Broncos, four time premiers and perennial Finals contenders, that have emerged slightly above the rest of the pack. Coached for 12 successive seasons by Wayne Bennett, a man who is as deep in thought as his teams are acquainted with success, the Broncos have failed to miss a Finals Series since 1991. The impressive streak has ensured Brisbane remain the trendsetters and benchmarks in most facets of the game. And as importantly as it is to all coaches, the sterling record has kept Bennett in the top job as long as he wants it.

But the wiry ex-winger has not remained content using the same strategies to see his side through each season. Like an animal fighting for survival in the wild, Bennett lists the ability to adapt as both his trademark and his forte.

"I have had a bit of luck along the way, but I suppose the bottom line is that I keep producing winning football teams," Bennett offers.

"I know if I coached the same way as when I started with the Broncos in 1988, there is no way I would still be here. My attitudes and philosophies on how the game of Rugby League should be played have not altered all that much. And I still only have two half-time talks - one when we are winning and one where we are losing. But in 12 seasons, things have changed a lot and I really have had to adapt and adjust to the different styles of play.

"Of all the successes I encountered in 1998 (coaching Queensland, Australia and Brisbane to Series wins and a Premiership respectively), the one thing that really pleased me was being able to be a part of State of Origin again. It had been more than 10 years since the last time I coached at that level and what it said to me was that I had retained the ability to keep in touch with the game. There is not a chance the selectors would have afforded me the honour of coaching at the highest level, a decade apart, unless I had correctly adjusted to the majority of changes that had taken place. I can only hope that in the year 2008, they will see fit to give me another shot at it. That would be the only higher honour I could possibly be given."

While considered a man who guards his emotions close to his chest, Bennett has never shied away from sharing his wisdom with those who will listen. At times a philosopher, Bennett even wrote a book during the mid '90s entitled 'League's A Lot Like Life'. The book contained

his own personal thoughts on the character traits needed to succeed in life and offered excerpts from some of his favourite readings concerning integrity. The basis of his work was that the road to success in football often mirrors a similar path needed to eke out a contented existence. It is a view Bennett still maintains and it can be adapted to Rugby League on both sides of the fence - playing and coaching.

"My number one tip to all aspiring coaches is that you have to be your own man, no matter what," he says.

"If you are trying to change to beat someone who is better than you, eventually they will catch you up anyway. The pressure associated with pretending to be someone else will inevitably drag you down and more than likely, it will outweigh any benefits you may have gained. The other important characteristic I believe all coaches should have is the ability to persevere. You have to handle the hard times and never walk away from a problem, regardless of how impossible it may seem. A man who walks away is a man with regrets and he will find it incredibly difficult to regain the confidence of his team once he turns his back.

"I think it is also a necessity that a coach displays a strong interest and affiliation with the club he is representing. Whether that be as an involved committee man or by providing a respectable public face for the team, he has to contribute in some way, shape or form. I am a strong believer that the coach should establish a close knit group among his players and at the Broncos we have implemented a number of strategies to try and emulate this. We have a 'buddy' system which links players at all levels of the club with administrators and the coaching staff, and throughout the year we design competitions and events to bring them together as a unit."

A hallmark of the Broncos organisation has been their willingness to transpose ideas from other rival sports in Australia such as Rugby Union and Australian Rules. Last season, Brisbane entertained the training presence of ACT Brumbies' halves George Gregan and Stephen Larkham and Collingwood star Nathan Buckley. At times Bennett has also endeavoured to borrow ideas from peripheral vision sports such as soccer, basketball and hockey. And under the early leadership of now-Melbourne director John Ribot, the Broncos took the relatively new step of developing links with American teams, such as their NFL namesakes, the Denver Broncos.

"I am constantly looking for new ideas all the time," says Bennett. "I have been over to the U.S. a couple of times since I started with the Broncos and visited a number of gridiron and basketball franchises. It has been an eye-opener, because in many ways, you can draw parallels from their sports to ours and ascertain whether we are on the right path or not. A good method of learning for any purpose is by watching a successful example. We do it at training when we run demonstrations or practice drills. Therefore I think a reasonable method for Rugby League to progress and adapt to change is by watching and mimicking the examples of other flourishing sports. Having said that, not everything can transpire from a game like gridiron to a game like Rugby League. Their sport is all about structure and ours is about spontaneity, and I doubt anyone wants to see that change.

"If I had to pinpoint any one change that has had the biggest affect on the profession of coaching, I would say it has been the advent of video analysis. Since I began my career, I think coaching has progressed to a far more intelligent level and a great degree of that is to do with video. Jack Gibson started experimenting with it well before most others caught on and that was reflected in the ultimate success of his teams. The major advantage is that video is not subject to the vagaries of the human eye and once something is down on tape, poor memory cannot erase it. It helps players analyse their own performance in a more accurate manner than any other medium. While I don't always agree that players should comment on the performance of the team, they can pick up what they did right as an individual or what they need to do better."

Both revered and criticised for their wealth of playing talent, Brisbane are undoubted forerunners in the area of recruitment and development. While having signed a handful of established stars at opportune times during their existence, the South-East Queensland club relies mainly on a diet of locally-raised juniors, usually recommended by renowned scout Cyril Connell. However, with opposition clubs poaching from the Queensland catchment at a steady rate, how does the club ensure they have the stocks to replace the likes of Lewis, Miles and Langer upon retirement?

"The Broncos search for the kid that nobody else can see," Bennett reveals "If you target a player that is being chased by everyone, often you will end up with someone who has thoughts about moving elsewhere or is perhaps not attuned to working hard to achieve their goals. We look for a little spark of brilliance; that something special on the inside. Cyril has a fantastic eye for talent and his instincts are usually right. All-round they may not be the greatest footballer, but if you persevere and develop them to a creditable level, they will have that extra punch that others find hard to match. Quite often we have thought of letting a couple of our players go - and I am talking about guys who have gone on to become established First Graders - but we hung on and persevered and won through.

"I like a player who can slot into a variety of positions. Rugby League needs multi-skilled players and I think every position desires a person with a strong all-round game. It is a terribly sad situation when kids are stuck with one position for the entirety of their playing career. There are going to be certain restrictions on what positions they can play at different stages of their development, but overall I believe everyone should get a chance to play as many positions as possible."

Just as he recognises the importance of options for his players, Bennett also realises the importance of accepting a variety of views and remaining open to thoughts other than his own. As previously stated, Bennett credits the majority of his longevity to the ability to adapt and that adaptation has only been allowed to take place by putting aside his ego and concepts of the norm. One of the great features of sport, in any form, are the dynamics that prevent competition from becoming stale and expected. Whether they be in the form of different players with differing attributes or by playing on different surfaces or by altering the social surrounds to affect the outcome of the match. The same concept applies to coaching,

where alternate styles of approach form an entertaining reflection of human nature.

"I suppose the important thing to remember is that many things in Rugby League are dependant on personal philosophies," Bennett states.

"There are no real answers to certain problems, so most times the situation and your own personal ideas play a vital role in the eventual outcome. For instance - with a captain - depending on your type of team, you may need a good talker or maybe someone who leads with actions, not words. Alf (Allan Langer) was the type of guy to grab the ball and run with it and the others would follow him. He did a lot of things against convention and his style would not have suited some teams. But luckily for the Broncos and myself, he was the perfect fit.

"However, while there are variables all throughout Rugby League, winning still remains the most important factor for nearly every club. When you have everyone working towards a common goal, it is inevitable that structure and predicability will creep in. You can't blame the coaches, because like everybody else, they need to keep a steady job. If they find methods that work for them, it is understandable that they will stick to them and perhaps rely on them to an extent. And if coaches don't impose some form of structure to represent their own views or beliefs, then they probably don't feel like their involvement in the team is being reflected at all. As with most things in football, it is all connected to a sense of self-worth."

Coaching Tip:

While travelling is not as much of an issue for social players as it is for elite players, there is a common ground for both. The best system is the system which makes the team, as a collective whole, most comfortable and eager to play. In the NRL certain teams like to arrive at their destination two days before a match, while others prefer just one day in advance.

The most important aspect is that the coach thinks through the game day as thoroughly as possible, noting any obstacles and options available to overcome them. If the team preparation is adjusted suitably and the players remain settled, then a greater focus can be afforded to the upcoming match.

Chris Anderson

Fulton, Lewis, Langer, Johns, all these players have at one stage of their career been heralded as the best the game of Rugby League has to offer. Fulton was an undoubtedly talented centre, gifted in both ingenuity and an uncanny ability to breach defences. Lewis was a born leader, an inspirer of men. Langer possessed an unrivalled short-kicking game and the courage of a giant, while Johns has taken over the mantle with his seemingly effortless precision in attack and defence. But for all their differing styles and diverse approaches to the game, the one thing that all four have in spades is the ultimately important quality of impulse - the ability to seize an opportunity with a quick, decisive action.

Impulse is a characteristic that is often referred to as a born talent, but this is not entirely true. It is true that being born into certain family environments may alter the degree of impulse and willingness to act upon it, however, generally it is there to be nurtured by coaches and is simply ignored.

So how can this most precious of quantities be harvested in a manner that is advantageous to all parties concerned?

There is no coincidence in the fact that Premiership coaches Chris Anderson and Wayne Bennett have reached the pinnacle of success in back-to-back seasons, both at the club level and on the International arena. The duo are two of the most respected coaches currently in the NRL and significantly, they control teams that heavily accentuate all facets of competitive impulse play.

At the Melbourne Storm, Anderson presides over one of the most 'naturally instinctive' halves combinations in the world - Brett Kimmorley and Scott Hill - innate communicators with the ability to turn a game on its head in just a matter of seconds. Yet, the eight-Test veteran does not consign his thoughts on impulse towards only his most skilful ball-players, he believes every member of his squad has the ability to contribute significantly and should have the confidence to do so.

"If you sit down and watch all the videos of your team's games throughout the year, generally you will find - particularly at the elite level - that only 20 per cent of your tries come from set moves or structured play," advises Anderson.

"Therefore it is absolutely vital that you develop the players' impulse component to a higher level. A lot of players have had their careers stunted or not develop at all because coaches have imposed too much structure at an early age and, in effect, trained the skill out of them. At Melbourne we try to reverse that by teaching the players to work for their teammates and capitalise on opportunities for the advantage of the team. The psychology behind this is that players who were previously restricted won't usually feel guilty or stupid or whatever if they use their impulses to help somebody else out, rather than solely for the benefit of themselves.

"I think the mental aspect of Rugby League is everything nowadays. There is not a great deal of variance in terms of physical fitness and playing staff among the top teams in the competition. So if your team is to succeed, you cannot afford to have any one of your 17 players heading out onto the field with the slightest doubt about their job in their mind. It is all a part of preparing your players to the best of their ability. Personally, I prefer my players to be over-confident rather than doubtful in any way."

One area where impulse can be nurtured without greatly altering the structure of a team's gameplan is in the department of off-the-ball play. Sports such as hockey, soccer and basketball have long valued the importance of correctly positioned support players and although Rugby League is beginning to explore off-the-ball play with increasing fervour, there is still much improvement left to be made. Essentially this style of play focuses on providing every player without the ball the opportunity to further the team's position through an array of complimentary manoeuvres. Not only will players be in better positions to receive the ball or distract defences, the overall mind-set of the team can change from increased participation. As Anderson states, by keeping the full squad in motion, with optional directives, there are also increased opportunities for impulse to play a leading hand in proceedings.

"Certainly players appear to become more eager and enthusiastic when they feel they have a task to do and are not simply waiting their turn," he says.

"A great deal has been made of the Storm's go-forward and I think a fair portion of that had to do with our off-the-ball play. You have to consider that the game of Rugby League these days is all about speed. If your players hang back and you rely on the ball-carrier to do all the work, then your psychology, towards both speed and gaining ground, is backwardly inclined.

"Conversely, if your players get themselves involved off-the-ball, then they are becoming pro-active rather than reactive. I think impulse is better served by pre-empting what is going to happen as opposed to simply reacting, because it puts you in the driver's seat. Quite often players that rely solely on reaction tend to over-react because the pressure of the situation has suddenly doubled."

Flat attack is a concept that has been largely rejuvenated by the Storm in just a matter of two seasons. Based around a series of one-out rolling rucks, flat attack combines elements of speed, endurance, timing and agility. Largely a ground-gaining exercise used throughout the first four tackles of any set, this style of attack is intrinsically beneficial to the impulse notions supported by Anderson. He outlines space and practice as the two major factors that will aid a player to act on impulse and due to the mechanics of flat attack, believes they are perfectly suited to one another. In some instances, passes from dummy-half may verge on forward and can result in surrendering possession, but overall the former Canterbury, Widnes, Hull and Halifax winger says the positives far outweigh the negatives.

"As far as I am concerned it is a natural evolution of the rules that have been put in place to govern the play-the-ball and offside," offers Anderson.

"I think as a coach you should foremost look at the rules of the game and not worry about traditional views of what you can and can't do. When defences only had to retreat five metres, I do not think flat attack would have been a viable gameplan, because there was not enough time or area to execute it in. But now it is a competitive strategy and there is no reason why it should not be used.

"Our aim is to earn space by pushing the defence back rather than retreating to provide us with more room. We work towards a long-term goal of tiring the defence and giving us latitude to attack by concentrating at each ruck on catching the defenders one-on-one and timing our run so that we hit the advantage line at the precise moment the ball arrives there."

Anderson emphasises the importance of a uniformed approach throughout all levels of the club to attain the correct atmosphere in which impulse can be encouraged. Visits to the American NFL side Kansas City provided him with the inspiration to establish small family environments at first with Canterbury and now at Melbourne. New arrivals to the playing staff are usually teamed up with an established First-Grader, and staff at all three levels - administration, playing and support - are united in presenting the one positive, supportive attitude. This generic attitude is vital to the confidence of players encouraged to play on impulse, because doubts and contradictions inevitably lead to them questioning their decisions and hence performing below par. But expectations are not solely a one way street and, as Anderson reveals, there are certain characteristics he seeks and obligations a player must fulfil for him to closely consider recruiting them into his system.

"My pre-requisites for a good player do not revolve around flat times for 100 metre sprints or bench presses; it is all about attitude," affirms Anderson.

"Very often talented kids will arrive at a senior club with one facet - speed or size - developed to a phenomenal level, but they fall flat because they do not have the ability to play a well-rounded game and don't have the attitude to overcome it. I tend to steer away from high maintenance kids who are in your face all the time or need you to watch out for their behaviour. It puts too much stress on the team and it wastes what little time you have together.

"I am probably biased, but I think a country kid who plays First Grade bush football at 16 or 17 is more likely to succeed than a City Schoolboy rep. of the same age. Schoolboy players tend to have less room for improvement and peak at a younger age. The bush kid comes to the big city and he probably hasn't had his skills refined, but already he has the ability and generally his dedication and toughness will be better. And one thing's for sure that kid does not want to return to his home town and have everyone around him know he has failed.

"There are two theories, or sayings if you like, that I have and the first one is I tell my players I want them to do their job, but sometimes doing your job is not enough. The second is that professional athlete is not just a name - it means you conduct yourself in a certain manner and be as dedicated to correcting your faults as I am. I want a kid who can understand that."

Anderson believes part of Melbourne's success is due to their training surrounds - situated in a precinct bordered by the homes of Aussie Rules teams, athletes, basketball sides and top level tennis seeds. He says his players look forward to practice sessions, if only to glimpse running stars Cathy Freeman or Kyle Van Der Kuyp flashing past them on the outside tartan. This enthusiasm is invaluable and ensures that the bread-and-butter daily gatherings that have become part and parcel of full-time Rugby League are not taken for granted or devalued in their worth. Anderson himself admits that he loses time at training and sometimes has to be reminded by fatiguing players to stop because he loves the atmosphere so much and is still having fun after two hours on the run. And this rosy view is extended to the long-term future of Melbourne where he says 'the sky is the limit', providing the Storm use ongoing stability and success as their hallmark rather than seasonal change. This he believes, is also the key for the NRL to establish the code as the premier winter sport over coming years.

"Rationalisation has given Rugby League the best chance it has ever had to put something back into the grass roots of the game," declares Anderson.

"There will be greater profits, a better spread of talent and a chance to restructure to cater to the ordinary footballer. If they can get it right, it will take some beating from other sports and hopefully it will ensure the longevity of Rugby League as a major pastime.

"In terms of the football side of things there are also a few avenues that should be cleaned up if we want to be strong every year round. There needs to be greater structural implementation between coaches and referees, especially regarding rule changes. For example - scrums are a farce and if we treat the public like idiots, then we really can't expect them to respect the game and pay money in return can we?"

If money and effort are not reinvested and skill is not returned as the primary focus for all coaches, Anderson insists the game will suffer a desertion from both spectators and players alike. There will be no one to cheer on the Fultons, Langers, Johns' etc and perhaps there will be no one to take over from them on the field. A leaf needs to be taken from the coaching books of masters Anderson and Bennett - an impulse of passion needs to be made to secure the future of Rugby League.

Coaching Tip:

Preparing your team each week is about honesty. Be honest about the efforts of your players and expect them to do the same about your performance as coach. Identify flaws in their game in a positive manner and encourage successful players to demonstrate and help dissect how they managed to perform well the previous week.

Most players tend to be humble or are expected to act in such a manner if they are being praised, but there is value in learning from their successes.

John Lang

Of all the challenges a Rugby League coach must face on a season-to-season basis, melding individual players into a single cohesive unit is perhaps the most difficult task. The majority of great clubs throughout history have prospered on a sense of teamwork, rather than personal brilliance, but they have had to work hard to establish such unity. Outlooks have needed adjustment, gameplans have been altered and attitudes refocused in order to maximize the team's chances of success.

After six seasons with the table-topping Sharks, a short tenure as Australian Super League coach and dual Premierships with Brisbane Easts, John Lang has become accustomed to tailoring gameplans and team goals to suit differing circumstances and personnel. As the former State of Origin star alludes to, forming a winning team is reliant on combining both the strengths and weaknesses of the players concerned, with a suitable style of play.

"It really is a marriage of your philosophies as a coach and the qualities of the players at your disposal," Lang offers.

"Your style of play has to take into account the individual abilities you are working with. I try to come up with the best style of play to suit my players and then, in terms of a gameplan, I will look at the strengths weaknesses of the opposition and adjust our game accordingly. You have to accentuate the overall strengths of your own team while pressuring the opposition in areas where they are deficient. Your game cannot be reinvented every week, but you can place more emphasis on certain facets against certain teams. I try to instill in my players an awareness of what the opposition do, so they can preempt or respond suitably when situations arise. For example, we have adopted a system in defence that we can adjust depending on the actions of the opposition once we have determined their type of game.

"As far as patterns of play are concerned, they must be matched to the standard of your players. Generally, the more experienced and the better quality the player, the less restrictive the coach has to be. The balance you try to achieve as a coach is to have a basic organisational structure which enables you to operate efficiently as a team, but does not korb individual flair. The coach who can attain that is well on their way to success."

Lang's understanding of the important individual components which make up his team, also extends to the facet of 'impulse play'. While not exactly handing his players a free license on the field, he recognises the benefits of having confidence in them to stamp their own presence on the game while working within the team's guidelines. Without personal flair, indeed much of the game of Rugby League would become stale and predictable.

"Instinctive players are an integral part of the game," Lang says.

"A mark of a very good player is that he will take advantage of a half chance and either do something creative for himself or create an opportunity for a teammate. Coaches nowadays seem to work towards the correct balance of impulse and structured play. Not too many will restrict their class players. You cannot put a price on those players who can instinctively react and put on something special. Ultimately, they can win a game with a number of key involvements and for an opposition coach, that is very hard to coach against."

Once patterns of play and gameplans have been moulded to suit the specific peculiarities of the team and players in question, winning consistently becomes a major focus for the team. Certain devices like video and statistical analysis can contribute towards this in some form, but are not guaranteed to provide a consistent lift week-to-week. Primarily it is the calibre and stability of the team and its members that will dictate the level of performance given. Lang acknowledges that while it would be a dream come true for all his players to perform at their best both simultaneously and continually, it is a concept that remains largely unrealistic.

"It is what we coaches are all working for, but you can never get there," he says.

"It is the holy grail of coaching. All you can do is try to get as close as possible. A little analogy I like to make is that I see coaching as being somewhat similar to driving a faulty remote control car. You can press all the right buttons, but sometimes, seemingly for no reason at all, the car wants to veer off in its own direction and simply doesn't want to respond. You can't always have total control, but you can have a lot of fun along the way.

"I find the closest method to having players perform at the higher range of their ability each week, is to make sure you surround yourself with top-class professionals. When Cronulla had Les Davidson and Danny Lee on board, they set an example for the other players in regard to high levels of performance consistency.

"From a coach's point of view, one of the most important factors in ensuring consistency is that you make whatever the players do enjoyable. Training has to be relevant and provide a certain amount of variety. Know your players, know when to back off and know when to have some fun. Most importantly, set an example. Try to do the small things well, be professional yourself, show enthusiasm and be well organised."

But when things break down or adverse situations arise, the coach may have to address player issues that are hampering the progression towards the team's goals. Quite often these issues can be related to the mental state of the players, ie. boredom, complacency, negativity or arrogance. But rather than consider player psychology an over-riding factor in his team's success, Lang prefers to view it as one of three key areas, along with skill and fitness. And as with the other areas, he prefers to be an advisor and supporter as compared to a know-it-all.

"I think it is important to remember as a coach you are only an amateur psychologist," Lang states.

"I would especially hate to think that there are junior coaches who are trying to analyse and mess with kids' heads. It is extremely hard to rectify any long-term problems they might have, because to a great degree, I believe their outlook on life is innate. That is why I usually try to offer practical advice rather than emotional advice. You really only have to have a basic understanding of the players' mentality. Treat them properly and with respect and expect them to do the same back. Particularly towards the elite level, you should focus on them doing their job, not telling them or asking them why they should. I feel the most important aspect of a player's mental approach is that they have the drive to succeed.

"Having said that, I value the importance of emphasising the positives in everything you do together. Positives are like snowflakes, you can throw them around and if they don't accomplish anything, then they haven't hurt anybody. On the other hand, negatives are like a powerful explosive, they can be highly effective at times, but more often than not, they cause irreparable damage. As a coach your aims should be maximising player enjoyment and boosting their self-confidence."

With an eye to the future, Lang anticipates skill as the fastest growing area of improvement in the game. For example, he envisages a day when all players will be able to pass to both sides with equal accuracy and kick effectively with both feet. And he points to an increase in specified coaching, sighting the widespread use of kicking, tackling and catching coaches throughout the higher levels of the game. However there is no doubt for Lang that the hardest challenge and most rewarding experience for a coach will always be, at least in the near future, to teach and further the concept of individuals playing as a team.

COACHING TIP:

Teaching players to pass to their unfavoured side (for right handers it is usually to their right and vice-versa for left-handers) can be made easier with a simple alteration.

Instead of using both arms to pass the ball, try and spin the ball at a target using only the unfavoured arm. As accuracy and strength improve, develop a drill for normal passing situations.

Wayne Pearce

Just as nature intends that one day the majority of caterpillars must eventually become butterflies, Rugby League culture dictates that there comes a time when players face the challenging transformation from team member to team coach. But while in both instances there is a metamorphosis taking place that will ultimately forever change the life of those involved, the respective mutations work in differing directions. For the caterpillar, their new life is about expanding horizons, flying to new heights and gaining a decidedly more appealing facade. For the Rugby League player it is almost the exact opposite. The glamour and limelight of a glittering career do not necessarily equate to off-field success, the pressure to perform can be more confronting and the responsibilities increase ten-fold.

For Wests-Tigers coach Wayne Pearce, his decision to retire in 1990 was a daunting and an uncertain choice. Having represented his State 15 times, his Country 18 times and yet having never won a Grand Final, there was a definite feeling of emptiness as he turned the page to the next chapter in his life. History however, recalls that in the space of just three seasons, Pearce had returned to the fold as a coach at the elite level with Balmain, and just over half-a-decade later was appointed State of Origin coach for New South Wales. Despite the fact that the former Rothmans Medallist was regarded, even in his playing days, as a step ahead of his time in terms of professionalism and attitude, his feats are still regarded with the utmost respect and amazement by the large contingent of player-cum-coaches.

So what was Pearce's secret to handling the transition from one side of the fence to the other so smoothly?

"I think nerves motivated me a lot and although I had a bunch of people who were telling me for quite some time that I could do it, I was not convinced myself," reveals Pearce.

"I do not think there is any secret ingredient to handling it well and even a few months after I started, I was still walking around thinking 'Gee, this is tough'. I suppose the only aspect you can really draw from is that nerves are in many ways a good sign because they mean you care about what you are doing and you are afraid of letting people down.

"The toughest thing you have to get used to, as a former player, is the limited impact you have on the outcome of a game. Even with the amount of time you spend together at training these days, your destiny ultimately lies with whoever has the ball or is next up to tackle. When you are 100 per cent satisfied with your preparation and the outcome still fails to come your way, that is when the frustration begins to peak, but it makes you stronger and eventually you learn to walk away."

The veteran of 192-First Grade games realises that the makings of a good footballer and a good coach consist mainly of the same component - honesty and dedication. Preparation and professionalism were two words always associated with Pearce throughout his career and he has ensured to carry them over into his new profession, where they are possibly even more beneficial. "Jack Gibson once said that 'you can't be a mug six days a week and expect to be a brilliant footballer on the seventh' and I have really adopted that same philosophy," says Pearce.

"Preparation is the essence of a successful team. I like to cover all my angles and pluck out all the positives I can before my side shapes up for their next match. I want each player to be the best they can be and if they do not share that same attitude of excellence, then it becomes a difficult relationship. Without a good attitude to preparation, they are basically wasting their time with me.

"One activity I do is to list 18 points that I expect from each player and I tell them these points at the start of the season. If they step out of line, then I ask them to come into my office one-on-one and rate themselves out of 10 on each category. If they know they are not giving their best, I ask them what is wrong and if they honestly think they are doing alright, then I tell them why they haven't reached my expectations. Self-analysis is a great tool because it puts the onus back on the player and if they see their own downfalls, they tend to rectify them quicker than if someone else told them what to do. It also prevents the coach from having to step in with a big whip and be the 'bad guy' and cause trouble between himself and the rest of the team."

Pearce, a university graduate of sports psychology, does not limit his extent of preparation to honing physical fitness and refining ball skills. With most of his philosophies centred around types of people rather than types of footballers, Pearce separates the on-field actions of his players with the off-field mentality they carry with them. He knows that often they are not reflective of one another and if misread can be detrimental to the team.

Borrowing from innovative techniques and implementations that he craved throughout his career, Pearce has established an array of programs and systems to calculate, analyse and hopefully improve the mental condition of his troops.

"The psychological aspect of Rugby League still remains largely unexplored as far as I am concerned," the proud Tiger affirms. "I am a big fan of self-hypnosis and visualisation for players to improve their confidence and, consequentially as a result, their game. At Balmain, we had a wall with three faces on it; the first one was smiley, the second one was normal and the third was frowning. Players had to put a tick beside the face that corresponded to how they felt and it would give the staff a fair indication of what to expect and how to approach the day. It also lets the coach identify any overall team problems with morale like mental fatigue from over-training.

"In the past there was a perception that the head coach should be a born psychologist and that was just unfair. Although I have trained for it, I still use an outside counsellor because I don't trust myself to be unaffected by the time I spend with my players. Besides, players tend to bottle up their feelings in front of their coach and only unleash their thoughts when confiding with someone who is a safe distance away from them emotionally."

Although considered the blue ribband event of the Olympics and the epitome of physical greatness, the 100 metre sprint combines a limited amount of variables and resultant reactions. Conversely, Rugby League is akin to having the starter's pistol fired 500 or so times - with players having to react in a different manner each time. The array of situations that arise on the football field can commonly be prepared for through game simulation training exercises. But the ability to react is a deeply ingrained thought process, which Pearce believes, should also be approached from a psychological angle.

"Football in every code is totally concerned with reaction," observes Pearce.

"Every moment players are in the game, they face a choice of options and unless they can react well, they will never succeed at the top level. Better players are readily identified by being able to make quicker and more valid decisions while under the pressure of a tight situation.

"Training your players to react properly through drills is a fairly effective way of improving this and, if challenging, it can be both fun and rewarding if the desired objective is achieved. However, I think that psychological analysis is of greater worth and can impose much deeper patterns of thought than running through a simulation."

Now at the helm of the newly-formed Wests-Tigers, Pearce envisions many more changes to take place in the world of Rugby League over following years. While amalgamations, rationalisation and commercialisation were the catch phrases of the late '90's, Pearce sees game-related issues as the real talking point upon entering the next millennium. He predicts new areas of expertise and new systems of player development to rise. "The areas where there are enormous gains left to be made are, in my mind, agility and skill," he says.

"Keep in mind that you can combine a whole host of fitness skills that incorporate both skill and agility. I am not fully convinced that the physical aspect of things has reached its apex and if we can train these components together, then you really are going to see some amazing athletes. The development of periodisation techniques for training have also helped improve the ability to fully concentrate on specific areas.

"We had a few American gridiron players trial with us a few years ago and they were magnificent athletes, but didn't have the mental link to do things like catch and pass in succession. If we proceed ahead with all the aspects I have listed, then we are going to see a hybrid player who

is exceptionally gifted in terms of speed and strength, but can also perform at a high skill level with greater agility."

In closing, Pearce emphasises three invaluable motifs for coaches to live by. He says at the starting level, a coach's priority should solely be to help every player reach the highest level of their ability. From there, the focus should be on having the courage of conviction and establishing a sense of your presence, your goals and the steps you intend to take to get there. And finally, as the goal appears on the horizon, you should focus on being your own worst critic and being prepared to learn more so that the outcome becomes a perfect idealisation of what you set out to achieve at the very start.

Coaching Tip:

When identifying problem areas for your team, be sure to phrase your criticism correctly. If the team experienced difficulty with kicking in the last game, be wary of making broad statements like "Our kicking on the weekend was terrible".

Such a statement provides a feeling of helplessness and fails to identify footholds with which the team can try and improve from. Instead, "Our kicking on the weekend really suffered when they put us under pressure" identifies the problem area in an easy to break down component and is not as outlandishly negative.

Positive thinking is essential when you confront the reasons for certain reactions and you must eliminate your own pre-conceived ideas of structure or you will never really understand."

Phil Gould

Goals, no matter how desirable, almost always at some point appear unobtainable. In everyday life these goals may arise in the form of losing weight, finding a better job or any other strain of self-improvement. In Rugby League though, these targets usually pertain to being placed near the top of the ladder, or when broken down to week-by-week aims, beating the better teams on a regular basis.

At first some sides may seem out of reach and impossible to defeat, particularly at the junior level where physical disparity so often determines the outcome. However Phil Gould, former Sydney City, Penrith and Canterbury coach has a distinct principle which he believes helps to avoid the enormity of an impending fixture and create a level playing field. In essence, it revolves around viewing the present time in a reference frame of its own, rather than in relation to an eventual goal.

"Certainly, try to be as good as you can be on any given week, but understand there will be ebbs and flows in the course of a season, both individually and as a team," he says.

"Really do try to keep yourself occupied in the short term, try to keep yourself in the moment. If you do that, each day runs into the next and each game runs into the next and each month runs into the next and then in the longer term each season runs into the next season. It's day in, day out honesty. Review what you have done, work on what you can improve and look forward to the events of the next day.

"Rather than just looking at the end result all the time, concentrate on the job at hand. If you get tied up in the win/loss situation too much and worry what this game might mean later in the year, you carry a whole burden on your shoulders. It is the same as what you expect from your players. When they are out on the field, you want them to concentrate on what they're doing right at that moment, not what might happen in the future."

In the dreaded situation of shaping a team at the bottom of the ladder into genuine title contenders, every aspect or avenue of possible improvement needs to be scoured. And by the same token, every department of vulnerability needs to be either completely overhauled or lessened in its impact. Gameplans, like the slogan of canned seafood company John West, often revolve around the concept that "the fish that they reject, make them the best". It is this ethos of selective improvement that Gould carried with him in his first three seasons at Sydney City, taking the Roosters from fourteenth, to ninth, to fourth in successive campaigns.

"I think the key thing is that I'm very aware of weaknesses, as a team, as a coach and as a person," says Gould.

"I try to work hard to make sure my weaknesses don't affect anyone else and I endeavour to reduce their impact on me. I know I am not perfect and my team will never be perfect either. I don't kid myself. I can accept that. Honesty definitely plays a large part in proceedings, because you can't shirk what work needs to be done in order to improve and you have to swallow your pride enough to try and avoid any weaknesses that may hinder the team. Probably my greatest strength as a coach is that I always remain conscious of avoiding those pitfalls. I do not take myself too seriously and I have the ability to laugh at myself.

"I guess I have always taken the approach right from the very start, especially at this level, that the players and staff in your club don't work for you, you work for them. In particular with your players, their careers depend upon the work that the coach does and in this day and age their livelihood and the livelihood of their family rests on your shoulders. I try to meet or recognise that responsibility with the commitment it deserves and I feel obligated to give them everything they need to achieve their goals. It doesn't matter what they want to do or how they want to do it. I am very flexible. I see that as a responsibility to both the players and the staff to help them succeed, no matter what deficiencies you have to work around."

Upon reaching the cut-off for the Finals or lingering near post-season calculations, it is important to diversify the team approach to suit individual match-ups. To progress this far usually means, as a coach and as a team, the majority of concepts needed to win consistently have been covered in the gameplan. However, to gain that extra advantage or edge against a Finals opponent, other more detailed permutations need to be considered.

"It has evolved that I tend to formulate gameplans in relation to the opposition team far more than what I did just a few years ago," Gould said.

"I anticipate dangerous opposition players arriving at a particular play so I design a plan for our players to meet them at that spot and stop them in their tracks. The ball may go in their direction a dozen times before anything actually evolves out of it, but if you meet them there every time, you at least have a chance of nullifying the threat when an opportunity is created. It is such a big part of the game and at the end of the day, it relies a lot on maintaining the correct attitude and concentrating hard. I really do think that that is a big difference in the game. Attitude often determines whether you win or you lose."

So how does Gould's approach apply to playing against a physically dominant side, say like last year's Premiers Melbourne?

"The Storm are so big and strong, if you give them any latitude in defence they will end up rolling you backwards and onto the ground," he says.

"That is hard to take, both mentally and physically. They are the sort of side that you've got to be very committed to play. They beat us at Olympic Park because we were just not ready for the physical

commitment. Our players saw a lot of opportunities against them, but didn't realise how hard they were going to have to work to get a chance at it. You have got to be physically up to it. It is slightly similar to how Chris Anderson had Canterbury playing when he was coaching there. He imposed a very hard style of play for the opposition to get used to, but if you took them on right, you would win.

"A lot of Melbourne's game plan relies on just one pass. I did some stats on their game against Canterbury earlier in the season just past and what I found was absolutely amazing. Everyone said it was a sensational game of football, close all the way. But only on three occasions in the whole game did the ball go beyond the second pass. Either the dummy half ran or he passed it to a one-off runner or to a pivot who picked up another runner. That was all they had. Of the three times the ball did go past the second pass, Melbourne scored twice. Yet hardly ever did the ball even get to a second receiver. I think that is a factor all opposition teams will be concentrating on now.

"They play an extremely flat game and they do rely on getting some latitude and speed in the play the ball, otherwise their gameplan won't work. In my opinion, they play offside a lot. But they have worked hard to learn it and they are definitely good at it. They really drill their play the ball at training and they get a fair number of second plays in the game which also tends to disorganise the opposition. They use a very, very rigid pattern of play. They hit one in, go to the short side, hit the posts, play open. It is all very rigid and every time they play, you know where the ball is going. However the fact is, unless you are diligent around the play the ball and work hard to dominate in defence, they'll play over the top of you. I don't think they could do it with any other halfback than Brett Kimmorley and their five-eighth Scott Hill who is another running player. When he hits the advantage line he is constantly taking on the defence. He doesn't actually put any of his teammates away that often." Gould stated.

But occasionally when a coach fails to realise a goal or is cornered into a near-impossible match-up, they will bemoan the abilities of their players and negatively impact on the fortunes of their team. It is at this stage Gould suggests, that the aspects of fun and enjoyment should be reinstated as the primary objectives for taking the field. As the two-time Premiership coach alludes, the strength of Rugby League lays with the players and the integrity they display on the field is often more vital to the community than a simple victory.

"Some coaches say they can't win with their players, but the simple fact is you need 17 men to play the game unless you want to try and do it by yourself .

"I am not trying to down play the coaching role because it is very important and we do work hard, but certainly the quality of the people you are dealing with makes it so much easier. I really do admire players and I think if you got someone who had never experienced Rugby League and put them in the middle of the field, you would frighten the hell out of them. But the players go about it with no fear.

"I think sometimes the general public, and even those close to them, are a little critical because they don't understand just how difficult a game it is to play. The players have worked hard, tuned themselves up and they are extremely brave and confident with their skills. Their execution of plays and ability to evade, displays a high amount of instinctive intellect. There is great anticipation of what they must do next and it is done at an explosive speed. I have the utmost admiration for them and I watch football pretty closely.

"The players today are so big and so strong and fast, that it probably overshadows what it is they really are - courageous. They can execute plays at the advantage line and run into holes and put themselves in position without fear or favour. On top of that, they just seem to be hitting each other harder or hitting the line harder every season. They're extremely brave people. Our individual footballer is a better sporting product than years gone by. He is a better athlete and a better student of the game. He is a harder worker and he is more committed. I really do think that in all the trouble the game has experienced over the last five years if it wasn't for the players we wouldn't have stayed afloat. The sporting public owe a lot to the players, they have kept Rugby League alive."

COACHING TIP:

When devising training programs for your players, remember to consider the 'work space' concerned with the different individual positions. A player's 'work space' is defined as the characteristics normally utilised by them in a game situation and it affects the size, fitness and skill needed to play well in that environment.

For example, if you had a still camera on a front row forward for the course of the game, you would see that he has a completely different work space to a winger or a full back. The length and quantity of their runs, number of defenders to evade and workload in defence are vastly different. Thus their training must be tapered to take this into account. However, the basic thought is to make all players as strong, as fast and as skilful in their own work space as you possibly can.

Other important factors to remember are the side of the field the player usually works in (left or right) and that not all players in the same position have the same style. Eg. A second-rower may be a wide-runner or a close-to-the-ruck hitman.

Brian Smith

Although performance enhancing drugs have been widely and rightly condemned throughout the Rugby League fraternity, there is one supplement that most successful coaches subscribe to - remaining positive.

Adopting a positive attitude is the role of a leader. Even when it seems the world is on the shoulders of a coach, very rarely is it in the long-term interests of the team if he decides to vent his spleen and display the rage that has been pent up inside.

Despite narrowly losing preliminary finals in successive seasons, Parramatta coach Brian Smith remains one of the firmest advocates of thinking positive at all times. After rough trots with English club Hull in the late '80s and a 1-5 start to the 1997 ARL season with the Eels, Smith decided that maintaining his composure was of far more benefit than tossing in the towel and calling it quits. Even in losing badly he argues, there is still an abundance of positives to be found.

"I would say that one of the absolute greatest feelings as a coach is when you are losing consistently and your players remain 100 per cent behind you," Smith states.

"Of course it is not something you want to do often, but it restores a lot of faith in human nature. When we were at Hull, Bradford kicked us badly in a match and the players were all down, moping about and expecting me to punish them. But instead, I told them that I understood why they lost and that their schedule had probably worn them out. We trained lightly through the rest of the week and while I accepted the loss, I told them it could not possibly happen again. By the next match, I had won them and they were stunned because I had done the complete opposite to what they expected. Eventually they repaid me by winning, but that probably was not the most important thing to come out of it as far as their careers were concerned. The best thing to arise was that no longer did they see negativity as the only way to react to a loss.

"Then in '97 when the Eels got off to a bad start, I was thinking 'Why does this always happen to me?' The press were calling us \$8 million flops and I copped a bit of a bagging all round. Trust me, when you are being attacked by people on the outside, it is incredibly tempting to blow your stack. But while I was churning up on the inside, I never let my players see that. Abusing them would have only hindered our objective and possibly split the team. We made a group decision to stick together and remain confident. The players kept faith in their ability and all of a sudden the sun started shining on us again. Sure, I identified areas we needed to improve and made some minor tactical changes, but that was mainly to get them focused as a unit. I knew they could win games, they just needed cohesion. When a bunch of players can turn around like that it makes you think, 'Never mind the footy, these guys are prepared to help me in a crisis' and that is a wonderful side of life."

In contrast, one of Smith's most enjoyable seasons was with English club Bradford in 1996. Although the Bulls did not win the competition until the following season, Smith says "the writing was on the wall after club officials worked hard to establish a comfortable team environment. With marketing, advertising, finance and staff attitudes all in sync, the football side of operations was bound to stabilise and prosper down the track." He describes the unity among the front office as amazingly inspirational and fantastic for on-field performance. Smith says "the power of people who bond together, will always remain a phenomena and proves that from one dedicated movement, a powerhouse team can be established for the future."

However, in keeping with his ideas on positive thinking, Smith says the Bradford surrounds were no more of a learning experience than any other time he spent with a number of teams. Losing in fact, provided him with the knowledge to win, by exposing faults that were previously undetectable. And perhaps more importantly, it offered him a lesson in life.

"You find out a lot about a person when the pressure is applied," he says. "It soon becomes clear who you can rely on and who will turn you in. People that you thought would stick by your side may disappoint you and while that isn't a nice feeling, it is better to find out that with a losing streak than on Grand Final day. Nothing can really prepare you for the hurt when someone who you consider to be a close friend, lets you down. But it happens all through life and it is better that you deal with it positively rather than let them win by becoming bitter and twisted on the inside.

"A losing situation is a critical stage in a coach's career and while it may seem hypocritical to say it is good for something bad to happen, most coaches need it. You discover a great deal about yourself when you have to deal with these problems and that is likely to help you handle things not just in football, but outside of it also."

Having played in Group One for Casino as a teenager, Smith travelled to Sydney to play halfback first for St George and then at South Sydney. A total of 29 First Grade games belied his obvious tactical knowledge and appreciation of Rugby League's finer aspects, but after ending his playing days he focused on a new found career of coaching. Starting out with the Newtown Under-23s in 1978, Smith progressed to Souths Under-23s and onto James Cook High School, where they won back-to-back University Shields in 1982-83.

It was then he received his start as a First Grade coach with Illawarra for four seasons before departing to Hull. Returning to Australia, he took St George to Grand Finals in '91 and '92. A short stint with Bradford in 1996 bisected Smith's stints on home soil, when he eventually took the reigns as coach at Parramatta. However, although having completed one of League's longest apprenticeships and being now recognised as forming the NRL'S toughest week-to-week proposition, Smith still continues to progress as a coach.

"When I first started coaching, I put a piece of paper on the wall of my bedroom that basically said I would try to learn from everybody, but, would remain true to myself until the end," Smith reveals.

"I reckon I have stuck pretty close to that ideal. I read a lot, but I would never say I have directly copied someone else's style. I have been heavily influenced by Bill Walsh, the legendary San Francisco '49ers head coach. I finished his most recent book 'Finding the Winning Edge' earlier in the year and I thought it was wonderful. Every coach should be given a copy of it because it contains so much helpful detail about coaching.

"Honesty with players is an important, if sometimes difficult part of coaching. Rugby League players are very perceptive people and they can tell the difference between sincerity and insincerity fairly easily. As a young coach, I sometimes had difficulty being forthright with players. Too many people in society nowadays surround themselves with what they want to hear, not necessarily the truth. My number one message to all coaches is to hang in there no matter how tough things may seem," he says.

"Historically the majority of successful coaches have, at some stage faced the prospect of being discarded by their club. You only have to look at Wayne Bennett, one of the most successful coaches of all time. The media, as they are wont to do, conducted a poll in 1991 that asked whether Bennett should be reinstated after four seasons with the Broncos. The overwhelming majority of respondents voted 'no', but the very next year he took the club to the top of the ladder and to their very first Premiership. Not only that, he backed up the next season and did it again.

"It was not just Bennett the great Jack Gibson was 'let go' by South Sydney after an unsuccessful period - Parramatta took him on board for three successive Premierships!!! If you intend to stick around in coaching you have to face the bad times. You can ride the crest of a wave at any particular moment, but it is important to remember how hard you had to work to get there and just how far you have to fall. Problems like a bad run of injuries aren't usually even thought about until it happens to you, but if coaching is your passion, you must deal with it. I believe that part of the joy of coaching is living through the tough times, saying, 'Come on and throw something new at me. I can last. I am tough enough'. It might sound dour, but part of the tapestry of coaching is surviving those losing streaks, overcoming the injuries and achieving, when it is most difficult to do so." Smith concluded.

Coaching Tip:

When communicating on game day, be sure to use short, concise messages that cannot be misinterpreted. As a player gradually fatigues, their ability to analyse information decreases and words are processed into actions without double-checking.

To avoid confusion, make sure runners relay the message directly to the person concerned, or if that is not possible, to designated team communicators. E.g. Hooker or Halfback.

Royce Simmons

As with players, often the one characteristic that separates a successful coach from a mediocre coach is hands-on experience. The values of experience are many - greater tactical knowledge, better preparation techniques and integrity in the eyes of the team - just to mention a few. However, like most of the important qualities in life, experience only comes with a certain degree of both hard work and time.

When former Australian and Penrith hooker Royce Simmons hung up his boots in 1991 he left on top of the world, having played a starring role in the Panthers 19-14 Grand Final defeat of rivals Canberra. Although he had reached the pinnacle of on-field triumph, Simmons knew he had much to learn if he was to snare a long-term coaching position in his football afterlife. Rather than stay put in Australia and hope for a lucky break, he trekked overseas to Hull, England, where he took on the head coaching position for a total of two seasons. By himself, on foreign soil, Simmons had the chance to learn every aspect of the coaching role and developed ideals about the type of club atmosphere he would establish upon returning home.

"Hull was the best apprenticeship that I could have possibly served," Simmons claims.

"I was very raw when I first arrived there and the beauty was there was no one to seek help from at all. I couldn't go and say, 'Oh listen Tom, I am struggling here could you give me a hand?' I learnt about everything. I was there all alone and trying to instruct players how to do different things like weights, so naturally I had to learn more about it myself. As a result I read up on weight training and eventually I could develop programs for the whole team. I was the conditioner, manager, video editor and real estate agent for the overseas players. I covered everything to do with the game. Hull was my school of hard knocks. My time there gave me an appreciation of what my trainers do now at Penrith, what planning needs to be done behind the scenes and the luxury of having people like an assistant coach to mull over ideas with. I know now how important they are."

"When I returned to Penrith as coach in 1994, I spoke with our CEO Mark Levy and the first thing that we agreed on was that we would surround ourselves with decent people from the local area. I felt that my time in England had proved to me I could handle a lot of things on my own and it was best we brought in assistants who were cultured and could help the club, not just me. Now our staff are such, that from top to bottom everybody has the Penrith Panthers at heart. Secondly, we wanted to surround ourselves with players that had good lifestyles and high training standards. We wanted people without attitudes who would

eventually look at what they could put back into the juniors. A club needs players who want to learn and win and are willing and want to train. That attitude should be for the whole club in general. Then knowing that the players had those qualities, we focused on their football capabilities. Generally in the end it comes back to asking them what they can do for you and the team, more than the coach saying what he is going to do for them."

In effect, Simmons' apprenticeship gave him a grounding in how to build a club from the bottom up. He became adept at pinpointing areas in need of improvement and formulating action plans in order to reach his targets. After Penrith's appearance in the 1991 Grand Final, the Panthers failed to make the Finals in either '92 or '93, finishing ninth and twelfth respectively. The homecoming of Simmons did not have an immediate effect, but in 1997 the side made the top five for the inaugural Super League competition. In the two seasons past, the Panthers have struggled with a horrendous injury toll and finished just short of finals contenders. However, Simmons has already begun an operation to overhaul the team from also-rans to serious competitors, starting from the pack backwards.

"Basically we have targeted players that can tackle," Simmons states.

"Nigel Gaffey is a really good attacking player, but I watched him and I realised that he is a better defensive player than he is an attacker, which is a definite bonus. So we signed him. I watched Scott Sattler - people said he wasn't a good defender - but I thought he was, it was just the defensive partner with him wasn't helping out too much. Craig Greenhill joined us - he is as tough as nails and has proven himself at State of Origin level. Then there's Johnny Cross, another great defensive player. We signed him too. In effect, we built up a very good mobile back row that had defensive punch. I think if you can't do a 'one on one' tackle in the game nowadays, there are not too many places for you. After we achieved the first round of rebuilding we began looking for new avenues to improve on.

"Now at the Panthers we have game books which we fill in each week. We view the opposition's strengths and weaknesses and from this the players will write down their performance goals and the team goals. We check them regularly and then during the next week I might go over their individual videos with them. I will discuss their last few games with them and then give them a couple of areas that I think they can improve on. I only give them generally one thing in defence and one in attack and we work on that for a couple of weeks."

Another facet that Simmons identified as below-par was his team's performance away from Penrith Football Stadium. Although now classified along with The Sharks as formidable Saturday night opponents, the Panthers have struggled like many teams, with travelling due to their out-of-town geographical location. Simmons recognised the problem, but was not so sure that it could be remedied by focusing on the football

aspect of things. Instead, the 233-game First Grade veteran aimed to improve the planning and preparation put in place by himself and his coaching staff

"Playing away from home should never be an excuse at all," Simmons says.

"Our record isn't that flash, so last season I tried to make it as much like if they were at home. For example, in the past when we were playing away, we would schedule a nine o'clock breakfast, at ten o'clock we would go for a walk, then we would have a team meeting at twelve thirty and go to the game after that. Now my way of thinking has changed because we don't do that when we are at home. We get up when we want to, we go for a walk when we want to. So now the rule generally, is when we are away, prepare yourself as best you can - as close to your home conditions as possible. If they want to sleep in until 11, we let them sleep into 11. If they want to go for a swim, and they want someone with them, we will send someone. If they feel flat and one of them wants to talk to me, then they can come into my room and we'll talk. Personally, I believe that we go to another ground the same size as our own, the people over the fence are the same except they are yelling out for a different side. That's what I truly believe and it shouldn't worry anyone whether they are at Penrith Park or the SFS.

"In terms of new recruits playing away from their old surrounds, well we won't bring down kids from the bush until they finish school. We have lost a few players by trying to transplant them while they're still young. Instead we sign them to a scholarship and pay their way out at school. We might send some track suits, boots, whatever, but we are not going to pay them big money. Penrith believe strongly in leaving players with their mother and father, because parents can monitor them 24 hours a day and talk to them about interests away from footy."

To Simmons, skills are the essence of the game. A self-confessed average player with above-average dedication, he believes skills are the new area where players can gain a distinct advantage over their opposite man. Unlike years gone by when fitness and skills were two mutually exclusive groups, he promotes the concept of combining ball-drills with cardio-vascular components. As a result, he also has a higher tolerance for the impulse skills of his players, given the increased time spent on ball-handling at training.

"We really work hard on our skills, even in pre-season training we do four skill sessions a week," Simmons reveals.

"The drills have conditioning entwined with them and are performed under fatigue. They are done quick, under pressure and we try to make the drills as game-related as we can in both attack and defence. Sometimes we will do 100 warm up passes, even before we run. Just 100 passes, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. Coaches like to think that players who were graded years ago should know how to pass by now. Unfortunately that is not true. Aspiring coaches might

not be aware, but a lot of players at Grade level still cannot pass correctly and need practice. At Penrith we do a lot of drills. We have about 150 different drills and they are all good. Sometimes we practice basically the same skill, but we use them in different game-related situations so the players enjoy them and get fit at the same time. We use heart monitors at training and we have realised that we are getting the same workout doing drills as we are in our running programme, but we are having fun and improving our skill level.

"Ryan Girdler has a flick pass and people have said to me 'I can't believe you let him do those fancy passes'. But let me tell you this, Ryan is always practicing his flick passes, he doesn't just go out there and all of a sudden pull one out. He practices it and the other players know and are aware and look for it during the game. If a player goes out there and does something he hasn't practiced I get cranky. For instance if a player does a chip or grubber kick and I have never seen him do either of those kicks in training, then I would not be happy with him. If he has practiced it and he thinks it is on, good.

"I let my players know if we are making forward momentum and everything is going OK, then I haven't got a problem with them playing impulsively. Although, if we have a breakdown in possession and things are not falling into the groove, then I get a message out telling them to come back to the basics. And that is the same at training as well. When they get out of their groove or are fatigued, we stay on the paddock and do a few simple set routines to keep working out of it. Then when they get back into the groove, the momentum picks up again and away they go."

For Simmons, momentum is also something he is searching for in his career. He believes a constant search for knowledge and the confidence of both his players and peers is the route to attaining a smooth transition from season to season.

"I would condense my strengths down to communication and the ability to learn and teach," he says. "I believe I have the ability to relate to my players and also a willingness to learn from other coaches. For instance when the team is in Brisbane, I always make sure that I have a quick chat with Wayne Bennett. I pick up a lot of things from him. In '98 I visited some of the English soccer clubs looking to pick up an odd thing here and there. A lot can be learnt from other coaches just by listening. I have been around the game for a fair time, but I don't stick my head in the sand and think that I know everything.

"I am honest and I won't lie to the players. I wouldn't say that I am great mates with any of them and I don't think you can be. But, what I have got is a lot of respect for them and I make sure I show it. Variety is one way of showing that, whether it is reflected in your training methods or just how you talk to the players. I don't think you can keep coming back each week with the same thing if you want your players to feel respected.

"Try and associate your involvement with mostly positive thoughts. And when you cannot be positive, face the fact that you have to come down on somebody. I was a very dedicated footballer who tried hard and was lucky enough to play for Australia, but I was a long way from a champion footballer. I can relate stories to them on how to become a good player when you have average ability and a lot of dedication. I tell them about players like Chris Mortimer and the other guys I played with that had positive attitudes."

And it is with a positive attitude and the experience of his English apprenticeship, that Simmons aims to continue his career. He has seen a polarity in not only geographical locations, but also in available resources and help at-hand. But in both cases, there are still the same principles needed to succeed - a lot of hard work and a touch of common sense.

Coaching Tip:

There are a number of reasons why the amount of time spent on skill sessions with children should, by far, supersede the amount of time used for fitness training. Firstly, a child's metabolism is vastly different to that of an adult and will not usually need extra assistance in burning off energy. Secondly, the cardio-vascular and muscular systems of both pubescent and pre-pubescent children are still developing and will not respond as positively as the body of an adult. In certain cases, it may in fact cause injury or degenerative conditions.

But perhaps most importantly, the skills learnt at this age will hold them in good stead when they reach the senior level and cannot rely on physical attributes alone. And with a larger array of sporting options available nowadays, skills will keep them more interested in remaining in Rugby League than sprints and laps will.

David Waite

Endowing themselves with monikers such as Warriors, Knights, Tigers and Sharks, Rugby League clubs aim to promote a sense of kinship or a pack mentality that hopefully depicts them as the most cohesive and hence powerful force in the competition. And behind the scenes, clubs have also realised the intrinsic value of establishing strong and smooth relations not only at the elite level, but in the transitional phase between junior development teams and the senior grade. Unifying the aims and values of the administrative, coaching and playing staff is a prime objective, bringing together the club's collective ideals while at the same time dismissing any disruptive polarities in opinion.

Having taken the first merged team in history to a Grand Final in their inaugural season, St George-Illawarra coach David Waite is well versed in the act of unifying goals. Waite brought together an elite squad of 25 players in late '98 which consisted of 13 men from the old Saints club and 12 from the now-extinct Steelers. Needless to say there were many differences in style and opinion that needed to be ironed out, but by season's end everybody was working on common ground. Throughout his career Waite has highlighted the importance of supplying a team ethos, something that appears even more valuable now in recovering from his team's heart-breaking defeat in the epic Grand Final against Melbourne.

"It is imperative that a coach installs a generic philosophy for their club that can be followed from the ground up," states Waite. "It is not necessarily for the players, but for all those that come in contact with them. Players want to succeed no matter what it takes, however the coach has to show them what steps to take to get there. As the head coach of an NRL club, obviously my job is vastly different to the average junior or social coach, but the same ideas apply. At the Dragons I extend my philosophies and tactics down to the Under 16s in Harold Matthews' Shield, which I consider an important age in player development. In effect, all the coaches from Under 16s up follow the same basic principles as I do.

"It is like having a whole army of apprentices who think like you and who will provide solid stepping stones for players to follow along their career path. Once a player reaches me, the focus is on pushing them to their potential, both as a footballer and a person.

"A lot of development these days centres around psychological assessment. You can't ascertain a kid's views on life or reactions to certain situations just by talking to him for half an hour alone or with his parents. Maybe if you are lucky, you might be able to tell a fair deal

about them after half a season and then it is probably too late. I believe in sports organisations conducting psychological profile testing of their personnel similar to the Olympic level where they send their people to special counsellors who can test and analyse the person in a neutral environment.

"I think one-on-one in a non-threatening environment is also the best situation to utilise your motivational talks. Coaches have to remember that motivation is not about short-term arousal, it is about permanent change in lifestyle and that is not easy to achieve."

A thorough thinker and one who prides himself on the tiniest areas of opportunity, Waite values the importance of taking an individualised approach to formulating a team gameplan. He considers his players in much the same way DNA is viewed in reference to the body - as complex building blocks that form a strong and healthy machine. Therefore he endeavours to minimise further complexities in their mind that may cause confusion, instead promoting the simple actions that will lead to them forming a machine of the aforementioned proportions.

"The drama with a gameplan is that you are pitching it to 17 different people," Waite says.

"Each individual will have his own interpretations and reservations about it and some might not want to use it at all. I think the key is making it easy to understand. You can have the most technical, you-beaut plan and if it is not understood, it simply doesn't work. It has to be pitched to your players at an individual level and broken down so that each person understands their role in the whole scheme of things. Not everybody will have the same role - some will have more involvement, some less - but they don't necessarily have to know each others' plan.

"I do not expect my players to give 100 per cent each week because I think it is utterly impossible and I would be a unreasonable man if I expected that, it is all about peaking at the right time.

"What I do expect is focus. Focus promotes consistency, which in turn, gives the coach enough direction to elect an appropriate team and the resultant gameplan. My saying is that if you expect your player to scale Mt Everest one week, you will be disappointed if you expect him to do the same next week. Setting unattainable targets that look impressive only serve to hurt the team. I would prefer my players walk off the field eager to play again, rather than feeling downcast as if they failed in some way because of unrealistic expectations or targets".

With players of the calibre of Anthony Mundine, Trent Barrett and Nathan Blacklock at his disposal, it is no wonder Waite emphasises the value of impulse play. But now that the number of NRL teams stands at 14, the spread of talent will make for even more fortified defences and the quality of impulse will be of an even greater value. It is fair to say that only those with honed instincts and attacking flair will be allowed the same latitude of seasons gone by.

"I believe impulse is the most influential factor in the majority of NRL teams at present," he says.

"It is an incredibly difficult trait to teach and I suppose that is why halfbacks and five-eighths tend to stand out a touch more at times. There is no value in restricting impulse - only damage. If an impulse player is restricted on a certain play, eg. your team might make 15 metres on a good hit-up and the player is then tackled but that 15 metres could have been a try if your team seized the opportunity. Sometimes it will take up to a quarter of the game for another gap to open up, so it is imperative you grab your impulse chances. At the end of the day it is tries, not hit-ups, that are remembered, because they ultimately determine the outcome of the match.

"There are still a few areas in the NRL where we don't see impulse play much of a part. Defence is almost impulse-free, except for on an open break or what commentators term 'scrambling defence'. I am not sure whether that is something we can ever improve upon, but I am sure coaches will look at it further in the future."

Waite states that "Predicability will always be related to the rules of the game." Predicability is also a term that has been often unfairly leveled at Waite throughout his career. The eye for detail and pursuit of new avenues of improvement have been misconstrued in some quarters to be boring and unnecessary. Having proved his critics wrong in 1999 however, Waite is in no hurry to change his ways and in many ways, he maintains his analytical approach as a homage to one-time mentor and present-day rival Warren Ryan.

"Warren has easily been the biggest influence of my career," reveals Waite. "I first met him when he was the physical education teacher at my high school and we shared a number of the same ideals. We became close and after several years, I was reunited with him at Canterbury in 1985 where he was in charge of First Grade and I had control of the Under 23s. Early in my career I copped a lot of flak for being his clone, but when I moved to Newcastle in 1988 I tried hard to remedy that image. I worked on establishing my own ideas while still maintaining the knowledge Warren had passed on to me. Over-technical is a word that will probably always be used to describe me because of my association with him, but that is fine. That is important to me, however what is even more important is that I consider myself a truthful, honest man who would never con his players in any way. I am flattered that people think I give attention to detail and analyse the technical components of the game, but I also like to think I am a gambler that will take risks.

"Anything technical is just an advancement on the basics of the game. It is nothing flash. It just depends on how far you want to take things. Personally I believe I have not performed my job throughout the week if something can come out from under a rock on gameday and frighten and unsettle the team. The basics are the foundations of the game and if

we don't get them right, there will never be an entertaining product. For example at the moment not enough people pick up the ball properly, let alone pass it or even kick it correctly. I prefer to break down team goals into individual skills and organise them into a performance cycle over time. Essentially, if your players don't do something that combines their hands, eyes and feet in every session, you are neglecting your job as a coach."

Coaching Tip:

Handfuls of drills and information do not simply convert to a better football team. The common denominator in absorbing and practising different skills of the game and time with positive correction.

A coach can plan 100 moves, but over a season he may only have sufficient time to explain each one for five minutes. Understandably it is of more benefit to concentrate on the basics with fewer moves and have a greater amount of detail.

Hence in order to create a balance of both detail and data, time management skills and good planning need to be honed in tandem with in-depth analysis.

Craig Coleman

Although considered the bane of coaches throughout the sporting world, losing streaks are the bookends by which careers are defined. Usually beginning when predecessors have fallen on hard times and either resigned or been removed, coaching careers also tend to draw to a close when similar circumstances arise. Therefore combating and controlling the symptoms and outcomes of such circumstances, by necessity, become a priority for coaches and clubs alike.

Very often the key to rebuilding an unsuccessful team and rounding the corner to prosperity is stability. Unluckily for Rabbitoh stalwart Craig 'Tugger' Coleman, his period at the helm of South Sydney was cut short not by a losses, but by the inevitable NRL rationalisation to 14 clubs. However in his decidedly short stay of time, the former halfback was generally regarded as having the uncanny ability to inspire men and turn around unfavourable circumstances. After closing his playing career with now-extinct clubs Western Suburbs and Gold Coast - where he tried valiantly to lift the respective sides past mediocrity - Coleman returned to red and green colours to coach Souths' Reserve Grade side. But, after only a year-and -a-half in the lower grades, he assumed the head role as First Grade coach and then, in a matter of just one season, took the Bunnies from 17th on the ladder to within a footstep of the Finals. Despite appearing to possess all the relevant experience and qualities to define complex methods of changing a team's fortunes from lowly to honourable, Coleman reckons it is simply a matter of going back to basics.

"There is no secret - just a bit of good hard work and a positive attitude right through from the front office to the top 17 players," Coleman insists.

"I try to strike up a balance between playing with confidence and playing for survival. There has to be a certain amount of cockiness to make your team feel like they deserve to win, but also a small amount of fear to remind them of what they are endeavouring to avoid.

"I encourage my players to try different things and back themselves and I will not take a player off for simply trying to pop a pass that doesn't stick or for throwing a cut-out pass that misses its intended target. I tell my players that my number one pet hate is players that give up and at no time is there any excuse to put your head down and let a team score 15-20 points against you in the last five minutes. Some days your team is going to lose no matter what they do, but I still do not consider it an option to shut up shop and give any less than your best. One of my favourite sayings is 'Bring your boots and be ready to play'."

Part of Coleman's back-to-basics approach that he adopted at Souths was ensuring his team members wanted to come to training rather than being obligated to do so. Providing ongoing variation and an indication

that he was focused on improving the players' football, not just fitness, quickly became a focus of his regime. Physical sessions were largely integrated with skill drills like quick hands, angle running and defensive match-ups so that both facets of play were improved and every player got a chance to have a run with the football. This last factor, says Coleman, was imperative in maintaining morale and avoiding mental fatigue that may arise through a sense of either boredom or isolation. He argues that with the ball in their hand, players tend to not even realise the physical stresses on their body and enjoy learning, and therefore, will whine less and absorb more information readily.

In terms of variation, Coleman looked to sports outside of normal consideration like boxing and even judo. Most coaches supplement their training time with ball sports such as offside touch, soccer or basketball to increase skill levels and on-field vision, but martial arts combine neither of these. Instead Coleman used these sports, judo and boxing to emphasise factors such as footwork, agility and defence - with a great deal of success.

"I developed the idea of judo sessions in the pre-season because previously the team had encountered a lot of problems with bigger sides," Coleman reveals.

"I knew we were going to have little blokes like Darrell Trindall, Craig Wing and Wes Patten in our line-up and I thought we might struggle once more. What the judo taught us was how to control and knock over larger opposition, while remaining in control at the same time. It also showed the importance of keeping your balance when being held and some methods you could use to fend off people. In terms of our defence, judo helped us wonderfully, because it allowed us to tackle and pin down a big man while quickly regaining our own feet simultaneously and retaking the marker position or defensive line. Then when we had our four giants - Mark Carroll, Ian Rubin, Matt Parsons and Paul McNicholas in First Grade at the same time, it worked like an added bonus.

"Just before the season started we had a session where everybody sat down and the coaches asked the players some very honest and personal questions. When it came to naming what you liked most and least about the team, the one positive that kept arising was how much they respected the effort of the coaching staff to provide variety and their eagerness to be at every session. That is a fantastic sign for any club, because when you have got the players on your side, you have got them exactly where you want them."

An integral characteristic of Souths' early-season rise was the us-against-them mentality that pervaded due to rationalisation. Army strategists around the world have noted throughout time that fear of a common enemy or backs-to-the-wall situations are largely conducive to inspirational feats and a greater willingness to perform. Coleman heightened the club's fight for survival and heavily oppressive odds of retention, by accentuating unbalanced game simulations at training. His plan was to acclimatise the players to tough situations and unearth a pro-active mindset that would be more effective in battling against the top teams in the competition.

"I do not give my players the overlap at training like a lot of coaches do," he explains.

"I will put, for example, four of our fastest guys - Tricky (Trindall), Julian O'Neill, Craig Wing and Justin Loomans - as the defensive line and make four attackers try and get the ball through or around them. The idea is to encourage the attackers to create overlaps by themselves, because that is what they have to do in a game if they want to win. Simply teaching them to beat oppositions by taking advantage of 3 on 2 situations will not make the team a successful unit. If you have to wait for the other side to do something wrong and lapse, then you are being reactive, not pro-active. Teams that are in control are teams that win.

"It is the same for defence; we put our nine top defenders against maybe 13 attackers and try to shut down the ball down without the offence breaching the line. If they can do it at training, then there is no reason why they can't do it when the chips are down in a match.

"Probably the only situation where I allow our players some latitude is on the last tackle drill, where I make the fullback and winger drop back to encourage them to swing the ball wide. Other than that it is up to the players to create their own sense of control and dominate proceedings. Creation and domination - that is what Rugby League is all about."

In terms of building a successful team from scratch, Coleman emphasises the assets of quality players and contemporary tactics as the most valuable commodities following the establishment of a positive mental attitude. He believes a good team needs good footballers, especially those that can break the line and in turn set an example for and inspire fellow teammates. These players provide lessons and role models for which young and developing players can endeavour to replicate and no matter how much they are earning, Coleman says, 'they deserve a few more cents in every dollar for doing what is an extremely hard job well'.

Keeping abreast of rule changes and gameplan trends also rates highly on Coleman's list of desirable attributes. He identifies the advent of 'flat attack' and the use of interchange as of the utmost importance to coaches trying to formulate successful templates for performance, particularly in a forward-oriented team such as the '99 Souths side. To perfect flat attack, forwards have to constantly meet the advantage line at top speed and often dummy-half passes will verge on being called forward, such is the precision. But in all the technical mechanics of perfecting such a style of play, Coleman says many teams fail to work on one basic component - evading the defence from marker. Practicing running to markers a set distance either side of the ruck is a simple yet effective way to counter the opposition, while at the same time improving service from and communication with the hooker.

Coleman's interchange philosophy centres around providing equitable expectations for both player and coach. He prefers to replace players when they still have a little bit left in the tank and he informs them, via a trainer, approximately two sets before the actual transaction is set to take place. This has three advantages. Firstly, it informs the player of

their role and keeps them in control, perhaps allowing them to put in an extra ruck or two before leaving the field. Secondly, it keeps the player eager to return to the field and lastly, it ensures the player is removed BEFORE they commit a mistake due to fatigue. Coleman argues that a coach who gives his player the hook after they make a mistake, needs to give himself a hook for failing to have the preparation and foresight to prevent it. But while 'Tugger' recognises the importance of maintaining an up-to-date outlook and changing with the times, he admits there are things for him that will never alter.

"Rugby League is a game I love and I think I will continue doing so until the day I die," he says.

"As far as coaching goes, I have learnt to always persevere with players and be honest to yourself and them. If I think something is not right I will tell my players, but I don't expect my opinion to be right each time - I just think it should be up-front for everyone to know. Sometimes people don't like to hear the truth because it hurts, but in my opinion that is the only way to coach.

"There are still some things I have failed to come to terms with and I don't know if I ever will. One of them is telling players they are dropped. I hate doing it. And the other is distancing myself from the players as a coach not a friend".

Coaching Tip:

When undertaking video sessions it is infinitesimally important that watching your team takes precedence over studying the opposition. The game from your team's perspective, good points and bad, should be viewed along with your players for positive feedback and discussion to take place. Conversely, opposition clips should be condensed to 15-minute packages to quickly identify opportune areas while minimising viewer boredom. This attitude gives rise to an ethos that the destiny of the match is in your own team's hands and the opposition can spend time worrying about what may happen, not yourself.

Mark Graham

Having proven to be more than worthy adversaries in the Test arena last year, New Zealand are still struggling with Rugby League where it counts most, at the grass roots level. Represented in the NRL by the Auckland Warriors alone, New Zealand is in effect a one-team country, not a one-team city like Melbourne, Brisbane or Canberra. Rugby Union still maintains a firm position on the pedestal of Kiwi culture and both playing numbers and resources for Rugby League have suffered in turn. Decisions made by the NRL to cut their Reserve Grade competition have relegated the next tier of competition below the Warriors to the local Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and local leagues. It is therefore, no wonder fears are held that if Auckland fail to fire for as few as two seasons, the sport in New Zealand may collapse and all but disappear.

Wearing the collective anguish and hope of a proud sporting nation on his shoulders is Mark Graham, a 29-Test veteran and the latest man to assume the head coaching role at Auckland. Respected in his playing days for his tough, gritty approach to the task at hand, Graham has brought with him expectations of increased performances and invariably, a better run of results. However, his goals do not lay solely with the seasonal fluctuations of the Warriors in the NRL; they also incorporate a wider perspective of the game's health in New Zealand and a desire to attain success and professionalism at all levels. Still, Graham says, the best path to rejuvenating Rugby League in New Zealand is via a 'trickle down effect', beginning with success at the top.

"Without Auckland in the NRL, Rugby League will be a mere speck over here compared to Rugby Union," Graham reaffirms.

"Having spent the majority of the past 20 years abroad, it has been a fairly big culture shock returning to New Zealand. Arriving from a place like Australia, where Rugby League is truly appreciated, to a country where a lot of schools simply refuse to play the game, takes a certain amount of getting used to.

"New Zealand is known for having some of the best privacy laws in the world, but when it comes to sport, there is a perception that kids should only play union. It is a bit absurd when children have the right to withhold their report cards from their parents, but they can't chose a certain code of football over another. If the Warriors set a professional winning example at the top, then hopefully we can change that type of attitude." he said.

Through implementing and recommending strategies with which to further the survival and expansion of Rugby League across the Tasman, Graham sees intangible benefits that will lead to Auckland becoming a powerhouse for years to come. Already the NZRL has mirrored examples set by soccer and union, whereby juniors are classified not only depending

on age, but also weight. Graham believes this approach is imperative to the wellbeing of Rugby League because at the moment New Zealand "produces a ton of powerful monster forwards, but very few quality halfbacks". He also applauds the establishment of a development program primarily focused on agility, ball skills and kicking as a means to compensate for the difference in muscle fibres that many Polynesian athletes have. But in all, Graham believes the major transitions that need to be made are not necessarily of the physical nature.

"The major difference in my approach, even since my last season with North Queensland in 1998, is that I tend to focus more acutely on the culture and psychology that pervades the players' lives," he explains.

"That aspect of Rugby League in New Zealand is huge, because I think previously players were not shown from an early age how to push through the pain and be strong mentally. The Warriors now use a fair degree of self-visualisation and other psychological techniques to help the players preview upcoming matches in a positive mindframe.

"At the start of the season I asked my players to identify a saying or quote that is relative to them personally and to write it down sign it and we put it on the wall. They had to jot down what their idea of a champion was and a few times throughout the year, we revisited their definition and assessed how they were progressing as an individual. Another device we used was to take strength, sprint and beep tests before the first game. When guys like Jason Death, who only scored average on the tests, started performing at a higher rate than the others, then I took players aside and said "Hey, how come you can run/lift/last better than him at training, but not in a game?"

Graham has also noted areas of improvement that exist right across the board in the NRL. Passing in particular, is an avenue which he believes could be greatly enhanced through a change of attitude and variation in drills. Graham says transferring the ball accurately and efficiently is still the major downfall of most sides, highlighting the performance of New South Wales in the first match of the 1999 State of Origin series where dummy half passing was a factor in their loss. He is a firm believer of playing on instinct and agrees with Parramatta coach Brian Smith's practice of teaching players to pass one-handed and fend with the other. While conventional football coaches would consider such a drill too risky, Graham insists that any facet of play can be reduced in risk if it is taught sufficiently.

Having served a seven-year apprenticeship as assistant coach at Manly, Norths and the Cowboys, the former-back rower has remained up to speed with the advent of relatively new strategies like off-the-ball play and comprehensive video analysis. Graham says quite often the tries a side fails to score through inadequate use of these two procedures, are the ones that will ultimately cost them the game. However he does not consider tactics as the only by-product of his lengthy tenure under the guidance of coaches Sheens, Lowe, Louis and Fulton.

"Personally, I consider that apprenticeship to be my number one strength," Graham reveals.

"If I had spent that long at university, I may have been a brain surgeon by now. When I look back, I am so pleased that I didn't put my hand up to be a head coach straight away. I had a few areas - like my temperament - that needed to be handled better, and if I had gone straight to the top job, I do not think I would have realised that. The apprenticeship also gave me a golden opportunity to learn different things from other coaches, ideas that I probably would not have thought of by myself. For example, Tim Sheens used to have a candid camera to follow around a particular player for the whole game and then he could break down what areas of improvement to work with them on.

"My philosophy has always been to enjoy what ever I choose to do and so far, the desire is still very much there. I try to challenge and teach my players at training and hopefully they will carry the same attitude as I do. The scary thing these days is that some young players face the possibility of never working a day in their life until they turn 30. They can survive on scholarships until they turn full-time professional, then even if they retire before 30, there are still sponsorships and other things to carry them over. Life skills are being neglected and too much emphasis is being placed on looking after 'mates' no matter what they do. While that is admirable in many ways, I do not think it teaches them to use common sense all that often. Serving an apprenticeship as coach helped me avoid that and hopefully, I can pass on some wisdom to those in need."

His wisdom also goes out to those who constantly criticize referees. While admitting to pulling his hair out with frustration on more than one occasion, Graham believes, by and large, that the man with the whistle receives far more than his fair share of castigation. Not only has the abolition of a national Reserve Grade competition made development hard for New Zealand players, it also denies referees a stepping stone to the elite level, Graham opines. He stresses that there is no use complaining about errant decisions unless referees are provided with increased assistance from administrators, touch judges and coaches alike.

He offers this advice to the referees ruling body to try and recruit recently retired players into their ranks.

"The speed of the game and the technicalities that have been applied over the last few years have provided a lot of indecision in both the mind of the player and the referee," Graham states.

"If a player makes a mistake, he usually gets another chance, but if a referee mucks up, he gets grilled for it. It is an extremely hard job and we coaches really need to help them out. The NRL should get all the coaches around a table and discuss any changes they want to implement, because let's face it, we are the guys who are going to do our utmost to exploit and milk everything out of whatever it is they come up with. If they consult us first, we could probably point out any possible faults before they blow up in their face or end up in the newspapers.

"As far as any implementations I would introduce myself, I think we should make common sense and fluency more important than being pedantic and precise. The interpretation of knock-ons vary from week

to week, so maybe we shouldn't be so exact and perhaps allow the lineball decisions to pass by without a stoppage. People say that Rugby League needs scrums like the old days, because it emphasised competing for the ball, but they forget how much that involved the referee and all the scrum penalties that were awarded.

"The situation at the moment certainly is not ideal, but to me it is better than seeing an extra five penalties per game. If the NRL want to fine-tune the scrum, I would suggest allowing the attacking team an option of where on the advantage line they want to pack down. Then they can pack 10 metres, 20 metres or halfway across the field. I think you would see more moves and clean breaks because of the indecision created in the minds of the defence." Graham said.

Indecision however, is not a term that Graham wants associated with the future of Rugby League in New Zealand. Courage and conviction are more along the lines of his thinking and into the new millenium he hopes Rugby League will supersede rival codes in much the same manner that he envisions Auckland establishing themselves as Premiership contenders; by hurting the opposition from the first tackle of the match.

Coaching Tip:

The ability of a coach to control player discipline, and in turn penalties, is a multi-functioned skill. In terms of field position, confidence and cohesion, it is of the utmost importance. But one aspect that many people fail to recognise is that the fewer penalties a team gives away, the less opportunities the opposition has to utilise their vast array of set moves.

As most set moves are enacted from a restart in play (tap or scrum), a team can negate up to half of them if discipline is maintained throughout the match, hence building a psychological edge.

Peter Louis

Education stands as the vital key to assisting players in their quest to mature as capable and knowledgeable students of Rugby League. Without substance, it is very difficult for either player or coach to progress past the basic instincts associated with running, catching and passing. Clearly this is not enough to develop a competitive and skilful football team on its own merit and therefore information, both demonstrated and communicated, needs to be provided for evolution of talent to take place.

While Peter Louis has recently shifted his interests from coaching to refereeing, he maintains there is a desire to educate players to a further extent throughout all levels. In nine years as First Grade coach at Norths, Louis experienced Finals atmosphere on no less than six occasions, unfortunately never making it to the Grand Final. But in the process of leading the Bears within striking distance of the title so frequently, he uncovered the majority of educational concepts associated with maintaining consistency, intensity and avoiding mental fatigue. One of Louis' favourite techniques to both educate and revive player interest was to reverse the respective roles of player and coach.

"I think the major problem coaches cause is that they tend to try and teach everything," the former Canterbury First Grader says.

"More opportunity needs to be given to players to try and teach skills or tactics to their teammates. You will find that when a player has to think about developing or running a drill for their mates, they will break it down into components they never really thought about before. In a sense letting them teach the others forces them to think about how well they have been taught and what areas they need to improve themselves.

"If you think about it, it gives everyone a beneficial change of pace. Players will enjoy taking control, but more importantly, they will learn probably more than at any other time. For the coach, it lets you take a backward step and perhaps focus a bit more acutely on the skills of the player at question."

Louis is a big fan of video analysis, both of his own team and of upcoming opponents. The old adage that you learn 60 per cent of what you see and 20 per cent of what you hear or read, makes visual stimulation by far the most efficient educational tool outside of practical learning. Most NRL clubs have independent analysts to help them compile telling statistics from their videos and to help provide different viewpoints on the action that takes place. However for clubs playing at the social level and particularly in juniors, a parent or nominated person with a video recorder can be sufficient enough support.

"Video is by far the best working tool a coach can have," says Louis. "If you assess your team's performance for five hours on video, you will finger a lot more aspects than if you had to think about it for a whole

week without visual stimuli. I honestly think that it must have been terribly hard for coaches in the old days when they had to do everything by memory. I just don't know how you could coach like that. "Video sessions are also very important for the players too, because quite often they cannot see what they are doing wrong. You can tell them at training, but it will not hit home until they have either made a mistake in a game or seen footage of it on television. From a coach's perspective, you don't want to make mistakes in a game at all, so it is best to nip it in the bud and solve it at training. Very often people are critical of players for certain things they do, but you have to remember that they can't pick themselves up out of their body and look at it from the sideline."

Leading by example is a term frequently used to describe team captains and, in many ways, that leadership can only be established and kept through a good education about the game. Education need not come in a scholarly manner, but in a general understanding that encompasses all the facets needed to play football successfully. The importance of a competent captain is evident in the team's ability to recover from setbacks, rapport with the referee, scoring decisions and ultimately the overall record of performance. Louis argues there are four key elements that are important in all quality Rugby League players, but are further accentuated in captaincy contenders.

"I look specifically for good temperament, intelligence, personality and skills," reveals Louis.

"It is an idea I picked up from Ajax Amsterdam, the successful Dutch soccer team, and it can be shortened to T.I.P.S. for easy memory. I think foremost your team captain should be well respected by the other players and he should understand the game well and display competency in his knowledge of the rules. He does not necessarily have to be the strongest or fastest or biggest or well-known player - he just has to be tactful and provide the team with direction."

In his own education concerning Rugby league, Louis admits he started behind the eight-ball by failing to establish a philosophy towards the style of coach he wanted to be. While he admired men like Jack Gibson and John Monie for the innovation, authority and success associated with them, he did not deeply consider the individual characteristics of coaching psychology until after beginning his career at Woy Woy on the Central Coast of New South Wales.

"I was a reluctant coach when I started out and I think I didn't develop my philosophies as well as I would have liked," laments Louis. "Eventually I began thinking about the mannerisms of coaches I played under and took ideas from them that emphasised areas like skill organisation, discipline and player respect. I was never an avid reader, but I followed my heart and tried to explore my own interests and anything that I could use in relation to Rugby League. That was all a part of being who I am and not trying to pass myself off as someone else."

"I have always been of the opinion that supplying variation is the hardest thing to do in coaching. At Norths, we had the majority of our squad together for six years. Everyone has a threshold for boredom and,

unless situations change, players' games tend to vary as compensation. It is impossible to keep them at the peak of their performance forever but the effort must be there."

"Nowadays I am probably more flexible to the needs of the player and I will definitely listen to them if they have some input into our style of gameplan and even with recruitment. Research and common sense have showed that a lot of the old-style methods may have been great for discipline, but in terms of morale and physical health, they were vastly detrimental. It is important that every coach has the ability to accept the changes of time and adapt accordingly." Louis said.

The departure of Louis at Norths and the subsequent changes that have taken place to the proud Bears club have stirred emotions around the Rugby League world. Louis hints that he knew his time was coming and perhaps in this instance, let his emotions over-rule the educated understanding he had displayed so evidently throughout his career.

"Ten years at Norths is a long time coaching in anybody's book," he offers. "My time was always going to come to an end. I wanted to be a part of history and the decision by the club to move to Gosford was along the same lines of thought as my own. It was an exciting time and we were all convinced we had secured the future of the Bears and held onto our identity." He said.

Sticking by his guns until the last stand, Louis maintains there is a definite ethos that should be carried into coaching by all novice mentors. Trust, honesty and being 'fair dinkum' are all pre-requisites in his book. And while he is a firm believer in the ongoing education of players he says coaches need to be genuinely interested in the hearts of their players, not just their minds. Above all, he says 'whatever you do, do it with passion'.

COACHING TIP:

If you want to mould your side as a horse for all courses, than you must train to that effect. Night games should be prepared for under evening conditions, while day games may require you to move the session to an earlier time slot if possible.

Persisting with training in the rain is not just a sign of dedication, it can highly increase the confidence of players to handle the slippery conditions during a game situation.

Phil Economidis

Much is made of the contribution and impact that Rugby League coaches have on the success and winning records of their teams, particularly at the elite level. But where does the average coach fit into the overall scheme of things? What input does a beginner coach or even a Level 1 qualified coach have into the procreation and development of Rugby League? What role does the coach portray in the public eye of a sometimes controversial and turbulent sport?

To ascertain the answers to these questions, we must look at a coach who established not only a credible record under difficult circumstances, but one who also stood the test as an ambassador for the game's image and integrity.

Declared the ARL 1997 Coach of the Year, Phil Economidis was widely acclaimed for guiding the embattled Gold Coast Chargers to a most unlikely semi-final berth. It was in that season alone that Economidis defined his career as an intelligent and motivational mentor. But with the ARL-Super League war at the height of its battle, the recognition meant that much more. The award signified the achievements of a man who put the sport first and above all, emphasised a message of working hard to reach set goals.

After the Gold Coast Chargers crumbled, Economidis spread his wings and had a short stint with the Fijian national side focusing on a berth in the Rugby League World Cup 2000. But he retained his values and held on to his grass roots philosophy, eventually returning to coach Murwillumbah in the Gold Coast - Group 18 competition.

"Not many people know this, but I came right through the ranks from being an ordinary junior coach to the national level," Economidis reveals.

"I started out with just a normal kids team, with a genuine interest and love of the game. Eventually I moved on to junior representative sides and from there, worked my way into senior football. I progressed into senior rep. teams and then took up a position on the Queensland Rugby League coaching panel and finally the Gold Coast (Seagulls back then) offered me a chance as their skill development co-ordinator.

"Whatever I did, I just tried to do it to the best of my ability and along the line, it started to pay off. The lessons I learnt were invaluable and, throughout the whole time, I retained an interest in the game and a desire to gather more information. I believe my long apprenticeship was essential in the way I handled my players at the Chargers and I think it is something all coaches should have to experience. Basically, I am a good student and a product of the ARL coaching course. My one hope is that I can provide light to all the novices who are starting out now."

It is these novices who Economidis believes should take responsibility for the future of Rugby League and who are best positioned to avert the

game from the instability of two years ago. He describes his own training sessions as 'building blocks' and in the same manner, his vision for the development of Rugby League revolves around even smaller 'blocks' being put in place from an early age. The foundations should consist of knowledgeable and well-meaning information being disseminated to players from forward-thinking, preferably accredited, coaches. If this system had been in place half a decade ago, Economidis insists the game would not have had to endure the massive cut-backs which have dominated headlines for the past six months or more.

"It is my belief that if we had enough coaches with the correct preparatory skills throughout all Levels, we wouldn't have had this problem at all," he enthuses.

"They had to rationalise the competition because the argument was that the playing talent was not good enough across the board, it was too thin. But if all those players at the 22 elite clubs in 1997 (Super League and ARL) had been brought through a system whereby all their coaches were capable of imparting decent knowledge on them, they would not have had to cut to such an extent. A lot of what has happened is connected to an imbalance of nurtured coaching and I don't think that has been made evident. Certainly there are financial issues involved, but if all players had been developed to the same level, it would have been less of an issue.

"In regards to elite coaching, I think clubs have to shoulder a certain amount of blame themselves. They create a profile for their team by signing 'big name' former players, regardless of the extent of their qualifications. Most clubs justify it by saying they need the profile to attract new players, but there is something else that works as a far better lure - success. I think all coaches need to spend a couple of seasons with a lower grade team before they take up a head coach spot. At least you get some idea of whether you have bitten off more than you can chew."

As far as his success in 1997 with the Chargers goes, Economidis does not proclaim to have a fantastical formula that can be used uniformly across the board. His ideas and theories for the season were mainly born out of the constant flux of playing talent that passed through Cararra Stadium from one year to the next. At times Economidis confesses he felt that he had to "introduce the players to one another", such was the constant turnover of playing staff. Thus in hope of a successful season, he tried to embed a form of artificial stability to the dynamic playing roster by selecting the right time to blood players and producing a harmonious and confident environment.

"A lot of people thought I was a magician or a miracle worker, but that simply wasn't the case," Economidis states.

"I went into the 1997 season with an intended aim of building the confidence among what players I had, so that they were not afraid of the household names or superstars they would be up against most weeks. You can't allow your team to feel intimidated or not believe in themselves, because that means they have already lost the mental battle and these days, that is more than half the fight.

"I have heard some people suggest that the key to make a poor team play well is to make them perform better than what they are usually capable of. To me that is a contradiction in terms and it isn't much of a long-term strategy. That type of philosophy assumes everyone can improve to a Wally Lewis-type level and I don't support that. My way of thinking is that your team needs stability and hands-on experience. It has been proven time and time again that if you place players into tough situations or give them an opportunity against the 'big names', they have the ability to lift themselves. It is all about receiving the right experiences at the right times."

An important aspect of Economidis' system of inducing confidence and an instinct to seize opportunities is the focus he places upon the ability to attack with vigour. While not particularly renowned for their ability to win hard, grafting clashes, the Gold Coast were notorious for snaring upset wins against more fancied rivals by clinging in the game until the dying seconds. While Economidis attributes a great degree of that resilience to the amount of skill drills he ran while players were fatiguing, he says it is intrinsically tied to the mental attitude he endeavoured to instill within the club.

"My philosophy is that if an opposition team scores 30 points against us, we will still win if we score 31, so there is no use getting down in the dumps," he affirms.

"Don't get me wrong - I still like to spend 50 per cent of my time teaching defence, but there is a slight emphasis towards attack. I teach players to play what lies in front of them. They are not robots, they are Rugby League players and part of that title comes from being able to make different decisions for different circumstances. Inside your own 20-30 metres there is definitely a need for structured play, but when you are close to scoring, structure is only going to serve to weigh you down.

"That is why when I am choosing a team I look for a prop that can bust the line occasionally, but more importantly, can bunch defenders together and fight hard until they tire. That way, once we are established just short of the halfway line, we can spread the ball wide and either catch them short on numbers or short of breath."

Over recent seasons Economidis has been unashamed in his belief that South-East Queensland deserves more than one elite team in the national competition. However, his stance has not dulled the admiration he carries for one-time rivals Brisbane and the professionalism evident from their front office down through to the playing field. In particular, Economidis applauds the talent of head coach Wayne Bennett and his ability to prevent a champion team from turning stagnant with success. The ongoing renovations to their playing staff may be numerically similar to the changes suffered by the Coast, but in terms of calibre, the Broncos are in the process of upgrading rather than downgrading.

"I respect Wayne Bennett because not one player has left the Broncos and gone on to prove him wrong," Economidis says.

"When he tells them their time is up or that he does not think they can offer the club anything, nine times out of ten he is right. The only

exception is Michael Hancock and who is to say that if he left, he would have had the same impact that he still does now? Wayne has a knack of being able to see what players will fit into his system, regardless of their talent, and he is prepared to let quality go if there is any way he can find a better replacement.

"As a lot of losing teams would know, it takes an enormous amount of time and effort to locate and cut adrift the dead wood that is bringing your side down. Some of the time it may be players undermining you and if you do not kick them out, things will invariably get worse once they know they can get away with it. The role of coach is to provide your players with guidance and, in the right circumstances, dropping miscreants can provide a sense of that."

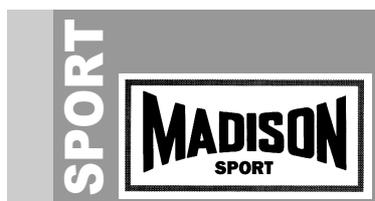
A novice who worked his way to the top and a man who still admits to holding adoration for other coaches, Economidis provides the perfect mixture of humility and dedication. His position at the coalface of the NRL may be temporarily reduced, but the experience and attitude he imparted on both his players of the time and the general public has left lasting notions of responsibility and integrity.

Coaching Tip:

Although an integral facet of Rugby League, most coaches neglect to teach their players how to fall with the ball correctly. Some consider it instinct, but for the main it is somewhat akin to the action perfected by cricket wicket-keepers.

The ball must remain protected and the body must hit the ground in a manner that results in a minimal fluctuation of the limbs and, in particular, the elbow. Jarring movements increase the occurrence of injury and in turn, lessen the amount of control and confidence a player has with the ball.

Drills to perfect this technique can be carried out on a sand pit for minimal injury and can be combined with defensive drills for simultaneous lessons.



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