

Using Games to Teach Skills

Over two days in December 2007 I had the great experience of attending the Asia Pacific Conference on Teaching Sport and Physical Education for Understanding. The conference, held at the University of Sydney, was aimed at physical education teachers, coaches and teacher and coach educators. It featured well known researchers and authors in the sport education field, presenting and providing practical demonstrations on the topic of Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU).

TGfU is now a central component in physical education degrees and is proving to be a popular and successful training method for coaches. All Blacks assistant coach Wayne Smith is a strong advocate for a TGfU approach to coaching. The methodology was developed in the 1980s by leading sport educators Rod Thorpe and David Bunker from Loughborough University, England. Initially its development was in response to dissatisfaction in the way physical education was taught in English schools. Thorpe and Bunker felt the traditional PE lesson of skill-based drills followed by, if time permitted, a game did little to inspire a love for games and physical activity and also failed to improve the skills that successful game play required. In contrast, Thorpe made the observation that when children were left to play on their own, whether in the backyard or before a training session, they were creative, having fun, challenging themselves and learning a lot about the game.

It is a truism that in junior cricket, the best players are those who play with brothers or friends in the backyard, local park or even the garage. And not only are they often the best players technically, but they also have a deeper tactical understanding than their peers. Backyard Cricket (or BYC as my Under 15 team like to call it!) can throw up a lot of tactical considerations. My backyard had a very short square leg boundary - the fence was only 5 metres from the wicket. Over the fence on the full was six and out so when the new tennis ball couldn't make early inroads into my neighbour's innings, I resorted to dropping in the short delivery. My neighbour couldn't resist the pull shot, struggled to keep it on the ground, and so sacrificing six runs for the sake of an early wicket was a commonly

employed strategy! In time he got better at playing the pull shot along the ground and I had to find other weaknesses to exploit. Informal play like this develops the ability for players to think, strategise, experiment and dream. Most importantly it is great fun and highly motivating.

So it was with these observations in mind that Thorpe and Bunker developed a coaching methodology that attempted to recreate the enjoyment and learning of informal play, recognising the inherent desire kids have to play games. TGfU essentially uses modified games as the vehicle to teach technical and tactical skills, as opposed to the traditional skill drills approach. The table below highlights the difference between the two approaches.

Traditional	TGfU Approach
Use of drills primarily to practice technical skills	Teaches technical and tactical skills through modified games that are closely related to the original sport
Teaches the specific elements of the game in isolation and then combines them into the whole game	Teaches the whole game and then refines the parts
Coach-centred - the coach uses direct instructional methods that may or may not consider the players' needs	Athlete-centred - the coach creates a learning environment that focuses on the players' needs by using a variety of coaching methods
Practices are often boring and therefore un-motivating due to lots of time spent standing waiting in lines for turns	Practices are fun, relevant and challenging and therefore increase intrinsic motivation
Players become highly dependant on the coach	Players become independent and thinking players
By extensive drilling, coaches strive to develop automatic responses that promote mindless, robotic players	Sessions designed to develop thinking, understanding and decision making skills that are required to play well
Players provide limited or no	Players have considerable input

input to the coach, who makes all decisions	to the coach and help the coach make decisions
Command style coaching	Cooperative style coaching

Comparisons between Traditional and Games for Understanding Methods of Coaching (Martens, 2004)

TGfU fits in ideally with SPARC’s athlete-centred coaching philosophy. In the previous issue of CoachEd there were a number of articles outlining the CoachForce programme and the NZ CoachApproach. The CoachForce programme has been set up by SPARC to drive coach development in NZ in a bold, new direction which encourages coaches to give players more responsibility and ownership and develop independent, confident players who are able to coach themselves (athlete-centred coaching). With TGfU the game is essentially the problem which the players must solve. The coach facilitates this with effective questioning, allowing players to deepen their understanding and come to the solutions themselves.

The beauty of the TGfU approach is that it can be used effectively at the young, beginner level right through to senior, experienced athletes. The common thread is that players will enjoy the game more if they understand the game better. Observe any Kiwi Cricket game and it can often be frustrating to see the lack of game understanding. Novice players struggle to score runs because they don’t know how or when to run between wickets. Fielders lack the understanding of backing up or throwing to the stumps for a run out. If players can learn even these basic aspects the game will have more action and excitement. No doubt coaches will be saying that they’ve told their players these things “a thousand times!” There is an old saying - ‘Tell me I forget, show me I remember, involve me I understand.’ A TGfU approach allows problems to be posed in the form of modified games and players’ involvement in the game allows them to figure things out for themselves.

Likewise, for older players simulation or scenario sessions can put players in situations which they may face in games. They are forced to analyse and adapt to the situation, fostering tactical decision making as well as placing techniques under match-like

pressure. A key consideration in selecting players for Auckland age-group rep teams is situational awareness (knowing what to do in different situations) and it is often an area of weakness when observing players in the various district, regional and national tournaments. The same old net sessions every week do little to overcome such concerns.

Teaching Games for Understanding is in no way the be all and end all of modern coaching - it is a tool in a coach's tool box. However, it is a tool that needs to be used more and as coaches we can sharpen up by varying our sessions more and introducing tactical considerations to improve game understanding or game sense. Ultimately, we want players who are not merely technically proficient, but are savvy, innovative and smart cricketers.

Having attended the conference in Sydney, the plan is now to develop a TGfU resource for cricket coaches offering ideas for modified games and associated questions that coaches can use to generate discussion with players. If you would like to know more about TGfU, please contact me and I can direct you to websites, books or send you some papers from the conference - kmcmillan@aucklandcricket.co.nz.

Finally, thank you to Alec Astle and Mark Lane from NZ Cricket for giving me the opportunity to attend the conference, meet some passionate people and watch the third Ashes test in packed-out Sydney pubs!

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