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Definitions

Game Sense

Game Sense is the Australian derivative of the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982) developed by the Australian Sports Commission (den Duyn, 1997). Game Sense is an innovative coaching pedagogy developed by the Australian Sports Commission and first published in 1997. It places all learning within modified games or game-like situations and is player centred. The tasks are set for the players and they solve the problems guided by the questioning from the coach rather than have the coach tell the players what to do.

Coaching

Lyle, (2002) provides a useable role for the coach. “The role of the coach is to direct and manage the process that leads to the achievement of identified (and normally agreed) goals p.38.

Literature

There have been a number of books and journals written where Game Sense has been reported on by a range of authors. Below in short appraisal of advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages

Decision Making Versus Drills

Decision making occurs when players have a level of independence. Player independence can only occur, in my opinion, which is also supported by Kirk and MacPhail (2002), when players can perceive information and make a decision, this can be both a conscious or unconscious reaction. Drills based training does not allow this to occur because the pressure and dynamics that occur in the game are not present. It can be argued that the drill is practise in isolation.
Application of Skills

If you believe that skill is a product of technique and pressure. Then practicing just technique without pressure is not enough to ensure skill acquisition by players. The Game Sense approach does not separate skills from the context of the game. It sees skills developed within the context of games while understanding and decision-making is developed.

Fitness, Transfer and Specificity

One of the areas reported by other coaches in previous studies has been the use of games to develop the fitness of players (Light, 2004a). It has been argued that games can more accurately mirror the requirements of rugby. This facet of Game Sense or games training interests me and in the past when I was coached, games were often seen as inappropriate, diversionary or a waste of time. However coaches should see real benefits in that games and fitness are closely related.

Structured versus Unstructured

Rugby coaches have recently referred to elements of the game as structured or unstructured to delineate the method to be used for training. That is more structured components would be more closed in selection where open methods would be used for unstructured components. Game Sense offers ad open method for unstructured training.

Disadvantages

Coaches comment that Game Sense often appears messy and difficult to see progress. It’s difficult to see the benefits and results in a short period of time when using Game Sense. In conducting a Game Sense based session coaches often indicate that they feel its not real coaching. There is a tendency for coaches to want to tell players what to do, instead of extending the players by asking probing questions. Coaches often use games as a “filler” instead of as a coaching tool.
**Alternative Perspective**

There is, as discussed by Eddie Jones, an alternative model or explanation for looking at skill development especially at an elite level in the context of Game Sense. This continuum is represented below.

![Skill Development Continuum]

**Technique**

The skill is practised by the player with the emphasis on repetition and development of well grooved motor program (Magill, R. A. (2004)).

**Skill under Pressure**

The skill is then practised in a competitive environment constructed by the coach.

**Skill in a Game**

The skill is then enhanced by game specific training (scrimmaging) similar to what might be experienced in competition, where the player is stimulated by the situational requirements of rugby. The game would normally be designed by the coach taking into consideration the skill and the specificity of rugby. The use of games in elite level rugby training is dependent on players achieving a high level of skill execution.

For the motor program to progress from technique to skill there needs to a degree of “structural tension”, which is an underlying level of intrinsic motivation that enables the player to learn. Structural Tension can best be described as a desire and motivation to attain the skills required in elite Rugby.

**How to use Game Sense**

Alan Lander’s chapter on Play Practice in Action provides an insight to the application of Game Sense when designing a session. There are three broad areas for consideration when designing a game.

1. Shaping Play
2. Focusing Play
3. Enhancing
Shaping Play

Each game should have its own rules, size and shape of playing area, goal and numbers of players. An example might the use of touch grid iron to improve ball handling. Start by playing odds against evens with half back always on the attacking team. Play between the 22metre line and the try line. A rule change might be you can’t make a pass that goes above the shoulder or below the knee. This then puts greater emphasis on supporting the ball carrier and running into space. The game can then be changed by altering the size of the perimeters or having even more attackers than defenders and vice versa. Communication between players becomes crucial to success.

Focusing Play

When focusing play we link teaching with the real game and look for opportunities to question players about their execution. This is an opportunity to provide feedback with error correction and strategic aspects of play. Using touch grid iron again we might ask the support player about their role when the ball carrier is moving forward. It’s during this time we can determine whether the players understand their role or if the errors are performance or knowledge errors. The use of video if available is an excellent accessory.

Enhancing Play

Requires the coach to be able to identify critical moments during the game that are important for illustrating or communicating a message about a skill. For example a player may execute a skill in an exemplary manner. The coach may stop the game “freeze play” and focus on that aspect. He might ask a series of questions that relate to the skill that assist with learning. May be as simple as asking the player why they did what they did.

At this point the coach needs to understand:

- That tactics and strategies are as important as a desired skill set.
- Be clear about the skills or skills to be developed.
- The use of questioning with players is vital to the success of Game Sense as a tool.
**Why does Games Sense work?**

Cassidy, T., Jones, R., & Potrac, P. (2004) suggest that coaching methods can be described as direct, task, reciprocal, guided discovery or problem solving. Those methods that embrace guided discovery or problem solving produce a deeper level of understanding and are longer lasting. Essentially Game Sense has advantages over technique or drill based coaching because it embraces the key concepts of specificity which has been an important concept in rugby coaching but much more closely related to strength and conditioning in the past. Game Sense as a way of learning places the athlete in the position of problem solving in a (open skills) changing environment. Game Sense is also an opportunity for implicit and situational learning to take place. It may also be an example of “structural tension” because of the motivation generated in a game environment. Generally players are intrinsically motivated when playing a game.

**Conclusion**

Game Sense cannot be used for all the components that are required in a rugby coaching session. There are safety considerations and a need to provide skills correction or clarification and games do not always facilitate this. Game Sense does offer an opportunity to be involved in a learning environment that is an alternative to the directive approach of drills. Due to sociological and environmental changes children and young adults do not play games in the same way the as they did thirty years ago. Game Sense takes into consideration that players have different ways of learning (Rugby Warriors 2005) and that this needs to be addressed in the ways coaches select methods for coaching. Game Sense is another tool for coaches to use the same way they employ other methods in coaching.

**References**


Rugby Warriors. 2005 Polynesian Rugby Documentary Foxtel May 2005

