



Coaching & the Journey towards Helping Players Find Their Love for the Game

Description

A few weeks ago while tucked away during a cold Newlands winter night I was lucky enough to watch a truly amazing contest, one that has shaped my future, if not my destiny. The Gallagher Premiership Final between underdogs Harlequins and top dog the Exeter Chiefs. A clash between a side who a few months earlier languished in some of the darker areas of the league table, against a perennial European powerhouse. The Final ended 38 – 40 to Harlequins, with Harlequins rallying around their young talismanic fly-half Marcus Smith to be crowned champions. As the game came to an end I was filled with emotion, nostalgia, passion, ecstasy and so much more. I was so overwhelmed not purely because Quins had done something so unimaginable, but rather in the manner they had done it.

Following a change in coaching leadership Quins moved into an almost player-lead environment, where players' input became greater, and their style of play become more attacking. As simple as that might sound, in a game where territory and risk-taking have become almost non-existent, seeing sides "chuck the pill" is something myself and so many fans alike almost forgot existed. I think maybe that is what made this final so exciting, how Harlequins played with a tempo so quick even the toughest of defences could not stop it, or how even when the chips seemed down, the boys in pink were able to keep pushing the envelope.

This Final hit home for me because it reminded me of why I fell involve with the game so many years ago as a young kid. Rugby has changed, as winning, success and climbing the ladder of success becomes ever more important for coaches who now drive ideas of minimal risk into their players. Environments are creating players who exhibit almost robotic tendencies, without much understanding of the game. I say this acknowledging that I was part of this conveyer belt until that game. The new Premiership Champions played a style of rugby that pushed the boundaries, they took risks, when many sides would have opted not to, they trusted their teammates to execute when many others would have shied away, and played with a passion that unfortunately for Exeter could not be matched and mirrored that of a High School XV playing their last game of the season. Modern-day rugby has changed quite a bit in the age of analytics and analysis. Teams prefer the kicking pressure game, coaches feel it gives the best chance to win, with the outcome being it is not always the best product to watch. Sides opt to give up the ball, kicking away possession in the hopes of winning the ball back through their stout defence. A great winning model at test level, as our victorious Springboks showed

two years ago, but one that has sadly become almost the norm in school rugby.

Year by year schoolboy sides are becoming ever more averse to risk-taking and singularly focused on winning, as player development, enjoyment and excitement take a back seat, winning is, unfortunately, riding shotgun. For kids these days, playing schoolboy rugby is not necessarily about enjoyment, risk-taking and relationships, but rather about results, outcomes and performance. I am not an idealist, I understand the value of those components, I just do not think they should be the most important things. Creating environments where players learn to love the game and express themselves should be. Players should be pushing ideas around and actually playing the game rather than entering into ping-pong kicking battles. Their enjoyment should come from the memories made, important competitive values they are being taught and an opportunity to do something they love with some of their closest friends. I heard a quote a few months back that summed it up perfectly "Players never fell involve with the game by chasing kicks." As coaches, I think we should never forget that quote, no matter how simple and cliché it might sound. We should always ask ourselves: What we are doing to help our players discover and nurture their love for the game and some of its most important values?

Coaching is a beautiful process. One where you have the opportunity to help young boys and girls find their passion and love for the game. And that should never be forgotten, no matter how much we might be pulled into another direction. Our job is to facilitate players in the process of problem-solving, self-exploration and understanding of the game while making sure they have loads of fun on the way. Granted it is not always easy, but let's not forget that. And if we do, let's take a moment to remember why we fell in love with the game ourselves.

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