

MTBA Skills Coach Pre-course Reading

Part 3

Group Management

Case study

Greg arrived at the rugby fields ready to coach the local under-14 club rugby team. He had volunteered to coach the team and despite having never coached a team before Greg was quite excited about the challenge. After consulting with some of his experienced rugby friends he spent considerable time planning a detailed and comprehensive program. With the program in hand Greg was confident the first session would go well. Unfortunately what followed was a disaster. The players would not respond to direction, two individuals started fighting, balls were being thrown randomly around the area, one individual was in tears because he was laughed at when attempting one of Greg's training drills and Greg could not hear himself speak over the constant rude interruptions from the players.

This chapter is designed to provide coaches such as Greg with quality group-management skills. The use of group-management skills not only helps the coach to enjoy coaching but also provides the opportunity for individuals to benefit from their participation in sport.

The aspects of group management that can enhance the sport experience for both coach and participant include:

- Engaging the participant
- Establishing formations and routines
- Catering for individual differences
- Incorporating minor/modified games
- Encouraging self-management
- Managing behaviour.

Engaging the Participant

Case study

Susan wanted to engage the interest and rekindle the enthusiasm of her intermediate diving squad. The girls had been participating in diving for five years and were beginning to lose interest. Susan contacted two of her friends who had recently finished competing for Australia in the Olympic Games and asked them if they would perform a demonstration for her diving

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squad and follow up with two weeks of coaching. The young divers were enthralled by the demonstration and noticeably motivated by the opportunity to work with their idols.

Providing quality demonstrations is one of many strategies used to engage sport participants. The following are some of the more successful strategies that can be used to engage participants.

Voice and Expression

It is interesting to observe the impact particular communicators have on their respective audiences. The Wiggles seem to use their voice and expression to cast a spell over the three to eight year olds in their audience. A late night current affairs presenter connects with their audience using empathetic and often dramatic intonation.

Varying voice quality and volume to suit the situation is a trademark of effective coaches.

Eye Contact

Whether working with a group or an individual, the ability to maintain eye contact can personalise an interaction. Making eye contact gives the impression of confidence, helps to add expression to the message and enables the coach to assess the attitude of the players.

Signal for attention

There are many ways to capture the attention of a group. Whatever the method, more often than not, it should be loud, different, pleasant and gain attention. Some coaches use a whistle and others use a variety of commands. Ironically it is possible to gain attention by being quiet. This usually happens when players are expecting noise and it does not happen, or when the participants have a routine that involves a briefing from the coach. At a coach briefing, the coach can use silence to create a mood of suspense and intrigue.

Ask Questions

Soliciting a response from participants using questioning and discussion techniques shifts the focus from the coach to the participant. The participant assumes some responsibility for their participation and becomes more involved in the learning process. It is recommended that young participants, and some participants with a disability, be asked questions that the coach knows they can answer. More difficult and complex questions should be reserved for mature participants.

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Praise and Compliment

Case study

Mark was watching his new under-10 soccer team arrive at training. Not knowing the individuals, he was interested to observe their behaviour before commencing the training session. He noticed one individual was continually seeking the attention of others by 'big noting' and disrupting their independent play. He also overheard this individual make some rude comments to a nearby parent. However he did observe the same individual kick the soccer ball with good balance and excellent vision. Mark called the players over and as soon as they arrived, before the 'attention seeker' had time to display his repertoire of 'look at me' skills, Mark commented on how impressed he was with what he had seen when he arrived. He made particular mention of the excellent kicking skills of the attention-seeking individual and asked him to demonstrate. Mark then used the player to help him with a range of tasks throughout the session. Apart from a few digressions the attention-seeking behaviour ceased.

Sincere and equitable praise and compliments to the team and individuals can be delivered in a variety of ways. The coach can comment, place good results on the notice board, send emails, applaud, give rewards and provide leadership opportunities to support the participants.

Quality Instructions

Combining brief clear instructions with video demonstrations and meaningful anecdotes enables the coach to maintain the interest of participants. Most sport participants choose to learn by doing. If participants need to absorb vital information then a concise message, which enables the participant to visualise the intent of the message, will reduce loss of concentration and level of frustration.

One of the most difficult coaching behaviours to adopt is to limit instructions to one or two key points and then inject the players back into activity. The coach often has a wealth of knowledge and can feel compelled to pass it on to the players in one session. If this is a problem then one solution is to plan to deliver key messages across the entire program lasting several weeks. Knowing there is an opportunity to impart knowledge at a later date can help reduce the urge to be verbose.

Notice Board

An up-to-date and well-presented notice board and/or newsletter are vehicles for engaging participants when they are away from training and competition activities. They can connect

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each individual to their team and/or club/school and establish a sense of belonging. The notice board can include human interest information about members, be a display board for the training program (often used by swimming coaches), provide advice about upcoming events, display team lists and display team/club rules and regulations.

Establishing Formations and Routines

Case study

Lyn used a circle formation to practise the set and dig skills with her under-16 volleyball team. By placing four to six players in a circle, Lyn was able to emulate the game situation. Players were instructed to 'keep the ball happy' by hitting it with set and/or dig shots consecutively into the air. While there were many hits and Lyn was pleased with the cooperation among players as they nominated the person in the best position to set or dig the ball, all players were only hitting the ball forward. There were no back sets. One of the players suggested someone be placed in the middle of the circle and that they be responsible for balls that came into the central zone and were only allowed to play back sets. Lyn was delighted with the number of opportunities to respond that the circle formation provided.

Formations

Coaches strive to provide situations where participants can have maximum opportunities to practise at high rates of success in a safe environment. They also strive to position themselves so that they can readily observe each participant. This can be achieved using either a drills approach or game sense approach.

One of the most effective ways to manage the skill development of participants is to play modified games. Using small-sided games with rules that require players to focus on particular skills can result in improved skill as well as an understanding of how to apply those skills in competition. The game sense approach certainly complements the drills approach to coaching.

The following formations usually work for most coaches when managing a 'drills' approach to training activities. In each diagram the participant is 'x' and the coach is 'o'.



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```
Lines
xxxxx
xxxxx      0
xxxxx
```

```
File
xxxxxx
      0
xxxxxx
```

```
Lines — end to end
xxxxx                xxxxx
      0
```

```
Squares
x    x    0    x    x
x    x                x    x
                x    x
                x    x
```

```
Grid
x    x    x    x    x
x    x    x    x    x
x    x    x    x    x
      0
```

```
Circle
                x
                x    x
0    x                x
                x    x
                x
```

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Safety

Safe activities are often the result of the use of effective formations. It is not possible to prescribe the exact dimensions of each formation for each sport. Formation dimensions depend on the purpose of the activity, the skill level of participants, the dynamics of the group, the number of participants and the available equipment and area in which to play. Through trial and error coaches will discover the best arrangement to provide a low-risk environment for each participant. The above examples have been proven to offer safe options for the management of sport groups.

To maintain the integrity of a formation, particularly when introduced for the first time, it is recommended that coaches use markers to define the formation. Care should be taken to ensure that the markers are not going to hinder performance by distracting the participant or causing an injury.

Challenge

Once a formation has been adopted it can be modified to increase the level of skill or to adjust the intensity of competition between individuals.

Case study

When he reduced the area of the squares in a grid formation Larry found that the two-on-two modified game of 'keepings off' became more intense and that it was easier for the less speedy players to gain possession of the ball. When Larry significantly increased the size of the squares, the players had to run further and it had a noticeable effect on the training of their aerobic fitness.

Routines

A coach needs time to manage unpredictable events such as a parent issue, faulty equipment and an injury. The coach also needs time to offer feedback and support to individual participants. By establishing routines and giving the responsibility for routines to the participants the coach can devote more time to nurturing the sport skill development of the players.

Warm-up and cool-down routines can sometimes be managed by the players. Players in younger teams can help to set up equipment. Older players can take responsibility for tactical responses during breaks in competition games against opposition teams.

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Having consistent routines for moving between coach instruction and activity can greatly reduce management time. If the players know where to go, how quickly they need to be there and what behaviour is expected of them on arrival, then more time can be devoted to activity.

Tips for establishing routines

- Set up areas of a facility for specific elements of the program (for example, nets for batting and bowling practice in cricket)
- Keep accurate records of participation and performance (for example, the track and field coach recording split times for an 800-metre runner)
- Identify which part of training is intense and serious and which part is more relaxed (for example, because the surf is good, the surf lifesaving coach lets his squad have 30 minutes to freely surf the waves then proceeds with some interval training focusing on entering and leaving the surf. The participants know that the coach always schedules 30 minutes of time for relaxed practice)
- Establish 'set up' and 'put away' systems for the equipment and facility (for example, rowing coaches require their rowers to not only set up their boats and place the coach's boat in the water, but they also must wash down the equipment before putting it away in the shed)

Coaches should be aware that the concept of time can be fairly flexible in some Indigenous communities (particularly remote) and many Indigenous children often do not wear a watch. A participant turning up late may not be a sign of disrespect or lack of commitment, but simply that the concept of structured time is less important. Some strategies that can be used to overcome this include:

- Structuring training times around other activities (for example, training starts straight after school)
- Helping to organise car pooling with other participants.

Case study

Jill is a young softball coach working with a group of Indigenous athletes in the Northern Territory. She is finding it difficult to gain the attention of the participants at the beginning of a training session, as some of the participants constantly arrive late, and the rest of the participants just seem to want to spend time laughing and having fun. Jill wants the participants

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to do a 'proper' warm-up, and take the training sessions more seriously. She feels that the participants are showing her a lack of respect by laughing and mucking around at the start of training.

After attending a cultural awareness workshop, Jill realises that the approach she has been taking with the group needs to be changed. By using fun games as part of the warm-up, Jill discovers that the participants are able to channel their enthusiasm and desire to have fun, and she is able to run an effective warm-up. Jill has also found a strategy for increasing the level of respect shown to her by the participants, by involving one of the senior players (who has a high status level in the community) in a leadership role. Jill finds that her training sessions are gradually becoming more frequently attended by the players (and on time!) by changing her approach

Catering for Individual Differences

Inclusion

There are many examples of clever modifications to rules, equipment and regulations that have allowed people with a disability to participate in sport, for example, the bowling ball ramp used in tenpin bowling to help control the delivery of the ball, the tie-down mechanism for wheelchair athletes to secure their chair to the shot-put circle when throwing, and the bell in the cricket ball for vision-impaired cricketers.

Levels of ability are a feature in sport. Occasionally a participant presents with an extreme lack of ability caused by a physical impairment that is not able to be compensated for using other personal attributes. It is important that all players be given every opportunity and encouragement to be included.

The introduction of classification systems has created a structure to allow participants with disabilities to compete against other participants with similar abilities. Classification systems are also common in able-bodied sport (for example, age groups, weight divisions, handicaps) to enable fairer competition.

Case study

Erin is the coach of a netball squad and one of the players in the squad has a vision impairment. Erin has set up a 'piggy in the middle' activity in training that requires two players to retain possession from a third player without the third player intercepting or gaining possession of the ball. As Erin starts the session, she notices that the player with a vision impairment keeps

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dropping the ball and, as the single defensive player, cannot get close to touching or retrieving the ball.

Erin observes what is happening and asks the players ‘What can we do to give the person with vision impairment the best possible chance of catching the ball?’ Some adaptations to the activity are suggested by the players that will help. These include using bounce passing only to slow the game down and provide the person with a vision impairment an auditory cue. The players also suggest trying a variety of balls — lighter, brighter and slower (partially deflated). Erin also tries changing the court lighting to provide better contrast.

Specific Groups

By using group-management skills, the coach can improve each participant’s access to, and enjoyment of, their sport. At training the coach is able to:

- Place individuals in groups of similar ability
- Assign reliable and responsible individuals to help the younger or less able players during training
- Arrange for participants in ability groups to participate at different levels of the program.
- Layer skills based activities to allow individuals to progress at different rates.

It can be time consuming to organise a training program in which individual participants and groups of participants are working at different levels at the same time. However, from a management perspective, the benefits to the participant far outweigh the time and effort taken to prepare and organise the program.

Be fair

Group management should have as a focus providing each participant with:

- An equal opportunity to participate in practice and games
- Consistent treatment in relation to feedback, rewards, discussion, application of rules and leadership opportunities
- A consistent coach attitude.

Keeping records of each participant’s game time and interactions with the coach is an effective way to manage this critical role of the coach.

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Incorporating Minor and Modified Games

Game sense

All training activities should directly emulate a part of the game. Players enjoy activities that not only emulate a part of the game but are in fact a 'minor' game. There are many examples of this: half-court basketball, corridor football, mini-golf, half-court tennis and end ball. Sports coaches are increasingly designing minor games to raise the players' understanding of a particular aspect of the game. Further information on using a game sense approach is contained in the previous chapter.

Case study

Geoff coaches an under-12 Australian football team. He was convinced that the players were not reacting quickly enough to the flight of a ball kicked by another player. When he asked the players what they looked at when the ball was being kicked, they all said that they looked at the player kicking the ball. Geoff wanted them to look at the ball contacting the boot and to be familiar with the different flight resulting from different angles of ball drop and foot/body position at the time of contact. He introduced a game of 'force back'. The game involved pairs of players trying to force each other across the field by kicking the ball past their opponent. The opponent had to stop the ball either by marking it or trapping it on the ground. Geoff was delighted with the results as players intently watched their opponent's kicking foot throughout the game.

Increase participation

Long lines of participants waiting for a turn, and 'adult' games with large playing areas and large numbers of players on each team, greatly reduces the opportunities for players to be actively involved. These approaches also reduce the level of enjoyment for many participants.

Using the formations mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, with several groups of players operating at the same time, requires planning and organisation. The extra effort results in better, more active and happier players. Another way to increase participation is to use a game sense approach. An example of this is two-versus-two basketball. The coach wants to focus on

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goal shooting and increasing each participant's opportunities to shoot. The squad is divided into simultaneous games of two-versus-two basketball using each end of the court and the three-point lines as the boundary for the modified two versus-two court. Players enjoy the opportunity to have many more shots at goal and experiment with ways to beat their opponents.

Many sports have modified their games to increase participation and cater for the abilities of younger participants and athletes with a disability. One of the key modifications has been to reduce the numbers of players in each team without disturbing the essential ingredients of the sport.

Wheelchair basketball is a modified game that has been developed to cater for a specific population. Some other sports, such as football and baseball, allow a percentage of older, less-capable players to play in younger age divisions to ensure that they continue in the sport.

Encouraging Self-Management

Teaching players to manage themselves greatly reduces a coach's need to manage. Examples of ways to improve a participant's ability to self-manage include:

- Setting challenges that require participants to develop a skill and/or strategy to solve a problem
- Discussing with participants the effects of poor individual behaviour
- Ensuring players understand the connection between behaviour and the consequences of that behaviour
- Requiring players, who make a mistake or fail to follow a team plan, to do work to compensate for the negative effect they have had on the team performance
- Acknowledging players who go out of their way to assist with management, organisation and planning tasks
- Asking players to explain the outcomes of their execution of skills.

Some tasks that players can perform to practise self-management include:

- Taking responsibility for captaining segments of the team on game day (for example, a backs captain, forwards captain, a freestyle leader, a relay captain)
- Organising the club presentation night

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- Planning specific training segments
- Coordinating transport to events.

Managing Behaviour

Guidelines for reducing the likelihood of typical behaviour problems include:

- Establish a code of behaviour at the first training session. Involve participants in the process of formulating the behaviour code. Develop clear expectations regarding attendance, punctuality and training standards. Explain the reasons for each rule and agree on consequences for breaking them. Avoid punitive consequences, rather require the offender to compensate and/or retribute the situation caused by the poor behaviour.
- Inform administrators and parents of the codes of behaviour and consequences that will be applied.
- Deal with the behaviour by focusing on the behaviour and not the individual participant as a person. Do not publicly insult or embarrass the participant.
- Avoid punishing a group for the poor behaviour of one participant.
- Take a firm, fair consistent approach to managing behaviour. Apply consequences quickly and fairly. It may be necessary to exclude an individual from an activity. The exclusion should be brief and the coach should take time to discuss the incident privately with the individual while they are excluded.
- Avoid using punishments such as running laps or push-ups. If you intend to use running or push-ups to improve fitness, then they will have a negative stigma because they have been used as a punishment. Also they are monotonous and have little value as one-off exercises.
- Use rewards, praise and acknowledgment to reinforce desired behaviours.
- Develop programs that have fun, variety, high rates of activity, high rates of participation and opportunities for friends to interact.

On occasions, a coach may need to manage extreme behaviour. In the case of extreme behaviour, the type of management required is usually determined by whether or not the behaviour of a particular participant or group of participants will significantly disrupt and/or possibly harm other participants. If it is likely that other participants will be harmed or significantly disrupted, then the coach should exclude the offending participant/s from the program. Unless a qualified counsellor, then the coach is limited to supporting the poorly

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behaved individual by helping them to seek professional help. Extreme behaviour of this type should not be tolerated in sporting programs.

Off-road Safety

The minimum recommend age for participants riding off road in a group situation is 12 years old but this can be widely variable depending on the rider's skill level and physical maturity.

The coach's position is paramount during off road group rides. The coach should be positioned so that they can see all participants at all times and be within earshot. For larger groups, there should be more coaches (consistent with the required instructor to riders ratio) spread throughout the group and able to communicate with each other. Ideally all groups should have a coach as lead rider and a sweep rider and all participants remain between those coaches at all times. As always these requirements will vary according the makeup of the group and terrain.

Key considerations for riding in an off road environment –

- Know the route and any technical features involved.
- Ensure the route is appropriate for the group's skill and fitness level.
- Be aware of weather conditions and be prepared for change.
- Complete bike and equipment safety checks for all riders before heading out.
- Provide a briefing, including details of distance, rules, conditions and possible dangers.
- Establish regular rest stops and carry out route briefings at the rest stops.
- Encourage participants to consume adequate amounts of water and food.
- Carry a first aid kit at all times.
- Carry basic spares and tools to suit all participants' bikes (ie tubes for all wheel sizes).

Summary

Group management encompasses:

- Engaging the participant — employing interactive strategies that motivate the participant to respond
- Establishing formations and routines — organising activities in such a way that participants have optimal opportunities to participate successfully
- Catering for individual differences — developing programs that facilitate the simultaneous participation of athletes with various levels of ability and varying physical, social and mental capacities



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- Incorporating modified and minor games — using a game sense approach to develop the application of skills in the game situation and to increase participation in game situations
- Encouraging self-management — applying behaviour-management strategies that result in the participant taking responsibility for their behaviour.

The style used to implement these strategies will vary greatly among sports and across maturity levels of participants. Taking the time to acquire these coaching skills will eventually free the coach to focus on the primary task of enhancing the learning of each participant.

References and Further Reading

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