

BECOMING A BETTER BENCH COACH: PART 1

In the heat of the action, you can't afford to lose your cool.

Part 1 - Match Analysis

Introduction

Coaching in the game or "Bench coaching", is arguably the most important aspect of successful coaching at elite level. While thorough planning and preparation are crucial to success, months or even years of effort may be wasted because of a single error by the coach at a crucial point in the game.

Clearly some coaches do seem to have an almost uncanny ability to 'read' a game and to make sound tactical decisions while under great pressure. Malcom Blight's almost magical intervention at half time in the AFL grand Final would be the most recent and dramatic example.

In a broader sense effective bench coaching is important because it can have an impact, both positive or negative, far beyond a single game. From a positive point of view a competitive game provides coaches with some of their best opportunities for effective teaching. In a sense the tough game provides the perfect learning situation; the players are focused and want to do well, action is real, the learning is contextual and relevant and motivation is high. The challenge for the coach is to recognise and use every teaching opportunity that emerges.

As with many highly complex human capacities, the process of bench coaching seems to be more intuitive than reflective in nature so it is not readily amenable to a simple analysis. The challenge for coach educators therefore is to tease out the critical components of this ability - make them intelligible - and find ways of helping all coaches improve in this crucial aspect of their craft because many novice coaches often appear to be like mere spectators who simply 'watch' the action but 'see' little.

Match Analysis

A real game is a whirling, often chaotic, ebb and flow of action with no 'instant replays' so the coach must note, interpret and react to, continuous sequences of action, all the while remaining cool, calm and collected.

The process of Match Analysis, that is the ability to really 'see what is happening at every instant of the game underpins, bench coaching. To 'see' in this sense implies that they have the capacity to both direct their observation to what is really important and that they know what to look for.

Templates - reading the game

In order to do this they need a precise model or 'template' of the game to give purpose and focus to their 'seeing'. Effective match analysis is therefore based on a thorough understanding of the fundamental nature, strategy and tactics of a game.

For Lacrosse, Soccer and other 'invasion' games these are encapsulated in the "Principles of effective play". These provide the verbal and conceptual 'template' necessary for intelligent observation and thus help to simplify the process of analysis. They also provide a common tactical 'language' for both coach and players which makes communication easier and helps the latter more readily understand their role in the total team effort.

With such a template to provide an overall framework for observation the coach is free to focus on other important factors such as 'one on one' match ups, the 'tempo' of the game and specific patterns of play

employed by the opposition.

Without the structure provided by these 'principles' or 'rules' a coach is like a tone deaf conductor who cannot read music, trying to improve an orchestra.

Statistics

The collection of 'hard data' on performance at a basic level or advanced level can be valuable when it gives coaches a clearer picture of future opponents or when it hardens the post match analysis of ones own team. Even though sophisticated computer programs are now beginning to give coaches in some games access to 'real time' data, they cannot yet replace the coaches capacity for real time analysis, based upon intelligent eyeballing.

There are also intangibles such as intensity or hustle which are not easily measured but which can change the course of a game as much by their psychological impact as by their objective value in gaining or retaining the ball. Perceptive coaches who value these elements of good play are gradually finding ways to quantify them and to factor them into any analysis of player performance.

However the fact is that most coaches will have to rely on their own powers of observation - intelligent 'eye balling' - to analyse what is happening on the field and can rarely expect more data than their eyes can give them. As in our everyday lives receiving more information is often not as important as how we interpret and respond to what we already have.

Scouting - Pre game Match Analysis

Pre game match analysis or the 'scouting process' involves the observation and analysis of future opponents either in the flesh or through video tape. It can give a coach invaluable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of future opponents and enables them to predict the probable reactions of opposing teams and individuals to specific tactical situations.

Again it is worth pointing out that player performance and statistics, as well as specific patterns of play, can vary from game to game so the 'team' you scout may not be the same 'team' you play against statistically or tactically. Remember they will also be preparing - to play against you! A scouting coach may learn far more that is useful about an opponent by identifying their 'philosophy' of play rather than merely gathering statistics for the former is unlikely to vary much from game to game. Thus a scout must try to identify the crucial elements of an opponents 'style' and consider a whole range of issues such as - How do they combine in attack? who are their key playmakers? how fast do they counterattack or fast break? - how well do they recover in defence? do they play with heart? Are they tough and resilient? Do they keep coming back when they get behind? Among the most crucial issues are the philosophy and psychological make up of their coach.

In order to quickly develop the observation skills necessary for effective match analysis the serious coach must spend time watching lots of games, particularly at a level above the one they are coaching.

Reflection - Post match analysis

Post match analysis of game film combined with match statistics can ensure that a very objective picture of player and team performance emerges. It gives players the chance to come face to face with their own performance and enables the coach to constructively plan future strategies for improvement.

Even at the lowest level, post match analysis is critical because it provides a coach with a specific focus for succeeding practices - it will also help players understand the reason for that focus.

It is important to use video replay of games positively, to highlight and reinforce successful aspects of play which have been emphasised in practice and which provide evidence that a team is beginning to achieve its goals even if the results are not good.

Developing match analysis skills

Because it is central to effective coaching the sport of Lacrosse has made the study of Match Analysis & Bench coaching the major theme of its Level Two program.

The following examples are practical learning experiences which we believe will help novice coaches develop match analysis skills.

1. Interactive 'simulation' session - Focused observation of game play.

Coaches are allocated an individual player to observe as they are involved in a play practice (ie 3v1 continuous transition drill). They are to observe the player using the template of 'principles of play'. Breaks in play are taken and the coach is able to provide feedback to the player.

This exercise can be made progressively more complex by having the coach focus on an increasing number of players.

2. Exercises applied to Apprenticeship – Mentor Program

The coach is to observe a game that their mentor is coaching. They are to observe and note the game with a particular focus in each half.

Σ Identifying the dominant players in each of the teams. How did you make your decision and when during the game?

Σ Describe the pattern of transition into attack used by both teams.

Σ Describe the pattern of transition into defense.

Σ Observe and comment on both teams settled attacking patterns.

Σ Observe and comment on both teams defensive patterns.

Discussion of these features of the game can then follow with the mentor coach.

3. Self directed learning package

Attend another 'invasion' type sport and observe the game and then address the following issues.

Is the template of the principles of play a valuable tool for observation?

Did you find the game interesting, when comparing similar play principles?

Were you able to transfer your knowledge to this game?

Attend a game of a younger age group. Select the five players that you would recruit for your team and outline the reasons. Detail a training session that you would plan for the team you observed as a result of what you saw in the game.

BECOMING A BETTER BENCH COACH: PART 2

"Coaching in the game"

Match analysis 'during the game' is a significant component of bench coaching. There is vast difference between pre or post match analysis and match analysis in the 'cauldron' of a crucial game. Match analysis during a game is far more than the collection and interpretation of statistics, however valuable that may be. It is a complex process involving specific skills in observation and analysis.

The coach must be able to:

-  Watch the players of both teams in a relatively calm and dispassionate manner, even under intense pressure.
-  Discern patterns of play and identify the contributions of individual players – on both sides - amid the apparent chaos of the game.
-  See whether or not your team is attempting to carry out its game plan and if not why not?
-  Remain composed to decide what changes can be made & then act with confidence to make them.
-  Gain maximum value from timeouts, substitutions and make the best use of quarter and half time breaks.

This form of match analysis is multi layered and, as with the appreciation of anything complex, the layers are usually only peeled away through thoughtful experience over many years.

At its simplest level, effective bench coaching enables a coach to influence some games through changes in tactics or personnel while at the highest levels of play, where the difference between teams is minimal, the skilled coach can sometimes tip the balance through well timed substitutions, tactical changes or time outs.

Precepts of Bench Coaching

Effective bench coaching is based on several key precepts (principles) which the coach needs to appreciate.

- 1.** There are two teams out there - and two coaches ! Coaches like good chess players they must learn to see every game from the other teams point of view for only in this way can they anticipate opposition moves and predict likely responses. In effect they must be 'coaching' both teams. Coaches must also accept that it is the task of the opposition is to make winning as difficult as possible, and to actually enjoy the challenge that this provides.
- 2.** A competitive situation can bring out the best and the worst in both player and coach. The pressure to perform effectively, to win, or at least not to lose, can affect even the most level headed individuals who may lose their sense of perspective and say or do things that they will long regret.
- 3.** Success or failure is determined more by the quality of training and preparation than on any changes made during the game. Coaches must 'keep the faith' and believe in what they are trying to achieve and have confidence in what they have done in training.
- 4.** No matter who the opposition is or how well you prepare your team, players are going to make mistakes – forced or unforced. The manner in which the coach responds to these mistakes can have an influence on individual & team performance.
- 5.** Improvement takes time. Getting a team to play in the way that you want them to or developing

a club culture does not happen overnight. Coaches must therefore be prepared to take the long view and work systematically to achieve their goals.

6. Coaches must accept responsibility for their decisions and live with the consequences of their actions. To do this they will need a coherent philosophy of sport and of life, and they must develop the capacity to always look forward and remain positive.

The process of Bench coaching

The process of bench coaching begins when the whole team meets prior to the game and extends through until a brief post game meeting. It is important to establish routines and expectations in relation to each one of the following elements.

Prior to the game

A suitable arrival time and procedures including a warm up routine need to be established, agreed upon and adhered to by all team members. This period allows the coach to check that all players have arrived fit and well, to remind them of the specific elements of play they must focus on and to ensure that they are 'ready' to play. The coach must also ensure that they - and any assistants - are themselves prepared for the game.

The pre game warm up must be carefully planned to prepare players physically and mentally for the often frenetic early moments of the game. It should gradually build in physical intensity, include practice of key techniques and some realistic basic tactical elements.

During the game

Since it is difficult for a single coach to watch everything that is happening on the pitch at the same time, observation must be focused. The template provided by the principles of play ensures a common focus for all standards of play.

The process becomes an 'expanding and revolving diagnosis' as the coach continually asks questions about what is happening in the game.

-  Are we focussed and 'in' the game?
-  Are the opposition doing anything really unexpected?
-  Are we settling down into our game plan?
-  Are we gaining possession from the centre?
-  Are we responding quickly to changes in possession?
-  Are we carrying out our defensive tasks?
-  Are we running hard into attack positions? Are we supporting the ball carrier?
-  Which team is controlling the tempo of the game?
-  Are we finding the right balance between ball possession & attacking moves?
-  Who is our most dangerous opponent in attack?
-  Do we need to reorganise our defence?
-  What opposition weaknesses are there? Can we exploit them?

Clearly the questions asked must reflect the performance level of the players. With a team of beginners the coach may first look to see if players remember their basic team assignments or are they just chasing the ball wherever it goes. With an elite side the focus might be on how tightly your defenders are tracking and marking their opponents in dangerous positions.

Time outs

Timeouts provide opportunities to remind players of key elements of the game plan, to make tactical adjustments, to give your players a breather, to make multiple substitutions and to disturb the tempo of

the game. They must be viewed as a time to look forward, to give positive instructions about what needs to be done.

Coaches must remember that by calling a time out they are also giving the opposition an opportunity to make adjustments as well – they must anticipate what the opposition coach may be contemplating. In preparing for a time out the coach needs to organise their thoughts and be ready to give their players precise, succinct information.

Quarter/ Half time breaks

If the coach has been able to digest and interpret the lessons of the first half they may be able to make small but significant adjustments in tactics during this period.

Again it is very important to see the game from your opponents point of view, to try to anticipate and pre-empt changes they may make and so keep them off balance.

It may sometimes pay to make specific short term tactical changes at half time just to confuse the opposition and cause them to quickly forget their coaches half time instructions.

Substitutions

Various systems of substitution can be used by coaches. The key factors are good communication and well thought out policies which ensure that all players know how the issue of substitutions will be dealt with. It will help if they understand why the team has been selected for any game and clearly understand their roles as starters or substitutes.

Post game meeting

The procedures or rituals following the completion of the game need to be established and the coach will need to identify the content and most appropriate ways of communicating it with players and the team during this time.

Developing skills for Bench Coaching

Interactive 'simulation' exercises.

Coaches are involved in observation and analysis of game play. Teams are usually small sided (5/side for Lacrosse) so that the game play area is contained and continuous. A 'freeze replay' approach is used to pause play and allow feedback from the coaches.

-  Observe both teams for 5min and appraise the performance of both teams.
-  Discuss observations, present focus for development
-  Observe team play comment on implementation of suggested actions.
-  Use freeze replay to comment.
-  Observe team play and response to freeze replays called by senior coach.
-  Interpretation of template and communication.
-  Observe team play and initiate time outs.
-  Preparation, communication and anticipation of opposition coach.
-  Observe team play and prepare for a quarter or half time break.
-  Preparation, communication and targets for action following the break