

Article 2 –Athlete-Centered Approach for Elite Players

This is an excerpt from Chapter 9 of Lynn Kidman’s book **Athlete-Centered Coaching; Developing inspired and inspiring people**. This book is a great resource to any coach that is looking to improve their coaching and is the ideal companion to the USA Rugby Coach Development Certification. The book will be available from USA Rugby shortly.

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Wayne Smith

International Rugby Coach

This chapter discusses the coaching approach developed and used by Wayne Smith, one of the two current assistant coaches of the All Blacks (the New Zealand national men’s rugby team). A prime proponent for the athlete-centred philosophy, Wayne Smith is noted for his ability to formulate a team culture that is more successful than that produced by traditional rugby approaches in the modern era.

An athlete-centred approach, as suggested in Chapter One, is ideal for sports teams as it gives athletes control and choice, it enables them to make decisions while competing, and it brings back the ‘fun’ of participating in sport because athletes have greater internal motivation. As well as using an athlete-centred approach with elite rugby squads, Wayne has used it when coaching children. His philosophy, vision and values can make rugby, in his case, a sport of the 21st century.

Wayne was interviewed at length while he was still coaching the Canterbury Crusaders, a New Zealand regional men’s rugby team that plays in the Super 12 international rugby competition, which he coached from 1997–1999. Then, after he became assistant All Blacks coach in 2004, Wayne edited and added to many of his quotes from the original interview; therefore some of his experiences since 2000 are integrated here. Since the interview and editing, Wayne has coached Northampton Saints in England before returning to New Zealand to be an All Blacks assistant coach. The interview remains an honest reflection of his views, as what has changed in the interim is not his thinking about coaching but his experience. His wisdom remains widely valued.

The chapter begins by focusing on how Wayne has developed his athlete-centred philosophy. Wayne then discusses his own development as a coach and reasons for adopting Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), the advantages and implementation of such an approach, and the process of empowering players. He also covers some of the challenges he faces in continuing to use an athlete-centred approach and how he will use it with the All Blacks.

Wayne’s Philosophy of Coaching

Wayne believes in traditional values and works hard with players to identify and develop those that are meaningful to the players and that are bone deep—that is, with them for a lifetime. Wayne’s philosophy also relates to the importance of developing the whole person, not just the rugby

player. He suggests that a focus on career goals is a key to developing thinking people who are able to empower themselves. He supports this focus by encouraging players to study, work or help in the community. He also encourages players to think and creates an environment in which players are not scared to have a go. All these elements in his philosophy are reflected in his description of himself as a coach:

I am a coach that likes to learn and believes that learning faster than the others is critical. I communicate that attitude to the players, making sure that they also are open to new ideas. Players generally like innovation, but it's important they treat everything on merit. You've got to be prepared to make mistakes and allow your players to make them. The team that makes the most mistakes wins the game because only 'do-ers' make them. Your job as coach is to ensure they're not making the same mistakes over and over.

In the three seasons that Wayne was coaching the Canterbury Crusaders, the team won two Super 12 championships. His athlete-centred approach with the Crusaders was innovative. Many of the players had never been coached in this way. Wayne became a leader in rugby coaching by learning how to empower players. His example has provided encouragement for many coaches of rugby (and other sports), who are now beginning to learn about and use an athlete-centred approach.

Wayne's Development as a Coach

Wayne has a passion for rugby. After finishing his playing career with the All Blacks (1980–1985), he saw it as an obvious progression to coach the game he loved. In 1986 he went to Italy to play for a club. He learned Italian and was thrown in the deep end when he began to coach an Italian team:

When I went to Italy, I'd already been an All Black and a captain of the New Zealand Sevens team for which I took almost a player/coaching type role along with a very open coach, Bryce Rope ... We were the first New Zealand team to win the Hong Kong Sevens (in 1986) despite the fact that most of our team [had] never really played the game. Fifteen-aside rugby is much more important in New Zealand. I took responsibility for researching the game. I read books about sevens ... I made sure I understood the fundamentals of the game ... The experience gave me the knowledge that I could research and apply skills and tactics that I was unfamiliar with. I was open to learning, wasn't threatened by the fact that I knew little about the game. I was quite prepared to do my homework to ensure I was giving it the best shot I could.

Wayne has continued to use research as a major form of developing his coaching. He believes a coach can never stop learning. He also realises that the way he played and was coached is not necessarily the best way for the modern game:

When I first went to Italy I couldn't speak the language and I was coaching players who had grown up in a different system to mine. Putting them through the sort of trainings that I had been used to wasn't going to motivate them, wasn't going to work. I wanted to get the most out of the opportunity. So I had to adjust pretty quickly to what I call a global coaching methodology, which in its pure sense is playing the game, rather than analytically developing individual techniques. The French coaching influence in Italy had developed a style of coaching based on opposed situations designed to develop intuitive (or recognitional) decision-making skills in players.

Wayne clarifies the idea of a *global methodology* to coaching:

If you look at a range of coaching methodologies, 'analytical' would be on one end of the spectrum and 'global' on the other. Using an analytical methodology you'd instruct a player, 'Put your foot there, put your hand there, drop your shoulder and finish up in this position'. A global coaching instruction would be more along the lines of, 'This player has the ball, stop him from scoring a try', ... It's about doing it, the coach observing and letting the players sort out the most effective way themselves. I think effective coaching moves up and down this spectrum.

A large part of Wayne's initial coaching development was observing the Italian coaches:

I went and watched coaches who literally threw the ball in the air and two teams played, tackling each other as they would in a game. It was very unstructured but I thought that I could adapt and improve this style. I developed activities that had one area of a field strongly defended, then threw the ball to the attacking team to see if they could figure out the space and make some ground. That's a situation in the game that's real. I modified the approach to develop my own style. I was still (at this stage of my learning as a coach) telling them what to do and where to go, but at least I had started developing this raw Game Sense type approach.

This approach reflects elements of TGfU as discussed by Rod Thorpe in Chapter Eleven. Rod developed the use of game-like situations in which players learn about technique and tactics of the actual game. TGfU allows the development of greater intrinsic motivation among players and more movement appropriate to the actual game for which players are being trained.

When asked for his advice for coaches who are interested in learning about an athlete-centred approach, Wayne suggests:

The key thing I think is the openness to learning. I think coaches need to look at things on merit and understand that just because they've played the game, they don't know everything about it. This is particularly so in sports like rugby where laws are changing all the time. Having a passion to improve is important. Knowing that you are part of the problem means you can also be part of the solution.

An issue that Wayne reiterates extensively in the interview is that he is still learning about coaching and about how to use an athlete-centred approach. Coaches always need to be developing, learning and asking plenty of questions. On his own learning, Wayne says:

I am always trying to do things better. Progress for me is not going back to my natural or learned instincts from years of being coached in a certain way. The tendency for me under pressure is to bark out orders and say, 'Do it this way'. Sometimes, I'll come home and think, 'I know that wasn't the way to handle that' or 'I had a poor night tonight'. It is good practice to film your training runs so you can review your coaching performance. The next day I make a conscious effort to make improvements.

A questioning approach encourages the self-awareness that players need to get better at what they're doing. This doesn't mean you abdicate your responsibilities as a leader. You set your standards and expectations. Your job as coach is to then ensure the players come up to them.

In his modern coaching, Wayne uses others' knowledge, including the styles and methods of other coaches, to help develop his coaching and continue his learning. He seeks the advice and information he needs, often by email. He sets up relationships with coaches and experts who can help him, such as those who use an athlete-centred approach, and asks many questions. Elaborating on his past and present approaches to learning, Wayne says:

When I first committed to using empowerment in my coaching, there was no one else really using it, so I needed to look at other sports to keep learning. I still like to see what other coaches do and whether I am on the right track or not. I know the way I want to go ... to continue empowering my players and to get better at questioning (rather than instruction). I also want to be my own person and develop my own style. I work hard not at copying, but at understanding and adapting what I learn.

I have to work on my ability to discriminate between the need to ask questions about the skill and the need to ask about the tactics, i.e. understand whether it's a skill issue that let the player down or a game understanding one. Did he fail to pass because he couldn't technically execute it quickly enough, or did he pass because he didn't see what was [going] on? You can get the answer quickly ... by asking, 'What did you do?', 'What did you see?' and 'What did you want to do?' You can soon find out whether he wanted to pass and couldn't or whether he ran with it because he didn't see that the pass was on.

The skill is in understanding how to use the questions and doing it quickly and selectively so that you're observing more than talking. Let the players have a go, then if you see the activity being done correctly you don't need to step in. My biggest fault is overquestioning.

As evident from Wayne's statement, asking meaningful questions and 'reading the play' is important. (For further information on how to ask meaningful questions, see Chapter Twelve.)

Wayne and Teaching Games for Understanding

TGfU (see Chapter Eleven) is an approach that has become popular in New Zealand and Australia. It can be a useful tool in an athlete-centred approach because it encourages athletes to understand and appreciate the game. In addition, it enables them to make informed decisions, take ownership of their learning, and exercise choice and control over how they play the game.

On TGfU (or Game Sense) as a part of an athlete-centred approach, Wayne says:

We never trained like that in my playing days [using Game Sense]. The closest we came to it was pick-up games as kids. All my life we'd always trained without opposition, not really simulating game situations or pressures. [There was] no thought of where the tackle line was or what you were looking for to make the pass or run through the gap. Game Sense is a logical way to create tactical understanding and awareness, getting players making the right decisions in various situations.

The use of TGfU enabled Wayne to begin to develop a non-traditional approach to help athletes learn. TGfU had a great influence on his thinking and the development of his empowerment approach. Wayne admits that, before he started using TGfU, he was a coach-centred or prescriptive coach:

I was still very much an instructional person who told them what to do, how to do it and when to do it. It wasn't really until I came back and got involved with kids at KiwiSport level in my job that I started to understand about learning. You can tell people how to do something until you are blue in the face, but unless they understand it or believe in it themselves, they aren't going to take it on board. So, I started to ask some questions.

Then while doing some personal development ... I came across David Hadfield who had written a paper called Query Theory on a questioning approach and how it created self-awareness. It was exactly the sort of support and evidence that I was looking for to validate the approach. Coaching is all about raising self awareness and generating responsibility. Effective questioning achieves this, whereas giving people the answers stops them from being either responsible or aware.

I try to use this coaching approach] all the time, a mixture of positive reinforcement, Game Sense and a questioning approach. I don't always succeed. I still fall back into old habits at times. I can also be a bit reactive, especially when things aren't going well.

Patience and composure are two virtues I am still trying to master.

The games in TGfU are a key to designing training sessions. Instead of using the traditional practice drills, which have no real relevance to the actual game, Wayne tries to design games that match the purpose of a particular drill:

I have used the Game Sense-type approach for training since 1986 when I started playing and coaching in Italy and saw the French influence. I was putting players in match-like situations and changing the rules or the situation to develop adaptation. Game Sense ensures players practise having to make decisions all the time.

If there is no purpose, a coach tends to use questioning for the sake of using questioning, which is a common occurrence when coaches are learning about TGfU. In TGfU, the questions should come from and be geared towards achieving an objective the coach and team have identified. Wayne observes that questioning without a clear objective can be counterproductive:

Not knowing what to achieve or not having an objective is a common fault. Questioning, for the sake of it, was a big problem I saw when reviewing a video of one of my sessions. The players participated in very little activity because I kept asking questions. Observation is a big part of a Game Sense approach. Look before you question so that you can be more incisive and meaningful with your queries.

When Wayne designs his training sessions, he is still learning and developing TGfU ideas. To coaches, he suggests:

Take a drill, then try to think about how you can change the rules, the size of the field, the time limit, the scoring systems, etc., to get what you want to get out of it. I try to give [the players] a framework so that they can design their own drills. I don't have a book of drills because every time I go out there, I do something new. Drills develop from the last training and reflect what we are trying to achieve next week.

Wayne is aware that his coaching style is different and that his knowledge of rugby is extensive. From this perspective, in regard to planning for using games at training, he suggests:

You don't have to do what other people do. Think of how *you* can do it e.g. if you want to work on your forwards picking the ball up and going through the middle of the defence, you create ways to spread the defence at training. They are not even drills; they're mini-games.

In identifying the biggest advantage to using TGfU within an athlete-centred approach, Wayne also gives a practical example of how he uses questioning as a major coaching technique to ensure athletes are learning from the various games:

The biggest advantage to a Game Sense approach (opposed activities/games) is that it develops tactical awareness. You put [the players] in real game situations with similar pressures and you require them to choose the right options. It ensures that they have the skills to make the right tactical decision. You ideally want all the players to see things the same way so that they make the same (right) decisions and you get a measure of synergy in your game.

For example, when you create three attackers against two defenders, the obvious thing would be for the second attacker to draw the last defender and pass to the outside guy because he is the one in space. If you can see that the player understands that, but cannot execute the skill, you need to ask some questions. For example:

Wayne: 'What did you do?'

Player: 'I held on to it.'

Wayne: 'Where was the space?'

Player: 'It was outside.'

Wayne: 'What was the reason for you deciding to hold on to the ball?'

Player: 'I couldn't get the pass away.'

Then you know it is a technical issue. You could then ask:

Wayne: 'Why couldn't you get the pass away?'

Player: 'He was on me too quick.'

Wayne: 'How could you give yourself a bit of time?'

Player: 'I would slow down.'

Wayne: 'What would you need to do to slow down?'

Player: 'Take short steps.' Or maybe it's a hand speed issue and: 'I had enough time, but I couldn't get the ball ready, it was going to be a bad pass.'

Wayne: 'What was the reason you didn't have time to get your pass away?'

Player: 'I took the ball into my chest.'

Wayne: 'Where were your hands when you caught it?'

Player: 'They were out in front.'

Wayne: 'Where do you think your hands should have been?'

Player: 'Towards the passer. If I met the ball earlier, I could have passed it.'

So you can get them through to the answer and they come up with it ... They will learn from it better than having been told the solution.

I like the approach. It is logical. Players are working on understanding the game, not just the skills required. You can work on all the skills you like, but if you can't use them in the game, you are not going to get much satisfaction. If you have detected that a behaviour has become a bad habit, it may take more than just this process to change it. Old Way, New Way [see Chapter Two] is an effective method of turning bad habits into good ones. I'd suggest you [coaches] do some reading on this in order to trial the approach.

It is also worth remembering that there are times when athletes do need to be told what to do—the trick is to identify that moment. This is part of the art of coaching, as Wayne suggests:

There are times when you need to say, 'You had more power in the tackle that time, what did you do differently with your foot?'

They might say, 'I am not sure.'

Wayne: 'What did you do that time with your leading foot?'

Player: 'I put it closer to him.'

Wayne: 'So what did that do?'

Player: 'It generated more power from my front leg ...'

Wayne suggests that players learn from the approach because:

... they understand it ... I could tell them 10 times, 'You've got to meet the ball early', but if they have self-awareness that meeting the ball early allows them to get the pass away faster, then they are probably going to try it a lot more quickly. The thing about questioning is that, whilst coaches should have some knowledge, good observation skills are really important. You have to be able to see the three-vs-two or the two-against-one situations.

... most times I use a technique where I carry a second ball and I'll look and see if there are two attackers against only one defender. I will blow the whistle and throw the ball to the two attackers. I want to see how they react and how the play develops. It is not just the skill of questioning, but it is the understanding of the game that is important. There are a lot of skills associated with a questioning approach, but it can be quickly learned if you are motivated to do so. It's not coaching by abdication. You also need to ensure your players understand why you are using it.

Learning TGfU as part of an athlete-centred approach is like learning any other skill. Coaches need to be prepared to trial it and search for ways to continue to develop it:

You have to understand that if you are going to use the approach, you're not going to be perfect at it: you have to keep practising it, keep learning it. It helps you expand your armoury, drills and ways of doing things. It helps you improve your own understanding of the game, as well as your players'!

Implementing an Athlete-centred Approach

Before his recent coaching successes, Wayne lectured about empowerment in a practicum course at Massey University. He said that at that stage, 'there was a lot of scepticism because I hadn't been coaching in New Zealand' and he lacked credibility. Nevertheless, he suggested to the students

that he would use an athlete-centred approach with the Crusaders: 'I am going to empower my players. I am going to use a questioning and a Game Sense sort of approach.'

Yet he also admits, 'There would be times where I fall back into the way I was coached.' As part of the process of learning about this approach, coaches will tend to revert to the coaching style that they experienced as players. Wayne reflects on why people, including himself, tend to fall back to old habits:

Sometimes it is because of frustration or time pressures, or things not going right ... we film our trainings to look at the drills we are doing and make sure they are valid, see whether the players are doing them really well and to check our way of communicating. Quite often I go home and think, 'Gee that wasn't the right way to handle that player tonight'. I've had to learn strategies to cope with people making mistakes. I have very competitive instincts and like to see everything done well. It has been an ongoing learning experience allowing the players to make errors along the way, which is now an important part of our team environment.

One of the concerns Wayne raised, from his perspective in a very public position, is that people tend to criticise something new until it has been proven (usually by winning). An athlete-centred approach draws away from a traditional coach-centred approach (which has been considered successful), where coaches claim control and ownership of their athletes.

The Process of Empowering Players

So Wayne put all these systems in place, using an innovative type of thinking, but what really happened? How did the players react to this approach?

I think the reaction initially by some of the players was a bit of scepticism, things like, 'This guy doesn't really know what he is going on about'. I know I had a bit of credibility problem with a couple of them initially because they wanted me to come and say, 'This is what we are going to do and this is how we are going to do it'.

They responded this way because they are used to people coming and telling them what to do and they can tell from what a coach tells them whether he knows the game or not. It took a while to establish the fact that I did know the game, that I wasn't asking questions because I didn't know the answers. I was asking for a reason.

It also took them out of their comfort zone a lot because I was trying to get players doing things they traditionally didn't do. Rather than just carry the ball into contact and set it up, I wanted forwards to be able to pass and get the ball into space. I did that by asking questions like, 'Where was the defence?', 'Where was the space?', 'How could you have got the ball there?'. Initially, the players really struggled with it. Forwards didn't see it as their job. Their role in the team traditionally was to set up rucks and mauls. It took a

while for them to start understanding the concept of team attack. By them knowing what we were trying to achieve and playing like the backs in certain situations, we were going to be more effective. The vice versa is true as well, i.e. backs have to know how to perform the forwards tasks at the breakdown.

There were some personalities on the team who felt that while I was questioning, I was criticising or bringing up negatives in their play. Often, the question I asked should have had a positive response from the player because it was about a good thing that they'd done. However, because I'd asked it in the wrong manner, it created defensiveness in the player. For example:

Wayne: 'Why did you do that?'

Player: 'I did the right thing.'

Wayne: 'Yes exactly, but tell me what you did.'

Player: 'I passed the ball.'

Wayne: 'Why?'

Player: 'Because that ##### defender came in on me, so I passed to the guy that was clear on the outside of me!'

Wayne: 'Great.'

That showed me that the player understood the situation, but I should have avoided using 'why' as a question—it can cause players to feel like their ability is being question[ed] and often results in them seeking justification for what they did.

There are still two or three players that tend to react negatively to questioning. I think, in general, all players initially had some problems with [being questioned]. The activities I used were also new and different for them. They were used to doing the traditional ruck and run type practices for rugby rather than being put in game-like activities. I'd throw a ball to the attack and if they couldn't get through, I threw the ball to the defence. They had to switch roles quickly. It took a great deal of trust on the players' behalf to forgo what they had been used to (and felt comfortable with) and commit wholeheartedly to my methods. Now those same players, when they go back into a more traditional coaching environment, quite often become frustrated with the lack of learning.

Wayne also encourages input from the players:

The players will quite often come up with extensions to activities, progressions if you like. They will quite often come and say, 'Why don't we do this?', 'Why don't we put this player here and create this?' or 'Why don't we make the field bigger?' or whatever.

The players' input encourages creative thinking. The players have to play the game, so their ideas and ways of reading the game are highly relevant to training for it.

To empower players, it is important that they gain the skills of self-awareness (see Chapter Two). Athletes need to understand how and why they are performing, including in their tactics and skill development. Wayne had initial difficulties in trying to get players to become self-aware:

In the first year [of coaching the Crusaders], they were so lacking in self-awareness that I would ask ‘What did you do?’ and players would have trouble remembering what they did. They played like robots. They did what they were told to do and didn’t really *feel* their performance.

Empowering through questioning has other advantages along with increasing self-awareness among players. Questioning also focuses athletes in their thinking and thus their concentration remains consistently higher in trainings, which transfers well to the game. Wayne agrees that questioning ‘really makes them aware the whole time. But also you know that your trainings can’t be quite so long. It’s ... hard to concentrate for long periods of time.’

Some Challenges of an Athlete-centred Approach

Although, as Wayne’s experience indicates, an athlete-centred approach offers many advantages, it also brings challenges to coaches who wish to make use of it. This section draws attention to some of those challenges (many of which are also identified by other coaches in this book), along with Wayne’s response to them.

A challenge indicated in both research and practice is that using an athlete-centred approach is very time-consuming. It takes time for athletes to become accustomed to being coached in a different way. It also takes time to develop athletes into thinking athletes. Yet the long-term advantages ultimately override this challenge, as athletes begin to make informed decisions, have fun and increase their self-esteem. In line with this idea, Wayne notes:

It is going to take a while ... and that’s what people don’t understand. If the quality outcome you are after is satisfaction, then we got that straight away. My first year with the Crusaders [of building the team culture, without actually winning the Super 12s] was exciting. Since then, we have won the tournament twice, but to me it’s not the winning that counts—it’s doing your best to win. Having fun and learning together is a rewarding experience. We’ve had hard times, but generally the smile on their faces is the biggest indicator to success. Seeing a group of talented individuals selflessly giving to each other and enjoying the experience makes coaching worthwhile.

Another possible time constraint that Wayne identifies is:

... one player who is struggling, the rest of team is going well and they want to keep the momentum up. Particularly if it is a Thursday night training, the last training before the game, you want flow, you want continuity, you want a bit of feeling being built up. If you step in and stop that through questioning one player or trying to get instructional, it is

quite often negative. The hardest part about the art of coaching is understanding when they are on a roll, and when to step out.

Observation is a big part of empowerment as is getting the questions right. It is quite hard ... One thing I found difficult earlier on was sitting back and observing for three or four minutes before coming in. When you are trying to establish yourself, you'll find a lot of young coaches feel like they've got to get in there to espouse their knowledge. They have got to show that they know what is right and what is wrong. Even when [the coach is] using a questioning approach, they feel they have to show that they are involved.

Another concern for the development of athlete-centred coaches is the perception that a coach has to reel off all his or her knowledge to the players, when really coaching is about enabling them to learn.

Wayne reflects on differences in success between a prescriptive (coach-centred) coach and an athlete-centred coach:

It depends whether you want long-term success or short-term success. A team that you hear in the changing room yelling and screaming as the coach gets them hyped up, are often beaten because they will only have short-term success against you (they are going to be really tough in the first 20 minutes). If you just ride it out and keep your cool, react to what you see, talk, guts it out and be relentless, you'll get on top of them every time. It is the same in a seasonal sense. The teams who are autocratically run have short-term success, do really well earlier on. Teams like ours tend to take a while for everything to come together.

I know one of my faults is that early in the season I tend [to] work on too many things. The players can sometimes get too cluttered, but I believe it's important to show improvements throughout the season. Whereas autocratic teams are really good earlier on, they tend to peter out a wee bit. In contrast, empowerment ensures a dynamic, living, learning environment. You've got new players coming in, new ideas, new intellectual capital, [and] new leaderships. It is ever changing and for that reason, long-term success is often sustainable.

One further challenge in using an empowerment approach, Wayne indicates, may arise if the right team culture is not in place:

I can't see too many disadvantages to the approach, unless you haven't got the culture and you can't trust the players to be genuine about it. You need to have an honest team to get improvements.

Conclusion

Although Wayne does not have all the answers and does not claim to be an expert, he provides coaches with some insight into how to implement an athlete-centred approach. He has

suggested that the players are intrinsically motivated and learn well when coaches use questioning and TGfU to enhance decision making.

Learning an athlete-centred approach is not an easy task, but the benefits to the team and individual athletes are immense. The learning process is easier when coaches begin by considering *how* such an approach might be suitable for them and remembering that the process of implementation requires time. Coaches will make progress by trying new ideas and continuing to self-reflect on how the approach is working within the team. There are also techniques, such as questioning and understanding TGfU, that need to be practised. The more coaches practise, the better they will be at ensuring athletes have ownership of their learning and direction of their sporting and life experiences.

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