

## **MINIS COACHING - COACHING THE TEAM, NOT THE BOYS!**

**By  
ANDY BROWN.**

*The author is a thirty eight year old father of three, whose eldest son plays for the local U10s' team. He is booked on the LI training course in May.*

I recently got involved in coaching junior rugby when my son's U10s' team lost its one remaining coach due to work commitments. It's actually quite amazing that we really had an U10s' team at all, since for the whole of this season up until January 2005, the boys hadn't won a single match. There had been a couple of near things during the early part of the season, but there had been more than their fair share of pummellings as well. Morale was not good.

Individually, every boy had talent. I'm not going to say that they were all aspiring Martin Johnsons or Charlie Hodgsons - we all know that in the modern game, very few individuals are good enough to make the first XV of a national league side, let alone Premiership or International class - but every boy had it in him to be a reasonable quality rugby player at an appropriate level. The trouble was, it looked like the team might disband.

After all, what's the point in turning up week after week, training session after training session, only to be beaten into a metaphorical pulp on the scoreboard, or to have several individuals on your team simply never pass the ball? So, after a humiliating twelve tries to nil defeat, followed by the coach's announcement that he was unable to continue, the team reached an important crossroads. Disband completely, or find a new coach?

Enter two unqualified volunteers, one of whom is yours truly. I have absolutely no qualifications as a rugby coach. I like to think I have a good understanding of the laws of the game and generally kind of know about how it should be played. As to skills coaching - setting up drills, defining running lines, creating lineout and scrummaging calls - well, let's just say it was all new to me.

Fortunately, I could see that, while the team really did need to keep working on their skills, the biggest missing element was teamwork. That's what rugby is all about, isn't it? And we didn't have any.

With hindsight, it's easy to criticise the previous regime. There were complex drills aplenty and many a training session was spent talking about different lineout calls, backs moves and other such things. The trouble is that at this age, the boys' attention span is usually pretty minimal and they have the propensity to get 'giddy' very quickly.

When another parent and I took on joint coaching responsibilities, we were very careful to ensure we knew between us what we wanted to happen. We both have little experience in skills coaching drills, but in life, as in rugby, team-building skills are fairly universal. We decided that as a matter of urgency we would build our training sessions around good team-building ideas, together with a well defined structure for match play.

So what did we do? We built our structure around several basic principles:

1. We train, together, *every* Wednesday night and Sunday morning. Wind or snow, rain or shine, Wednesdays and Sundays are rugby days.
2. We ensure the boys are all together at the start of the session, ready to start, and we talk to them all to ensure they understand what is expected of them. Where there is dissent or cheekiness, it's off around the posts for the lot of them! It's amazing what a couple of long runs do for the concentration!
2. We do everything together. All drills are carried out by all players working together. Where drills require smaller 'teams' to be created, we make sure there are no cliques built up.
3. We don't complicate matters by creating weird calls or special moves; we concentrate on the basic skills. We ruck, we maul, we scrummage, we tackle and we run and pass.
4. In match situations, we make sure the little things are right. All boys are gathered in a huddle for the pre-match team talk. The same huddle happens again at half time and again at the end of the match, whether we win or lose. We can attend to simple things in the huddle, such as ensuring their water bottles are all together rather than scattered around the ground with their parents.
5. We get the parents involved and informed. We ensure that the parents understand why little Johnny is playing tight-head prop this week and what we hope to get out of it. We also ensure we listen to what the parents are saying. I'm aware that I hadn't approached our previous coach about the boys' lack of teamwork before. If the coach doesn't know your concerns, he can hardly be expected to address them!
6. We ensure there are no prima donnas in the team. We congratulate good play - rucking, mauling, tackling and passing - with every bit as much relish as a try scorer.

We had two training sessions before our first match as team coaches and straight away an improvement was seen. Simply putting the coats and water bottles in a central place meant that the boys all had to come in together for a drink and this gave the opportunity to instigate the 'team talk group hug'. We ensured the boys were mentally prepared and ready for a game of rugby. This first game recorded another loss for the team, but it was a moral (and morale!) victory. The boys were already seeing the fruits of their labours in that they were very close to a win.

Myself and Rob, my coaching partner, noticed something that day that was out of the ordinary. Instead of going back to the clubhouse and scattering around the place, every one of the boys chose to sit and eat their lunch together at the same table. Something important was happening.

The following Wednesday training session saw the best attendance we had ever seen from the U10s and on the Sunday after that it was clear the boys had belief in themselves. A resounding 45-15 victory followed - the first of the season - and the boys (and I have to say the coaches as well!) were ecstatic! This last week saw a much tougher match against the 'auld enemy' and it looked at one stage as if it was back to the drawing board, with the score at 0 - 25 at half time. The boys, though, had other ideas and drew upon their new-found trust in each other to bounce back and record a memorable draw at 30-30. For us as coaches, this was even better than the previous week's win!

Since Rob and I took over the coaching, we have had three new boys join the team for training. For a team that was looking like it was about to fold, we now find that it is growing and expanding. The boys all enjoy playing the game again.

Just imagine what could have happened if we knew what we were doing!