Coaching through small-sided games

Traditionally technique has often been over-emphasised within practice sessions. While technique is an important part of the overall skill, it has often been taught in isolation, without requiring players to think and apply the techniques to the situations required in the game. This is like giving a person a piece from a puzzle but not showing them the lid with the picture. Where does this isolated practice fit the game?

By using a game approach, players are challenged to think about what they are actually doing, and why. Players are taught to use the appropriate technique at the right time and place, while under the pressure situations created by a game. Coaching though small-sided games has been shown to result in improved learning outcomes for players and coaches.

Using games as the predominant coaching tool places an emphasis on the play, where tactical and strategic problems are posed in a modified game environment, ultimately drawing upon players to make decisions.

It places the focus of a lesson on the student in a game situation where cognitive skills such as tactics, decision-making and problem solving are critical. The isolated technique development is utilised, only when the player recognises the need for it.

The skilled coach creates and manipulates the game, specifically to develop the skill that is the primary focus.

Coaching through small-sided games is a tool to:

- guide players to discover and develop the game
- increase motivation and enjoyment
- develop tactical awareness
- improve individual skills
- challenge players to think about what they are doing and why
- encourage creative solution finding.

The Sequence for Coaching through Games:
1. The players warm-up by playing a small game, raising their pulse rate and including some dynamic stretching.
2. The players play a small-sided, conditioned game designed to isolate a technical or tactical learning point.
3. The coach observes the players trying to solve the problem within the game.
4. Through questions, the coach assists the problem-solving process, identifying skills which need to be improved.
5. If necessary, the coach leads a short skill session focussing on a skill identified as being important to success in the game.
6. The players go back into the game – hopefully with more success.
7. The coach modifies the game to provide a further challenge to the players.
8. The coaching cycle begins again.

**When Coaching through Games, consider the following:**
- What is the main objective/purpose for the activity?
- What skills and tactics do you want to develop?
- What will be the main problem/challenge for the players?
- What are the boundaries and safety laws?
- What questions may you ask to help the players achieve the technical and tactical goals for the session?
- What progression can be used to support each individual?

**In order to achieve this, consider the following:**
1. Varying the playing area in which the game takes place: Longer or shorter; narrower or wider.
2. Changing the starting space between attack and defence: closer; further away; wider.
3. Varying the shape/positioning of the attack and defence: bunched; spread; single file; various groupings (2s, 3s, 4s).
4. Different starting positions: contesting the ball; sprint starts; lying down; back turned; kneeling; tackling.
5. Introducing the ball in a variety of way: pass; high ball; kick; roll; bounce.
6. Dynamic starts (moving) to the game, no static situations, always moving.
7. Applying pressure in different ways.

If a coach sets the same task for a group of 15 players, at what level does s/he aim: the top, middle or lower level? By dividing a group of 15 into three groups of five or even five groups of three, based on similarity of need, the task becomes much less difficult.

In a small group, with an appropriate task, participants can be challenged appropriately so they achieve a good level of success. If the coach teaches players how to change the task, they are then able to adjust it themselves, leaving the coach free to give feedback.
Games can be modified depending on the number of players, available equipment, and training area, specific skills that need practice, level of pressure and fitness levels.

1. Varying the Playing Area
   • Players need to be aware how much space is available in which to play as it should affect their tactical choices.
   • By moving between different size playing areas the players need to adjust or change their choices of play.
   • How effectively do the players use the space available to them (e.g. in a narrow space do they make full use of what is available and do defenders make good use of the side lines available for defending)?
   • How might the attack or defensive formations distribute themselves in the space? Alignment.

2. Changing the Starting Space between Attack and Defence
   • This is a constant challenge for players in games to deal with defence that is very close (one metre away) or further away (10 metres away). The tactical choice changes. What to do with space available, where to run or not run?
   • How much time is available to the ball carrier to make his choice of play and what roles do the support players play in support of his actions?
   • Are the players encouraged to look at the distribution of the defence or the support before the attack begins as this might govern their choice of play?

3. Varying the Shape or Positioning of the Attack or Defence
   • Rarely do players arrive at situations in the full game in a linear way, so we must try to replicate the situations that tend to occur in the game.
   • Variation of the start position requires the players to re-position themselves in the most effective attacking or defending organisation – it is what we might call going from ‘Disorder to Order’.
   • This positioning encourages players to understand the need for both deep, close or wide alignment applicable to the varying situations that occur.

4. Different Starting Positions
   • Too often we see players starting in similar positions (i.e. a lateral static line) that is rarely seen in the game.
• Players need to get familiar with the varied positioning that occurs after the set pieces begin.
• The imagination of the coach/player can be utilised – bunched, spread, two lines, single file, sat down, kneeling, backs turned to opposition, doing various exercise before play is called.

5. Introduction of the Ball in Differing Ways
• As in the game the ball arrives in a variety of ways – passed, from kick, rolled, fought for in a contact area, off ground – so we should encourage the start to replicate as many game situations as possible.
• We encourage players to react to the varying situations that challenge their tactical choice of play (i.e. support players knowing where to effectively move to support the attack). <br>

6. Dynamic Starts
• Rather than start the game from a static situation introduce more dynamic forms of play.
• Players moving in the space before introducing the ball.
• Players move into the space from outside so they have to choose where to run and why.
• Players need to look at the opposition before game starts so they can make tactical choices appropriately.
• The movement creates more dynamic and exciting forms of attack and helps to organise the defence.

7. Applying Pressure in Different Ways
• Reduce the time the player has to make a decision and perform a skill.
• Reduce the space in which the player has to perform a skill.
• Increase the speed and intensity of the activity.
• Condition the defence when developing the attack.
• Condition the attack when developing the defence.

Developing Technical Skills through Games Activities
Rugby skills can be broken down into ‘Key Factors’. A key factor is a component part of a whole skill.
For example, in catching a pass (the whole skill) key factors include:
• turn the head to look at the ball
• reach towards the ball
• spread the fingers.

By splitting a whole skill into its component key factors, it is easier for coaches to diagnose parts of the skill, which may need development and work on them.

Key Factor Analysis (break down the skill into components)
• Introduce one or two key factors at a time (max three).
• Gradually introduce different pressures by: – reducing time
– reducing space
– increasing the intensity
– conditioning the opposition.

Remember:

All of the above methods of applying pressure involve opposition. It is very easy to perform skills in unopposed practices, as there is very little pressure on the players. Training unopposed will have little or no relevance to the player's ability to perform.