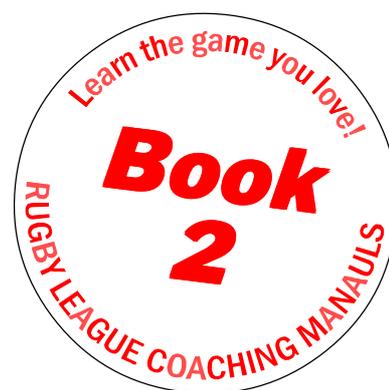


# COACH TALK

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# Andrew Farrar

## St George - Illawarra Head Coach

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*Andrew Farrar had a distinguished playing career with Canterbury Bulldogs, Western Suburbs, New South Wales and Australia, before joining the coaching ranks in 1995. After a year coaching Reserve Grade at the South Queensland Crushers, Farrar headed to Illawarra to coach the Steelers Reserve Grade side.*

*In 1998, Farrar took up the First Grade coaching position at Illawarra, and after a promising debut season, joined David Waite as Co-Coach of the newly merged St George Illawarra Dragons at the start of 1999 season.*

*Farrar took on the reigns as Head Coach of the Dragons in 2001.*

*RLCM interviewed him to discover how he gets the best out of his players each week.*

**RLCM Do you look at players as how they would respond to your method of coaching?**

**AF** I think so, you are probably looking at the mix of a team more than how a player will respond to my way of coaching. I think it is probably the building of a relationship more so than anything. Obviously there is give and take in any relationship but some players can be quite strong willed and probably as a coach you have got to give a little bit there. But, at the end of the day, the players have got to know who is running the show.

**RLCM Where do you see the big changes in the game?**

**AF** The interchange has changed the game immensely. I don't know whether it is for the better, I'm a bit on both sides of the fence there, but I think that has been the major change.

**RLCM The 10-metre rule?**

**AF** Well they said the 10-metre rule was going to open the game up. I don't think it does. I think it gives defence more of an advantage than it does the attack because with the five-metre rule it was quite easy to

draw and pass. Now you hear the terms 'slide in defence', 'drift defence' and 'inside out' because the defence has so much time to readjust. It is a lot harder to actually draw someone and let the ball do the work.

**RLCM Explain your preparation on a weekly basis, and on match day. Do you have any set areas?**

**AF** Between the three coaches we had in 2000, Max's (Ninness) main area was the overall skill factor, like catch, pass and basic skills. David Waite's area was mainly the defensive side of it and I looked after what we did with the ball. In saying that, I probably had the easiest part because of the talent that is in the side. The hardest part was probably not to reign them in but to get them to value the ball and value possession a bit more. Even though they were our set areas, there is still a fair bit of crossover. David did not say 'that is not your area', if I had a tip for how to defend a certain player. So we bounced a lot of ideas off each other.

**RLCM Match day preparation, do you have a set routine when you are on the road?**

**AF** Pretty much a set routine. We have breakfast and we usually get them out of the motel and have a game

of cricket or something that will get them moving. We have a bit of a meeting before we jump on the bus to go to the game. Match day we try not to be too heavy, whether it be physical or mental, we tend to let them find their own level on match day. If it is not in the computer by then, well it is never going to be in the computer.

***RLCM How much does video analysis play in your coaching style?***

**AF** From our side of the fence, we have a review tape of which I do our offence and David did the defence. We have statistics taken off the match tape and also individual tapes for the players. Each week the players get a tape of their own game, each action they do, which I think comes in very handy... I think the longest we have ever gone in review is probably an hour...I usually have first crack at them and I might have six or seven minutes of tape of where we went wrong and right in the game. I would have a chat about it and then David showed his cuttings of tape where we went right or wrong in stopping them. It does play a fair part in it...But I don't think we overplay our hand in the video room. It is a little bit like, it is good, but if it is too much it defeats the purpose.

***RLCM How important is feedback from your senior players?***

**AF** I have always been a great believer that the best judge are the people who run on the field, that's why in this day and age, they have started to go to the post match media conference. To me, I would rather go there and say I thought that was OK and back out. We have senior players who are very good at expressing their opinion, and are very smart football minds. They are the best judges and I think they're the people who should be talking about what the game was about because they were out there.

***RLCM Do game related skills play a big part in your training?***

**AF** It has always been the way I have coached. We are very game specific. We play a little game called scenarios, 'like it's the third tackle with two minutes to go, you are four points behind, what are you going to do to get us another set of six?' You're putting them right in there under the thumb, under the pressure that they would be under. Obviously, it is not a real game, but I think if you keep on repeating that, once

***With the right coaching any kid can be brought along and developed as long as he has got some athletic ability.***

they get into that situation, more than likely they will come up with the right decision... I think to win football games you need more right decisions than wrong decisions.

***RLCM Putting the opposition under pressure?***

**AF** I think we are fortunate because of our pace, agility and footwork when we've got the ball. In 1999 we ran in more tries from the back of the field than any other team, so playing against us, teams would feel under pressure whenever we got the ball. In saying that, I would like to see us be a bit more hard nosed. That comes from my days at Canterbury where defence built pressure.

***RLCM Is there a style of play that you try and surround yourself with?***

**AF** Yes without doubt, we try to play a reactionary style of play. We call it leading into space. It is a little bit along the lines of soccer coaches. In soccer you have got to lead into space to beat the offside trap. I think that is our main structure in how we want to play. We have got link players but you need people leading into space because a lead will cause some reaction in the defensive line and then you can play off that. I suppose it is just the talent in between the players' ears, their vision, their intelligence, their ability to judge distance, and how much time and space they have.

***RLCM Do you do much work on the play the ball, the ruck markers and dummy half plays?***

**AF** We do place a lot of emphasis on it in our training...We talk about winning the ground. You have got to win on the ground when they have got the ball, and you have got the ball. The importance of it has probably multiplied over the last few years with the rule changes that have been in place, but we used



# Tony Smith

## Huddersfield Giants RLFC

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*Tony Smith began his playing career in Casino on the Northern Rivers of NSW.*

*During his junior years, Tony always played up an age group and developed into a strong defender with a good tactical kicking game. In 1985, Tony joined the Lismore Workers RLFC and played First Grade as an 18 year old, the Workers were then coached and by Graham Murray, nowadays of Sydney Roosters and ex-Leeds Rhino's fame.*

*Tony was graded in 1986 with the Illawarra Steelers and thus began his professional career in Rugby League, finishing as a player with Bradford Bulls in 1997.*

*Being appointed as the assistant coach in 1998 to his brother Brian Smith at the powerful NRL Parramatta Eels whetted Tony's appetite to one day become a Head Coach of a elite Rugby League club.*

*His opportunity came in October 2000 when he was appointed Head Coach of the Super League Huddersfield Giants for 2001.*

*Andrew Bartlett one of Tony's first coaches at junior level in Casino knows him well and said "Whilst playing as a junior Tony had the ability to read the game and showed from a early age he is a 'thinker' of Rugby League".*

### **RLCM We hear coaches talking about winning the game in the ruck area.**

**TS** That's right, it is a competition, and for a lot of teams that is where their game is won or lost, just purely through that competition in the ruck area.

The 'play the ball' may only take a couple of seconds, but winning this part of the game can make a difference in the end result. That is why people say winning the ruck or winning the game on the ground is important. For some teams if they win it enough they will win the game, that is their philosophy and vice versa.

Nowadays it seems this is a big part of our sport, it has got, dare I say, a little bit like touch football, meaning getting the 'rolls' going. There is a huge emphasis on the speed of the 'play the ball'.

There are different theories on it, I think the ten metre rule has been more influential than anything else. When you have a eagle cam view of the game and look from above it is often 12, 13, 14 metres that players are actually having to retreat. So if you can be down quick and get a good 'play the ball' it will upset the opposition's defensive line and that will reflect on them not making good decisions.

I have seen individuals dive and go in low, then the next runner not looking so much to go through the line, maybe poke their nose through it to get the defence going backwards, not attempting off loads,

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not looking to break on that particular play, they may have two or three of those plays, then try to break you on later plays. I think most teams have tactics like that.

A 'roll on' is very difficult and tough to stop when the opposition gets you going backwards. It is something that must be worked on.

Whereas if you slow their 'play the ball' down it gives your defensive line a long time to get back, turn around and nominate.

### **RLCM Lets talk about holding up, turning or turtle players onto their backs and other techniques of tackling that enhance winning the ruck.**

**TS** Players must practice all techniques of tackling and of being tackled in the ruck area. Getting underneath is difficult to do at speed in training, but you do have to take that risk from time to time. Vary the degree of contact, sometimes just go down on the ground, roll over, have somebody jump on top of you, that sort of stuff. So, you can go from very little contact up to some weeks of heavy work, remember our game is a contact sport, you have to do contact drills.

Try to come up with other quirky little ideas that you can do, sometimes even doing the old lounge room footy on your knees and that sort of stuff where you wrestle each other onto the ground.

Wrestling is good but beware you risk injury when you get into a full on wrestle either standing up or on your knees. But you must practice it, put the football jersey on and go out on the field and practice wrestling, particularly the turtle part of it.

### ***RLCM And in the gym?***

**TS** Weight training is more specific to the game nowadays, once upon a time players would relate to how much they or others could bench press. Now it is getting a more practical. There is a bigger movement of the weights nowadays even with their squatting and their clean and jerks. Parramatta have a machine, called the Dominator, it is for twisting and throwing and very specific to our game. It is a good piece of equipment.

### ***RLCM What happens when your players get turtled, how do you advise them to respond?***

**TS** Once they have been put on their back, they must get on to their chest or front first, it sounds silly but some players will try to get up from their back to their feet. That is the slowest way that you can get up.

Once on their back you often see players pushing out, trying to force the opposition players away from them, but the more that they push the wider they become and give the opposition big levers (arms) to control, thus they are more vulnerable to being held down by holding their shoulders with downward pressure.

If the player can make himself tighter and can get into a little ball on his shoulders, and spin, then he is more likely to be able to turn over onto his front. His power to spin comes from keeping his feet on the ground.

When players are lying on top holding down, the only positive thing about pushing and kicking out is that you can sometimes attract a penalty. But it won't help you turn over. It will actually slow you down.

### ***RLCM The speed of the play of the ball.***

**TS** When I was at Parramatta we would change our thoughts on this situation from time to time, it would depend who we were playing. Against an opposition that bases their game on fast 'play the balls', if we let them do it and let them feel comfortable, then we would have a hard game on our hands. There were other teams when playing the ball quickly was not so important and we would play in a different way.

Rugby League Coaching Manuals

But in every game you need some quick 'play the balls', they can set up the big plays. Parramatta changed their philosophy on it, sometimes a slow 'play the ball' can actually be a good one for you. I think the obvious one is getting out of your own area, most players won't take a lot of risk in that zone.

We talk about playing the ball really quick and catching the defence off guard, but sometimes it can actually throw the offence off also, because they are not set up and ready to go on that particular play. Sure you can run at them and you might find fault in one of the opposition from time to time. But a few of your own players will also not be ready for what you are about to do. So sometimes by having ordinary speed 'play the balls' can be an attacking advantage.

Some players have got the wrong mix on the 'play the ball' contest, while they are fighting hard to get up quickly to 'play the ball' they come up with errors. The question is, at the end of the day what would you prefer, retain the ball by having ordinary speed 'play the balls' or have a quick 'play the ball' but have to surrender the ball every now and then.

So, be aware the emphasis on fast 'play the balls' can be overdone and react against you if errors are made in your own half.

### ***RLCM The role of the dummy half***

**TS** I believe a dummy half has to have good vision and be a good schemer. Some dummy halves count numbers and others just run on instinct.

Some see one marker and just go, that's their rule, it doesn't matter what else is called, that's what they do in the game and they will run either side. They run when somebody is left lying on the ground or they notice two players peeling off but struggling at the side the players, they will run and their aim is to achieve a quick 'play the ball'.

A perfect dummy half should have good vision and good instinct on reading situations.

Forwards are the players to start the roll and are the ones to get a team on the front foot. But it is often these little dummy halves with a simple instinctive scoot from the ruck gaining easy metres and then a quick play the ball which allows for two or three big forwards to run over the advantage line continuing the roll.

I think Melbourne's style of the flat ball is a good way for dummy halves to play. Their dummy half goes forward before passing and disguises whether the pass is forward or flat, I think most teams are adopting similar tactics.

**RLCM** *Being a dummy half cannot be left to one player, you obviously have other players for that role.*

**TS** That's right, if your dummy half is just passing off to the forwards you maybe wasting a few of your outside backs ability. Say to your dummy half, take off, get tackled, start us on a roll. This gives you a chance to watch other players perform at that position.

**RLCM** *The Short side.*

**TS** Dummy halves with good vision can exploit the short side, players often go there for a rest.

Often it is where some weaker defenders are or the star opposition attackers, waiting in defence. If so, aim attack at them to make them tackle, obviously to make them tired. Also, be aware the opposition will attack your short side for exactly the same reasons.

**RLCM** *The role of the markers.*

**TS** The role of markers is an ever changing one and a complicated subject. With the ruck area and the speed of the 'play the ball' being so dominant nowadays coaches are expecting a different role from their markers. They are required to be more efficient than they were in days gone by, where the simple instructions were first marker left, second marker right

Markers need to be more aggressive than we have seen in the past. They are needed to stop some of the advantage line quick 'play the balls', by being able to slow up the attacking player who dives down in the ruck area.

The marker needs to be able to tackle runners side on and low, allowing the other defenders to put him on his back and negate any roll on through quick 'play the balls'.

I would expect markers to be situational to where they are on the field, they should know what is required of them in that section. They should know what tackle it is, how many players the opposition has behind the ball, which way the opposition is likely to go and what is needed to combat and defend their position for the play that is in front of them.

All scenarios of what can happen around the ruck should be put into game situations at training so the markers can recognise it when it comes into the game.

Marker play is a really important area, we could spend a lot of time on talking about the role of markers.

**RLCM** *Where do you want your players to run. Are they aiming at a player or aiming for a position on the field.*

**TS** Often players will run into a spot player or a weak defender and I encourage players to do that. It also would depend on the tactics for the team that we are playing against.

Their marker area might weak, so we may aim to go behind the markers or we may get our dummy half to put on some plays, sending them one way attempting to get in behind them on the other side, it varies.

If you are playing a team of gorillas, would you just power it up? Probably not unless you have got a team of gorillas yourself. If you have got a big pack and you can keep them on the park all the time, you don't have to vary that so much, you can just keep powering to wherever you want to begin your power plays.

Sometimes the game philosophy is just to go to an area and isolate certain players, not necessarily getting them going backwards, sometimes it is just a spot or a situation that they do not handle too well, that has been noticed in research.

This is where a juggling act comes in for players, we may say our tactics for this game are 'we want get to this point on the field to put on these type of plays'. So, do they put their helmets on and just run to that spot of the field, just purely so that they can put that play on, or do they run somewhere else where they think there is a bit of weakness.

Now, this is why smart players are needed, if they don't go to that spot hopefully it was because they had a good reason and they might put a chink in the opposition somewhere else, allowing for a try.

Certain players will only do exactly what you want them to do, they will just go to that spot, some players are always going to be a like that, but teams need smart players who can get see a different option.

So to answer the question, yes we will send players to a spot on the field that we want to set up, because if you put this play on against this team they struggle with it, although, they might shut you down on the first couple of plays and maybe even the fifth one, but you might score on the sixth.

Coaches must try to get this message and to teach players that although there is a team plan and you are going to a spot on the field, if a player sees something else on, tell him to do it.

**RLCM** *Parramatta's ball carry was noted last season are they doing anything different in the way they carry the ball.*

**TS** We would like to think some of the players did. We spent a lot of time on skills and drills on how to carry and how to grip the ball.

This came about by looking at the ball carry of the great players of the past. Watching the way they held the ball, what it did for them, how they were able to transfer the ball from hand to hand and side to side, more quickly than some of the ways players do today. We saw the benefits in the way that they gripped the ball and the options that they then had to pass the ball and off load.

I think there is not enough time spent on this skill with young players and this probably contributes to handling errors. It also has to do with the way that we pass nowadays.

There is more spiral and torpedo passing in the game now and the grip of the ball is different for those passes than the more traditional pass.

Parramatta were teaching ball security, ball control and trying to eliminate mistakes but also the ability to grip a ball one handed and not just in your favourite hand.

We wanted the players to have the ability to be able to hold the ball in either hand, or both hands and be able to swap. It maybe a forgotten art or skill and it has to do with the way players carry the ball.

**RLCM** *Are young players shown too much emphasis on the spiral Pass?*

**TS** Yes. Although there is a need for spiral passes in our game and the balls that we use nowadays are suited for spiral passes. But, I think too many of our younger players have only a spiral pass. I think players who have all methods of passing are more valuable to a team.

If a player can do the traditional pass he has more options than just a spiral pass.

The traditional passes are easily disguised. You can set up for a long ball and just through the fingers and your motion, you can pop the ball short. It is really hard to do that with spiral passes because the spiral has a wind up and it is a one speed and it actually has one height and when you are talking about weighting a soft ball, spirals go horizontally, like a bullet and is hard to catch.

It comes back to the way that the player holds the ball. When he is getting ready to throw a spiral pass he needs to wind up, but if one hand is taken off the ball or pulled off the ball, the ball will be dropped.

When you do the traditional pass the ball is gripped in a fashion that you can take one hand off it and still have a hold of the ball. I think we don't spend enough time in teaching grip, carry and passing. I think they need to learn both and practice both.

Parramatta spent a lot of time on practising traditional passing, we would have preferred not to, but some players are not taught as juniors on the correct methods of passing and catching in their junior days. Passing and catching coaching sessions go right back through their 16's and 18's and 20's so hopefully when those players do reach the higher levels the elite coaches do not have to worry about passing as a priority.

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# Graham Murray

**2001 Sydney Roosters RLFC Head Coach**  
**2002 North Queensland Cowboys Head Coach**

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*Graham Murray is widely recognised within Rugby League circles as a team builder, with the inherent ability to draw the best out of his player's week in and week out. Murray has achieved success at all levels of coaching. He led Penrith to a Reserve Grade Premiership in 1987; took Illawarra to a major semi-final and Tooheys Challenge Cup victory in 1992; coached the Hunter Mariners to an unlikely World Club Challenge final berth in 1997; was the brains behind Leeds' English Super League triumph in 1999; and more recently oversaw the Sydney Roosters go within a whisker of notching their first premiership in 25 years. Being named 'Dally M' coach of the year in 1992 is yet another coaching accolade for Murray. His remarkable success at such an assortment of clubs illustrates his rare capacity of uniting individuals into a formidable team.*

*Murray also enjoyed a fruitful playing career chalking up 87 career First Grade games for Parramatta and Souths. He also skippered the Eels' Reserve Grade side to premierships in 1977 and 1979. **RLCM** talked to Murray while he was coaching the Roosters in 2001 to ask about his recipe for success, as well as his thoughts on Rugby League in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2002 Murray headed North to take on the position of Head Coach of the North Queensland Cowboys.*

***How has full-time professionalism changed players?  
It's a lot different to yesteryear when they combined  
work commitments with football isn't it?***

You have to tell the players about the importance of turning up on time and wearing the right uniforms and behaving in a team environment. When you went to work you learnt that pretty quickly because the bosses wouldn't put up with lateness or inappropriate attire. In those days Rugby League was in the evenings and you had a bit of leniency for the players because you knew they had worked hard in the pits all day, and were lucky to have them there. Nowadays you have got to emphasise that it is important to be punctual, it is important to be dressed properly and polite. I think one of my coaching staff in Leeds said once, 'my time is the same price as your time and your time is the same price as the next blokes time.' So if somebody gets held up for five minutes, or the team gets held up because of someone for five minutes then you have to times that by 13 which equates to 65 minutes being wasted.

The players get too much idle time, and combining that with more money can be a deadly mix. At the Roosters, we try to fill in a lot of their time. But they don't want to be with you the whole time so you just try and find the balance. You can't train them eight hours a day. They're human beings they just can't take it. We do weights in the morning and running in

the afternoon, but you have got to allow the players down time so their bodies can recover.

***Your coaching philosophy...***

My philosophy is to enjoy myself wherever I live and wherever I coach. I think I've always enjoyed myself wherever I have been. I loved it at Penrith, I loved it at Wollongong, Newcastle, Leeds, and now Sydney. I had a great time when I captain-coached in Lismore as well. When I first meet my players with a new club I always say 'I'm going to enjoy this, if you want to enjoy this you better get on the bus with me.' That is what it's all about. If we are not enjoying ourselves then we are not going to be very productive as a group. Having said that, you can't be jokers all week you have to know when to switch on and switch off.

***Has a coach's role changed?***

Definitely, and that is why I think you need an assistant coach. I never thought I would, but I wouldn't work without one now. An assistant can dovetail everything that you do, and things you might miss he can pick up. If I'm a bit cranky he can be the nice guy, when you are the nice guy he can be a bit cranky, so that person is a very important to your club. Grant Jones is my assistant here at the Roosters and he is perfect for the role. There is so much that you have to do with the players.

### ***Your strengths as a coach...***

I think I'm easy to get on with. Having said that, I will never dodge dropping a player who I don't think has performed well. I get on with most people and my door is always open. I think one of the things I seem to be able to do is generate good team spirit which goes back to enjoying myself.

### ***Good team spirit is vital isn't it?***

You have got 28 people and you're putting them in a room and saying 'you are going to spend the better part of eight months with each other and all of you are to be best friends,' there is a lot of hard work there. They're all from different walks of life and you have got to make sacrifices. You just can't walk in and say this is me and this is the way it's going to be for me. It has to be for us, the team. I usually say to players when we first meet 'if you really want to be a selfish bugger and just think about yourself you should have taken up an individual sport like golf, singles tennis or boxing. But here you have collectively chosen Rugby League which is a team sport and you can't get away from it, we are a team sport and we have got to be operating as a team.'

### ***After the game...***

In the first two days after a game I think there should be a lot of down time. I think you have got to let the person physically and mentally relax and get over that last encounter. So, early in the week has got to be fairly low key, we have a swim on Monday and then have lunch together, then we might have an activity in the afternoon. Apart from that I don't ask them to do anything. We don't speak about the previous game at this time. Some people say you should address it the next day, but I still think the players need the down time. On Tuesdays we do weights, have lunch together and then assess the weekend's game. We then have Wednesday's off, so the first three days are pretty low key and I think the players need it, I really do.

### ***How do you motivate the players week after week?***

I remember years ago I was at North Sydney Oval and I was walking down the steps to the game. At that time I was coaching Second Grade. The Under 23's were about to go on and I walked past the North Sydney shed and they had *Rocky 2* running. I remember thinking, 'they are fired up'. Then I went to our shed and they had *Rocky 3* going. I said to the players 'don't think I'm okaying *Rocky* movies for motivation every week. It is all about motivation of the inner self. I will talk to you and I'll get us ready but I can't physically take you and put you on the rack and say I want you to remain focused.'

### ***What type of drills work do you do?***

These days you have left hand side and right hand side, so we have the left-hand side versus the right-hand side which is a good exercise. I think that is what you have to do, you have got to try and make it fairly game like. And the players will tell you too that they like those types of drills. It is reactive, and they are being put under pressure. But having said that, in your drills and skills you have got to work into something. You start off with no opposition and then you work with a couple of pads against four players and then you might work eight on eight. So you can't be doing something that is very physically demanding straight away, you have got to determine what you are trying to achieve.

### ***How do you re-build the confidence of a dropped player?***

Everyone is disappointed when they get dropped to Second Grade and they all treat it differently. It is just a matter of opening the lines of communication. I will always say hello to a bloke I've dropped even if I have nothing really constructive to say to him.

### ***How do you go about winning the battle of the ruck?***

I think if your defence is in order you will win the ruck. I think you have just got to be aggressive in defence and make sure the opposition earns every inch of ground.

### ***Where do you generally want your 5<sup>th</sup> tackle kicks to go?***

Over the fullbacks head. If we achieve that then it opens up the possibility of trapping him in the in-goal area. If we can't he is going to be just inside the field of play which means his teammates have to come right back to the goal line to help him out.

### ***What is the major difference between the English and Australian games?***

I reckon the top five sides are good in England and when those sides play each other it is a good battle. At their home ground they probably won and at your home ground you probably won, that is how close it was. With the bottom nine teams you knew you had a win which means most British players aren't conditioned to playing tough matches every week. I think those soft games is where they falldown. In the NRL no one knows who is going to win. There is no doubt that in the top 20 British players there is some very skilful footballers, and they will win the odd Test match against Australia, but they just will not be able to back it up and win a Series. They just haven't experienced week in week out tough football.





# Michael Hagan

## Newcastle Knights Head Coach

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Michael Hagan joins former teammates Andrew Farrar, Terry Lamb and Steve Folkes as a First Grade coach, after all four emerged in Warren Ryan's Canterbury sides of the mid '80s. Hagan, a Brisbane Wests junior played in the Bulldogs' 1985 and 1988 premierships before moving to Newcastle where he played 89 games at pivot. Hagan also squeezed in a stint with English club Halifax and was a member of Queensland's dominating State of Origin teams of the early '90s.

Hagan served his coaching apprenticeship under Mal Meninga at Canberra, where he coached First Division and under Ryan at Newcastle. Already he has impressed with his decision making and positive approach to the game. A long-time skipper of the Knights, Hagan will take on god-like status if his side remains atop the NRL ladder. RLCM caught up with the rookie coach recently to discuss all things Rugby League.

### **What do you think of the limited interchange rule?**

I think on face value it was probably something the game was looking for, and I think an element of physical and mental toughness has come back into the game. We're now seeing the better players stay on the field for longer periods, and I think that is what you want to see, good players taking advantage of lesser players when they get tired. I think what we've created in the last three or four years is those real explosive athletes, and you still need an element of that. Gordon Tallis for example, who was one of those people, he now has to be a bit more conservative in his movements so he can still provide that explosiveness in attack. I think players, coaches, and supporters would be fans of the new limited interchange rule. We're seeing some terrific close games, and you can almost see the games ebb and flow.

Rugby League Coaching Manuals

### **Are teams using the ball more under the new rule?**

I think it's about making the defensive team work harder. You're also seeing a bit more second phase football early in the game. So it's not just a matter of chasing points, but about working your opposition over and making them get off the ground and make another effort. It all adds up over 80 minutes of football. I think defensively second phase is the hardest thing to stop. When you're tired the first thing that suffers is that you don't wrap the football up.

### **Are you still adjusting to limited interchange?**

As different players get a better level of fitness that changes the amount of time they can cope with. So it is very unique to your own team depending on what fitness level they're at and what type of player you have on the bench. We're tinkering with that most weeks and some players that we think can get through 20 minutes might be struggling because they haven't had much football, so we might be making changes after 16 or 17 minutes. It is pretty critical at the moment as to when you get them off and how long to leave them out there because the errors will come. I think we're expecting some of our players to play 80 minutes, which after four to six weeks is okay but come rounds 16 to 18 we might need to rotate that a bit, because they are working really hard at the moment. Some of those 80 minute players are working harder than they did last year, and we're measuring certain efforts they're doing in games and it has certainly increased.

### **Do you think the players enjoy limited interchange?**

I think so. We're going back to where the number 1 to 13 has a bit more prestige about it. We tried to convince everyone that it's a 17-man game, and while all 17 players are important, I think the starting people are getting more football. So if you're in the starting

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team you're guaranteed more time than the blokes off the bench. I think that is getting back to the old days because that is the way it worked back then. In other words, if you're good enough to start then you get to play more football.

### ***What are your thoughts on the other rule changes?***

I think the stripping of the football rule and the benefit of the doubt going to the attacking team have been good introductions. I don't think we've got anywhere near as much controversy because of the changes that have been introduced. The games are being determined by the football teams. The officials aren't coming into all that often, although there is still a few things they're not getting right with the video referee and there are still a few problems with the technology...I think we've got the game right in most areas.

### ***What's your school of thought on defensive patterns?***

You've got to have a couple of different scenarios depending on who you're playing against and the situation in the game that determines how you defend your line. So there are a few different variables. You can't be a one-dimensional defensive team any more, you've got to have a bit of versatility in the way you defend different situations. We're working pretty hard on that at the moment, where we're not necessarily up and in or slide, but a bit of a balance between the two. With a defensive pattern it's an understanding of why you're doing it and how you solve certain questions that the opposition put to you. You need to have some smart players on the edge of the ruck that understand it before you can be really confident in how you do it. In all the patterns you've still got to be able to defend over the football. That is a skill in itself, to be able to do it relentlessly for 80 minutes. If you've got across your board a desire to defend well then

## **If you turn the ball over on play two often, then you know you're going to be in for a pretty tough day**

### ***How do you see a good finish to a set?***

I think just maximising the pressure you put the opposition under, in terms of where you give them the football, whether you can make a contest of it, whether you can get a repeat set of six or whether you're good enough to kick for a try.

### ***Do you use game related drills in your training program?***

Our pre-season is focused pretty heavily on game related drills as part of our conditioning and skills program. I think it's an area that if you've got a bit of creativity you can come up with any number of different ideas to suit game related situations. I think the players enjoy it and get a lot of benefit from it and I think the way we play probably reflects the way we train.

that is half the battle. The hardest thing is defending when you're tired, and controlling the football still has an enormous effect on how you defend over the 80 minutes. If you turn the ball over on play two often, then you know you're going to be in for a pretty tough day.

### ***One on one defence how do you incorporate that into your training regime?***

Once you get into the season and the level of intensity with which they're playing at, the hardest thing is to simulate that at training with any quality. Even if they put the tackle suits on you find they're still a bit reluctant because you've probably got to do it at 85% of intensity to get some value from it. In the off-season you can apply it a bit more when they're not actually playing week to week and they're happy to rip in a bit. It's a real fine balance between technically what

you want to work on without subjecting them to further injury. That is the hardest thing in our game, to get the full on contact like the NRL without causing further injuries. Given how much we're paying blokes to play on the weekend you don't want them to break a leg on Tuesday. It's a fine line to tread.

### ***Who have been the greatest influences on your coaching career?***

Warren Ryan and his thinking on the game, and the fact that he made me a better player because he was very uncompromising on what he wanted from me. There was some resentment initially but he made me a better player because of that. Phil Gould followed on from him and was a different style of coach. He showed a bit more confidence and was a bit more of an arm around the shoulder type of coach, where as Warren was very direct and tough. I've worked and played under a lot of other good coaches. David Waite of course, Alan McMahon who did a terrific job at Newcastle and Graham Murray and I've become close friends in recent times and I've learnt a lot from him on the people side of the business. I've been pretty fortunate. Chris Anderson was my first coach at Halifax and I also played under Malcolm Reilly at Halifax. Mal Meninga, who asked me to coach the Raiders' Second Grade team at the start of '98, for which I'm very grateful, also influenced me significantly. As did Robert Finch, who knows his football and taught me a great deal at Newcastle and Canberra. Keith Onslow has been a great influence too, and encouraged me to start coaching and pursue the necessary courses. He has also been very helpful in the areas of skill development and player recruitment. I think ultimately though you've got to apply your own thoughts and styles to coaching.

### ***What sort of drills do you do when the players are fatigued?***

It might be less numbers more space so you're really trying to maximise the amount of space they need to cover defensively. It might be seven on five to give the advantage to the attacking side so the defensive team is under more pressure. We might do a conditioning component and then go to a game, so it's a bit of trial and error.

### ***Where do you want your markers to be?***

There have been some different principles, the first marker chase and the second marker hold. I think with the emphasis on the ruck at the moment I don't recall seeing many first markers getting out and making tackles any more. The game is too quick and the timing of the ruck is too good. Again you have to adjust that as far as what is best for your personnel. So again it's a bit of a horses for courses situation.

### ***What are the signs you look for when replacing a player?***

There are certain movements defensively that you're looking for. If they're not doing their job defensively how you want them to do it, then that is the first indicator that you are maybe going to be exposed at the ruck. So there are subtle things we're looking for in those players that are getting really worked at the ruck and we'll make decisions on them. If you leave them there for two sets then the opposition is going to get you, so you've got to get them off before that if you can.

### ***Do you emphasise the importance of off the ball play to the players?***

I think they've all got a role to play even if they're not going to receive the football in terms of helping someone else get in space by doing something to a defender. It is something the players don't get a lot of kudos for but it is still an important part of their job. There is a real unselfish attitude to it, putting yourself in a position to help someone else. Most players want the football when it's all said and done. I don't know too many backrowers and centres that want to run a decoy, they all want the football.

### ***Has training changed nowadays because we are seeing a lot more offloads and attacking football this year?***

To be honest I think the players are more skilful today because they've been fulltime for five years. Everyone can throw a spiral pass left to right and right to left across the board. So we've got a more skilled group of people and I think that is something we didn't see 10 years ago. We had skilful players in the game back then, but not the high percentage we have now.



# Daniel Anderson

## New Zealand Warriors Head Coach

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*Daniel Anderson has come into prominence after stepping out of the shadows of Parramatta Eels mentor Brian Smith to take over the reins of the New Zealand Warriors. Anderson served his apprenticeship at Parramatta, coming through the ranks from being a Development Officer before the call came from across the Tasman to make his mark in the NRL. It's been a long steady journey for the former park footballer who began coaching with the under 13's at the famed rugby league nursery St Gregory's at Campbelltown on Sydney's outskirts. RLCM spoke with Daniel recently to discuss life as a Warrior.*

### What are your basic philosophies with coaching?

I was the development officer and development manager with Parramatta for a long time, so I think my basic philosophy for the game reflects that. I consider myself a technical coach in many regards and like to think that part of my ability is to bring a player further along the path, bettering his understanding of the game as well as his physical abilities. I don't like to smother my players though; I prefer to see them run with their own unique styles but just tweak their natural abilities by maybe tightening a few areas that might be loose or loosening a few areas that might be tight. In New Zealand at the moment we're a little undernourished as far as development is concerned – the coaches are good but they are working above the basic elements of the game. This year with the Warriors we have gone back to focussing on the basic core elements of the game; it's up to the players to advance on that, they're the ones with the flair and the skill so they teach you a little bit about what to do but if they're not holding the ball or passing correctly to begin with then they're always going to struggle.

### What are your thoughts on '*man management*'?

It's very important at any club but particularly at mine with such a wide range of characters that come from cross cultural backgrounds and different religions. I don't want to inhibit anyone's personal style so for us to work as a team we all need to have a bit of empathy for one another. I'll speak to the individual to get a guide on their styles and from that work on harmonising the team. Living in Australia and watching the Warriors before I'd been offered the job I'd heard about the reputations of the Polynesian

players and their inability to go the full eighty minutes but it didn't take me long to work out that was all a myth. They are very resilient to training and to injury; they train extremely hard and often and are proud people. I don't treat them any differently to anyone else as far as structure of training is concerned.

### On the basics, what have you brought to the club in terms of defence?

I have a bit of a penchant for tackle technique and have done a lot of work on it in the past. We're okay at it but a bit raw – we don't miss a lot of tackles anymore but our defensive system is at times loose and that goes back to the mental application of the players. The best sides in the competition, the Brisbane's and Parramatta's are very motivated when it comes to defence and sometimes we don't match that. Our players have embraced our system so it's now a matter of players having faith in each other so they don't get selfish and look after their own to the detriment of the team. But on the whole, I'm happy with what we've done and we're improving all the time.

### How do you harness your players attacking prowess?

I don't. They have to do it themselves. It's a matter of them knowing when the time is right to try things. Once again it comes down to the core elements and in that regard we're still weak – we don't pass the ball as well as other teams or play the ball as quickly; these are the things I'm currently focussed on. As far as the rest is concerned they have a free reign to promote the football and do whatever they can that is good for the team so long as it's not outside the parameters of their own role, like a front rower attempting to put up a spiral bomb for example. I have no problems with

players putting their hands up to try things, but they have to show me they're practising it on the training paddock first. Kevin Campion for example does a bit of kicking for us but he's earned that right because he puts in the effort at training to improve the chances of it actually coming off in the game. All I ask is they don't play outside their parameters but when they get on the field, if it's on, I tell them to go for it. You've got to throw something at the opposition.

### **What is your approach to game plans?**

We're not extravagant in any way. I'll provide information for players on opposition teams and information from our game last week. I actually try to get the players to scheme together. The boys are scheming together anyway, when they're playing cards or trying to get to the showers first so I told them they should be doing that with their football as well. So they get together and try things at training which is great because they come up with a lot of the ideas and therefore they own them. I might tell them about an opposition player who has a problem with defending an overs line and then they'll come up with a scheme to make something out of that. We've only just embraced that ideal but it's been effective so far. I mean, the thinking is they are scheming together in life anyway for fun, just trying to gee each other up, so why not use that for the betterment of the team. On the whole though we don't have a drastic change from week to week but you adjust minor things depending on what your opposition is doing.

### **Can you coach vision?**

You can enhance it by doing things like simulations and role-play. A lot of teams are playing aggressive styles of training games in-house now to see what players have the right nerves and composure under pressure. There are some good young players that have vision but because of the hierarchy in the team they have to wait until their time comes to get the ball before they can show it. The reason so many older players are considered the visionaries in their team is because they've had to bide their time; even when Andrew Johns first came into the top grade he never got the ball as often as he does now. Time spent by the individual thinking about the game can improve vision but a lot of it is intuitive as well as trial and error.

### **How do mentally prepare your team to play?**

It changes week in week out. Sometimes you start as underdogs and other weeks as favourites and I've found that changes the way the players approach the game. A lot of people say to me 'how come you play so well at the back end of games, in the final 20 minutes', and I think that comes down to their mental approach. Sometimes we seem to get so wound up

and then all of a sudden we'll let in a couple of soft tries and the opposition skips 12 points clear and then we relax because the pressure is off. We need to feel comfortable within ourselves when we're still under the hammer. I don't spend long sessions with players before a game; I just sow a seed with a player early in the week and then quietly bring them along so they are ready come kick off. It's no good if they're ready on Thursday because they'll be burnt out on Sunday. The veteran players play a big role in the team's preparation as well – Stacey Jones and Kevin Campion usually take us for our final training run before a game.

### **What are your thoughts on ball control as opposed to field position?**

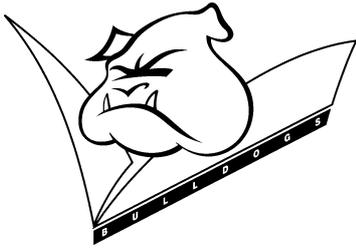
There are a lot of variables in ball control and field position. Here in New Zealand the players grew up with Gilbert footballs and not Steedens, and the Gilberts are like soccer balls so the players don't hold the ball properly because they can't; it's too big. And this is why we drop simple balls sometimes; it comes down to the players' historical teachings. Weather wise, it rains a lot more in New Zealand – if we play a night game we pretty much know it's going to be wet so we have to consider this in preparing the team. As far as the field position is concerned, it depends on the possession ratio in the game; if we have a high ratio we might chance our arm but if we're in front on the scoreboard we might be a little conservative. There are countless variables that change the way you approach your thinking but you need to be able to modify rapidly even in the game depending on these conditions. But the critical element is the possession ratio.

### **What for you is a good finish to a set of six?**

A try ultimately but outside of that I'm looking for a 40-20 or a goal line dropout. I don't mind a mid-field bomb either; basically an attacking kick as opposed to a defensive one.

### **Can you coach patience?**

I haven't found a good method yet to teach patience so it's trial and error for me at the moment. I encourage the boys to try things away from the game, like golf and tennis for example. Good teams and individuals maintain composure and can therefore take advantage of opportunities when they arise rather than pushing for them when they're not really there. When a mistake is made I'm looking to see the player doesn't make that mistake again – if he does, to me that illustrates poor patience, poor composure. The teams leading the competition have enormous patience and composure and when the pressure is on they won't stray from their original plan. We're still looking to do that consistently at the moment.



# Steve Folkes

## Bulldogs Head Coach

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**Canterbury coach Steven Folkes has compiled a rugby league resume most could only fantasize about. Grand final winner, New South Wales State of Origin player, Kangaroo. As a member of the revered, uncompromising Bulldogs pack of the 80's Folkes developed a reputation as one of the game's most disciplined players. Tough and hard. Aggressive, but not dirty. Since assuming the Canterbury coaching ranks he has devoted his time to ensuring the current pack of Bulldogs are similarly valued. Folkes considers discipline a priceless commodity.**

"I believe discipline comes in many forms and hopefully as coach I am instilling in my players the need to be self-disciplined. I think a lot about this before I decide if the player should come to our club in the first place. When we are looking at a young guy we go into his upbringing fairly extensively because we figure we can learn a fair bit about how he is situated in terms of things like discipline from the way he was brought up. There is no doubt in my mind that a team's fortune can change once they (the players) are individually prepared to alter their attitude. Take this year (2001) for example. Last year we finished well down the ladder, out of the eight and this season we've come second in the minor premiership. I put the turnaround primarily down to the player's attitudes. We didn't like where we finished last year, we weren't used to failing and we decided to take another look at ourselves to try to make some positive changes. We got more disciplined, changed our attitudes and changed our standing on the ladder this year".

**Folkes is something of a football rarity in these sometimes-selfish days of professionalism. He's one hundred percent Bulldog, always has been. Folkes has just chalked up season number 25 with the Canterbury club as either player or as a member of the coaching staff and appreciates more than anyone the culture of success the club has constructed.**

"I have only been away from the club for one year since I joined and that was when I had a season in England. We have been fairly successful since the time I came into grade and I was fortunate enough to be playing with a lot of great players who demanded and fully expected to win. Coming from that background I have found it easier to attempt to instil that desire in my players".

**Desire, attitude and discipline are words employed repeatedly from the Folkes coaching command. He had these assets as a player, and now he's looking to find it in his chargers as the educator. Teaching such skills falls into the relatively unknown subject matter called *man management*. The ability to bring together an eclectic group of athletes and transform them into a well-drilled, highly motivated team unit is never easy. But, as Folkes says, it's part of the job.**

"I think it's more a matter of them blending personality wise with the other players in the team. I think it's important you don't have too many egos in the team and I think we really haven't had too many problems along those lines while I've been coaching here and even further back probably. *Man management* is probably the single greatest asset a coach can have. It is, to me, learning how to get the best out of an individual. They are all so different and so unique. One player needs a bit of a cuddle and a pat on the back and some encouragement that way, while another bloke needs a swift boot right up the behind. It is finding out the balance and trying to work out every individual but there are some I haven't worked out of course. Trying to work out every individual and what excites and motivates them is one of the real challenges of my job I think".

**We often hear rugby league players in post-match interviews bemoaning the fact 'they didn't turn up to play', or they 'left their boots at home'.**

**These clichés often represent a lack of mental preparation on the side of the losing team, resulting more often than not in a horrible thrashing. So what can the coach do to ensure his team will be ‘on-song’ come kick off?**

Folkes says, “I believe a player’s mental preparation, as with their physical preparation, can change from week to week depending on who you are playing against and how you went the previous week. There is always a defensive element in our training during the week and if there are areas we need to improve on then we will focus a little more on that. It should go the same way with the mental side of things as well. The key is to stay on top of the player’s attitude and address it as soon as it becomes a concern. If you leave it until Sunday, it’s too late. The attitude affects everything, but particularly your defence. You need to be defending the way you want to play. We try to defend aggressively and pro-actively”.

**Folkes also has some tips on what the coach should be looking out for as he watches his team during the opening half of the match.**

“Defensively you need to make sure that everyone is doing the little things correctly so they are working as a team and there is good communication between individuals. Sometimes it happens better than others and you need to keep an eye open to address it if bad habits begin creeping in. Primarily while I’m watching the game I think I am watching our players but I’m obviously keeping an eye open for the players from the opposition that are causing us concern. For example, if they were getting some good go-forward from their dummy half that would be something I would give my players a rev up about during the break. I would speak about the need to dominate the ruck, about markers getting quickly to their feet, and working hard without rests. Halftime is generally too late to start introducing new plays. Your planning should be completed before kick off but at halftime you can remind players about some of their personal goals they set. Perhaps they have set themselves the target of making 140 metres during the match, average play the ball time of 2.5 seconds or whatever. It can be helpful to remind them of their individual goal so every time he’s running it up or playing the ball in the second half he’s going to be thinking about his goal. My halftime routine varies from week to week and depends on how we’ve performed in the first half. By the time I get down from the grandstand the players have probably been in the shed for two or three minutes and I think they need that time to get their breath and get any medical

things seen to. Once that has been taken care of I generally give my messages, short and to the point. If something’s drastically wrong, it’s probably an attitude thing, and if the game’s close, we maybe just need to tweak a couple of things”.

**Keeping things short and to the point is a tactic Folkes encourages all coaches to try with their team, particularly in the hour or two leading up to kick-off.**

“If you give a player too much information he’ll get confused. Most times before a game I only talk for about two or three minutes. In the hour or two before that I get around and see the players individually, ask them what their goals are for the day that we would have already discussed earlier in the week, so that I know they have been thinking about their jobs. We might discuss a few things as a team as we get closer to the match but the shorter your messages, the more chance it has of sinking in”.

**Following on from the Bulldogs less than impressive season 2000, coach Folkes was forced to reevaluate not only his team’s overall performance, but also his own functioning as the head coach. It’s a process he now encourages others to follow.**

“After the 2000 season I broke down what was required of me and how I could better utilize my time. I’m the head coach and get paid accordingly, but I realised there was not enough hours in the day for me to do all of the little aspects I needed to be good at. By learning to delegate a little bit I have freed up a lot of my time to focus on what I believe to be essential to the team’s progress, areas like *man management*. I really like the hands on responsibility that comes with coaching and as far as I’m concerned it’s important that the people who are with you on the coaching staff think the same way you do”.

With a magical blend of seasoned veterans and exciting rookies on the player’s list, and a hardhead like Steven Folkes in charge, Bulldogs fans should feel extremely confident of watching their beloved club continue to be a force in the NRL competition for many years to come.





# Matthew Elliott

## Canberra Raiders Head Coach

*The 2001 year was an unpleasant season for the Canberra Raiders. The once customary premiership heavyweights failed to make their mark on the competition table, struggling to field the same starting thirteen week after week, and experiencing a curious coaching structure with Mal Meninga and Matthew Elliott sharing the responsibility.*

**In 2002, Elliott will have sole ownership of the Raiders' reins; and as he tells us in this edition of RLCM's Coach Talk, it's something he's looking forward to with relish.**

"I always had an ambition to coach, it's something I've had pretty much my whole life in fact. I've always been keen to investigate new ways to get a message across and to teach and now that I have the opportunity to employ that knowledge here in Australia it's fantastic".

**I actually believe that decision-making is the most important art in our game at the moment, both offensively and defensively.**

**Elliott has become something of a Rugby League nomad. Born in Townsville he played football in Lismore and France before spending six years at St George where his playing days were ended following a serious knee injury. In typical fashion, Elliott refused to let the set back keep him away from the game he loves.**

"When the knee exploded for the last time I was devastated because I was only 28 and I thought I still had a few good years left in me. I played under Craig Young and Brian Smith during my time with the Dragons. I have no hesitation in nominating Brian as my chief mentor; I learnt so much of him as a player but a lot more as a coach. He knew I was keen to stay involved and luckily for me Geoff Carr gave me the

job as the coaching and development officer as well as the Under 21's. It was a great job because I learnt so much in those early days and it gave me a taste to learn more and more.

**Since turning coach Elliott's passport has continued to be covered in ink. He has spent time plying his trade in England and now finds himself in the nation's capital. Elliott has used his travels as a method to be trained by some of the world's top coaches.**

"I have never been afraid to say I don't know it all. One of the good things about the time I spent in England was its proximity to the USA. I went over there three or four times and was able to spend time with the Denver Broncos and the Philly Eagles. I also got to see a few ice hockey organisations and a few football clubs in England. All in all it gave me some fresh ideas and helped to expand my knowledge".

**One aspect of the coaches' role that Elliott considers to have increased in significance is the issue of 'man management'. It has become something of a buzzword in coach's circles over the last few years and Elliott expects it to become an art all aspiring coaches will soon have to master.**

"In the USA the American football teams have a coaching staff that extends to about fifteen people. We don't have that luxury here so you have to be careful with the way you deal with the players now that we are all full time professional. I don't think you should be spending eight hours a day with the players or letting them spend that much time with each other. It's about getting the right balance and depending on whom you talk to the balance is always

different. Some people will say that the game is ten percent physical and ninety percent mental while someone else will say it's the other way around. I'm not sure what the percentage really is but there is no doubt that there is a balance and you need to find it in order to become successful. Physically there are plenty of studies and customs you can use to get the players into peak condition, but when you start dealing with the mental side of a player's make up it becomes a lot more scarier. There will always be a lot of arguments about how that should be carried out and how it should be addressed. My personal way has been to develop a routine so that the players become aware of what is going to be required from them physically before they step onto the park. There is no painless way to play our game and the players need to prepare for each match as if they were going into battle. I'm not saying that the players have to learn to overcome fear but just that they have to be ready to put their bodies on the line".

**Despite Elliott's fascination with physiological procedures he steadfastly maintains that Rugby League is a simple game that can fall victim to over-complication from interfering coaches. Elliott has a penchant for technique and basics and says he won't stray from that principle.**

"I think basic skills are and always have been the core of our game. How you actually carry the ball, how you pass it and your general tackling technique. The way you do those skills may have evolved over the last fifteen years but the principles stay the same. I think kids do need to be exposed at some time to some of the more technical aspects of the game but up until about, say fifteen, I think they should engaged in areas which are simplistic in their nature. Things like the spiral pass irk me. It wasn't that long ago that only a few players used a spiral pass and now everyone does; but I still believe that the spiral pass isn't an effective pass over a short distance, certainly over ten or fifteen metres it is, but percentage wise it's not good to use over a short distance. But because children are taught nothing except the spiral pass from a young age that's all they seem to do".

**True to Elliott's preference for players to have a mastery of the basic aspects of Rugby League is his desire for the way he wants his Raiders outfit to execute their game plan each week. It's doubtful the Raiders will fall into a trap of trying too much too early in a game - but Elliott does hope to instil a belief in his troops that good things will happen if they back their hands occasionally and do the little things correctly.**

"This might sound strange but I believe that movement is the key to success. That might sound like a business statement to some but it's a performance statement for me because I believe if you have movement (i.e. in attack) with the ball then you will firstly create opportunities for yourself and also put pressure on the opposition's defence. If you have movement it allows you to make more off-loads and quicker play the balls. There has to be some form of rhyme and reason but it is effective if it is used correctly because it can create so much opportunity. The flip side is that in order to create movement you have to lay the platform of getting the simple things in order first - you cannot have one without the other. While it might sound easy to carry out it is actually one of the harder things to implement because it taxes so much energy to have continual movement - players are carrying fatigue, duress and also a bit of adversity, so that's one of the great things about our game. If movement was easy to ensure then we'd all have nil-all score lines every weekend. It will never happen because mistakes will always happen and that will stem from many different areas.

"I actually believe that decision-making is the most important art in our game at the moment, both offensively and defensively. A decision not to pass or to pass can decide the outcome of a match - to stay up in the line or retreat. Some of the responsibility for that rests with me, the coach, because I have to make sure I am coaching awareness into my players. Some coaches are very good at coaching players' awareness in their skills but the next phase of the evolution is to work on their decision making. For me, that's what makes someone like Andrew Johns so special - he just understands what is happening in front of him. He spends a minimal amount of time making people around him work because wherever he goes his team tends to congregate and he can spend a lot of time watching the opposition and making decisions based on what's best to beat them. He's just a marvel to watch. I'm not saying that Andrew Johns is great simply because of his decision-making - it's just an important part of what makes him good but it's something I would like my players to improve on this year and in the years to come.

*After a lifetime of criss-crossing the planet in an attempt to carve out a coaching career, Matthew Elliott finally hopes he has found a permanent home with the Canberra Raiders. History will determine his fate, but if perseverance and commitment count for anything, the Raiders appear to be on a good thing.*



# Chris Anderson

## Sharks and Australian Coach

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With the fresh challenge of taking over the reigns at Cronulla this year, Chris Anderson feels rejuvenated, despite his status as veteran coach of the NRL. The current Australian coach has recruited deftly; his former Storm collaborator Brett Kimmorley the most notable, and people out Sharkies' way are looking forward to what fruits September may bring. RLCM caught up with Anderson for this edition of Coach Talk.

**RLCM: How have the new rule changes and the limited interchange altered your philosophy toward attack?**

Anderson: It's changed a little bit. The game has become a little bit more expansive I suppose because you tend to throw the ball around a little bit more. The days of taking ten big forwards into a game are gone – you can't expect to just roll over the top of them (opposition) with a big pack and that has opened things up for the guys who have that attacking flair. Personally, I don't think the new rule about not taking the defence back the full ten metres is going to change things a great deal – it just means that you have to have more support for your runners. If you send them up just one off, then they'll be easy pickings, you need the options. It doesn't matter how far the ref is getting them back, when someone goes to the line, they need options, and that means players have to make the effort to get there and support.

**RLCM: You were credited with bringing the 'flat line' of attack into the game – to great success – at Melbourne. Are you playing any deeper now that you are at Cronulla?**

Anderson: No not at all. I think it's more important now than ever before to get right up on the advantage line. The fact is you have to be going at them (defence) before they start coming at you. My interchange bench has changed – I used to run on four big forwards and just keep rotating them, but these days I tend to just use them for resting players. I don't have two front rowers and two second rowers like I used to, I mostly go with one front rower, two second rowers and an outside back. The reserve front

rower is there to give your two starters a rest, while the back-rowers are used as alternates.

**RLCM: What do you make of the new play the ball rule?**

Anderson: I don't think they needed to change it. My worry is that when you get two good teams together it is going to blunt attacking football, so I don't agree with it. It won't affect the way we play. I think teams are getting in each other's faces a bit more but I reckon they've gone about it the wrong way. If they want to stop score 'blowouts' the NRL should try to even the teams up than try to start changing the rules.

**RLCM: The new decoy running crackdown has attracted plenty of controversy in 2002, what is your take on it?**

Anderson: The rule is a silly one. What they (the referees) should do is if anyone runs behind one of his own players with the ball then that's called a shepherd, but if the ball is passed behind a bloke then that is fair enough and the defence should have to adjust. The way the League has it at the moment people in the defence can take a dive and stop a try – run into a dummy runner and the try will go begging. I'd make a black and white rule that if you run behind one of your own team with the ball it is an infringement, but if you pass it it's okay. We don't practice decoy running much at our club anyway because we play so flat that most of the boys are up supporting each other. We do a couple of blocks out wide (in the backs) but not enough for players to be getting in the road. But the way it is now, you're open to a defensive player who wants to be lazy and run into a dummy runner. If coaches start coaching that, which they probably will, then the refs are really going to start having problems.

**RLCM: The top teams in the comp seem to be able to not only dictate the tempo of a match, but to also lift it at various time during a contest. How is this possible?**

Anderson: If you're going to be successful in this game, you have to learn, as a team, to be able to

control it (the game). It's more important to be controlling the tempo in certain parts of the field than in others. We attack a little bit more after a kick, when we've got them down their end. That's when we lift our tempo to keep the pressure on them down there. It's the little things, completing your sets, kicking well and limiting mistakes, but it also means trying to raise your levels in areas where the other team may not be expecting it. Things like keeping pressure on the opposition down their end. The better teams can control the ball – if you can control the ball you will control the game and therefore dictate the tempo. Flat attack is a tempo game, you just want to create a roll over effect so you can create some room to get their defence standing still. If you have the ball you've got everything you need to win. By controlling that and the field position you can make the opposition continually come up with second and third efforts. All teams in this comp are as fit as each other but energy is all about making teams work when they don't want to. If they're working hard coming out of their own end or turning and chasing kicks all the time it's going to effect their energy levels. In turn, that affects your attitude – you become less positive. When that happens, either through continually rucking the ball out from your own end, or defending your line for successive sets, that's when teams get beaten.

**RLCM: We seem to be seeing a lot more dummy half running this year, why is that?**

**Anderson:** Some coaches seem to be keen on it at the moment because I guess they see it as risk free – particularly coming out of their own end. The risk with that though is that it probably lends itself to negative football, which I'm not sure, is a healthy pattern to fall into. It might be safe but I don't think it's something I will adopt. Having said that there are some rules you have to adhere by when you are coming out your own end just to get to the stage where you can put in a decent kick. You have certain rules but I don't think it has to get to the stage of straight one-out running. Sometimes you can surprise them (opposition) by putting a spread on them down your own end.

**RLCM: I'd like to talk about defending a lead. We saw a classic case of a team unable to defend a lead this year when Melbourne came from 30-10 down to beat Parramatta – how do you coach a side to defend a lead?**

**Anderson:** The big thing with defending a lead is to continue doing the same things that helped you

get the lead in the first place. That is controlling the ball and controlling field position. You can't go negative but you don't have to take risks down your end of the field and you have to ensure that your kicking game remains intact. Basically you don't allow the other team to get a sniff down your end of the field – the danger zone. The opposition is always going to smell a change in attitude; so you can't afford to put the shutters up and get negative because they will sense it and cash in on it and the next thing you know the game is back on but the ascendancy and momentum is now with them and not you. You have to stay positive but take fewer risks – it's a fine balance but it is one a team must be able to find. Things can change so quickly these days that even a couple of tries buffer is not enough. You saw in that Parramatta-Melbourne game that when the Eels let the Storm back into the game it never looked like the Eels could score more points because they had just become so negative that they're confidence was shot and the mistakes became more regular. They (Parramatta) really had no idea how to defend a lead. They started to panic and play as if they needed more tries and their kicking game I thought was pretty ordinary. What they really needed was to play more controlled and composed and do the little things right to shut the Storm out of it. In the Grand Final last year Newcastle shut up shop with twenty minutes to go – that's when Johns started taking field goal shots. If Parramatta had of been a little more controlled in what they were doing they nearly could have got away with it. If you're taking pot shots at field goals twenty minutes out, you're sending signals that you've gone negative.

**RLCM: How do you form a culture of a club? Coming from Melbourne to the Sharks, have you found it more difficult to put your stamp on the way the club plays?**

**Anderson:** Yes, I have. One of the good things to have happened at Cronulla is that a lot of players have left and we have brought fresh players in – so that has brought with it a sense of freshness into the place. It's a good thing for us because the culture now is not so in-grown, like it used to be. Most of the boys here have been used to the way things have been done for the past eight years and all of a sudden it's changed so it's going to take time for everyone to feel settled. When I first came to Cronulla the players were used to doing things their way and I have found that a little bit hard to change. We're working on it but I wouldn't say we've changed it yet. There are some attitudinal things we need to change here. Bringing players from other clubs has

been a positive for us – some of them have come with good habits. I think the biggest problem here has been that they haven't won anything, and as a result they have tended to stand still. We probably need to get a bit more professional in a few areas. I have identified some areas that are not conducive to winning and that has come about by people just falling into old habits.

**RLCM: Cronulla has never won a Premiership – they've got to finals but haven't been able to take the next step. Why?**

**Anderson:** If you've been there and continually had the door closed on you it becomes something that, mentally, is tough to get through. Cronulla have had that – they get there (finals) most years, but they fall at the second or final hurdle most years. Last year I think they should have beaten Newcastle in the finals – the Knights were there for the taking but they just couldn't finish them. That becomes a bit of an issue mentally when they do that. We'll cross that bridge when we get to it – we're working on that now and we are believing in our ourselves, trying to build up momentum during the year so that when we get there we go in with a belief that we are genuine contenders, not just making up the numbers.

**RLCM: It seems a coach is becoming more and more like a sports psychiatrist?**

**Anderson:** It is starting to feel like that but it's just the way it is. Footy coaching is probably only 40% about coaching and 60% about creating an environment for people to do well. I think that's the important part. Footy is a pretty simple game. If it was just footy coaching, I probably would have been bored with it ten years ago – I do enjoy the challenge of finding out how to make things work. The game is simple but the *man management* is the thing that separates the people who are prepared to have a go from the people who aren't. That is the thing that I would say effects performances from almost anything else.

**RLCM: How does a coach pick himself up week after week?**

**Anderson:** Like any job you have moments where some things are harder than others. I enjoy the challenge, seeing players grow, watching frustrations being overcome and to get a group of players grow as a team and as individuals. You have to keep reinforcing the message. To get a group like this (Cronulla) and take them to another level is a fresh challenge.

**RLCM: We see the juniors today being coached to tackle higher in an effort to lock up the ball. Should we still be coaching the youngsters to tackle around the legs?**

**Anderson:** In our game a lock-up tackle is considered good technique. That has become the basic tackle. There is a fair bit of technique required to be able to lock the ball up effectively so I can understand junior coaches wanting their team to be able to practice that. You actually tend to go for a combination tackle – the first player locking the ball up and the second player going low. The days of just taking them low is not practiced anywhere near as much by us anymore but I think young players need to be able to understand that, because it lays the platform for the future and reinforces the basics. You shouldn't be as competitive with the kids – let them have fun.

**RLCM: How important is blind side play?**

**Anderson:** It's more important for me than it is for other clubs. Some clubs are using second rowers as locks but for mine that cuts down their options. I like to have a real lock forward so that we can use both side of the ruck and increase our options. The half and five-eighth work one side and your lock works the other and you have your bases covered. For me it is important you have three genuine ball players so you have more bases covered.

**RLCM: We continually hear coaches rattle off the cliché 'We need to do the little things right'. For you, what are the little things you look for?**

**Anderson:** It's more about doing things that are conducive to the team winning the game and not losing the game. You can fall into a trap of guys throwing passes that need to be absolutely perfect for them to come off – we try to cut down on those type of things, depending on where the game is. It's more for us about learning when to take your chances and when not to. When to push and when not to. Players know how to play but they don't always know as a group how to win. You need to teach them the things that will help them achieve it – things that will help. It's the basics really, play the balls, marking up, not being sloppy, not letting teams off the hook easily.





# Peter Sharp

## Northern Eagles Head Coach

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Season 2002 is Northern Eagles' coach Peter Sharp's fourth year in top-grade rugby league, but he's been on the periphery since 1990. A former back-rower with Maitland and Central Charlestown, Sharp has spent his time in the lower grades wisely, honing his education and preparing for the step up to the big time. In this edition of RLCM, we pinpoint Sharp's philosophies on life as an NRL coach.

**RLCM: You served a lengthy apprenticeship before breaking into the top grade. Is that the best way to go?**

**Sharp:** I think so. I never actually played in the NRL so it was great for me to come up through the grades as a coach. I really enjoyed my time in the

end of the day, everybody wants to win the comp. You can say at the start of the year that all we want to do is put some foundations down or blood some young guys but as soon as the first game is on and you don't win it, you're under the hammer. It comes back to the expectations of the club, fans and media. It's something that can be hard to come to terms with. Gaining the ability to deal with it comes with experience – you obtain the ability to block out the negativity that you get and become less sensitive. When you first come into first grade you are mostly coming from a world of no pressure and all of a sudden you are in the spotlight so you need to learn to handle the negative press when and if it arrives – the quicker the better. But as far as the coaching

## The simple fact is that ball control wins games

junior reps, the SG Ball and Jersey Flegg competitions. It was a great background and I got to meet some of the top players as they were coming through. Having said that I have to admit the step up from reserve grade to first grade is worlds apart – the intensity of the game and the speed of the game are just totally different but I think the hardest part of the step up is the external pressures.

**RLCM: Can you expand on that?**

**Sharp:** You really need to be able to handle the expectation of the media, the expectation of the club and the expectation of the fans. It's not the actual coaching of the side that becomes the most difficult aspect but more those external pressures that you suddenly find yourself placed under. I certainly found it a difficult adjustment. The fact is at the

itself is concerned, your principles remain the same no matter what grade you are coaching. And I also believe there are no hard and fast rules as to whether you should serve an apprenticeship before coming into the top grade, it's just that for me, I found it beneficial. I think the fact I didn't play NRL and never experienced it as a player, it was great for me to come through the ranks before taking the step up to head coach.

**RLCM: Is there a step up between coaching an NRL player and coaching one of the game's elite?**

**Sharp:** Basically not, everyone is looking for help and some knowledge, if you can provide those then it goes a long way to providing some credibility. It doesn't matter if it is a young guy coming into first

grade or one of the elite players, everybody regardless of their standing in the game has something to learn. The great part of coaching an elite player is the input the player can have in the side. If used correctly, the elite player can be a great coaching aid.

**RLCM : The word momentum seems so important in the game today – the ability to mount and keep pressure on the opposition. How do you coach that?**

**Sharp:** Pressure is a key ingredient in rugby league. You'll find the sides that are in the bottom half of the competition are the sides not able to maintain pressure for a long period of time. That's mostly

As far as breaking up the intensity of those teams when you're out in the paddock I guess there's a few things you can try. I remember back in Parramatta in the good old days when I was with Brian Smith trying things to decrease the speed of the play – set starts, kicks for touch, slowing everything down, questioning the ref's decisions – all that sort of stuff can put a side out of their rhythm. It might work, but in saying that, quite often a team like Brisbane or Newcastle will come straight out and go bang, bang, bang, and it's 12-nil before you even get possession. So it becomes important for me to get some possession early in the game, it's critical. If you don't – if they can get four or five back-to-back sets on you early in the contest, then

## I think the short side is a great place to attack not only down the attacking end of the field but also in your own half

because of inexperience with young guys who haven't obtained the ability to sustain pressure and then mount it back at them (opposition) be it offensively or defensively. In defence for example, you can apply pressure through field position – increasing your line speed, increasing your controlled aggression at point of contact to win the ground – all these little things. You can't do that down your own end when you're trying to defend your try line because it's all about survival then. Being able to change the tempo of the game is vital as well. For me, the Broncos are the masters of it. They can go quick, and then pull it back when they need a break and then go quick again. Newcastle is very good at this as well. They tend to start at a thousand miles an hour and blow sides off the park in the first twenty minutes. So as the coach you need to prepare your players to withstand that onslaught and be prepared for that speed and intensity of the game which they will find themselves in. All of the good teams in footy have continuity – the Broncos and Newcastle are two teams in particular that have had a lot of continuity for the last ten years, stable coaches, stable playing roster and they've worked into this speed of being able to play the game over a long period of time.

you'll find yourself on the back foot from then on. The Grand Final last year (Newcastle v Parramatta, 2001) is a perfect example. The Knights had a ton of ball early, controlled the speed of play and had continuity of possession – it was all over before you knew it.

**RLCM: How do you prepare an inexperienced player to handle that intensity?**

**Sharp:** That's a good question. Sometimes we have gone into games with six or seven players in our team who we need to make the adjustment quickly. You can simulate in training as best you can but the fact is a lot of it comes from game experience. Every time we play against those top sides our young players learn more and more – about halfback play from going against Alfie, about fullback play from Lockyer. In training you can only simulate it as best as you can. And as far as when you're out on the field the younger guys can keep up intensity for periods but they tend to lapse in and out from set to set of good intensity, where the experienced player can last the distance if required. Inexperienced sides tend to drift in and out of good football. I think it's really an issue with your mental toughness. The difference with Andrew Johns and

the rest is that he's tougher mentally. It's not a physical difference; I know that for a fact because I know him quite well – it's his mental toughness which sets him apart and with Joey it's astounding. And by mental toughness I'm talking about things like patience; not panicking if you fall 12 points down early, not going for the miracle play but being disciplined and working your way back into the contest.

**RLCM: What guidelines do you set down as far as taking risks in your end?**

**Sharp:** I think most sides are well structured when they're coming out of their own end. You'll find that when most sides can get down the other end they can score a try, that's not the problem – it's the sides that turn the ball over in their own half that are going to pay the price. We have structured sets, and that can come undone by poor decision-making. Finishing your yardage sets becomes very important for me – getting to your kick consistently on the back of good yardage makes a big difference in getting the ball out of your own end and away from your danger area (own 20 metres). The simple fact is that ball control wins games. If you can secure good field position and start and finish your sets in a better position than the opposition, you're a good chance of winning the football match. It's as simple as that. We struck problems in the trials this year where we found that we couldn't get out of our own half and there have been some games this year where some teams have almost played an entire half locked down their own end. To get field position you have to have good ball control – if you don't maintain possession you put your kickers under pressure - if you can get a roll on the kickers tend to find a groove.

**RLCM: What have been the major impediments to the flat attack over the last couple of years?**

**Sharp:** Interchange is one, and the ten-metre rule has also made a big difference. There is still a time and a place for it though – but I think now you need a better mix in your game as opposed to doing it all the time. Sometimes you need to play back from the line; sometimes you need to play at it. The flat attack is relevant to your go forward but I really think to do it successfully you need to mix things up. Now that we have to keep players on the field longer (due to limited interchange) and they are

playing closer together (due to ten metre rule) the players are under pressure themselves when they carry the ball and they have to do everything in the coalface. It's quality football but it's also high pressure – all the way from the player passing the football, to the player catching it, to the support players, because they are now so close to the line. As far as defending against it you simply have to make sure that you control the speed of the play the ball. You have to give your line a chance to get off the back foot. For example back when the Storm had Kimmorley and Hill coming at you with support runners in holes is very difficult to defend. They were brilliant at making the defence make decisions and combined with decent ball possession and good go forward, it was always going to be effective. So to control the play the ball you need to dominate the tackle. The flat attack is a very effective style of football but it's also fraught with risk.

**RLCM: When you took Kimmorley to the Eagles in 2000, did you find you had to change him to suit the team, or the team to suit him?**

**Sharp:** Well I like that style (flat attack) for starters so I wanted to play that way anyway. We had some problems with it and it's probably fair to say Kimmorley has had problems with it at Cronulla this year – so I think it's also fair to say we needed to find a better mix between Brett, myself and the team as well – a better mix in our game. I'm sure it would have happened if we had time to build on it, longer than just the one season. A halfback has always been critical to a team's success although I tend to think that might also be changing a bit as well. Parramatta for example is a multi-skilled team as opposed to the traditional half, five-eighth and lock doing the majority of the ball carrying.

**RLCM: Are you an advocate of using structured play to attack the blindside?**

**Sharp:** A lot of football is now reactionary based rather than being structured. The blindside is still a great place to attack – there is probably two objectives that come into play down a blindside. The first is to get an imbalance in the defensive line e.g. three on two, four on three. The second is to find a small or poor defender on the edge of the football field. Some areas to take into consideration when attacking the short side are the quality of your lead up plays e.g. your ability to shorten up the line





# Mal Meninga

## Ex- Canberra Raiders Head Coach

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**RLCM** Your transition from player to coach was quick. How did you handle that? Was the transition hard?

**MM** I always had faith in my ability to make the transition but I knew it was going to be difficult, but not as difficult as it turned out. I came to a club in a time when the game was going through some turmoil. I found that difficult and I think a few of the players found it difficult to make the transition from semi professional to professional Rugby League. It is about three years down the track, and I have started to get on top of things. I guess towards the end of last year and as seen in my performance this year, I'm on the right path, but it has been a long and traumatic, sometimes tragic path.

**RLCM** How do you use game related skills? Is it a large part of your coaching?

**MM** It is a very important part of the game, and a mix of a lot of things. The groundwork is the most important part of players' skill development. You have to be very creative with your skills sessions, if you keep the boys interested and occupied then sessions become more enjoyable. We have separate skills sessions for the backs and forwards, as well as additional skills session. It is important you get the mix of what you do. For instance you'll do the team as a whole and then do positional, individual, the back three, centres and five eighth. It is also important to work with your back rows, as they work with the back line and need to mix in.

**RLCM** How do you get the best out of your players each week?

**MM** You rely a lot on preparation, you rely a lot on the feedback you give to players to improve their game, and you rely a fair bit on the feedback you give to the team to improve the overall performance of their football. Your preparation has to be fairly intense, and has to be specific to the game that week and all the things that need improving from the week before. Obviously, you need to play with their minds a little bit and try and help their mental preparation. It is difficult week to week, and we set ourselves some standards where we play good, very good or excellent.

**RLCM** Sometimes individual players don't mentally prepare for a game, is that the reason for the big scores lately?

**MM** All the teams are fairly equal on paper, training methods are very similar and the coaching methods are similar. You have got 17 guys running around a football paddock, but you may have two guys that haven't come to play, that makes it difficult. We need the whole team performing really well and doing things together. If you can get a roll on, you can be extremely ruthless with the momentum, and with that momentum the opposition will struggle.

**RLCM** How do you work on the players' 'off the ball' skills, and make them aware of where they are and what they are doing in a game?

**MM** I think it's important a player knows what they're doing 'off the ball' whether it is support player, decoy work, movement, or shutting the gate. If you perform the 'off the ball' skills well you can hurt the opposition. It is easy nowadays to show the players through statistics and through video analysis where they are 'off the ball.'

**RLCM** What are your thoughts on captaincy? Do you go along with the Australian Rules philosophy where most of the clubs use co-captains?

**MM** I think in our case, we have got Laurie Daley who is our captain and does a wonderful job in that role. David Furner is our forward leader and he does a great job as well, but from our point of view Daley is a stand out captain and he wants the job. So we are very lucky. There could be a case like Parramatta however, where there is no stand out leader, you might have a couple of players that do a really good job. With the interchange rule if you have a forward as the captain for example, he is going to come off at some stage and you need someone else to take over.

**RLCM** Do you tend to use more forwards on your bench?

**MM** Definitely, they are doing all the work in the middle of the park, particularly the front rowers. Under the ten-metre rule you have got to be fairly mobile and fit, and some of our bigger guys struggle with it and you have to keep them going.

***The players need to be told how well they are going, how poorly they are going, they need to understand what they need to do to improve their game, whether it is mentally or physically.***

**RLCM** How important are impulse or reactionary players?

**MM** Very much so, but also very important are good all around players. I mean Laurie Daley is a really good example to that end. He can be a game breaker with a football but I don't think there is any better defensive player in the game, and he has got a kicking game as well. He is a real integral part of our machine. We have got a couple of young kids now who are impulse players but they are getting better because they are becoming all round players. They can run the football and also tackle and kick. Simon Woolford our hooker is another all round player. He has got good speed out of dummy half, he has got a kicking game, and he can also tackle. If a player can run, tackle, and kick I think that is a really good way of judging a player's ability. I think you have got to have good vision to, an aspect of training the players is that they have got to be able to read a situation when it does arise. I would like to think that my centres and my full back are the eyes of the football side and are able to read a situation when opportunities arise. It is ideal to have guys with vision, and good communication right across the paddock, so that opportunities are taken.

**RLCM** Do you find 'the footballer' is more skilful now at all?

**MM** Yes and no, some players are robots and will do a very good job for you, and some guys are skilful. It is going to sound like sour grapes but I think that the skill has gone out of the centres. I think that we have got to get back to junior league and through the grades, so you can come to First Grade and know

how to draw players and kick a football. At the moment we have got some very steady defenders, but not a lot of creative centres in the game.

**RLCM** The statistics showed Canberra was down on its defence last year, now you have turned that around. How do you work with the players to improve defensively?

**MM** We had the same philosophy last year and we have just improved on that. We improve our thinking on how to defend better and the simple solution was to do it together. You can't solve problems by yourself nowadays, you can't come out of the line to try and solve problems. You have got to keep hanging in together and doing it together. If you do it together teammates can help you. We have got a different strategy coming off our line and when we are in the middle of the park, and line speeds are an important part of that. We have worked pretty hard on it and have come up with some solutions for up and down the paddock. It is not hard, the simple solution is do it together.

**RLCM** Do you get a chance to look at the kids coming through your development program?

**MM** Kids that we think may play in First Division or our senior grades will come and train with us in the off season. We have club sessions as much as we can during the week with the kids, and we have optional extras as well during the week for kids to come along and hone their skills.

**RLCM** What do you look for in young players?

**MM** I think it varies. I like to think that we look at mobility and ball skills, but I think the most important aspect is attitude. If you haven't got the right attitude, it is going to take a younger player a long time to turn it around. Upbringing becomes an important part of that. During recruitment you see what Mum and Dad are like, and all sorts of things about how the player reacts.

**RLCM** What advice would you give to coaches coming into the game?

**MM** If I had my time over again I would have asked the club to give me a couple of years in the lower grades to develop my coaching philosophy, and to develop my thinking about how I want my players to play Rugby League. So I think you've just got to get the experience before you dive in the deep end.

**RLCM** Second Phase Play is an important part of the game now. How do you work that into your training drills?

**MM** Support play, attacking the inside shoulder, ruck work, I think you have got to work a bit wider of the play the ball so you can attack the edges. We encourage it all the time, when you do it at training it is done with intensity, under game situations.

**RLCM** Is there any reason why you don't have a psychologist?

**MM** We had one last year and it worked very well, but I had a chat to the players at the end of last year about attitudes. Their attitudes have been tremendous this year and because of that I felt there was no reason to employ someone full time. If we do need it, we will send the players along to part timers. We have got a lot of experience in our coaching ranks to help players get through week to week, and I think the players realistically prefer to talk to the coaches about things. Players are naturally inquisitive this day and age, and they need constant feedback. The players need to be told how well they are going, how poorly they are going, they need to understand what they need to do to improve their game, whether it is mentally or physically. I guess Wayne Bennett was my mentor with that aspect of Rugby League. Under him, I knew that if my game was down I had to work on the things that were letting me down, and funnily enough by working on those areas my entire game improved.

**RLCM** What are your thoughts on bench coaching as opposed to watching from the grandstand?

**MM** I think it is a good idea, I mix it up if I possibly can. I think you have got to have a general perspective on how the game is going but you need to get down to the touch line and see how the players are

thinking. From the side line you can hear them talking and see what type of things they are talking about. If there is little talk, you know there is a problem, and you need to send someone out on the field that is going to try and gee them up. It gives you a general feel on how the guys are thinking and reacting to the football game and I use both methods, which is probably the most suitable situation.

**RLCM** When you are looking at replacing a player? Are you looking at his defensive effort?

**MM** No, we are looking at their body language, looking at whether they can retreat and get off the line to help others or whether they're slow to retreat and becoming ineffective. We look to see whether they are walking, not shutting the gate, not going across, not covering the inside, not working from marker, not involved in the kick chase, or not getting back to help us get out of the red zone. There are a lot of things that come into play when making a decision on which player you need to replace.

**RLCM** Can you see squads becoming larger so that you can rest your best players?

**MM** Yes I can. I don't know whether it is good or not for the game. If you are going to go 26 rounds and play the 10-metre rule, there are going to be times where you may have to rest players. So you need a deeper squad. I believe around 30 is probably a good number, maybe 35 to get through a year. I think you need to have more players than 25, because you have to be very lucky to get through a season with only 25 players.

## NOTES

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# RUGBY LEAGUE COACHING MANUALS

**Book 9**

- Coach Talk - Wayne Pearce
- Penetrating The Defensive Line - Glenn Bayliss
- Coaching The Mini Mod Team
- Defensive Systems "Slide" versus "Up and In"
- Easy To Train Strength Exercises
- A Psychologists View - Dr Roger Peters
- A Coaches View of Psychology for Rugby League - Mick Aldous
- Skill Scene
- Eating For Peak Performance

**Book 10**

- Coach Talk - Peter Louis
- Developing Ball Skills
- Acquiring the Skills of Rugby League
- Skill Scene - Kicking
- Sprint Training - assisted running
- Stretching to Prevent Injury (Part 1)
- Performance Standards in Rugby League

**Book 11**

- Coach Talk - John Lang
- Captaincy - Mark Coyne
- Skill Scene - Play The Ball
- Easy To Train Strength Exercises - Alex Corvo
- Recovery
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- Sprint Training - resistance running
- Player Feedback
- Autonomous Behaviour

**DRILLS**

**Book 12**

- Coach Talk - Wayne Bennett
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- Coach's Insight - Ric Charlesworth
- Designer Games - Ric Charlesworth
- Mini Coaching - 'Real Coaching'
- Stretching to Prevent Injury (Part 3)
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- Recruitment - Cyril Connell
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- Off - The - Ball Play - Phil Gould
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# COACH TALK

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