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Crab football, climbing trees and coiffure: an Insight in Manchester

Coaching young adults can present a challenge to coaches. Our latest Coaching Insight seminar explored the minds of the coming generation.

The Firs Pavilion at the University of Manchester's Armitage site is redolent of a more gentle time when chaps played rugger and had steaming, communal showers before heading up to the tea room for a slice of Battenberg and a nice cup of cha. The three-storey, red-brick edifice built in 1851 actually dates back to times when an FA Cup Final (1893), an England versus Scotland rugby international (1897), the AAA championship (1897 and 1907) and the cycling events for the British Empire Games (1934) were held not a furlong to the north west in what was then the Fallowfield Stadium and is now the Richmond Park halls of residence.

These days the old tea room and its balcony look out on plastic pitches rather than just grass and student athletes visit only for the occasional meeting or to wait for a physiotherapy appointment. But for a TLR Coaching Insight on the issues inherent in coaching young adults a tea urn was temporarily reinstalled and coaches from as eclectic a mix of sports as the old stadium had ever hosted gathered to discuss the challenges of working with modern-day young folk.

Having been the first man to win international caps in both codes of rugby, BJ Mather has a playing record worthy of the word 'legend' but he does not trade on it. Unlike some former elite performers, he is an unassuming and personable man who these days plies his trade as the Rugby Football League's (RFL) head of player development, a role in which he helps young men through the transition from town team to the international arena. He was happy to offer the 25 coaches in the room, drawn mainly but not exclusively from the university's own workforce, access to whatever information they wanted from his laptop and his own bank of experience.

Prior to his presentation Mather modestly intimated that he had only prepared about 15 minutes of material and would leave the stage free for other speakers; in the event he took longer than that to get past his first slide. A combination of coaches open to new perspectives, a subject dear to their hearts and two excellent speakers meant that the evening's facilitator, David Haskins, had to work harder keeping to time than he did generating debate.

Mather's first slide, the one that generated so much discussion, was relatively simple, comprising a table contrasting how young adults who make up Generation Y perceive themselves – positive, creative, career-focused and in need of new challenges – and how older people see them – annoying, idealistic, unfocused and carrying with them a sense of entitlement. Mather placed himself firmly in the second group when he suggested he found himself echoing his own father but he also offered one challenging assertion from the RFL, where they seek to be "not player-centred but player-focused".

Given that governing bodies of sport, influenced by the work of David Haskins and Jean Coté, are preaching the gospel of being player-centred, Mather's contention is that the young men he works with have www.theleisurereview.co.uk

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become far too used to being at the centre of their parents' and coaches' attention and this has caused them to be unable to deal with the realities of elite sport. This message is revolutionary and his argument is that young players need to be challenged to take a role in their own development. As an example he explained that when his England programmes allow each player to be given one-to-one time with a coach who asks, "What do you want to work on?", all too often this question flummoxes young men too comfortable with being told what to do; and indeed how to do it. When given 15 minutes training time to work on their own game the same players "work on what they like doing, what they do well and not on what they need to work on".

It is Mather's contention that coaches and the programmes they work in should be "player-focused" with the player taking a pro-active role in their own development. This message fell on fertile ground, with one coach in the room complaining that at times he felt he was involved in "mass catering not coaching" and what he was being asked to bang out was entertainment not development, with "fun" being the dish of the day every day.

With slides on joint integrity and functional movement, Mather also highlighted the physical limitations of even the best players of the latest generation whose parents have fallen into the trap of letting screen time replace play time. Leaving aside debates about long-term athlete development and the sampling years, Mather suggested kids should climb trees and play crab football if they wanted to play for England.

As the discussions developed Mather was happy to talk about all aspects of his job, including coach development, and he made the point that the player development pathway is inextricably linked to that of the coach. Asked if the RFL has changed the way it trains and develops coaches to accommodate the way it wants to change the sport itself, he went further and suggested that changes in coach education were driving the culture change rather than following it.

After a brief networking break Justyn Price from StreetGames very quickly set his stall out and offered the coaches in the room a challenge. He suggested that if they wanted to "get the style right" when working with young adults then rather than becoming familiar with the latest in nutrition and performance analysis tools they should instead find out what music the players they work with like and the latest plotlines in *Geordie Shore*. One coach at least felt uncomfortable that "professional distance" would be compromised by such strategies and Price, who himself coaches a team of young female footballers, did not deny this; in fact he welcomed it. Using Dan Gould's line that "Young people need to know that you care before they care what you know", Price went on to repeatedly challenge coaches to reconsider their often dearly held beliefs and see things from the perspective of the people they coach.

The philosophy Price expounded – and which he clearly buys into as a volunteer coach as much as a professional coach developer – is informed by statistics. These days StreetGames is a big organisation that commissions and listens to a great deal of research and two of Price's slides based on that research were key to his argument and the debate which he stimulated. The first showed a blue line on a graph rising precipitously to the right as it represented attendances at StreetGames sessions since 2007. Last year the line topped two million and Price was clear that numbers like this prove that the disparate sessions delivered in unlikely settings for young people with challenging lives that StreetGames deliver are right for the people who attend them; not the coaches – or activators, which is the StreetGames title – or the governing body of the sport being used.

The second key slide, and one which caused many of the audience pause, listed the motivations of young people to take part in sport. In a room mainly populated by coaches employed and deployed in the

pursuit of BUCS points – a measure of success achieved by winning competitions organised by British Universities and Colleges Sport – the fact that some 70% of young people are in their sessions to keep fit, that 28% of men and 55% of women attend to lose weight, and 36% of young people polled cited fun and enjoyment as among their motivations was undoubtedly a bit of a facer.

As an experienced and skilled facilitator, Price had chosen to challenge the thinking of his audience and many left with a new perspective on their own coaching but quite why he was so keen to speak to a room populated by essentially performance coaches operating in a very specific and very mainstream bubble was a question begging to be asked. His answer, carefully considered as it was, should resonate in the world of sports coaching.

“Research shows that disadvantaged young people are less involved in sport than more affluent young people, accessing about half the opportunities to play, volunteer, compete and receive coaching,” he said. “StreetGames wants sports organisations to open their doors to young people from disadvantaged areas. We also want to help every youth organisation to make the best use of sport. The StreetGames training academy shows coaches and leaders how to make the difference. This is our vision to influence and change mainstream sport.”

With people like BJ Mather seeking to change his sport's very culture through coach education, David Haskins giving his time to enhance coach development evenings with his wit and wisdom while promoting the ground-breaking approach advocated by the C-system, and Justyn Price and StreetGames setting out to achieve transformative change throughout the sporting landscape, it might be time to re-evaluate the future of coaching. It might just be bolder, brighter and more challenging than at any time since Pat Duffy said “I have a little idea about a UK coaching framework I'd like to run by you.”

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