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Thriving on chaos: an Antipodean approach to coaching

When rugby league coach Martyn Rothwell used a Winston Churchill Fellowship to look at coaching in New Zealand and Australia he found chaos reigned; and liked it.

We are a country who even in this current financial climate are considered wealthy, have a leading health care system, have easy access to most mainstream sports, and sports that are well funded. Perhaps more significant is the easy access to the majority of sports and an apparent pathway into a professional career or playing the game at the highest level. My trip to New Zealand and Australia was based on the question: "Why we do not produce skilful world-class decision-makers in invasion ball sports, players who make correct decisions under extreme pressure in big-game situations, decisions in big games that win World Cups?"

The first leg of my trip was to New Zealand and I learned a great deal, not all of it about the question that took me there, but it was when I crossed the Tasman Sea that my coaching eyes were really opened. Having visited Australia before, I was aware of what to expect: a bit livelier than New Zealand with more going on. I first visited Brisbane in Queensland where I met Ian Renshaw, who had completed extensive research around something called the "Constraints-Led Approach" to coaching and Brad Donald, a rugby league development officer who was putting the theory to the test.

"The best players who have played our game," claims Brad, "have all learnt to play in the backyard." It is more than an opinion for him: it is a mantra and he lives and breathes it. In the 11 years he has worked in development he has observed that kids and elite players of rugby league are bored by traditional coaching methods and players of all abilities are being constrained by this approach. He explained that in elite rugby league in Australia there has been a real shift away from drill-based practice and small-sided games are used as the main vehicle to deliver coaching sessions through situational learning.

There has also been a push to change the coaching approach in schools away from traditional sessions which motivate or benefit only a few pupils. Alongside this concern about curriculum physical activity is a worry across Australia that kids are not playing backyard sport anymore. The technology culture is common across Australia, as in most developed countries, with kids choosing to spend time on computers over playing sport.

Many sports are developing backyard programmes to reintroduce free play back into children's daily routines and Brad gave me an insight into rugby league's programme and what the governing body was trying to achieve from it. The new approach is called Backyard League.

"What we wanted the kids to do is learn to play the game so when they went away they could play the game anywhere, at the bus stop, school yard or in the garden. The problem was that footy has been banned here – in some school yards – for the past 10 or 15 years because kids tackle and get hurt, so we wanted to try and reintroduce footy. With this programme we give away footys, week one we get them to a point where they're scoring tries and beating a defender, week two we get them playing games against each other and let them know that one-on-one is a game of footy or two-on-two or whatever; that is backyard footy. Then we walk away and the teachers run it. We leave them with a bag of footys and four markers and say, 'Listen, it's just like a lunchtime duty. Just put down the markers, chuck them a footy and let them negotiate [the rules] and just sit up on the hill and watch them.'"

When I observed Backyard League in action teachers would hand over the equipment bag and kids would run off to a spot on the school field and just play. One teacher said, "Creating motivation for the sport is just as important as

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creating skills because we want them to practise away from the school environment." It was clear that the high school kids were enjoying the games, probably because they were free to play how they wanted. In one particular session a kid consistently scored very easily because of his superior athletic ability. After he scored a third try his team decided that he could no longer score, which led to him creating opportunities for the other players in the team. This was great to see; the players managed the rules themselves and adapted on the run, always thinking of different ways to change the rules or score points.

People learn from people and I learned a huge amount from Brad but even more from a fascinating character called Sid. Sid has years of experience coaching rugby league, a fact which was evident from his conversation peppered with anecdotes about teams and players from years gone by. Perhaps more significantly he had great knowledge and experience of using non-traditional coaching and learning strategies.

Sid had spent time coaching at one of the National Rugby Leagues (NRL) under-20s teams, a very prestigious coaching and playing environment which historically has proved a pathway through to coaching and playing in the NRL itself. Sid's approach to coaching an under-20s team in the local Canberra competition was very unorthodox and would be considered by traditionalists as not coaching and perhaps even held to be reckless. His strategy was to cause chaos by challenging the team's over-reliance on instruction. Sid experimented with removing himself as an organiser, which he hoped would lead to self-organisation, although the journey towards that was undertaken through what appeared to be a chaotic and disorganised environment.

Sid set his stall out by turning up to his first training session with the squad with no apparent session plan or idea of a session goal or outcome. Sid approached the playing field, addressed the players and then threw a ball onto the pitch and shouted, "Just play." This was obviously met with a confused response from the players who didn't know what to do, probably as a result of not being put in this position before. The approach understandably led to lots of questions from players and the usual response from Sid would be: "I don't know, you sort it out!" Similar adaptations of this approach continued throughout the season with interesting results. Eventually the players created their own order, with systems and behaviours agreed as a result of the chaos. Players developed consequences for lateness, non-attendance and other actions considered not conducive to the team culture and performance. Players were also responsible for selecting the team and would justify their selection to the playing group.

Sid was so comfortable with letting go of the team that on the day of a cup semi-final he used the excuse that his battery was flat and turned up at half time. Because he had not "had the chance" to inform the players of his lateness prior to his arrival he was ordered by the players to sit in the stand and watch. Happy with their decision, Sid proceeded to watch the game in the stand. The players had warmed themselves up and were well ahead when Sid arrived. Ultimately they won the game.

The approach Sid takes is about all about being athlete-centred, all about empowering players to make decisions. A traditional approach to coaching does not do this. By developing names and calls for moves you immediately eliminate decision-making and this failure is common to both codes of rugby. Players have become so programmed that they only know a few solutions to a few problems and are flummoxed by the unpredictable.

You probably wouldn't find Sid's approach on any coaching course or see it used in a performance environment in which coaches are under pressure to get results. Under these pressures coaches normally go back to what they know best and coach teams through a very coach-centred approach.

In Sid's case he was summoned to meet with senior management on several occasions to explain his approach and on several occasions he was nearly removed from the coaching position. Understandably, it would take a very confident and secure coach to adopt this way of coaching but are the results more powerful and effective?

The answer to this question is best left to Sid, who told me: "As I began coaching I discovered that coaches felt that they needed to be the 'expert' and instruct their players as to what to do." The kids playing 'backyard footy' are no different to kids and adults in performance and elite programmes. Coaches should have the courage and the humility to let them all play.

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