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Play up, play up and learn the game

Play is an integral part of the learning process. Why then, asks Richard Cheetham, do coaches not embrace play when supporting the learning of others?

Play is regarded as a significant element contributing to a child's development. It is seen as an opportunity for them to explore, use their imagination, challenge themselves and be free from direction, structure and boundaries. Play is both meaningful and enjoyable as well as being essential to a child's development.

Can you recall your childhood experiences of play? What were they like, how did they feel and can you remember stories, activities and games you invented? Play is a powerful medium for learning so how can coaches and players benefit from incorporating it into their sessions and what is the true value of play when learning new skills?

Educational research shows that play is an essential component of a child's emotional and physical development. It is where they "pretend to be", where they explore, where they find new limits and where they really engage in physical activity. Ask a child to go and play and they will not look for guidance or seek further instruction; they instantly know what to do. Are sports coaches fearful of introducing it into their sessions? If so, why? What is there to be afraid of?

Let me share an example with you drawn from my work as a coach educator for the Rugby Football Union. Wearing this hat, I work with prospective new coaches who arrive with a very real enthusiasm hoping to develop a new generation of players and to share with them the passion they have for the sport; all of which, I am sure, will sound familiar. How do I start with a new group of 24 adults from all backgrounds who do not know one another? I make them pretend to be 8, 9 or 10 and behave accordingly.

During the course I will get them to do silver-backed gorilla impressions to teach the foundation of the scrum and tackle posture, have them wrestling socks off each other to develop functional strength and challenge them to find lifeboats (four per boat only!) to avoid hungry sharks and so develop communication, evasion and agility. I even make them play human noughts and crosses and throughout all this mayhem the interesting thing which emerges is that they all buy in and do not show their age, just their willingness to experience play again.

We know that the coach is vital to the quality and content of the learning experience but they are rarely judged to be successful by achieving this. Too often they are judged by winning, a more recognised and recognisable measure. The focus of coaching, I would argue, should centre on impact: what difference did the coach make, how was motivation kept up, what new ideas were introduced and how engaged were the group? Place a value on the group's achievements and ask how good the individuals feel about themselves as they begin to master new skills.

Play is an essential element in the coaches' tool kit to ensure that this can happen and the following ideas may help and encourage coaches to think about using play more in their sessions. These are elements

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found to have been successful among all age groups.

- Play enhances motivation and can raise self-esteem as it removes the fear of failure and encourages trial and error.
- Motor skills can be developed through play – a rugby match can be unpredictable, even down to the bounce of the ball so why not allow free time where children can be spontaneous and reactive?
- Try not to spend too much of your planning time solely on structure– play can often be used as a reward for hard work.
- Ensure that play does not compromise safety – I have suggested in the past that space hoppers are a very good way of learning balance and getting used to regaining balance through contact sessions but they have to be used appropriately.
- Play is an excellent way for the coach to connect with the group. Players are more likely to engage with a coach who provides enjoyable, fun and engaging sessions.

Our coaching styles and approach can be a projection of how we learned, how we were coached and what we believe is expected of us. Perhaps our experiences lacked the opportunity and outlet to play but that is not a reason why this should not be part of a more creative and broader-thinking coaching philosophy. Do not be afraid to change and adapt. The evidence is there to support the worth of play and its inclusion in any and every coaching context.

So be a silver back in the scrum and a shark in the chase. It's not just child's play. After all, play is "the essence of freedom. The things that tie you down or constrain you – the need to be practical, to follow established rules, to please others, to make good use of time, all wrapped up in a self-conscious guilt – are eliminated. Play is its own reward, its own reason for being". [Stuart Brown, 2009, *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination and invigorates the soul.*]

Richard Cheetham is a coach and coach educator, an inspirational speaker and a Fellow of the University of Winchester.

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