

A SEASON OF
ACHIEVEMENT

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A journal and guide for the effective
coaching of junior footballers

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PREFACE

I decided to write a journal of a year coaching the Moonee Valley Football Club under-12s – from the point of view of guiding a team that was not expecting success and how to handle the anticipated unrelenting defeats.

In the previous three years, with much the same group of boys, we had won only a handful of games and, at times, were happy just to score.

My personal goal was to implement achievement principles (see Introduction) and observe the impact, but the scope quickly widened and I found myself writing a guide for junior coaches.

The catalyst was watching what was going on in some areas of junior sport and knowing there was a more constructive approach.

At times, there appear to be contradictions in my approach as the season unfolds, but that is because there were areas in which I still needed to develop my thinking. I was often caught between the importance of process and fun and the desire to win. At times, I wasn't even sure you could use the 'win' word.

Sometimes, I openly professed a view – for example that all players are equal – then found myself confronted by the reality that I had implemented strategies which were at odds with that view and other beliefs.

You will notice shameless name-dropping as I discussed things with many AFL people or called on them for help. In particular, former St Kilda coach Stan Alves was a mentor as I wrestled with certain challenges. Stan's real talent was to keep things in perspective. When I whinged to him that I had to deal with the challenge of managing parental expectations three times during the season, he was flabbergasted. "Three times in a season!" he retorted. "I had to deal with three in a week and that was at AFL level. You've had it easy."

I have included in the book a suggested approach to the cultural change required if we are to consistently make junior sport the memorable and developmental experience it should be.

I hope you enjoy our season's journey.

Steven Ball

INTRODUCTION

How do you define success? There is no more important question to ask yourself before the season starts. Your answer will be the major influence on the way you coach, how you treat your players and how you conduct yourself. It will determine your strategies on and off the field and underpin your decisions. It will have an impact on the team's culture and the level of satisfaction you derive from the game at the end of the season.

There are two main thinking styles that influence the way we define success, but keep in mind that it is our actions, not our words, that will ultimately reflect our choice.

1. Competitive thinking

This style of thinking or approach is derived from defining winning and beating others as the key to happiness and success. Using this definition, the game is a battlefield where there can be only one winner and where the end justifies the means.

The game is about *me* asserting my superiority over *you*. You are trying to take away something from me and I must protect myself. What could your opponent take from you? Your self-worth and esteem?

By defining success as winning, you place your self-worth on the line in every contest. Every game brings with it the opportunity to not only affirm your self-worth, but also to have it chipped by defeat.

We perceive so much to be at stake that we develop a preoccupation with winning rather than with the process or striving for excellence. We really don't care if we played our best; the issue is, did we win? (Even a draw is perceived as a loss.)

This thinking is the source of jealousy and envy because we will only begrudgingly be happy for others when they achieve because it is not us.

It also leads to a fix-the-blame mentality as we try to seek explanations for our defeat.

At the heart of competitive thinking and our definition of what constitutes success is the fundamental doubt we have about ourselves and our abilities; doubt that only winning can alleviate – at least until the next game.

“This preoccupation with winning ... causes people to overestimate their abilities (and) ... get upset when they lose because they try so hard to be successful ... If they lose, they feel worthless and defensive and such defensiveness means they don't learn to improve.” (*The Psychological Edge in Rugby*, Michael Gourley, Human Synergistics, NZ 2003)

Further, this ‘winning is everything’ definition causes us to:

- Have a tendency towards aggression.
- Treat players unequally with the stars receiving most of the attention.
- Be reluctant to accept feedback on our performance if it is not in the form of praise. (Criticism is an attack on our esteem.)
- Have a tendency towards unrealistic expectations of the players and set unrealistic team goals (which naturally increases our frustrations).

Aside from the obvious challenges inherent in competitive thinking, the serious issue

is that in each game, you place your feelings of superiority and self-worth on the line and invest your energies in winning while you are not in control of all the factors that will determine the outcome, i.e. the skills and size of the opponent, the umpiring decisions, the weather, the opposition strategies and so on. Each contest *must* be stressful because the factors that determine the result are often external. What a risky strategy.

As an indirect result, we are easily frustrated by events such as umpiring decisions because we perceive *their ineptitude* to be blocking *our success*. We may implement inappropriate strategies, such as aggressive tagging or flooding. Worse, we may turn a blind eye to the violence our team instigates and rationalise that it is “part of the game” because the end justifies the means.

There *is* a level of competitiveness which is healthy and stimulating and which assists us to accomplish. However, there is a line. Once crossed, the game is no longer fun, improving is not enough, all feedback is received defensively and the players seem to be deliberately making mistakes or not trying (which we take personally). It is only winning that makes us happy and even if our rate of achievement slows, we feel we are losing. We are now compulsive about winning.

2. Achievement thinking

Achievement thinking as the foundation for your definition of success holds that winning is a desirable aim and outcome. It is *one* measure of success, not the *only* measure of success (even more so at junior level).

Achievement thinking holds that winning is a useful yardstick to assess how a junior team is travelling, but is not the sole driver of performance. We are really striving to fulfill our potential and be the best we can be. What is holding us back on this drive to excel is not others, but our own fears and limitations.

Achievement-oriented people like to test themselves in competition. They enjoy the contest and love a challenge and when it is over, they reflect on their performance and pinpoint areas in which they can improve.

Achievement people can be gracious in defeat and in victory because at no time was their self-respect on the line.

Achievement coaches talk about the upcoming challenge and the opportunity to test themselves and their players' abilities. They emphasise the process and the quest for excellence. Individually and as a team, they want to be better today than yesterday and better tomorrow than today.

They can share responsibility easily because they have no compulsion to be the centre of all knowledge and attention.

Their focus of control is internal. They control what they can and are not frustrated by factors outside their control. They are far less likely to blame umpires or other factors for a defeat.

I recently had the opportunity to meet with two Brownlow Medallists and used the Human Synergistics LSI tool (go to www.human-synergistics.com.au for further information) to assess their level of competitive thinking and gauge the results against the average Australian leader. Both players were well below the average and in the bottom 30

per cent or so of Australians. Both were very high on achievement. They were continually looking for ways to improve and welcomed feedback. Both liked to help others and were clearly not threatened by the improvement of others.

We think players such as these are successful because they are competitively driven, when, in fact, they are competitive on the field because they are predominantly achievement driven. Both players love to compete.

Winning is *not* a dirty word. It is what winning means to you that is the issue. Competitive people *need* to win whereas achievement people *want* to win.

These definitions of success are the themes that run through this journal. The aim is to put the achievement style into practice in all areas of junior coaching and observe the results.

Footnote

Interestingly, there is a trend in football to talk only about process and not mention the winning word. Some coaches seem to be applying competitive thinking to the trend by competing to see who can mention the winning word the least number of times, i.e. “I am better than you at not being competitive.” Nice irony.

“You tell us that winning is not important and the most important thing is to enjoy ourselves, but when we walk off the court after a loss, the look on your face and your body language tell us it does matter.”

15-year-old netballer

1 THE INTERVIEW

Although I was the only applicant for the under-12s coaching role, I was required to attend an interview with the junior club president and the coach of the senior club. I decided to go for an ambit claim with no fall-back position.

I had coached this team for a few years. It had more than 30 available players with six players being rotated off every quarter and players rostered off regularly. I had an idea and wanted to try it out.

I wanted two teams. A B-division team, which would comprise the biggest, best and oldest boys, and an E-division team, which would be the developmental squad. Agreed.

I wanted a maximum of 21 players in the B team, even if that meant there would be 26 in the E team. Agreed.

If any player in the B team was unavailable, I would be under no obligation to fill the team with other players and would just play with fewer players. Agreed.

We are a community club and at times there will be players in the team who may be out of their depth, but because of family needs, these players will play in the B team. Two such players only. Conditionally agreed.

Dominic, who I work very well with, would coach the E team. Agreed.

Training will start on March 7. Agreed.

Everything was set for my science project. What could be achieved with a stable group of players, with little rotating required and being able to leave a player in the same position all game to learn a role? Further, what would be the impact on the players and the team with the consistent application of constructive and achievement-oriented coaching principles?

Maybe we could sneak into the four. Be thereabouts. Dare to dream.

2 THE FIRST PRACTICE GAME

We decided on one practice match to prepare for the season. Last year, we hadn't played a practice match and it probably showed in the first few games.

Given the overlap of cricket finals and football training, it is often difficult for junior clubs to easily manage the first few weeks of the season. However, with a couple of training sessions under their belts, the boys were keen to get started.

Although I shouldn't be surprised any more, I am fascinated when I discover a club has organised three practice matches for its juniors. You have to wonder, given the season has 15 games (which is a lot), plus potential finals games in some leagues, about this approach.

We have 40 or so players and the other side is fielding 30 to 34. After some discussion with the other coach, we decide to play six quarters and play an A team and a B team.

The opposition coach suggests that this is not their best squad because the "better" players are involved in a lightning premierships. I am, to my disappointment, immediately suspicious. Why is he telling me this? Does the outcome of this game matter? How will we know the winner if we are rotating and playing six quarters? The coach follows up with: "As long as the kids have fun." Now I am really on the alert.

It is my general experience in coaching junior cricket and football that when a coach says "as long as the kids have fun" I am probably up against a highly competitive, outcomes-focused and somewhat pedantic coach.

This cricket season, I heard this phrase three times from seemingly amiable-looking coaches/parents.

The first coach then proceeded to infer we were "cheats" on the basis that we had cut the grass shorter for ourselves (a council ground which we had no control over) and had made the stumps higher for them when they batted. (I would very much like to know how to do that actually!)

The second parent/coach shook my hand, wished us the best and then proceeded to bat only his best batsmen. The general practice in junior cricket is to give everyone at least four overs. I caught up with him at the change of innings and suggested, as diplomatically as I could, that what he was doing was unethical. He was shocked. He replied that there was no value in giving all the players a bat because the last four batters normally only averaged one run between them. I don't think he saw the irony or my challenge. He did, however, have a nice comeback. One of our boys had questioned their opening batter's sexuality and he asked if I could discipline him!

The final straw was a coach who, after having uttered the danger words, would raise his finger for out while dancing down the pitch from his umpire's position punching the air a la Brett Lee and high-fiving his players. I couldn't help myself. I walked onto the pitch. "We will probably never see each other again, so I'm going to tell you what I think. Your behaviour is inappropriate. Umpires need to be seen to be objective."

His reply was swift: "You're only saying that because you're losing mate."

"Actually, I'm the sort who would say it anyway."

“The boys just want to have fun,” he said.
No common ground here.

Back to the first practice match. It’s the usual pre-season chaos.

“Where are the jumpers?”

“I don’t want to be No. 6.” etc. etc.

In fact, we have lost half the jumpers over the summer. There is a small group of parents/committee members discussing their potential location and blame. They already look stressed and overworked and we are yet to play the first game.

I divide the boys into two teams and decide they will play two quarters on, two off, one on and one off. I decide to set the tone for the rest of the year with an inspirational speech that will confirm to the players my deep knowledge of the game and affirm to the gathered parents the reasoning behind my appointment. I clap my hands to get their attention and pause for effect. Silence. Even some of the parents are leaning in. Here goes.

“Boys, I think you should go out and get a kick. If you do get a kick, kick it to one of us. Let’s go.”

Cheers, and off they sprint.

In practice games, you often see players in a different light. Players who you thought looked skilled at training might not do so well under pressure; timid little players who wear glasses crash into all and sundry with careless abandon, and the better players just do what they do. When our A team is on the ground, the boys are quite devastating and show glimpses of switching and running the ball. The B team struggles a little and is outplayed and outscored.

My early suspicions prove accurate. The other side doesn’t rotate its best players. Two or more ‘guns’ have played all six quarters. But what really irks me (though nobody else) is that at the end of the game the opposition bunch together, arm in arm, and march off singing the club song. What’s going on here? I didn’t even know anyone was scoring. How can you tell in a six-quarter game?

The opposition club has a culture in which winning is expected and has a history of junior success. It is prepared to make approaches to good players at other junior clubs. I’m irate. I propose we bring the boys back, have them march past the opposition rooms singing the club song. The blank stares I get following that suggestion tell me to let it go. The nearby junior committeeman seems to be not only reassessing the merits of my appointment, but wondering whether junior coaches should be psychologically tested first.

3 THE SEASON-OPENER

There was a nice air of expectancy leading up to the first game, though one of our committee members had been told at a regional meeting that our first game was against a strong team filled with 'guns'. This was to be repeated a number of times, by different people, with an inference that this was the luck of the draw.

The general feeling around the club, probably based on our lack of regular success over the past few years, was that we would perhaps be in for the usual honourable defeat.

At training, we concentrated on switching the movement of the ball, tackling and recovering, and centering. Training was well executed, with the boys excelling in the circle-work exercise, particularly in their willingness to run hard to make position and then run across the circle to be in position to receive the ball again.

I introduced the boys to Indian file (sprinting in intervals while running around the oval). I have read that this type of fitness training is inappropriate for juniors, however my thinking was to assist in the development of accountability. I wanted them to perform well when they were away from me. They would need to sprint when it was their turn and I would be 150 metres away! They did it well.

For the first time, I divided the players into the B-division and E-division teams. I think the players should train together for a variety of reasons, including that it gives the younger players an opportunity to pair up with the known 'guns'. When we do divide, the execution immediately improves in the B team – no doubt because almost all are proficient in their kicking and marking and are hard runners.

The downside is the promotion of a division between the two groups and the reinforcement of a seconds team. One of the advantages of the division, which I had not fully anticipated, was that there was a strong desire to get into the B team. This probably accounted for an almost perfect training attendance by players.

The B team contained 10 players from last season, eight who had come up from the under-10s and three new players. Now that we are training as a team, I can start to work on their teaming skills and assist the players to become familiar with each others' game, strengths and weaknesses. I encourage this by asking the boys after an exercise who had a long kick, who was a left-footer, who was a good handballer.

Ideally, for a run at the finals you would like to have about 18 second-year players. However, the first years are a very talented and coachable lot.

I couldn't make up my mind regarding the captain. There were a few potentials and last year I had rotated the captaincy between four boys. I'm not comfortable with the idea of having a different captain each week, believing it may devalue the concept.

Sunday is the hottest April day on record. Everyone is there early. One boy hasn't got his shorts and is stressed out. The team manager explains that it can be easily sorted out, but this does little to console him.

We watch the under-10s and are told that our game won't be played on this ground but on the one behind it – perhaps because of council restrictions on ground size for junior games. I'm introduced to the other side's coach and ask about the change.

“We think the smaller ground will suit the team and their style of play,” he says.

It’s hard not to be bemused.

“We are switching to suit your team?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Thank you. Most people would have hidden behind some vague council regulation or safety issue, so thanks for your honesty.”

The ‘new’ ground is small, windswept, still has an uncovered carpeted pitch and is uneven. Talk about competitive! They are counting on bottling up the game and switching to a defensive side when they have the ball.

The pre-match address is given on the ground. Three points only:

1. Be in front.
2. Tackle hard.
3. Switch when it’s clear.

At half-time, we are playing well and the game is effectively over. The boys run hard, play the ground better than the opposition and move the ball intelligently.

At the end of the game, the other team has scored only one goal to our 11. The boys shake hands and walk off arm in arm singing the club song. I’m surprised they even know the words.

I walk over to shake hands with the coach and tell him we’ll see them later in the year. He replies: “Do we have to?”

In the cramped, hot rooms, I keep it short. I announce the winners of the pizza, video and pie awards, congratulate the boys on their movement of the ball, tell them to look forward to training on Wednesday and, for an inspired finale, hand out icy-poles.

Everyone is feeling good about the performance.

4 VINCE LOMBARDI, WINNING AND JUNIOR FOOTBALL

“Winning is everything.”

Vince Lombardi, coach of the Green Bay Packers.

*“Winning isn’t everything;
trying to win is everything.”*

Vince Lombardi, later.

“Winning is everything.” This famous quote by legendary gridiron coach Vince Lombardi is like a battle-cry for those who coach with a competitive mindset and for those who deplore words such as “winning” and “competition” and argue for a fairer approach to sport.

I was fortunate a few years ago to meet Lombardi’s son, Vince junior, when I was in America and had the opportunity to discuss his father’s philosophies.

Vince junior believed his father was somewhat hard done by in the way that statement was used to portray him as obsessed with winning and accepting nothing less. The statement that the media pounced on was made, according to Vince junior, in the context of a team and organisation that was literally at the crossroads in terms of having a viable future – or any future for that matter.

“Winning is everything” meant that if this club didn’t start winning a few games soon, the players, coaches or the organisation itself would not be around in the immediate future. Also, he was talking to adults in a professional sport. (*What It Takes To Be Number 1*, Vince Lombardi junior, McGraw-Hill)

Vince junior said his father was *always* satisfied if he felt that everyone, including players and coaching staff, had given their all and performed to the best of their ability. Clearly, Lombardi’s preference was to win and for everyone to give their all to win. However, there were many occasions when he felt that the players had performed to the best of their ability and not won the game and he still derived tremendous satisfaction from their performance.

I talked with many current AFL coaches about this view and all responded in the same way. The aim of effective coaching was to get the very best out of the players. Not one was comfortable with the idea of being happy with the team winning, but not performing at its best.

One four-time premiership coach said: “I don’t care if the team is winning or losing. If they’re not playing well, we have a problem.”

The priorities for sport at the highest level are not the same as for junior sport, although there is some overlap. In junior football, we need to put a greater emphasis on achievement thinking and performance against goals set. This aim should come third – after enjoyment and improvement. That puts winning fourth.

It is, of course, a real challenge for many of us in junior coaching to sustain this approach in the face of unrelenting scoreboard defeats (and parental expectations). Last season, I think we won one or two games and, the season before, I can still remember the excitement when we actually scored!

We needed to redefine what winning meant and set achievable targets, such as one tackle per player each quarter or one handball from a mark. We tried the concept of trying to reduce the losing margins against teams in the second round, however that really just reinforced scoreboard thinking.

It hardly generated a sense of achievement or excitement when I announced after the game that we had reduced the losing margin to 10 goals.

The real key is to educate not only the players on this approach, but also the parents and manage their expectations. On a few occasions, I have addressed the parents during the breaks, explaining this approach and what was going to occur on the field as a result. I have explained that parents' negative comments regarding umpires or players are not what we want.

Another observation Vince junior made about his father was that the media enjoyed portraying Vince senior as a ruthless dictator who trampled over people with a win-at-all-costs approach. This couldn't have been further from the truth. Vince senior was wonderfully supportive of his players and was very loyal to them, a feeling that was reciprocated.

Vince senior had a great balance between a task-orientated and humanistic approach to the players. That is very important. If you are solely concerned with supporting the players, they will appreciate it but may wonder what the goal is. Equally, focusing on the end result only can cause players to feel that the coach is preoccupied with the goal and doesn't support them as individuals.

At junior level, it is useful to keep in mind the adage: People don't care what you know until they know that you care.

There is no doubt in my mind that Lombardi was obsessed with the whole process. As junior coaches, we can sometimes get out of balance by taking the role too seriously and believing everyone is committed as much as we are or should be – or that any advice offered to us is an attack on our very being.

Keep two things in mind:

1. "It's only a game. It's not a war." Boris Becker after losing a grand slam event.
2. If, as junior coaches, we tie our self-worth (and that of the players) to the totem pole of winning, then we have embarked on a risky strategy that we may not be able to control. This will lead us to see a win as a reaffirmation that we are "better" and a loss or draw, regardless of performance, as a blow to our esteem and the perceived esteem in which we are held by others. On this basis, every week must produce enormous stress as we strive to win and fear losing. We will also utilise strategies

that may be completely inappropriate for juniors then rationalise that the win made the end justify the means. Lombardi is never credited with saying: “We must win at all costs.”

Footnote

There is a strong argument for linking ‘choking’ (not performing to your best under pressure) with a competitive style of coaching because the pressure the coach places on the individual and the team produces a level of anxiety that is counter-productive.

5 WEEK FOUR – MOTIVATION AND ACHIEVEMENT

I like to catch up with other coaches to find out what they do at training and so on. This week after the game, I stopped to talk to the other side's coach about what he had planned for the week. He said that based on the team's performance today, it would be a week of punishment.

"You are going to punish them?"

"We lost. I told them that this week there will be no footballs, only running."

"Punish them?"

"It's not that we lost, but more that they didn't go in hard enough."

Later that day, I listened to coaches addressing their players and, faced with a looming loss, one coach questioned both their courage and commitment. I assume he was trying to motivate the players by humiliating or embarrassing them into following his strategy or adopting an approach they were clearly uncomfortable with.

It is an interesting feature of Australian Football culture that it is considered acceptable to question a player's character as a motivational tool. It is a fascinating mindset to be able to criticise the players and their level of commitment and seemingly not accept any responsibility for failing to build this commitment.

There are two main types of motivation relevant to coaching juniors – restrictive and constructive motivation. Both are effective in achieving results, however one comes with a heavy price tag.

Restrictive motivation

Restrictive motivation is primarily based on coercion and fear to pressure the players to act in a particular way. The restrictive coach may use physical intimidation to exert influence over the players, or psychological, i.e. "Do it my way or else ... you will be embarrassed, rejected, humiliated or ridiculed."

Coaches who use a restrictive motivational strategy are big on punishing players to the point where the players develop a mindset of "I have to do this or else the coach will punish me." As coaches, we are trying to get players to do something they really don't want to or cannot see the point in doing. We like to use push-ups, sprints, laps or restrict the use of the balls.

We want to get the players to the point that they will say: "I want to do it your way, coach."

"Because you agree?"

"No, I just don't want to do any more push-ups."

We build this mindset by punishing players for making mistakes to the point where they feel inhibited. We send the runner out to highlight errors and, worse, use the bench as a punitive tool to mould players.

The coach who uses restrictive motivation will have a steady stream of players going through the interchange gate and will have no hesitation in dragging a player – regardless of how long he has been on – for failing to follow the team rules. After

being taken off, the player, if he is lucky, will receive the stare or the silent treatment; if unlucky, the 'spray'. (The stars are less likely to be dragged for the same perceived misdemeanor.)

The theme that runs through the players' minds is: "I have to or else." We need to constantly push the players and, in response, they *push back*.

Most will push back in three main ways:

1. They perform to a standard that is just good enough to get you to shut up and off their backs.
2. They are slow to cooperate and push back by not listening.
3. They creatively avoid, for example, they fail to bring or wear the right gear, they need to leave the track for various reasons or they avoid training completely.

Coaching in the country was always interesting. Creative avoidance occurred every week. The dairy farmers would use the same excuse: "Cow got stuck in the dam again."

"Is that the same cow that got stuck last week?"

"Yeah, that's right." (As if!)

If you want to observe restrictively motivated players in action, just go to any club on any training night and watch. The player who really don't want to be there comes last in all the sprints until he finds out that whoever comes last will do three more. The player wins the final sprint by 20 metres. The same type of player may also fully commit to drills only when the coach is watching.

The real problem with using restrictive strategies consistently is that aside from stifling initiative, potential, creativity and risk-taking, turning players away from the game and finding players pushing back, is that it is stressful to the coaches. We always need to be watching over the players and pushing them to do things they don't see any point in doing.

Worse still, the players give up accountability to you to improve them. By using these strategies, we have diminished their sense of responsibility and self-motivation and have encouraged excuse-making for failure. Think of the mindset you are developing in the players: "We *have* to win or else."

The irony in this approach is that we motivate the players to win by instilling in them a fear of failure!

There is little doubt that *some* players respond to restrictive coaching, however, a recent study in Australia of more than 500 leaders found that staff rated constructive leaders the most effective. Restrictive leaders were seen to be less effective and less supportive – concerned only about short-term success, defensive when they felt threatened and having poorer relationships with others. (Go to www.human-synergistics.com.au for more information.)

My observations suggest that restrictive coaches hold a mythical, somewhat romanticised view of the past and some ideal team (which is never named) in which all players had exquisite skills, stuck to their tasks and always played by the team rules. It is this Utopian under-12 team that is the cause of their frustration over the "unrelenting" errors the current players make and their perception that the modern player lacks a sense of accountability.

Despite an intellectual understanding that the flow of football has fundamentally changed and is far more attacking, coaches with a restrictive approach talk about a return to the basics and want to hold players to an impossible goal – to attack *and* be simultaneously on your player if the ball is turned over.

Constructive motivation

This form of motivation is based primarily on wanting to do things because you like what you are doing and see the action as personally profitable. The phase that characterises this style is: “I want to.”

Constructively motivated players are:

- Self-starters.
- Self-motivated.
- Have drive and energy.
- Accept personal responsibility and have no need to make excuses.

Constructive-style coaches explain their reasoning to the players and give players choice. For the coach, the approach is one of: “Do what you please and accept the consequences for your actions.” People are, at times, surprised when I tell players they don’t have to train if they don’t want to.

“Will we still get a game?” the players tentatively ask.

“Probably not.”

“So we have to train then?”

“No, you don’t have to. Train because you want to and because we will be doing lots of good and interesting stuff and you will improve.”

I only want players at training who want to be there. The club will go on. My favourite scene in the film, *Hoosiers*, is when Gene Hackman says to the reluctant star: “Play or don’t play – I don’t care.”

I am not going to chase players, ring them or mollycoddle them. My attitude is: choose to play; it’s up to you.

Constructive coaches take the time to explain ‘the why’ and ‘the what’ and highlight the personal benefits.

Every activity that is introduced needs to be positioned in such a way that it makes sense, i.e. this will help you get more kicks or we need to do this running so that we can improve our teamwork. Last year, I sold switching to the players on the basis that it was a necessary strategy.

“Boys, look around at everyone. What do you notice?”

“We haven’t got any big players.”

“So if we kick the ball as we usually do, what happens?”

“They mark it.”

“I have an idea that I think you are going to like. It solves our lack of height and it creates more kicks for everyone.”

If you can’t think of a good reason why the players should be doing something, then maybe they shouldn’t be doing it at all.

In a team in which a constructive approach is consistently applied, players are treated

with dignity and respect. I like Sydney coach Paul Roos' reasoning as to why he would not drag a player:

1. The player already knows he has made a mistake and can fix it, and
2. There is no point hiding the player on the bench.

Keep in mind that both forms of motivation – restrictive and constructive – *will* work. A restrictive approach may lead to success, however, it is based on what *not* to do and comes with a hefty price tag. Constructive motivation reinforces and encourages the behaviour we want to see more of.

I appreciate that at junior level, players need structure and strong leadership, however, this should not be at the expense of developing self-directed, accountable and self-starting youngsters.

“I wish to hell I’d never said that darn thing (that winning is everything). I meant the effort ... I meant having a go.” Vince Lombardi, later still.

6 WEEK SIX

Standing at the home team's kiosk before the game, I overheard someone talking about our game and how the goal was to not lose to Moonee Valley by more than 100 points. I was immediately impressed. If you can sell that goal to kids, you have a gift.

Today's targets for us are:

1. Increase our smothering.
2. Keep the forward line open.
3. Get front and centre.

(All of which we have been practicing.)

I am not sure if (the captain) Nick wins the toss or not. It's up to him to decide which end to kick to and we are kicking against a gale-force wind. Astonishingly, the home side has only three forwards. The other three are loose players in *our* forward line. That's a new one – even to the under-12s where kids flood anyway as a rule.

The other strategy, clearly an instruction, is that after players have disposed of the ball, they must be bumped, pushed or in some way manhandled – even if it takes up to 10 seconds to catch up with them!

Well, at least the home team's intentions are aligned to its goal. I would have been far more impressed if the home team had used the bumping tactics against Marcus and Fergus, two of the biggest and most aggressive players in the competition. For some reason, they are largely left alone.

The tactics are not working because, for whatever reason, we always play well against the wind. I suspect it's because we run the ball a lot.

Nick plays a blinder in the centre and Max is devastating as a sweeper in defence. We score a few goals and hold them to zero.

With all the negating tactics, the game is frustrating to coach and watch. One of the boys gives the quarter-time address and says: "We should keep trying." Good strategy.

The game continues to be a succession of rugby mauls as the home team endeavours to restrict the scoring. In the last quarter, the home team receives an instruction, apparently, to all go to our forward line, which leaves it with not a single player in its half! "That's it," I think self-righteously, "Tony, tell everyone to go onto the ball. I'll show this team."

The game ends with a whimper. There was some tension between the teams and a few 'pleasantries' exchanged. I immaturely didn't seek out the other coach as a silent protest against the tactics (and I wonder why I don't get many Christmas cards).

The pizza awards went to the players who had smothered and/or kept the forward line open, which were the targets. I handed out an extra award to our leading forward, who made a number of tackles. I had spoken with him earlier about the importance of forwards tackling and sold it on the basis of creating more goalkicking opportunities.

Driving home revelling in my feelings of moral superiority with regard to the negating tactics, I was struck by that uncomfortable feeling you get when it occurs to you that there are other explanations. What if their forward line wasn't sent to the backline as a defensive

strategy, but rather to give everyone a kick because the game was lost? Oops.

When I mentioned to the boys at the end of the game that it wasn't much of a game to watch, blah blah, there was a muted expression on their faces. Later, it dawned on me that from their point of view, the match was hard work. They had just handed out an 82-0 defeat and must have been thinking: "What does he want? Blood?" It was a good reminder to me to lighten up and refer back to rule one: it's only a game.

PS: The boys told me during a game a few weeks ago that they were consistently being kicked in the ankles after they disposed of the ball. I haven't included it in the body of this journal because I suspect no one would believe it.

*"Fellas, guts is gunna win this game for us.
Guts – G-U-S-T! Now get out there
and show some guts!"*

Part of the coach's address in my first senior match. It is a great concept to combine a motivational speech with a spelling lesson.

7 TREATING OPPONENTS AS GUESTS

I don't know when I actually got the idea, though it had been bubbling away for a while, but I decided we should treat the visiting team as guests and not as the opposition.

When you think about it, the visiting team is there to test us, assist in our development and give us a game of football. However, we usually provide no welcome and pretty much leave the visitors to their own devices.

The competitive approach permeates our thinking and influences our strategies. We see the visitors as a threat to our position, as a group that may take away something we have – that is, if we give them any thought at all other than their position on the ladder and our chances of winning.

What if our approach was to make the visiting team as comfortable as possible? What if we sought to create a memorable experience both on the field, by the way we play and conduct ourselves, and off the field, by the way we treat them?

On raising this concept with several people, they were immediately comfortable with the idea on an intellectual level though felt that offering access to our resources, such as tackle bags, and making them comfortable might reduce our home-ground advantage.

“Do we really want them to play to their best?”

“What about the intimidation factor?”

What level of performance do we want? Any level provided we win?

As part of this concept, the junior coordinator has started to visit the away rooms to thank them for coming to play and wishing them all the best.

After the third game, we gave icy-poles to all the opposition players and boundary umpire – much to their surprise. It was certainly a winning play on a hot day.

The next week, we were better organised and had lolly bags for both sides. At the end of the game, I gave each of our players a lolly bag to take over to our guests.

“What about us?” they asked.

“I have bags for each of you. Off you go and shake hands.”

Still some resistance as they looked into the bags.

“You want us to give these to them?”

“Essentially, yes. Walk over, shake hands and hand each boy a bag.”

“Why should we?”

“Remember that idea we discussed at training about the visiting team being our guests?”

Silence.

The boys head over, clutching the brown paper bags, to the opposition players who are milling around waiting for the obligatory handshake and three cheers for “who are they again?” Unfortunately, given our reputation for on-field and off-field incidents, they are immediately suspicious about our new-age approach. (The brown paper bags were, unfortunately, similar to the council bags provided along dog-walking tracks.)

Some of the visiting team looked so apprehensive as they peered into the bags it was as if they suspected there may have been a thermo-nuclear device contained within.

A few diehards refused to hand over the lolly bags.

“Why should we?”

“Its not like they deserve it.”

“We killed them.”

I think the opportunity to have two lolly bags was just too much of a temptation for some boys.

The next step is to create welcoming posters, on a rotational basis, for the visitors' rooms.

On Mother's Day, we put a coupon in the bag offering a free coffee to any mum who took the coupon to the canteen. Many thought it a great idea. Their reasoning was that when the mums went to collect their free coffees, the kids would put them under enormous pressure to buy something! A win/win situation.

Next year, we plan to provide fruit platters to the older teams and the umpires.

8 EFFECTIVE THINKING SKILLS 1

This week, Shane Keogh, the progressive Essendon District Football League coach and local legend, asked me to address his club's leadership group and coaches. I spoke about three things:

1. Beliefs and their impact on performance.
2. Locking on and locking out.
3. Goal-setting through continuous improvement.

The following is the crux of that address.

Our beliefs about ourselves and our ability govern our performances both as individuals and teams. Once a belief is accepted by us, either as a player or team, we act as if that belief is a "truth" and almost indisputable. We essentially act in accordance with the truth as we believe it to be, not as it may actually be.

For example, if we believe we are not poised under pressure, then this will be consistently reflected in our behaviour in those situations. If, as a team, there is a belief that we are slow starters or trail off in the last quarter, then this, too, will become the consistent behaviour.

Without doubt, one of our main roles as coaches and leaders is to question any limiting beliefs that can block us from using more of our potential. I am not here to tell you the truth about you or this club, but rather to help you take away some of the beliefs and styles of thinking that are currently blocking us.

Where you developed these beliefs is not important; in fact, most of us will never know. It could have been from a junior coach who had you stereotyped as a defender, or from a teacher who told you the "truth" about yourself.

At a club level, the beliefs are often passed on from the older players and officials to new players. I heard that when Malcolm Blight arrived at St Kilda, he was told the "truth" about the club, i.e. "we don't win at Optus Oval when it's wet and we never win in Adelaide if it's windy." Think of your own club. What beliefs does this club hold that may be blocking us?

Remember Cliff Young? He was an ultra distance runner from Colac in western Victoria. Competing in his first race in the Sydney-to-Melbourne ultra-marathon of some 800 kilometres and against some of the best runners in the world, he won. Not only did he win, he took a day-and-a-half off the race record. Not bad for a sixty-plus man.

Cliff's achievement has a lot to do with what we are talking about here. The "truth" then was that to compete successfully in the ultra-marathons, you ran for 18 hours a day and rested or slept for six. Cliff didn't know that. It was his first race. He thought you were supposed to run for 24 hours a day! While other runners rested, Cliff was running. Not knowing the truth enabled him to win the race in record time.

Sometimes, it is the absence of knowing the truth that enables us to perform at a level more in line with our abilities. The really interesting thing about the Cliff Young example is what happened the next year. (Cliff didn't compete in the race for some reason – I think he was injured, or married.) His record was broken by a full day. Cliff, by his achievement

a year earlier, had changed the belief about what was possible. People realised it was possible to run long distances for longer periods. The belief had altered and, therefore, so had the performance.

This is the business of leadership and the role we need to play as coaches. What are some of the beliefs currently holding us back and are they really the “truth” or something we have led ourselves to believe or given permission for others to build into us? How can we take a day-and-a-half off the race for this club? If we, personally, and as a team, change the way we think, we will change the way we act and behave. We are talking about beliefs and opinions not scientific facts or inviolable laws.

Do you know how fleas are trained to perform in a flea circus? The fleas are placed under an upturned glass. The flea jumps up and hits its head on the “glass ceiling” and, after a while, will jump only to the height of whatever sized glass it is placed in. The flea has the potential to jump higher, but won’t try.

You and I are like that and so are many of our players. We have the potential, but we have been hurt or embarrassed and now know our limits.

Surely it’s the role of coaches to assist players to jump higher by removing the imagined barriers to higher performance?

This is hard to believe now, but when I first started playing senior football, centre-men were not allowed to go into the forward line. We would stand at centre half-forward looking at the opportunity, but be unable to grasp it. With the blast from the coach still ringing in our ears from a previous attempt to follow the ball into the forward line, or the sight of the runner coming out to take you off the ground still vividly etched in our minds, we would come to a halt – much the same as the fleas. That was bad enough, but worse was kicking across the goals. What most of you take as the norm today is because the belief as to what is possible has altered.

This group needs to consider the limiting beliefs in this club that are restricting its potential.

Stan Alves, talking about the challenges he faced when he arrived at the St Kilda Football Club in the mid-1990s, asked the players what sort of animal represented St Kilda. If Stan was expecting replies of lion, tiger and so on, he was sorely disappointed. He got kittens and other meek and mild creatures and one player observed that the club was every other Victorian fan’s second favourite club. “How do you figure that?” he asked. “Because we never beat anyone so nobody has a bent against us.” Stan set about changing the beliefs and mindset of an entire club that saw itself as second rate.

Change the way you think and you change the way you act, behave and perform.

9 EFFECTIVE THINKING SKILLS 2

It is important that we, as coaches and leaders, understand that once we form a belief about a player or a team that this belief can cause us to see only information that supports our beliefs. We may turn a blind eye to information that is in conflict with our opinions. This is called locking on.

There are three ways we lock on and reduce our effectiveness:

1. Locking on too quickly.

This occurs when we, as coaches, make snap judgements about players, i.e. “This player is a defender just like his brother” or “I had a player like him once and he didn’t go in hard either”. Once we form an opinion about a player and his capability, that is all we see. It’s akin to turning off the lights in a room. We develop a blind spot and even when there is observable data that is in conflict with our view, we rationalise our way out of the conflict by saying such things as: “He got lucky. He normally doesn’t kick those.”

2. Locking on too long.

“It’s always been like this around here.” “We never get a fair go from the umpires.” You will often hear such statements from the traditionalists who claim to be open-minded about changes proposed, but would then deny the efficacy of those changes. You will be unable to get through to them. Again, the lights are off.

3. Locking on to the wrong information.

Who do you listen to? Often, we accept opinions as fact, for example, “That player won’t man up” or “The local paper reckons we should finish in the bottom four.”

There is nothing inherently wrong in locking on as it allows us to focus and concentrate. There is, however, something wrong if a coach locks on and misses the potential in the people and team he is coaching. We must ask ourselves regularly: “What am I locked onto and in which areas is it causing me to miss opportunities?”

Finally, let’s talk about goal-setting for continuous improvement. Once we arrive at a goal, we lose our drive and energy. Have you ever said to yourself: “I can’t wait to get home to sit down, put up my feet and watch the football on the TV”? Once you get yourself into that position, you can barely get yourself up off the couch to go to bed. You have arrived at your goal and that’s it.

Have you ever known someone whose goal is to get to training but not to train? Or to train but not to improve? Ever known a team whose goal was to get to the finals but not to win or to win the first quarter but not the game? Once we reach our goal, it is all over.

Before you arrive at your goal, set another goal. Never go to training just to train, always go with the aim of improving in a particular area.

You would be amazed at the number of sportspeople whose goal is to train but not to improve. We never run out of energy; we run out of goals. Set goals for continuous improvement.

10 WEEK SEVEN

We are facing a team that is yet to score a goal (or a point) this season, so the emphasis is on skills and on being front and centre.

Our team has a lot of talented players, most of whom tend to outmark or outrun their opponents. There has been no great necessity to 'crumb' (gather the ball as it spills from a marking contest).

Over the last few weeks, we made an argument to the players as to why they should crumb more often for themselves and for the team. We decided the best approach would be to appeal to the kids' desire to get a kick or touch of the ball.

"Boys, hands up those who like getting a kick in a game?" (A show of hands.)

"Hands up those who would like to get a few more kicks without trying harder?" (Some suspicion and then a show of hands.)

To start the process, I had a parent hold a tackle pad over his head, at an angle. A ball was tossed in the air, bounced off the pad and the boys ran to be front and centre. We then went into the usual front-and-centre exercise in which two to three players compete for the ball and two players come in from the front and place themselves at the front of the pack for the crumbs. If the player marks the ball, the crumber receives a handball and handballs to players running past. Stage three was to encourage the players to be on the move to crumb the ball and stage four was to have the players watch the ball more closely in case it was going over the back.

The value in this process, aside from the obvious, was to give more meaning to such exercises as Markers Up and two players would be rotated as designated crumbers to practise these skills. It's not difficult to link the activities to an overall theme, so that most players see the point of the exercise.

A side benefit was that the boys started closely watching the flight of the ball so they could take the ball on the full as it rebounded. This was both fun and required less effort than when the ball hit the ground.

My real concern at this stage of the season when we were still to play the top teams was that with the number of 'easy' games, there was a tendency for many players to get at the back of the pack. I put this to one of my team leaders, who replied: "Everyone likes to get the easy kick and run into an open goal. That's why I wasn't in front." Remarkable honesty!

So this week at training, the emphasis was on movement of the ball and the session was not particularly demanding physically. Fifteen games in a season is a lot and kids do get tired. There was an expectation of an easy game. I don't know if it was the right thing to do (I still don't), but I set the team a target of 40 goals for the game. There were a few gasps, but no real dissension.

The other team was short so our club helped them out with kids from our younger under-12s group.

Sure enough, it was a cakewalk. Ten goals in the first quarter, eight in the second, eight or so in the third. At three-quarter-time, I pulled the players away from the parents and supporter group and put a proposal to them: "Boys, I think we should let them kick a goal.

They haven't kicked one this year and it would be a good thing to do."

There was silence, followed by shouts.

"It is football we're playing, isn't it?"

"No way!"

"We'll be laughed at by everyone."

I went down the "we've been in their position before" path to no avail. In the end, we took a vote – five for and 19 against. Later, when I reflected on the episode (and was a little less angry), I thought that given the team has been consistently on the other side of it for a few years, the boys weren't yet ready to be that generous.

I did try surreptitiously to engineer a goal anyway. With five minutes to go, I sent Tony out to tell the entire backline to go on the ball. In a show of speed that would have dazzled Olympic selectors, they tore off the backline and ran straight through the centre for our forward line. No backline players, three unmanned forwards and still no score! It was worth a try.

I did mention to the boys that at times during the game they had shown disrespect for their opponents by not standing close by them when we didn't have the ball or when there was a ball-up. I think it's something I might pursue later at training.

It still rankles when I recall a game last year when we were down by 10 or so goals and I looked across to the forward line and saw four players not even bothering to man up our players who were standing in their set positions. The four were chatting at centre half-back! I can't recall ever witnessing such callous indifference. I wanted the runner to go to their bench to let their coach know about this disrespect, but the look on the runner's face was a convincing argument to let it go.

After the game, I congratulated the players on their consistent efforts (nine goals a quarter) and for giving the 40 goals target a good shake. Picking the best players for the pizza and video vouchers wasn't easy. Mark had kicked 12 goals and I don't care at what level you play, that's a lot!

The only concern to come out of the game was a doubt about my own coaching. Players were not playing their positions during the goal-fest and the wing and back pockets were competing for the ball in the opposite forward pockets. It's a real balance between having fun, kicking goals and playing for the team.

I have been spending time lately trying to teach the difference between getting a kick and kick chasing. When I pose the question to the boys now, they say you can tell you are kick chasing if you are standing still when the play stops and don't run back to your position. Some have only an intellectual understanding of the concept and I need to come up with some strategies, other than the traditional approach of the bench or a tirade, to reinforce it.

11 CULTURE AND CULTURAL CHANGE

I hate our under-16s – or at least their behaviour. *Hate* is perhaps a little strong, but it reached a point this season when I didn't want them near my team. I didn't want them in the clubrooms to support us, nor did I want them to even train on the same night, let alone in the same oval.

Almost every training night, I would have a confrontation with the under-16s. At times, it would be over our equipment which, when they ran past, they would be drawn to like moths to a flame. They would pick up footballs and either use them on their warm-up lap or simply kick them away.

The cause of this behaviour lay in the club's culture, as much as the challenges of being a teenager in an adult-sized body. Like most clubs at any level, players follow the white line religiously when they run laps. That was fine for most clubs in the past, however now, on any given Wednesday, there can easily be more than 100 players using the ground – and not just the defined oval but also pockets of grass outside the oval.

Obviously, the white line was never intended to be a railroad track that could not be deviated from, but, as in *The Pirates of the Caribbean* when Geoffrey Rush explains the principles that pirates live by as, it's more a guide than a code.

When running laps, footballers at most clubs follow the white line around the oval, as both a courtesy to others and as a way of following a system. At this club, you could set your watch to the anarchy that would reign at 5.47pm each training session, when the under-16 freight train would wind its way around the oval and proceed to disrupt all in its path by running straight through any other group, usually forcing a complete halt to proceedings. The only deviation from the track was when the group took a short cut through an exercise to shave 40 metres off the journey by running inside the goalposts.

Many were inclined, as they approached the goal area where we trained, to kick footballs in the hope of striking my hapless players. On more than one occasion, some of the under-12s were genuinely hurt after being struck with a Sherrin missile launched from 50 metres away by an under-16 player.

No amount of remonstrating, no inspired speech by their coach, admonishing by the club president or heartfelt plea from the junior coordinator produced any lasting change.

Players had been getting away with this for years. In fact, not only had it become the norm, but it was also an implicit expectation. Most of the under-16s have had six years of exposure to this behaviour and even new players picked up the bad habit, regardless of their football background. This bullying was now an accepted part of the club's culture.

(I do actually like the under-16s as people. What I am talking about is culture and why the best place to set the culture right is in the youngest group.)

Every club has a culture. You can see it on any given training night:

- The way players dress for training.
- Whether they warm up before kicking.

- Whether they help gather equipment.
- The length of time it takes players to come in when the whistle is blown, and whether or not they kick balls after being called in.
- The number of parents there to assist or watch.
- The condition the clubrooms are left in.

Culture is the way people are expected to act and behave if they want to fit in and be successful. Culture is the shared norms, expectations and values of a club.

It is the way we do things around a club. The way decisions are made. Whether meetings start on time. How coaches are appointed. Whether budgets are met. How the club responds to challenges. Whether there is a victim mentality. Whether star players are given special treatment. Whether umpires are consistently abused.

A club's culture has enormous impact on – and might even completely drive – the performance and behaviour of individuals and teams representing a club. Culture impacts on how a club sees itself, and also determines its perceived image in the broader community.

While it is possible to measure a club's culture via a survey, you can gain a great insight into a culture simply by listening to stories and examples of behaviour by people around the club. The implicit and explicit messages in these stories reflect its culture.

Stories about stars, fights won, games in which umpires 'cheated', players poached from other clubs, players discouraged from going to higher-level clubs or pleas for parental assistance tell you a great deal about a club's culture.

Coaches from the SANFL and the AFL talk about how players treat their jumpers. At those levels, players never place their jumpers on the floor, as that would be disrespectful. At Port Adelaide, players are *expected* to fold their jumpers – right side out – after taking them off. That is culture.

The following steps will take you through the process of cultural change. This process can be applied across the board – from AFL clubs down to AFL Auskick groups. We are attempting to alter the way we do things.

Step one: create a sense of urgency

First, a club has to decide what aspects of its culture need to be changed. This must be clearly articulated to everyone. People also need to be told *why* change needs to occur. That is, what will be gained by undertaking this change process.

Essentially, you are creating a vision of a preferred culture, and how that culture will underpin future success.

To start the process, ask a group to answer the following questions:

- What is happening in this club that should stop immediately?
- What is happening that is good and should continue?
- What is not happening that should be?

This process should also take into account what is happening in the broader community, including changing demographics and community expectations regarding competitiveness, abuse and aggression.

If you are interested in developing a strong achievement-oriented culture, the questionnaire that follows might be a good starting point.

To what extent:	Not at all 0	Sometimes 1	Usually 2	Often 3	Always 4
1. Do we place winning over individual development?					
2. Do the best players stay on the ground the longest?					
3. Do we have unrealistic expectations against better teams?					
4. Do coaches and/or parents abuse umpires?					
5. Do we take good performance for granted?					
6. Is winning the game a feature of the coach's address?					
7. Are players 'pumped up' before a game by the coach?					
8. Do coaches get angry or frustrated during games?					
9. Are the best players kept in on-ball positions for the whole game?					
10. Are players expected to look angry and disappointed after a loss?					
11. Do the best players get most of the attention?					
12. Is our behaviour and approach at odds with the club's stated philosophy?					
13. Are players singled out for criticism at breaks?					

If your club scores more than 12 points, it probably needs to address some aspects of its culture. If it scores more than 30, please contact me so I can examine your club's competitive culture personally!

It is important to appreciate that culture drives behaviour, which, in turn, drives performance to a large extent. For example, if players train with a focus, are accountable for their own warm-up and listen to the coach, then these expectations will manifest themselves in team performances. In contrast, if your players have a casual approach to training and do not listen to the coach, they probably execute drills in a shoddy manner.

Cultural change is essentially about altering the environment and norms under which we operate with a view to becoming the type of club that will maximise everyone's enjoyment and success. While a strong, constructive culture does not guarantee on-field success, it will increase the likelihood of it occurring. In business, we know that organisations with constructive cultures generally provide better service and get repeat business. They mentor staff more effectively, assist in their personal and professional development, retain them longer and have better teamwork. Businesses with a constructive culture also recover better when trouble arises.

Junior teams can face other challenges that might hinder success. They can have a wonderful culture of teamwork and support, but those factors alone might not help them beat teams with bigger, more physically developed players. What the constructive culture will ensure, however, is the long-term success and development of the club, its teams and individuals.

Step two: communicate the new direction

Once you have decided what needs to change and why, the next step is to communicate this to all groups within the club and outline this direction and its benefits.

This cannot be done in one speech or via one newsletter. This approach would almost certainly fail – and probably generate a degree of cynicism. Every communication to parents, players and others needs to implicitly and explicitly convey the theme of the preferred culture being developed.

After the committee – and others – have agreed to the new direction, the club should:

- Meet with the parents to communicate the preferred culture and its implications.
- Arrange for all junior coaches and assistants to discuss strategies they will employ to support this change. They will also need to agree to have their behaviour during games and at training monitored, so that direct and specific feedback can be provided. The coach is the most influential person and needs to be aware of his or her responsibility as a role model.
- Communicate what is happening to players in oral and written form, outlining behavioural rules and expectations and the benefits of this approach. Players and parents will need to sign a document to indicate they are committed to this change.

Additional leadership strategies include inviting guest speakers to outline their own experiences. Our club was fortunate to have former Melbourne and North Melbourne champion and St Kilda coach Stan Alves talk about cultural change in the context of his

time at the Saints. Newsletters need to highlight the club's intent, while also soliciting feedback and promoting the benefits of change.

I have always been crystal clear on the style of play that characterises a club, the sort of team we would be, the way we would train, what the players could expect from me and what I would expect from them, the importance of achievement thinking and where winning as a priority sat.

Step three: reinforce, monitor and reassess

At every opportunity the club needs to hold people to the new way of 'doing things'. It is crucial that observable changes occur in behaviour.

Coaches, in particular, need to be monitored and given specific feedback. For example, "You are not rotating the players. Today, the same four players played on-ball the whole game."

One specific change I wanted to see in my own team was the way players dressed for training. Many wanted to train in their school uniforms and some in long trousers, like cargo pants. After explaining the reason why, I organised additional jumpers to be on hand for anyone dressed inappropriately. Boys who could not afford a training top were given one for the year and those who still didn't organise themselves were not punished (which was my previous strategy), but were required to wear a jumper of the team we were playing that week, which usually led them to being singled out in tackling drills. I also wanted to create an environment of respect for the efforts of those in the background, so when a committee member or canteen lady was nearby, a player would thank them for their efforts and lead three cheers.

One club set a roster for players to clean the rooms. I like that change.

On a regular basis, those instigating change should assess the progress and make adjustments based on progress or changed circumstances.

Step four: go for short-term gains

Start with the easiest things. Set a policy for training attire so people can see change happening. This will create momentum and make it easier to get support for bigger issues.

At some point, you will need to draw a line in the sand. The club must decide at what point enough is enough when change is happening quickly enough. If you are serious, then your actions will reflect this intent. If you are only hopeful without action then the chances of change are limited. It's up to you.

12 WEEK EIGHT

The game is against the highest-placed team (fourth) we've met this season.

Training was well executed and everyone seemed to be looking forward to the contest as a way of testing ourselves against one of the better teams.

We concentrated on moving the ball efficiently. The boys divide up into groups of three. One person mans the mark. A second boy kicks over him to a third player who has made position further up the field. The boy on the mark runs to man the new mark and the kicker now makes position further up field to receive, and so it goes.

Essentially it is kick, mark, run, make position and wait, until the player is ready to go again. It is hard work and definitely encourages hard running, holding the ball until the player is in position and accurate kicking.

In response to a few players arguing a decision with the umpires last week, I lined up the boys in front of me and organised for one of the faster players to sprint as far as he could when I signalled, stopping when he heard a whistle.

"Go!" I shouted and he tore off, while I turned to the gathered throng and gave them a 'spray' as if they were the umpires.

"You're kidding 'ump'. That can't be right! Open your eyes. Come on," I said. I blew the whistle. "Boys, look at Ethan. He has run 25 metres in the time it took me to argue. If he was my player, I could never catch him. When we are arguing, we are down a player and one of their players is covering six metres a second."

I believe this sort of practical demonstration is very effective, although in fairness, the team is very disciplined and seldom gets caught up in disputes.

We finish training at exactly 5.45pm as usual. I think an hour and a quarter is enough and there is nothing that gets some parents offside more than the coach who gets caught up in his or her own enthusiasm and allows training to drift on well past the scheduled finishing time.

The game

The boys play a devastating brand of football – hard running to position and switching leads to players running loose all over the ground. The defenders are continually streaming down field then rushing back. The kicking is very accurate.

They protect the ball-carrier by running alongside him, shepherding or bumping to allow a teammate to carry the ball 60 metres.

Even more impressive are the forwards, who, when they see this style unfolding, do two things. Matt, for example, unselfishly runs away from the ball-carrier, taking his opponent out of the play, while John runs towards the ball-carrier to clear a path for him.

Sam O. and Sam A. are starring on the backline and Tim has improved to the point where he is one of the most attacking defenders in the league. What continues to be pleasing is their willingness to shepherd and give off the ball to a running player.

Nick R., Robbie and Marcus, in particular, have an understanding. When Robbie has a free kick or takes a mark, he waits until Nick or Marcus can swing by for the handball

before executing long kicks. This is turning out to be a devastating play. (Amazingly for an under-12, Marcus has kicked a goal from outside the 50-metre line!)

In the last quarter, I take off the ruckman and look at the bench for a replacement. “Sam A. (one of the smaller players on the team), you are in the ruck. On you go.”

He looked at me incredulously. “The ruck?” “How hard can it be?” I reply. “You just jump around.”

Unconvinced by my assessment of the nature of ruckwork, he still sprints onto the ground as our unlikely ruckman. Sam A. has had such a great year it wouldn't surprise me if he won the next ruck contest.

The individual highlight is Frankie. Despite the game being effectively over, he still courageously smothers a full-blooded kick, puts in a great second effort and smothers again before gathering the loose ball and, with poise, kicks to a forward. Remarkable. I mentioned the effort to Donald McDonald, assistant coach at the Kangaroos, who said it was the type of effort expected from the likes of Glenn Archer.

The final score of 17 goals to one reflects the team's dominance and its disciplined teamwork. There is now a growing feeling that maybe we can make the finals.

13 MID-SEASON

It was great to be a spectator at the inter-league match on the weekend. The coaches are very relaxed and positive when addressing players. There was no tagging or abuse of umpires, and all players were given a fair go in a variety of positions.

Aside from the fact that Terry, the under-12s coach, is a terrific coach, I suspect that part of the constructive atmosphere in these games is because the result is inconsequential.

I particularly enjoyed the quarter-time address by the under-14s coach who asked: "Who got a kick?" In response to the show of hands he remarked: "That's what footy's about, isn't it?"

Perhaps all junior coaches should see themselves as inter-league coaches, which would reduce the emphasis on the scoreboard.

By watching the players from my team in the game, it was obvious that they had not yet mastered positional play. I have certainly been under-coaching in this area. Most coaches usually act on the assumption that by age 11, players know the positions and how to play them.

At times at training, I walk through a position on the ground so players can get a feel for the general area. I clearly need to do this more often. This was rammed home to me last week when I placed one of the bigger boys on the wing for the first time and he was clearly uncomfortable and uncertain. I sent Tony out to him with the message: "Tell him to mark an X on the ground with his foot, so he knows where a wingman stands." The ball came and went and went past again and the player continued to stand on the X he thought limited his movements! The next message? "You can move off the X."

In terms of positional rotation, I use these guidelines:

- No player can play on-ball for more than three quarters.
- There are 16 opportunities in a match to play on-ball, so a minimum of eight, but usually 11 players, must have a go in on-ball positions.
- If you come off the bench, you normally go on-ball or to a 'hot' zone where there's plenty of action.
- If you are not playing well, you are more likely to find yourself on-ball.

It was revealing when I informed the boys last week that not only would the rotations continue, they would increase in frequency. The general view of the boys was, "Why change a winning team?" I explained to them that winning was not as important as their development and pointed out the team's need for players who can slot into a variety of positions. They were still largely unconvinced of the merit of this strategy.

"What about this then? We have scored over 500 points in the last three games and had only three goals kicked against us. The defenders need to play forward also and kick goals," I explained.

I now have support from the defenders and grudging support from the forwards, who see still rotation to the backline as akin to being exiled to the gulags of Stalinist Russia.

I usually make as few positional changes as possible for the first half of a game, then, in

the third quarter, the on-ballers go off, back or forward. There are four new on-ballers and some of the backs go forward.

The first-year players go off first, followed by the second-year players. Everyone plays a minimum of three quarters.

The real value in this approach has been the overall development of the squad, with 10 players now able to play on-ball. There is no let-up when the better players go off or forward and I am sure it is a significant reason why we are so consistent through the games and tend to wear down the other sides. Also, it means the more skilful players can stay in fixed positions longer, which makes it hard for other sides to tag.

All of this is in stark contrast to last year when – as a result of overplaying the guns – I was able to make the top-four players heartily sick of football by season's end and largely ineffective through nagging injury.

It got to the point last year where they started missing training and the most dedicated and hardest-training player became uncooperative and was actually encouraging dissent. Imagine your best and most coachable player tired and not wanting to be there.

On hearing my favourite player openly stating that he had no intention of running or trying hard, I sent the rest of the team on a lap and called him over. His body language told me as he ambled over that he was up for a spray and would weather it with indifference. I said to him: "Nick, I just want to tell you how proud I am of your efforts this year and what a wonderful year you have had."

Astounded by the lack of a spray and the fact he was praised, he tore off to join the others in their sprinting, encouraging them to put in more effort. A good move by me, but it in no way made up for the thoughtless overuse of the top players.

14 BUILDING SELF-BELIEF

“I think we are playing all right and if we keep playing well and go in hard, then we will do all right.”

Acting captain Fergus speaking at half-time with the team 50 points up.

Walking into the away team’s rooms last week triggered memories of my early days spent in dirty, cramped, liniment-smelling rooms.

The source of this stroll down memory lane was a fading message on the wall: “Whether you think you can or whether you think you can’t, you are right.”

This statement is probably seen as a quaint principle from yesteryear, but Canadian behaviour expert Dr Albert Bandura argues that this principle is demonstrably true.

Dr Bandura initially tried to understand why talented people don’t always do as well as expected and why some people with seemingly little talent are remarkably successful (in any area). What he found was that if you think you have ‘it’ and believe in yourself, the chances of succeeding are very good. Conversely, if you think you don’t have ‘it’, the chances of failure are very good, despite your abilities.

What Dr Bandura found was what most junior coaches learnt very quickly – whether you think you can or whether you think you can’t, you’re right.

His principle determines how people feel and respond in different situations – how they think, motivate themselves and behave. In a sense it is the thermostat which determines what we will try and for how long.

People who have ‘it’:

- Approach difficult tasks as challenges.
- Sustain their commitment to their goals.
- Attribute failure to lack of effort.
- Heighten their efforts in the face of difficulties.
- Recover quickly from setbacks and are resilient.

From a coaching perspective, people with ‘it’ are less defensive to negative feedback, make better decisions and are open to new approaches. Contrast this with the traits of people who, in their own mind, lack ‘it’, who often:

- Shy away from difficult tasks and set low goals.
- Have a weak commitment to their goals.
- Slacken their efforts or just give up when things get tough.
- Blame themselves for their failure.

Players who may fail, but have ‘it’, say: “Next time I will try harder or use a different

approach.” Players who lack ‘it’ say: “Why did I ever think I could make that team. I just don’t have the ability.”

Efficacious players and teams appear to be risk-takers on the field, but from their point of view they don’t think it is a risk, they think they can do it. To some, they appear to be ‘lucky’. The ball apparently bounces for them.

This luck is an illusion. It is because they attack the ball with such a positive expectancy that they are more likely to make things happen and are not hamstrung by self-doubt.

In contrast, non-efficacious players are plagued by self-doubt, often mentally and physically hesitating and allowing opportunities to pass. For them:

- Doubt brings on hesitation.
- Hesitation brings on failure.

As coaches, you will witness this when players are not sure whether to leave their opponent and consequently get caught in no-man’s land in the flow of the game.

Mastering

The more skills you have, the more efficacious you feel. When coaching young players, you need to break down the components and, as they master each stage, add another level.

You can do this when teaching your team how to switch the play (transferring the football from one side of the ground to the other in an effort to find a clearer path to goal).

Step one

Players master kicking accurately to a target 20 metres away.

Step two

After marking, players turn right 90 degrees and kick to a waiting player 20 metres away who has called out, ‘Switch’.

Step three

This is then repeated around a square. Players kick to their right.

Step four

A teammate may be covered so the kicker has to decide if he still wants to switch. The motto is, “Never switch if there is someone near. Always switch if they are in the clear.”

Step five

Walk through the idea on a mini-field so players can practise and familiarise themselves with the idea.

Step six

Practise switching to the left or right.

This process helps players build their skill to the point where they say: “We can do this.”

I always welcome windy nights so we can practise kicking into the wind, running the ball into the wind and controlling the ball with the wind and with a cross breeze. The boys can practise leaning forward to simulate the action of kicking into the wind before actually trying to keep the ball low in real drills.

As a result, they are now never intimidated by the prospect of playing in wind.

If you want to assess whether your team has ‘it’, establish what is currently intimidating them and work on improving those areas.

Social persuasion

Good coaches see in their players what the players often don't see in themselves – potential. They then 'sell' players on those qualities and talk them into higher levels of performance.

One of the most important ways they do this is by not letting players treat wins or successes too lightly or pass through them too quickly.

Coaches should talk to players about success – asking how they felt, what strategies they used and how they overcame any setbacks. They should help players re-live their triumphs and get them to focus on the processes used. They might ask: “When you were on that big player, how did you decide to play him?” “What were you thinking when you took that shot from the boundary?” “How did you go about getting yourself back into the game?”

Always walk and talk your players through their successes. Too many times with winning teams, coaches become a little too task-oriented. Instead of trying to build the players' feelings of accomplishment and encouraging self-belief, they focus on the next task (like next week's game against the top team), missing a golden opportunity.

It is not enough to stop at revisiting their successes. You need to take them one step further. Help them look positively to the future.

When a player (or the team) learns a new skill, drill or strategy, ask him how he can use it in a game and what difference it might make. This assists him to feel that his efforts have purpose and that he can improve.

As a coach, you want highly efficacious players who are resilient and expect positive outcomes. It doesn't matter if they don't have the skills if they believe they can learn them.

The biggest threats to developing this is when juniors:

- Are consistently given unchallenging tasks.
- Receive praise for mediocre performance.
- Receive no feedback for indifferent performances.
- Are continually offered unsolicited advice.
- Are told, either implicitly or explicitly, that they wouldn't be in the team but for the influence of their family.

Two final comments on efficacy.

1. *“Those who have had great difficulty in developing a sense of self efficacy may have had authority figures who were overly critical, verbally abusive, or disinterested.”* A. Bandura, Self-Efficacy, W.H. Freeman and Co., 1997)

2. Coaches need to develop their own sense of efficacy:

- Do you think you can take a largely unskilled group of players and turn them into a dynamic team?
 - Can you handle the expectations of parents and raise the expectations of players?
- Do you believe you can implement the ideas in this book or is it all a bit intimidating? That's efficacy.

Footnote

I have met Albert Bandura. He seemed a nice person, but didn't strike me as having a great sense of humour. Yet his monumental work on efficacy requires a great deal of resilience to plough through it. I am sure the irony of this was not intentional – a book on efficacy that requires efficacy to read it!

Another observation that Bandura makes about champion athletes is that it is their efficacy that gets and keeps them at the top, However, as their athletic prowess declines, their high efficacy creates a blindspot with regard to their decline because they think they can still cut it at the highest level.

15 MATCH OF THE ROUND

Preparation

Through a quirk in the draw, the two undefeated sides play each other in the last game of the first round. All the players and plenty of people around the club have been looking forward to this game.

Everyone has an opinion. Some believe a loss won't be too devastating and that there could be some complacency in the team given that in the past four games, the team has scored more than 500 points to 18 against. Others believe we'll win by 10 goals. Some players even seem to be preparing themselves with a fall-back position of "a loss won't hurt us." A little parental influence there I suspect.

As we start preparations for the game, there is no discussion of winning, just words such as challenge, test and playing to your best. At Wednesday training, we quickly review the last game and, although it wasn't pretty to watch and the other team used negating tactics, I congratulate them on scoring so many goals and giving up only two points.

The team is losing one of the best utilities for the match because of school holidays, but the boys seem confident. They are, however, rocked by the news that the prime midfielder, the team's hardest-running, longest-kicking player, has broken his foot at school and is out for the season. It's hard to convey in words the look of dismay on their faces as the news sank in.

You have to keep in mind that there is still a feeling that our dream run is illusionary and will somehow end with us playing out our usual 'honourable' year.

We discuss briefly the implications of what needs to happen and how we can cover the midfielder's loss. I mention all the boys who have had a midfield role and done well and that we have got where we are as a result of teamwork.

Privately, I am concerned, but glad that we have been consistently rotating players through the midfield. I challenge a few boys privately to step up their efforts and briefly outline the plan:

1. In front.
2. In first.
3. Tackle hard.
4. Run.

I explain that training will revolve around these themes and we get started after the warm-up.

We start with one-on-one contests for the ball with second and third efforts required before they rest. The emphasis is on fighting for the front position. Next, the ball is kicked in the air with players fighting for the front positions and competing until the ball is returned to the kicker. This goes on for 15 minutes and they're all puffing.

Again, we emphasise in front and in first. We go into modified circle work for 15 minutes, which requires hard running and good decision-making on where to position yourself. Many players are storming across the circle to try to gain another possession or to fill up a gap. The players who needed to step up are starring and the 'guns' are working very hard.

I call them in and thank them for their efforts. Lynden Dunn, a former club player now on the list at Melbourne Football Club, comes over to meet the players. I ask him to talk about the forward line set-up and so on and then open it to questions from the boys.

Most of the questions are: “Who doesn’t handball? Who tries to kick the goals? Are you really an AFL player?”

Frankie thanks Lyndon for his time and we do a lap of Indian file, which they are doing remarkably well since the “no shortcuts” speech. They spend five minutes practising crumbing and that’s it. I call them in a final time and hand out the team for Sunday and the goals for the game.

I am feeling pretty good. The team trained well and the boys are looking forward to the game. Win or lose, I am proud of their efforts so far.

Walking off the ground, a parent of one of my favourite players stops me.

“I don’t think you are treating my son fairly.”

That sinking feeling, again.

“Go on.”

“He is always taken off the ground, so can never get into form.”

“Two things. First, every week, 16 players only play three quarters of a game. Second, he has been given plenty of opportunity. Although he is the main defender, on Sunday he played wing, full-back and then ruck rover. He is having a great year.”

“I just think he is not given the go that other boys get. I don’t see other boys off the ground each week like him.”

I’m now frustrated and annoyed.

“Every quarter, four boys come off. The youngest are rotated off first and then the second-year players. Yes, there are six boys who tend to play the four quarters, but even they are often rested in the second half of the last quarter to give players more opportunity.”

He seemed comfortable, but in no way convinced. My perception was that after two handouts and a couple of speeches to parents, everyone was aware of the rotation policy. I have just completed a draft document for next year, explaining to parents how the system works, i.e. guaranteed three quarters etc. but I think we’d better set it out ASAP.

Stan Alves said he insisted that the parents of the junior club he was coaching sign a document pre-season indicating they understood and agreed with the rotation policy. Each quarter, Stan was rotating 10 players on and off (!) so the team tended to drop away in the second quarter causing some parents to call out: “Get the good players back on.” In response, Stan would wave the document they had signed.

Last night, my son raised the issue of performance and satisfaction.

“So, if we play to the best of our ability and lose, you will be satisfied and won’t lose any sleep?”

“Yes.”

“What if we play poorly against Hadfield and win. Would that be satisfying?”

“I would rather that you play well and lose than play badly and win.”

He looked at me for a long moment, then walked away shaking his head, seemingly bewildered by the intricacies of adult thinking.

The game

It's the last game of the first round with the two unbeaten sides to meet.

The boys are reasonably quiet. Now and again, there is a call from one of the parents or players: "A big game today."

The warm-up continues with little talking. We use some tackle bags so the boys can make contact with something. Some of the boys knock me back a few steps when they hit.

Our ruckman finally arrives. He's not well with a heavy cold but wants to play.

I outline everyone's role and what is expected of them. One last punch of the air, running on the spot, calling out "five" and they punch the air five times counting as they go: "Three, two, one!" They are breathing harder now.

"Does everyone know their position?"

"Yes!"

"What's expected?"

"Yes!"

"Are you ready?"

"Yes!"

"Let's go!"

The boys are led out by Mark, who is captaining the team in Nick's absence. They run a few laps of the centre square, stretch, stretch a bit more and bump each other, stand around and then stretch a bit more while waiting for the umpires.

The umpires want to check the players' boots. It has been seven minutes since the 'fired-up' players charged out of the rooms. The Hadfield players are shown the ball and point out that they should be offered a choice of two. Someone goes looking for another ball to provide them with a choice. The coin is tossed and we are set to go. It's 12 minutes since they left the rooms – not ideal.

The game starts and within minutes Hadfield leads by 18 points and we're yet to score. We look disinterested and uncommitted. The on-ballers are not setting up as we discussed and Hadfield is playing terrific football. Hadfield players are in front and in first. We are well behind. Near the end of the quarter, the boys – who haven't panicked, unlike their parents and coaches – lift their work rate and start to wrest back control of the game.

Quarter-time break

The boys know to look at the whiteboard for position changes. I talk to each boy, providing feedback and an idea of what is expected of them this quarter. One parent can't help himself. Unsolicited, he brings the boys into a huddle, arm-in-arm, and calls for a greater effort, and tells them we can still win the game! I diplomatically call them to turn and listen.

"Back to basics – in first and in front. I need everyone to make one tackle this quarter. Can you do that?"

"Yes!" is the collective roar from the team.

"I need everyone to make one switch. Can you do that?"

"Yes!"

"Frankie, you are on the wrong side for the ball-ups. Marcus is right-handed. You know

that. Get focused!” (I immediately regret singling out Frankie. He is always in the best five, very coachable and courageous. Inexcusable.)

The whistle blows.

“Boys, I would like to say something clever, but basically you must want the ball more than they do. Ready?”

“Yes!”

Second quarter

The game is free flowing. Our manning-up is poor, but our switching is good. The boys try to handball most of the time when they mark and a few times we get hammered. A parent calls out: “They are handballing too much.”

“It’s what’s got them here. We’re not changing it now.”

Privately, I am happy that even under pressure, they continue to attack. My two key forwards are working hard. They run 50 metres to man up loose players in the centre. The runner comes in and relays some bad news: “Marcus is hurt and has to come off.”

Why today? I guess I knew he wasn’t well at the start.

“Matt to centre half-forward. Fergus into the ruck.

It’s a temporary move until I can sort it out. Matt, however, plays the game of his life and Fergus takes control around the ground. It’s a turning point in the game. Half-time comes and we are 10 points up. The players walk off as a group.

In the rooms, the boys are pretty quiet. I get around to all of them to give them feedback and outline their role for the next quarter. I put them into groups – backs, forwards and on-ballers – to talk about what they need to do. One boy from each group gives me a two-sentence summary. I don’t intrude on the discussion and simply watch, impressed by the earnestness of their looks. It’s interesting to watch which players step up and take leadership roles. There’s a clap of hands, followed by a quick warm-up.

“Ready?”

“Yes!”

“Let’s go.”

Third quarter

We dominate. The inspired move of Josh from defence into the forward line is working. Our key forward is tagged by Hadfield’s most dangerous player, which I am happy about because it takes him out of the centre. Robbie kicks two goals, and we are playing all over them. We lead by 26 points.

At three-quarter-time, there is a buzz. The parents are around and excited. The boys are confident. Not much is said. They run off and I wish I had mentioned more about working hard and manning up, but I didn’t.

Fourth quarter

Hadfield is coming back. A goal, followed by a few missed shots. Most of the boys are working hard, however a couple are not with it.

The injured ruckman has recovered and starts in the centre square as a target. The

momentum is with Hadfield, but it fails to score goals. Seven minutes to go! One boy who has had the flu doesn't go in. Tony brings him off. It's the first time this year I have taken someone off for any reason other than scheduled rotation. I send one of the rotated forwards back on.

"You are on the wing."

He takes off and stands 10 metres from us.

"The wing," I call out.

He doesn't move. Tony shows him where the wing is. I can't believe it! I am frustrated that one of the senior players doesn't know where the wing is.

The final siren sounds.

There's a big cheer. A three-goal win.

We walk over to Hadfield. The game had been played in great spirit and even the umpires comment on this. Everyone shakes hands – even Hadfield's players shake my hand. Hadfield displayed all the hallmarks of an achievement-orientated team.

Competitive-orientated sides begrudgingly applaud the winning team and are reticent to congratulate them. Hadfield players were generous and forthcoming and enjoyed the contest. It was a good lesson for me. It's sometimes not how you win, but how you handle losing that defines character. Hadfield Football Club should be very proud of its juniors.

There is a feeling that it was a good contest. I say a few words to their players, which is unusual for me. I hand out packets of lollies as the boys head for the rooms.

In the rooms, I congratulate the boys on their comeback and hand out the pizza and video awards. I am feeling very proud of the boys. I am especially pleased that the centre half-back and the full-forward, my special projects, have starred. There is lots of clapping and some of the best players are given another mention. In hindsight, I should have gone through the whole team and mentioned each player individually.

I have a large bag of Skittles to hand out, with small packs for the 21 players. A rush of hands and they're all gone.

"I didn't get one," says the full-forward. I thought I recognised a couple of the hands go back in there.

What a day! I hadn't mentioned winning once during the week. It was a great fightback, especially with some key players out. And there were some valuable lessons learnt.

16 THE OPTIMISTIC COACH

What is the best predictor for success in football? DNA? Hard work? Effective coaching? Parental support? Maybe all of the above?

There is a tool that can help you develop successful players (in spite of their DNA), assist them in their personal and school life and reduce their chances of becoming depressed and staying depressed.

It's a tool that you could use to increase everyone's chances of moving closer to realising their potential.

It's called optimism. It can be taught and it can have significant impact.

Over the past 20 years, Dr Martin Seligman (US professor of psychology and author) has studied more than 800,000 people to discover that optimistic people generally do better in all areas of life and sport than pessimistic people. Naturally when I first heard about the study, I was bemused. Why didn't he just ask the average junior coach and we could have saved him himself 20 years of research!

Seligman's work is far more important than just being able to identify optimism and pessimism in people and teams. He has been able to link optimism to performance and, more importantly, has created a simple process to develop optimism in people.

Dr Seligman's work has found that optimists:

- Recover quickly from setbacks.
- Are healthier.
- Are better in pressure situations.
- Are less likely to become depressed and stay depressed.
- Perform to a level beyond their level of talent would suggest.
- Are likely to persist in the face of adversity.
- Have a strong focus of control.

Optimists are more likely to play to their potential consistently, whereas pessimists are often on a performance roller-coaster.

What Dr Seligman found was that every one of us has what he termed an explanatory style. We use thinking process to make sense of what happens in our world and, specifically, what happens to us personally. It is what we use to attribute the causes of our successes and failures.

Remarkably, optimists and pessimists can experience the same event and arrive at a vastly different assessment (much like in the film, *Groundhog Day* – is the glass half full or half empty?).

Players are always attributing the cause of their successes or failure based on this explanatory style, for example:

“I kicked that goal because the wind took it.” Pessimistic. (“I got lucky.”)

“I kicked that goal because I practise from there at training.” Optimistic. (“All my training paid off. I caused this outcome.”)

Following is how to quickly assess whether a statement is optimistic or pessimistic and a simple strategy to enhance player and team optimism.

When events happen to us, good or bad as judged by ourselves, all of us go through the following thought process:

- We assess the level of control we had on the situation – **personal**
- We assess the extent the event will impact us and our world – **global**
- We decide how long the event will have an impact on us – **permanent**

For example, listen to a pessimist when something he perceives to be *bad* occurs to him:

He personalises it – “It was my fault.” The cause is internal.

He globalises – “This will affect all parts of my life.”

He makes it permanent – “I see no end to this slump I am in.”

Compare this to the optimist when confronted by the same event:

“The ball was slippery that day.” The cause of the error was external to you.

“It was only one part of my game.” We narrow down the impact.

“I didn’t play well *that* day.” Temporary.

Listen to a pessimist when *good* things happen:

“I only got the goal because of the wind.” The cause was external and I had no control.

“It was only lucky in that one area.” We narrow down the extent of the impact.

“This winning streak won’t last.” Temporary success only.

Compare this to the self-talk process of the optimist when good things happen.

“I trained very hard for this game.” I caused it and personalise the responsibility.

“I am on a roll and *everything* is going well for me.” Widening the impact and globalising.

“There is no stopping me now.” Permanent.

Amazingly, pessimists accept responsibility for events they had little control over, whereas optimists won’t accept responsibility for things they had no real control over and may even, for a time, accept only some responsibility for things they *had* control over.

On any given Sunday, you will hear players at all levels verbalising the mental process.

Coach: “Great mark you took today.”

Player: “Actually, I had my eyes closed and was pushed into it.” External factors.

Coach: “Well played today, Terry.”

Player: “Thanks coach. I normally don’t play that well.” Temporary.

Optimists will make losses temporary and narrow.

“We lost *this* game today.”

“It was just our kicking that let us down today.”

“The wet conditions and ground didn’t suit us today.” Temporary and external.

(You have to admire the optimism expressed by Australian Test captain Greg Chappell some years ago after he made seven ducks in a row: “I’m batting well ... I’m just getting out.”)

It is in every coach's interest to develop optimistic teams because Dr Seligman's research discovered that:

- In baseball, optimistic teams have a higher batting average under pressure.
- In basketball, optimistic teams do better than their talent would suggest.
- Optimistic teams do better after a loss the previous week.
- Optimism is a better predictor of success in sport than talent.
- When their performance is below expectation, optimistic athletes hold it together or do better the next time. Pessimistic athletes do worse in the next contest if their performance was below what they expected.

For us as junior coaches, it is important that we are able to recognise pessimism and appreciate its potential impact and have the tools to correct it. The simplest way to correct a pessimistic style is to become an 'ace disputer'.

Ace disputing means that when you observe players or the team being pessimistic, you need to step in and dispute their assessment of the cause of what happened and limit the scope:

Player: "I never kick goals under pressure."

Coach: "You missed one goal this game."

Player: "We never win in the wet."

Coach: "At times in this game we didn't handle the conditions." (Temporary and narrow).

Player: "I am not good in defence."

Coach: "At *times*, you didn't keep your player to the boundary." (Temporary and narrow.)

The good things that players and the team do make good things permanent and global and bad things temporary and local or narrow. If you do nothing else, you can make an enormous difference to the lives of young people.

With this knowledge, you will be more aware when you are around pessimism. Last year, my oldest son stated: "I am hopeless at sport."

"Really," I replied. "What about karate?"

"No, I'm a black belt. I'm good at that."

"Swimming?"

"Good."

"Ice-skating?"

"Hot."

"Well, help me out here. What are we talking about?"

"I'm hopeless at cricket."

"Batting?"

"No. Bowling."

Just keep narrowing it down. This process is nothing we don't do as coaches and parents. We just need to be more systematic. When your kids come home after failing a test, most of us as parents don't say things like: "Well, your life is over. You probably will never amount to anything and let's face it, it's not just school, is it? You have no friends and can't play sport." Generally we narrow it down: "You failed *this* test, today."

It is worth explaining the concept to the players so that they can become disputers. Fortunately or unfortunately, my kids have picked up the process – if somewhat selectively. Last year, when I wasn't being the parent I would like to be, I remarked in exasperation to my teenager: "Do you have to be so irritating all the time?"

To which he replied: "I am irritating you now. I am not actually irritating all the time." Give me strength!

I met Dr Seligman a few years ago and asked him about pessimism and teenagers. He said that in the face of unparalleled opportunity for teenagers today, there is an epidemic of pessimism in the world and that this generation was far more pessimistic about the future than previous generations.

He added that more teenagers were becoming depressed and staying depressed for longer.

As coaches of juniors, what a difference we can make to not just their sporting lives but to their entire well-being. It may only take a few words.

17 COACHING, UMPIRES AND COMPETITIVE BEHAVIOUR

This week, the umpires have had a tough time of it – both at AFL and local level. There has been a significant over-reaction by a number of interest groups and, at least at AFL level, apologies with the explanation that the attacks were in no way intended to be personal.

The nature and length of the abuse that local umpires seem to have to endure seems to be both changing and increasing in duration. It is far more vitriolic and can start from the very first bounce and continue unrelentingly.

I may have a slightly romantic view of the past (not too romantic given I did play in the Diamond Valley Football League in the late 1960s) and I still cringe at the memory of my mother's stinging attacks on the umpires that usually went along the lines: "You great white bunny." (I am hoping at some stage to move that memory into the repressed category.)

However, I cannot recall junior umpires of under-10 games requiring two escorts on entry and exit and at every break. Nor can I recall the sustained attacks on umpires as young as 14 from coaches, parents, runners and 'water boys' who are usually adults acting as de facto runners.

I have little doubt that the source of this behaviour lies largely in competitive thinking. Competitive behaviour is underpinned by a strong need to establish our self-worth by competing against others and comparing our efforts with the efforts and results of others.

Watch junior coaches with a high competitive style and you will witness barely contained simmering aggression and agitated body language. For them, competition is not about the challenge but more about protecting their self-worth, defending their patch and asserting their superiority over others. At its worst, they are overwhelmed by an irrational fear of losing and are obsessive.

Most of us are familiar with the fight-or-flight defensive concept as a protecting strategy and have all used it at times, however, the competitive coach is firmly mired in the fight mode and the game is about you trying to take something from me.

Players, coaches and clubs with a competitive mindset are locked into blaming external factors, such as the umpires, for their performances because the alternative approach is too daunting to ponder. In other words, we are not as good as we think, therefore, we are forced to question our own self-worth and the foundation of our self concept.

There is tremendous stress and tension in the game for the competitive coach for many of the above reasons and because there are factors that can impact on the result but which they can have little influence on.

This could be a conversation with a competitive junior coach who is angry and frustrated with the 14-year-old umpire.

"Why are you so critical and abusive to the umpires?"

"Because they are not doing their job properly."

“What do you mean?”

“The ump is favouring the other side all the time. We are getting nothing.”

“Why?”

“Who knows! The other side is on top and they are intimidating the umps into decisions. This club has always done it. (*Watch the game ump!*)”

“How are they favouring the other team?”

“Tackles! It’s going against us every time. You name it, it’s going their way (*You’re kidding umpire!*) and it’s costing us the game. We just want a fair go. (*Come on ump. Give us a break!*)”

“I still don’t get why you are so angry?”

“These boys want to win, that’s why.”

“Why is winning so important to you?”

“Because these kids are great kids. They deserve to win. They are all winners in my book. They will be crushed if they don’t. They have trained so hard. It’s not fair to cheat them out of what they deserve.”

“You or them?”

“What?”

“So the main thing is to win?”

“Of course. Football is about winning. That is what we train for and that is why there is a scoreboard and, of course, the boys should have fun.”

Quarter-time address: “Boys, listen up. The umpires have got it in for us. Every time we get these clowns, it is the same. They’re giving us nothing. You have to go in harder. Yes, they are big but so what? Some of you look scared to me. Are you frightened?”

“William, you are hanging out. Get in there or get off. Right?”

“Craig, what are you doing out there? Nothing.”

“Jamie, it was embarrassing when you didn’t tackle their ruckman. Jamie, remember the bigger they are, the harder they fall.”

“Boys, we can win this in spite of the umpires if you want it badly enough. And I only want winners in this team. If you want to play like losers go somewhere else.”

“I will tell you this. If you don’t win this game, you will regret it at training this week.”

“Boys, I want 10 goals this quarter! Remember, it’s not the dog in the fight but the fight in the dog. Show some fight!”

Half-time: “Listen up. This team is undefeated, but they are soft. They don’t like it hard. Here is what we are going to do. Tackle. Smother. Jostle them. Fall on them when you can. Punch from behind and don’t worry if you make a bit of contact.”

“Jeff, come in hard at the bounce and rattle someone. (*Three minutes and the address is still going*). On-ballers, scrag your player. Hold their jumpers and keep pushing them.”

“Do this and they won’t want it. Every time they get the ball, they must be bumped. After they kick it, give them a nudge and make some contact.”

“We are going to play two loose men in the backline. Boys, it’s up to you. I can’t do it for you. The umpires aren’t going to help. It’s up to you.”

“Do you want it?
 “Are you ready to fight for the ball?
 “Are you prepared to give *me* 110 per cent?
 “I want 10 goals this quarter!”

Post match: Lots of disappointed-looking boys and a few visibly angry players. There were sharp words exchanged between the players as they left the ground and the two teams’ runners fired a few parting shots across the bow. There was no ritual shaking of hands, three cheers or condolences offered by the other coach.

The umpire’s eyes dart around as he runs the gauntlet of the home side’s parents and officials. The umpires sit in their enclave and can hear the strong language, as intended, regarding the home side’s view of their role in the game.

“Boys, that was disappointing. I don’t think you tried hard enough. I know the umpires were crucifying us when we did go in, but it was a weak effort.

“We lost by 10 goals again. Do you care? Because it doesn’t look like it?.” “We will see how much you care this week at training. There will be no footballs – just tackling and running.”

* The above is a compilation of addresses and remarks I have heard over the last few weeks. It is not a fictional account and expletives have been deleted.

Strategies for reducing a competitive approach in your coaching and, ultimately, in the team.

- Reduce the use of competitive language and concepts such as: “We need to earn respect” or “It’s us against them.”
- Be open to the influence and opinions of others.
- Emphasise the will to win or excel over winning for its own sake.
- Keep in the front of your thinking that winning is a measure of success.
- Stop dragging players for skill errors.
- Regardless of the result, discuss what can be learnt from the game.
- Let go of the idea that winning or losing is a reflection of your value and knowledge.
- Use achievement language such as contest, challenge and test of skills.
- Be gracious to the other team.
- You set the tone and the players follow.
- Explain the concept to the parents and prepare them for the season.

Here is the challenge for us as coaches. All junior players need to feel that they are good at something and able to accomplish tasks. Players like the feeling that comes with achievement and can get their self-worth from being good at something.

As coaches, we need to be wary that if the players are continually rewarded and recognised for their successes and not the efforts or the processes they used, they will begin to develop a competitive approach that will see them do things to be the centre of attention. The players will no longer be satisfied with being talented. They will need to feel more talented than others and will set about proving it.

At some point, the game is no longer about the contest, but becomes the vehicle to

gain rewards, recognition and be admired. Now they are in the cycle of needing to 'prove' themselves each week as someone who is 'worth more' and superior.

It is at this point that the pain and disappointment of losing is magnified and their frustration with not being able to always control the outcome can lead to the abuse of umpires, who, as the externals, are an easy target of their frustration.

18 QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY BREAK

Given that training is optional this week, it is heartening to see most players have chosen to attend. We have the whole ground to ourselves and, after the warm-up, we practise moving the ball from one end to the other and rehearsing set plays. As usual, they train well and, although there is a holiday atmosphere, their execution is great.

The boys do pretty much the same training that a senior side would do, though it is a little shorter. They are adept at the front and centre, switching, rebounding and circle work. Tonight, the theme is decision-making and we have constructed the drills to require the boys to make a decision regarding not only who to kick it to but when to hold the ball or run with it. Training can often be performed with a minimal amount of thinking and, if it's true that the better players make consistently better decisions, then we need to ramp up those type of scenarios.

For example, the player with the ball has to make a decision to pass to a leading forward or run the ball up. This is further complicated by a defender who may or may not go with the leading forward and a parent holding a tackle bag to put additional pressure on the ball carrier.

On occasions, I will mark out a mini football field around 20 metres in length so that we can practise tactics on a smaller scale first, particularly switching. I stole the idea from Port Adelaide. On a tour of Alberton Oval, I was impressed by the basketball-sized football field in the gym which they use to practise moves. When the players have a good grasp of the new tactic, they step out onto the field and go through the process slowly on a bigger scale, then they do it at full pace under pressure. I thought at the time: "We can do this."

I reinforce the switching practice with a ditty: "Always switch if they are in the clear, never switch if there is someone near."

We probably underestimate what juniors can do if they are engaged, see the point and are having fun. Dom's team trained last night and after a few drills started circle work. After 20 minutes, I thought I should suggest to Dom that that was enough. The boys kept going and, remarkably, the quality of the drill improved. It ended after 35 minutes of hard running!

I have never seen a senior side sustain circle work for that long, let alone improve as they went on. The boys *wanted* it to continue. I genuinely believe if you put down on your Level 1 homework that you would do a half-hour of non-stop running with 11-year-olds, not only wouldn't you get accreditation, but you would have the league place an injunction on you!

As an aside, at times I am not sure I am actually in control any more. The team seems to have its own momentum and is self-managing and self-motivating. At training, when an exercise is not well executed, they generally know it and address it themselves with a "that was crap".

They get themselves in the zone for games and I don't say much before a game that is inspirational or profound (although I would like to). It seems they are coaching

themselves or perhaps, more accurately, I am just guiding and making minor adjustments with a nudge here and there.

We train quite hard for one hour, then I bring the players in for the warm-down. Aside from stretching, we have a hoola-hoop contest (some are of Olympic standard) and the ruckmen are in the *Comedy Company* category.

We give the inter-league reps a round of applause and that's it. Almost. For some reason, the boys start dacking each other (pulling down someone's shorts). Some of the boys run faster than they do in a game to avoid the indignity of a dacking. There is lots of laughter and the world seems good until Marcus steals behind the coach and dacks me.

There is a moment of silence as the boys weigh up both the potential consequences of this and the merit in laughing about it. Uncontrolled laughter breaks. I call out to Marcus (who I could never catch) something lame like he is on the bench this week.

It was one of those nights that reaffirms to us why we coach.

“Everything you do and everything you don't do provides the coaches with evidence.”

Coburg Tigers coach Dave Newett talking to the players about motivation and accountability.

19 ROUND 12

This week, we play a team with one win to its credit, so I set the target at 25 goals and one of the boys chimes in with: "To nothing!" I left it at that.

The real targets are:

- To man up on their kick-ins. Every team seems to get the first kick in from a point to one of their own players. The boys tend to zone off, which doesn't seem to be working.
- To handball from every free or mark.
- For Pagito to kick a goal.

I have chosen these targets to provide a stretch and a focus to improve the movement of the ball. The Pagito strategy is because somehow in the goal fest so far and an average winning margin of 80 points to eight against, Pagito has missed out on one. The plan is for Pagito to line up at full-forward and when he kicks a goal, for every player to run from every position and congratulate him.

Most of the boys interpret this as a licence to jump all over Pagito when he scores his first goal. The look on Pagito's face at the prospect confirms he is under no illusion as to what fate awaits him when he kicks a goal.

Each training night, we spend five minutes, at least, just kicking 20 or so kicks to an essentially stationary target. No great thing. What has impressed the boys more is why it is so important. I suggested to them that in the under-12s, for every ineffective kick it probably costs us a point, and for every effective kick, we probably score three or four points. It seems to have improved their concentration in the exercise now that they see the potential upside of accurate kicking.

Most training nights involve at least 10 minutes of tackling work using the six large tackle bags we have access to. Generally, the players practise tackling from behind and are taught to fall to their knees and lean back so as not to give away a free. They have also been instructed to bring their hands from below their hips in the tackle so as to not catch players around the neck. As an add-on, there is usually a football placed on top of the bag which is dislodged during the tackle and so the tackling player needs to make a second effort to recover the ball and handball it to a waiting player.

The tackle bags are also used for the players to practise punching from behind and another player tries to 'read' where the ball will be punched to.

Of course, many times we use the tackle bags to practise trying to take speckies. We have contests and the boys take amazing grabs by jumping up on to the tackle bags and trying to mark a ball thrown in the air. Some nights we try one-handed speckies. I'm not sure if these skills are being translated into the games or even if it is a responsible use of our training time, but hey, who doesn't like taking speckies? Is it irresponsible? Maybe. Is it a fun way to finish training? Definitely.

Game day

The players run on to the ground seemingly switched on and eager to give the 25-goal target a whirl.

One of the players from the home side is playing his 50th game and so his teammates are lined up to clap him as he runs on to the ground. Off the cuff, I line our boys up to applaud the achievement. They don't protest and politely clap as the player runs an extended line.

The game starts and the boys are immediately confronted by a very determined team that seems to be unaware of the role it is to play in the game, that is, score nothing and allow us to run over the top of them.

At quarter-time, the score is six goals to zero our way against the wind and it is hard to fathom why that is given we don't seem to be dominant and are meeting a very determined and attacking opposition. Pagito hasn't scored and is rotated to the backline.

The second quarter is another slog with the home team scoring twice, largely because the backline players were not near their players.

After half-time, there is still not much flow so we regroup and the rotations continue. Nick H. is moved from forward to ruck-rover. The score is 11.5 to 2.0, which continues to surprise me. This quarter is usually when our next group of on-ballers are rotated through. Aside from sustaining the momentum, it is a luxury to have 10 or so very skilled on-ballers in the team. The quarter produces another six goals, including three from Nick H.

It is a relaxed huddle at the last break and after a few minutes I call for their attention.

"Boys, hands up those who have seen Denzil Washington in *Man on Fire*?" Most hands are up. I turn to Nick H. "Everyone, I would like you to meet our own *Man on Fire*, Nick H.! Three goals in a quarter! You are on fire." Everyone laughs and claps.

John, the team manager, mentions it's time and I look over his shoulder to see the umpires in position and the home side set. I quickly read out the team only to have Ethan inform me that he is on both wings!

"You're fast enough."

The last quarter sees the boys run over the top of the home side. There are two highlights. At one stage, we have five players ringing the ball-carrier so I call out as they go past to link arms to protect the ball-carrier all the way to the goals. Obviously, they don't understand, but it's a concept I might try. Sounds like something Fremantle would have tried in the 1990s.

The second highlight is, of course, Pagito kicking a remarkable goal over his shoulder. Players come from everywhere and his parents are beaming. Just for good measure, he repeats it a few moments later with an even more spectacular goal.

That gives us 25 for the game and the players on the bench have that look of accomplishment. "We did it," one calls out.

I catch up with the other coach and he is very complimentary about our style and comments on the boys' maturity. To be honest, it's hard to understand how there can be a 23-goal difference between the teams given it never looked easy and the home side tried so hard.

In the rooms, I announce the pizza and video awards and call for quiet. "Boys, I would like to say something very deep and profound about today's performance, but I can't think of anything so let's just congratulate Pagito again!"

This naturally produces another round of painful backslapping to the point where Pagito is now not certain the result was worth the constructive abuse.

Driving home, Robbie says, "You know, you never talk to me at the huddles."

"I talk to you."

"You talk to everyone else about how well they are doing or what they need to improve, but you ignore me."

I respond with a range of rationalisations and adult speak but it does little to appease the hollow feeling in my stomach.

As parents/coaches, we try so hard to not favour our own kids that perhaps we overlook the opportunities we happily provide to others to improve.

It was strange last year when, standing with two other parents, we all thought our own sons had played OK and that the others' kids had played better.

There was an uncomfortable moment, a nervous laugh and, no doubt, an 'aha' experience for all.

20 CORRECTING BEHAVIOUR CONSTRUCTIVELY

*“Don’t smile if you make a mistake!
Show your disappointment.
I want to hear you scream out ‘F---!’ Show everyone
your disappointment. Got it?”*

A cricket coach to a young player who smiled nervously after dropping a catch at training. I was thinking of trying it out with my under-12s. I think some of them would embrace the concept with great enthusiasm!

This week after an under-10s game, their coach locked the doors and proceeded to ‘lock and load’. He gave the players both barrels with a spray reminiscent of country football in the 1970s. As is the case in most clubrooms, there was just a thin partition between the two teams so we were forced to weather the verbal storm too, while getting ready for our match.

The verbal abuse included a consistent smattering of expletives to the point where you had to wonder why parents wouldn’t step in and remove their child from that environment. Clearly, the club has a culture of either supporting this behaviour or turning a blind eye to it.

You have to wonder at the motivation behind the ‘spray’ and the end result you would be hoping to achieve. Guilt perhaps? Humiliation? A steely resolve to never get into that situation again?

During the next game, the other under-12s coach was freely expressing his views on a wide range of topics. From the first bounce, we heard expletives. and when our runner, a police officer, asked him to tone it down, he told him where to go! The coaches had worked the players up into a frenzy with the emphasis on being physical and, for the first time, a parent asked for her son to be removed from the ground as a safety precaution.

I have recently come to the opinion that it is inappropriate, if not unethical, to pump kids up with expressions such as “controlled aggression” and “attack the player with the ball”. There is a profound difference between generating excitement for the challenge and contest and pumping up players with a win-at-all-costs approach.

Our coaching staff have a chat as to whether to forfeit, but choose to continue. Boys are now being hit off the ball and even the umpires have had enough of the abuse from the coach and supporters. They order a boy off the ground for a hit behind the play. He responds with: “F--- you, I’m not going!” and refuses to leave the ground. He is now being supported by his coaching group and the parents. He digs in. Eventually, the boy saunters

off and receives a rousing cheer and a round of applause from the island of supporters and club officials!

For me, that just about summarises competitive behaviour, scoreboard thinking and unethical coaching. The same coach adopted a very egalitarian approach in that he was very abusive towards our players and his own players in aggressively highlighting their mistakes.

In terms of correcting behaviour and skill errors in kids (and adults), the first thing we need to be clear about is why we are giving this feedback. What result do we hope for and are our expectations realistic for that person?

Donald McDonald (assistant coach of the Kangaroos) is quite strong on this. He believes all coaches, from AFL to under-10s, need to keep in mind that most players are foot soldiers and will make skill errors under pressure; they will choose the wrong option at times and won't always be switched on 100 per cent. That is not to say that we need to lower our expectations, however, we do need to accept that the foot soldiers (and the guns) will sometimes make errors.

Clearly, we can't ignore the errors (or the good things which we often take for granted) so what is the process for correcting errors in a constructive way?

Here's a technique that can be used with everyone individually and should influence the way you address the team as a whole.

Humans move in the direction of their thoughts, whether it is good for them or not. Whatever picture we are holding in our mind causes us to move in that direction.

Just watch a game of 'Simon Says' and you'll see this process at work. When the leader at the front says: "Simon says, 'Hands on your head' and places his hands on his hips, a number of the kids follow the image that is in front of them.

Some years ago, AFL coaching legend David Parkin organised a famous sports psychologist to give a presentation to coaches in Melbourne. The psychologist spoke about the concept of moving in the direction of your thoughts, handed out a picture of an ice-hockey goalie standing in front of a goal and asked them to assess what they could see. Most said the obvious: "I can see a goalie and the goal." Those who scored consistently more often stated that they could see space around the goalie to shoot into. If we focus on the man on the mark rather than on where we want to kick the ball, i.e. on the obstacle rather than on the goal, we are drawn towards that image. (Which is one of the reasons why coaches ask players to pick a target beyond the goal they are kicking for as opposed to concentrating on kicking into the player making the mark.)

Frequently, we try to coach backwards by telling people what we don't want without offering up what we do want. At any match in the country on any Saturday, you will hear well-intended people calling out from the boundary line: "Don't miss. Don't kick to the left son." To correct behaviour and skills it's OK to point out what's going wrong – "You are kicking the ball off the side of your foot" – but we can't leave it at that otherwise we are reinforcing the negative picture.

All of us at some stage have used this concept when we have said to ourselves such things as: "I must not make any mistakes" or "Don't drop the ball today" or, at its extreme, "I must remember not to forget to ..."

What we need to do is point out the mistake, then finish with: “Next time, hold the ball with the laces up” or “Next time, kick through the ball” or “You are getting out-marked. Next time, punch from behind” or “Your player is getting to the ball too easily. Next time, take the front position” or in a team talk, “Boys, the next time you are in that position, switch to the other side of the ground.”

Always leave the player with the positive imagery of what you want them to do, not what you don't want them to do. This is strong leadership. You create the picture, hold them to it and seek out opportunities to reinforce the image.

Players want a solution. They generally realise when they have made an error and prefer information that will assist them.

Depending on the player and the circumstances, this constructive approach to correcting behaviour may also be delivered in a stronger fashion with an additional message: “You are kick chasing. Stop it! The next time when there is a ball-up, run back to your position.”

Using the words, “stop it”, has a number of benefits.

1. It marks the juncture between the old behaviour and the new.
2. It communicates your expectations clearly.
3. It is a vote of confidence in the player. You are saying: “You are a better player than what I am seeing. I see you as a good player. I believe in you.”

You might also say to the team: “We are spending too much time disputing decisions. Stop it. We are better than that. This quarter, we focus on the following ...”

Alternatively, it can be presented as: “Up until now, we have spent too much energy worrying about the umpiring. From now on ...” Again, you are drawing a line in the sand.

I know I have raised eyebrows when I have addressed the boys at a break with: “That was not good enough. I wouldn't mind if we were not skilled, fit and capable, but all of you are better than what I am seeing right now. This quarter, what we need to do is ...”

I have had this discussion with many AFL coaches and their assistants. Their opinions are divided, not over whether this is appropriate for juniors, but even whether there is any merit in telling senior players their efforts are not good enough.

Achievement thinking is about playing to the best of your ability. If the team is not performing to that level, then the players need feedback on their performance level with information to enhance their performance.

Often, coaches will argue that players know when they are not playing well, so why remind them? I think most of us, both personally and as coaches, have had blind spots with regard to our own performance standard or have been trying so hard we haven't noticed what is going on. Clearly, how this expectation is communicated, will be the key.

Coaches will need to personalise this technique to suit both their own style and the level of maturity of their players.

Even at training, this expectation needs to be communicated. At times, a drill is just meandering along, so we call the players in. “What do you think of how well you are training?”

“Four out of 10” or “Not very good” (or from Sam, who gave us zero, “That was crap!”)

“Boys, you are better than what I am seeing. What needs to happen for us to improve?”

“This time ...”

Further, it is important that you express your faith and confidence in the players and, when you are giving feedback, that you are specific and descriptive. For example: “We are not scoring from our opportunities. In that last quarter, three of us went for the ball at the same time. From now on, the player running towards the goal has the right of way and others should shepherd him through.”

Even when talking about concepts such as determination and desperation during an address, it is perhaps best to break it down into specifics such as tackles, smothers, etc.

I made it easier to discuss these concepts by asking the players at training how they would know if a team was determined and desperate. They said that they would be in first, chasing, manning up, putting in second efforts, etc. Now, I can easily raise these concepts during a game and be specific about what is required and get a consistent response.

I know that not all agree with this, but I also sell the idea of determination on the basis that you might get more kicks and the team will most likely play better. My belief is that the more kicks everyone gets, the happier everyone is – especially the parents.

Clearly, in providing feedback to the players, we want to be lavish (good word) in our praise at junior level and not just take the good things for granted. However, this approach needs to be tempered so that we do not cross the line of substituting ‘boosterism’ for positive feedback.

Boosterism is giving manifestly unwarranted praise to a player to the extent where it produces cynicism and, potentially, resentment. For example: “You had a terrific game today.”

“Thanks coach.” In the player’s mind, his self-talk is assessing those remarks knowing he managed only a kick and one handball. Sometimes, our caring and enthusiasm outruns our common sense.

We would be more effective if we were lavish in our praise regarding what we specifically admired and/or appreciated in the player’s performance or assessed the player in relation to previous performances. For example: “I liked the way you supported your teammates with that shepherd in the last quarter.” “That was the best game I have seen you play this year.” “Your running to assist made a big difference today.”

It is best to reduce competitive thinking by comparing the player’s performance to previous performances. If we compare them to the best, some players will feel they are never going to measure up.

If you are going to offer developmental information or advice to players after giving praise, you are better off following the praise with “... and next time you might try ...” It is significantly more effective than “... great game but ...”

In responding to perceived ‘mistakes’ on the field:

1. You need to assess whether the error is the result of a skill deficiency or an attitude problem, because that will change how you respond or if you respond at all.
2. You need to be sure about what happened. I recently spoke with former Hawthorn coach Peter Schwab, who said that even at the highest level, if you are not absolutely certain about what just happened, don’t send out the runner.

3. You must ensure the message always contains information that will assist. I read an article by a former AFL coach who said he once sent out the runner to inform a player he was getting beaten by his opponent (as if he didn't know!). He sent out the runner a second time to tell the player that if he wasn't careful, he wouldn't play again for the rest of the game. In a third message, the coach told the player that if he was not careful, he would never play for this club again. On reflection, the coach said: "I wish I had sent a message like: 'Try standing on the other side of your player and see if that helps'."
4. You should keep in mind that the majority of juniors know when they have made a mistake or error of omission so why highlight the point? Really, it's the players who *don't* know they are making errors who really need your effective coaching.

At junior level, there should be a "no drag" rule. I cannot imagine any circumstances other than fighting when I would remove a player from the ground for mistakes or errors in judgement.

Most people are surprised to find that includes 50-metre penalties. If there are lots of penalties going against the team, then the source of that problem is what is happening off the ground at training.

Everything we know about human psychology tells us that positive coaching, as opposed to coaching backwards, is consistently more effective with most people. The only difference between the most effective coaches and the rest of us is the frequency of their constructive feedback.

All you and I need to do to make the difference that we want in our players is to bump up the frequency of our constructive feedback and reduce the negative comments.

Footnote: When my sister was very young, she used to bite her nails. To discourage her, mum put duck manure on her fingers. She was forever explaining at school why her hands smelt. All that was achieved was that she was continually reminded of her problem. We coach the same way by sending the runner out with a verbal bucket of duck manure to highlight what the player already knows. So did the manure approach work? I'm not sure, but I do know my sister now enjoys a good pate.

21 ADDRESSING THE PLAYERS ON MATCH DAY

“It is thought that players can recall only up to three points from the coach’s address. At one AFL club, the players were surveyed before they ran onto the ground to assess their recall. Some 30 per cent could recall the three points, another 30 per cent or so could recall one or two points and another 30 per cent could recall things not actually raised in the pre-match address.”

Anon

Pre-match talks to footballers would have to be one of the more overrated activities in coaching, especially at junior level.

We like the ‘hot gospel’ approach with a call to remember the Kokoda Track and all it embodies, but how effective is it today and what percentage of players respond?

My own approach was heavily influenced by Terry Wheeler when he was coach of Williamstown in the then VFL. Terry used very little ‘rah-rah’ on match day on the basis that if they were not ready to play at 2pm, we were in trouble and the best approach was excellent preparation.

It is difficult for many of us to break the shackles of expectation and culture when it comes to pre-match addresses. Coaching in the country, I always felt I had to produce the inspirational address that would immediately be followed by the obligatory: “Come on boys.” I say ‘obligatory’ because in the country, the local community paid for the coach and the folk liked to feel their money was being well spent. It was also a measure of a coach’s worth – a hot gospeller was held in higher regard than the quiet, facilitator-style coach, regardless of his effectiveness.

There is research that suggests the length of impact of a motivational talk is around three minutes and probably less when people are crashing into you. Yet we, as coaches, were always looking for a theme we could use to lift the players’ performance – the Olympics, boxing matches, stories of teams that had won against the odds, etc. Very engaging to the assembled throng but really of questionable value to the players.

The club I was coaching had the opportunity to hear a pre-match address from an AFL legend to give me a break. (I had, I was assured, the full support of the committee.) He arrived at the ground and there was a great sense of excitement. He gave the players a hot gospelling, rousing, voice-straining, fist-clenching, eyes-bulging, fiercely delivered

oration that was spine-tingling. There was a tremendous roar in reply to his exhortations for a supreme effort against the old foe.

At quarter-time, the scoreline was 10 goals to our nothing. I decided to take back the reins at which point the invited coach got in his car and drive home.

I have no problem with rousing addresses, but I do have a challenge with their effectiveness, appropriateness and frequency of employment (or deployment).

For the under-12s, the pre-match address begins on Wednesday night. The boys get the team for the next game and the three target areas. We briefly talk about those areas and training is geared around those specific targets. On Friday, the themes are again highlighted and again practised – where to stand for kick-ins or manning up when they get the call.

Before the game, the target areas would be briefly raised and each player's understanding of his role and my expectations quickly covered.

Groups – backs, forwards, on-ballers – would discuss what they need to do collectively.

After the warm-up, I'd say: "Is everybody ready? This should be a good challenge. Enjoy yourselves."

The captain leads us out.

Nothing has been mentioned in the address that they are unaware of or haven't practised. If the preparation has been effective and their roles clarified, then they are generally enthusiastic and eager for the contest.

At quarter-time, the most important thing for the players is to check the whiteboard with the team for the next quarter. Everyone at every level wants to know where he is playing (and that includes AFL players).

Previously, I would go through the address and then announce the team in the last moments. Almost invariably, two or three players would want to know where they were playing, despite having been standing directly in front of you as the team was read out. I solved that problem with the whiteboard. The next quarter's team is outlined and it is the player's responsibility to find out where he is playing next. Great move.

Again, only one or two points are raised and perhaps a theme for the quarter, such as to handball off the mark more often. Importantly, any behaviours I want to promote, such as smothers or second efforts, are highlighted.

It is at half-time that our enthusiasm can really out-run our common sense with speeches taking more than five minutes. I have heard coaches speak for the entire break and, even as a spectator not under any pressure, it was difficult to recall what had been raised.

We are all trying to dress up the same message each week. Coaching in Gippsland, I used a film that had been on TV the night before – *Alfred The Great* – as my foundation. Bent slightly over, moving up and down the line and making direct eye contact, I recounted the attack on England by the Vikings in the eighth century.

I said: "When the Vikings attacked, Alfred's men defended, then launched their own attack. That's what we need to do. Defend then attack, defend then attack against this side."

There was complete silence. No shifting of feet or coughing from the players or the 40 or so spectators. No movement. Every player's attention was fixed on me. This spell-

binding moment was broken by the half-forward, who asked: “Who was this *Alford* again?”

When coaching Kilcunda Bass, I also learnt to never ask a question you didn't already know the answer to (much like in the courtroom). In response to lots of arguing with the umpires, I asked, rhetorically: “So who has ever seen an umpire change his decision?” I did not expect an answer.

“There was that umpire we had in the seconds once.”

“That's right,” someone else chipped in.

“And what about last year when ...”

Serves me right!

At half-time, three things generally happen:

1. I get around to each player and discuss what has happened and my expectations for the next half.
2. The players go into their positional groups and discuss what they need to do. This is valuable on a number of levels, not the least being some of the strategies they choose. “What are you going to do this quarter?” I asked a member of the on-ball group. The reply came back: “We have decided to get the ball before the other team.” Hard to find fault with that.
3. The boys are asked to congratulate a player who did something for the team. This is especially useful if it's very quiet in the rooms for whatever reason.

I seldom single anyone out publicly for anything other than praise and on the few occasions I have mentioned someone for not doing what was required, I regretted it immediately.

Unless we have talked about it at training, I tend not to use words or phrases that are general, such as determination, intensity, commitment and so on. If I am going to use a phrase such as, “You need to concentrate more”, it is usually offered up with a process that will assist the players. For example: “Boys, to improve your concentration, continually ask yourself this: ‘Where am I? Where is the ball? Where is my player?’”

I try not to be too clever any more. Yes, we have to put ‘sizzle’ in the same sausages each week, but I am more inclined to think it through now. “Is what I am about to say going to help in the short and long term?”

I am still haunted by the looks on the boys' faces when, in response to them looking for the easy kick in the goalsquare, I said: “You are cheats.” I don't think I could have had any more impact than if I had stuck a knife into their hearts.

On the other hand, a different approach can be useful. In one game after the boys had warmed up and were ready for *the* address, I said: “Boys, strike a muscle pose.” They all went into poses that would have made Arnold Schwarzenegger proud.

“Boys, that's impressive, but you would be better off showing your muscles out there (pointing to the field). Let's go.”

The under-14s team manager stood there looking at me with a mixture of disbelief and bemusement.

“That's all you do for the pre-match?”

“Well ...”

During any stage of the game, it is rare for the issue of winning to be raised. Usually, performance is continually assessed against the day's targets.

Post match is usually a quick one-on-one with most of the players, mainly remarking on their efforts or something I appreciated in their game.

This approach is infinitely more effective than the one I used last season when, in response to an ordinary performance and not troubling the scoreboard attendants, I said: "I see no redeeming features in that performance." There was complete silence. I regretted the comment immediately (and whenever I thought about it later). Fortunately, I was saved when one of the players asked what redeeming actually meant.

"It doesn't matter," I replied.

I know our excellent under-10s coaches provide feedback to every player publicly, which is a technique I need to become more comfortable with.

In summary ...

- Rule one. Remember it's only a game.
- Keep it short – two to three points.
- Single out players only for praise.
- Have the team changes ready. Kids find it hard to listen until they know where they are playing.
- Ask questions to check their understanding.
- On occasions, let players give the addresses.
- Allow for feedback, then provide clear direction.
- Always imagine that your comments on the boundary and at the breaks are being recorded!
- When in doubt, always refer and defer to rule one.

22 THE PYGMALION CONCEPT

“This is all bullshit. How am I supposed to coach fat, lazy kids with no skills and no motivation?”

Junior coach at an AFL Level 1 course.

At high school, the geology teacher enjoyed telling his classes on their first day what mark he thought they would achieve at the end of the year.

He genuinely believed that he could tell who would make it and who wouldn't and provide you with the actual percentage you would ultimately get. He thought that he had the power to tell the good students from the bad by just looking at them. It was a gift. In fact, this teacher had a remarkable hit rate but probably not because of his 'gift'.

The more likely explanation lies in the Pygmalion concept in psychology, which refers to the effect our personal beliefs and expectations have on the people who are allowing us to exert our influence on them.

So our starting premise as to who will make it, will determine the opportunities we provide that person, the attention and time we devote to that person and how long we will persevere with him.

This Pygmalion concept was studied more than 40 years ago in the US when a researcher tested all the students in a class then told the teacher which of the class had it and which didn't. The researcher misled the teacher. There was no test or assessment. The names were selected randomly.

The interesting thing from our point of view as coaches was that all those identified as having 'it' rose to the top of the class and stayed there. Guess how the teacher treated them? As if they had 'it'. The researcher was ultimately sued for the study.

We are definitely the Pygmalion to those we coach. All of us need to be continually mindful of not only the potential power we have, but also that the beliefs we have about individuals will cause us to treat them differently. Watch your starting premise: this player will make it, this one won't, he is a defender only, this player doesn't go in ... Once we form a view, we become selective perceivers. We tend to see only information that matches our opinion; listen only to people who agree with us.

We can be positive or negative Pygmalions. Our beliefs in how are players are – and could be – can help them realise their potential or fall away. Worse than this negative impact is that the coach can create a belief about individuals by just a casual remark regarding a player's hardness at the ball or his reluctance to tackle. This can then cause teammates to start treating him as not having 'it'.

Most of us, as parents, teachers or coaches, are very subtle in communicating our

expectations and would generally not just come out and blatantly say someone is hopeless! However, even with the best of intent, when can introduce our children, for example, as “this is the athletic one” or “this is my artistic child”, the message is clear and it is not hard to imagine the effect this can have on young minds in defining who they are and how we perceive them.

Last season, when a former AFL player attended training, I grabbed the opportunity to introduce him to my six guns. “Simon, I would like you to meet Nick. He is our captain and the most determined and hardest-training player in the team.” I did this for the top six; the lesser lights didn’t get a look in. What a wonderful opportunity missed to have built up the esteem of many in the team and to have communicated to them my faith and confidence in them.

The crucial thing is not that I thought about who to introduce, but that the idea of introducing the foot soldiers did not even enter my head.

All of us as coaches would vehemently argue that we treat our players equally, but the truth is we don’t and we won’t until we change how we see each player. It’s not that I should do less for the stars, but I need to spend more time and devote greater attention to all my players. When you really think about it, it is in these players that the greatest improvement can come.

As junior (and senior) coaches, one of our most important roles is to see the player in our care not as he currently is but as he will be as a result of our influence and effective coaching. Let go of the disruptive kid at training or the gangly youth and see him as he will be – an accountable, able player with all the traits that confidence brings.

This concept of the impact we can have on young people was rammed home to me on a number of occasions when I attended an AFL Level 1 accreditation program. To be honest, I had lost count of the number of times I’d sat next to junior coaches who, aside from not wanting to be there, were continually frustrated by the curriculum on offer.

“What is the point of this rubbish when I am coaching fat, lazy unskilled kids, most who can’t even kick let alone hit a target with their handballs?”

It is up to you. You can be a positive Pygmalion who builds people up or a negative Pygmalion who fails to assist his players to realise more of their potential.

So watch your starting premise: “This one will make it or this one won’t” or “I coached his brother and he was the same.” We will definitely sculpt our players based on our expectations of them.

It’s worth noting also that the more competitive you are in your approach, the harder it will be for you to treat all your players equally because you will be driven by necessity to devote your time and attention to those you perceive as increasing the chances of your team winning.

Finally, I heard a couple of AFL coaches interviewed some time ago on the topic of their playing lists. One said that he couldn’t be expected to be successful with the players on his list and made some remark about, “You can’t make jam from pig shit”. The other said he would like to have a few more players, but that they would be successful anyway and that he would develop the list he had.

That is the Pygmalion concept.

23 WEEKS 13 TO 15

Our performance in the past few rounds seems to have tapered off. Certainly the winning margins were narrowing. The team is not quite as settled as it was and perhaps the loss of the hard-running Nick R. through injury was having an impact on our style of play.

There was something else going on that I couldn't quite put my finger on. Every team we played now seemed to be very determined and 'pumped' for the game. There seemed to be more tagging of our players and increased use of negating tactics such as flooding.

The grounds were heavier and this didn't seem to suit us, given we had few bullocking types and were more of a mosquito fleet, as one parent observed.

Clearly, part of it was that expectations had been raised and everyone had been entertained by a remarkable style of play that had probably set a high benchmark.

However, lately, the game didn't quite flow and we had to work very hard. I thought it might be that we were so used to kicking goals that we had perhaps got into the habit of searching for the easy kick near the goals.

Then it hit me.

We were undefeated and on top of the ladder. Every team now set itself for us and, no doubt was being primed for the challenge of taking on the top team. Other teams and coaches were probably relishing the opportunity to test themselves, their skills and their tactics against the clear leader.

This was foreign territory for us. Over the past few years, it would have been us setting ourselves for the contest against the perennially top sides. Now we were them!

I raised the issue with the players. "Boys, do you know what is drawn on your backs? A target. Every team is hunting us." (Surprisingly, a few boys took the observation literally and grabbed the collar of their jumpers and pulled them forward to look at the 'target' on their backs!)

"That ends now. This week, we take the initiative back. This week, let us be the hunters.

"We can do this by being determined, working together and playing our game.

"Let us play to our best and if any team plays better, good luck to them. You *should hope* that they do play to their very best to really test us. We wouldn't want it any other way."

I think this constant pressure is probably one of the reasons the boys are so mentally tough and, unlike the coach, don't panic. Even last week, when a side kicked the first three goals, there were no signs that they were flustered. They stuck to the game plan and scored 12 of the next 14 goals.

"A team ... (once at the top) ... is closely scrutinised and everyone wants to defeat it. There are no easy games ... They are never underestimated and, indeed, every underdog pulls out their best shots against them. I believe this made us tougher and accustomed us to playing under pressure."

Ric Charlesworth, *Staying at the Top*, Pan Macmillan, 2004.

Later I said: “We have three choices (in the face of this challenge). One, we can step aside, lessen our efforts and take it easy. Two, we can continue playing as we are and we may or may not improve or have the year we would like. Three, we can step up our efforts, take training to another level and improve our teamwork.”

I put it to a vote and the selection was option three. (Whew!)

“There are six training sessions before the finals, so let’s do everything well, take no short cuts and support each other. Let’s not have any regrets like: “If only I had trained harder.”

Training on Friday nights at this stage consisted of a 10-minute warm-up, which comprised zigzag-running between cones, stretching and a few fun physical games.

We would always work on simple kicking drills, which I attempted to emphasise by suggesting that good kicks are rewarded on the scoreboard and that our goals in the game are the direct result of several pieces of good play. The goals against us are usually the result of at least four or five mistakes. (Ric Charlesworth, the former Olympic hockey coach, calls this “the chain of events”.)

Part two of training would revolve around moving the ball quickly with the emphasis on teamwork and handball. To enhance communication, we would, at times, perform drills with players not allowed to talk but only point to where they wanted the ball delivered or slap their chest to indicate they wanted the ball.

One parent arrived at training during one of these silent moments and couldn’t help himself. “Surely you should be encouraging loud calls for the ball not silence.”

“Wait a moment.”

After a few minutes, I would blow the whistle to signal to the boys to launch into “unparalleled noise”. A cacophony of caterwauling, screams and shrieks from the boys would follow. We called it the non-verbal communication exercise. (Courtesy of Stan Alves.)

Actually, I think people would be surprised by the number of times we divided into two groups and effectively just did kick to kick. Sometimes, it would be a theme night, such as “Tonight, practise your torpedoes.” (Or the banana, the long kick and, my favourite, the drop kick).

Part three would almost invariably be an exercise that involved being front and centre, reading the flight of the ball, shepherding, foot passing, peeling off and goalkicking.

We rarely do match practice because I believe it suits only the better, bigger players and, generally, it’s a rugby maul. (I have never had a request for match practice from the less talented players).

A parent provided the answer when he suggested that in match practice, no player should be able to score twice, thereby forcing all players to be involved and for teams to think more about what they were doing.

A rule I stole from school football is that at every ball-up, there needs to be at least one-third of the team behind the centre line so that packs are minimised. (I would like to see that rule piloted in the under-10s).

I have been carefully raising the nature of finals football and what will happen.

I mentioned to the boys that I had just attended a 25th reunion of the Kilcunda Bass Football Club's 1980 premiership (none since which is a shame). I told them that there was something special about a premiership and that there would always be a connection between them if they won and that they would talk about it for years. I don't know if this conversation had any impact, but I wanted to start the finals conversation, which I had deliberately avoided for some time.

Chatting in the clubrooms after training this week, someone remarked that one reason we had been so successful was our strategy of going straight down the centre. John, the team manager, and I looked at each other for a moment and both said: "That's not true."

I have never actually told the boys to kick down the centre. This hadn't occurred to me until that observation. Really, I didn't mind how they moved the ball or where they took it. I think I just thought they should do what they thought best and that I was probably tactically deficient.

Something remarkable happened in the game this week. The conditions were very difficult with a howling crosswind making one side of the ground the definite defensive side. Before the game, I told the boys that when they gained possession on the defensive side, they should kick into the central corridor, regardless of whether there was anyone there.

"Boys, have a look around you. There is a lot of talent around you. You kick it into the centre and we will get there. Trust your teammates. We will get there."

And they did.

I have never seen that before. Executing a strategy based on trust without any rehearsal at training. I was very proud to be their coach that day.

One of the older players gave the address at quarter-time, "Our intensity is not there. We need to lift it," he said.

We have discussed words such as intensity and desire at training based on the use of 'desire indicators'. I put the question to the boys: "How would you know if we were showing great desire?"

The answers came back: "Lots of tackling. First in."

The boys complete the season with emphatic wins and miss out by one point on inflicting the heaviest defeats on every team.

Everyone's attention has moved to the finals.

Footnote

There was another notable incident in the game just described. Coming off the ground, 'Denzel Washington' said: "One of the water 'boys' ran past me and said, 'Your team might be winning, but you are fat and playing like jackshit'."

What possesses an adult of about 40 to make a personal attack on an 11-year-old?

24 WEEK 16 – THE SECOND SEMI-FINAL

*“Boys, I held an Olympic gold medal in my hand recently.
You can’t buy one, so how do you get one?”
A hand shot up. “You have to earn one.”
“What does that mean for us?”
“If we want to be premiers, we will have to earn it.”*

Conversation with the players in the lead up to the finals.

Training this week was well executed as usual with the drills emphasising the importance of teamwork and being in front. The number of on-lookers was increasing as the excitement of being in the finals took hold.

The discussion points revolved around what happened in finals (which was foreign territory for all the players). I wanted to give them some level of expectation about the nature of finals and nip in the bud any thinking along the lines that we had already won.

I said: “In finals, you will run further than ever before. You will tackle and be tackled more often. The intensity will be greater. The excitement, challenge and satisfaction will be potentially greater.”

I briefly raised the “Coach Carter” idea in the usual way. “Boys, I think you have had a terrific year and you deserve to be premiers. Do you think the other team is going to let you win because I think you deserve to?”

A chorus of “nos” came back at me.

“To play well, what do we need to do?”

“Be determined.”

“Get in front.”

“Try harder.”

They trotted off to the next drill with a few cries of “Come on” and “No shortcuts.”

Sunday, July 30 – game day

The boys arrived early and most were changed, running on the spot and stretching 40 minutes before the game was due to start. I was a little concerned that they would be flat by the time we started, if not completely worn out.

The thing about finals is to keep the routine as normal as possible, however, for juniors, that is difficult. Unlike the home-and-away season, in which a game finishes and the next starts immediately, there is a 25 to 30-minute gap between games. This is compounded by the fact that the teams that have completed their game are unwilling (not unreasonably) to wait outside for that amount of time.

I tried to keep it as low-key as possible and organised for the boys to do their preparation on the ground. Even so, it was a longer than their usual warm-up.

After what seemed like an eternity, I brought them together. “Boys, just do what you have all season. That’s what has got you to this final. In front, in first and run and run.”

Hands come in for a final stirring cry of “Moonee Valley!” and off they trot to their positions.

We are kicking against the breeze, which never worries the boys because their style of running the ball is very effective into the wind. I always leave the decision on which way to kick to the captain as I can’t see the point of being captain and having little authority.

We are playing Hadfield, who have had a terrific season, losing just one game (to us). I’m pleased we are playing this team, not through any thought of over-confidence, but because I like the way they play football and they have a lot of character. It will be a great contest.

The siren sounds to start the match.

Almost immediately, the ball is in Hadfield’s forward line. Frankie takes a great mark running with the flight in the back pocket – a feat he manages more often than anyone else. We riskily switch straight across the face of the goals to a player who is covered. Turnover and goal.

The boys continue to attack, trying to switch and, as usual, don’t panic.

Some of the younger boys seem a little overwhelmed and are second to the ball. Our on-ballers are playing well and Tim, at centre half-back, is playing his best game of the season. Our leading goalkicker is stunned in a collision, but doesn’t want to come off and re-enforces the point with a goal.

At half-time, the rotations continue and I move Darcy from the backline to the wing.

The third quarter continues to be a tussle, but we are drawing away. The ‘inspired’ move of Darcy to the wing is giving us plenty of run. We continue to run the ball with players often running and bouncing 30 or 40 metres. Robbie takes the ball on the wing and is protected by two shepherding players and, upfield, John clears a way for him. He gets to the forward pocket before being overwhelmed. A 60-metre run.

I hear parents behind me expressing their concerns: “We are trying to do too much.” “They are handballing too much.”

I find these comments a little frustrating and say to no one in particular: “It’s what’s got us here.” I am probably a little sensitive as it was my son who attempted a Manassa-type run.

I have four players who consistently carry the ball 60 metres. I don’t know of any coach who wouldn’t encourage that.

Hadfield is adrift by a few goals now and its full-back is really stopping us from being further ahead.

I have two strategies to deal with his dominance. First, do nothing. Hadfield needs to kick goals to win and if this boy stays at full-back, regardless of his dominance, it’s hard to see that happening. Second, tag the full-back with a big forward. I don’t think so. (The best strategy, of course, would be not to kick it up in the air or kick it to our own players.)

The boys continue to play their game and have not panicked under the pressure.

The final siren sounds – 6.6 to 3.1. The boys come in quickly and we are surrounded by

parents and spectators. There are people here I have never seen and people who I think are watching their first game this season. Such is the excitement of finals football at any level.

A quick “Well done!” and we walk over to congratulate Hadfield. Hadfield looks disappointed, but as you would expect from these boys, they’re gracious and shake hands as they file past. I congratulate a few of them on their game as our boys march off singing the club song.

I catch up with Hadfield’s coach, Paul, and we have a quick chat. Both agree it was a great contest. If these boys represent the sort of player at Hadfield, it must be a good club, and if their coach is indicative of the type of person at the club, then you would be happy to have your kids coached at Hadfield.

In the rooms, there is lots of back-slapping and laughter and a throng of people that a senior club would be proud of. People are literally struggling to get into the rooms to be involved.

I say something like well done and suggest that this mini-season is not yet completed. The team manager hands me the awards, which surprises me because I didn’t know we were giving out awards and I hadn’t thought about it.

Our ruckman gets the main award, then a few of the boys who played their best games for the year, and Robbie. There are rousing cheers for all the names, although I thought the cheer for Robbie was a little muted. I might be a little sensitive on this.

Personally, I think it would have been better to have no awards and just go quickly through every player’s game.

Sunday night finds me somewhat subdued and flat. We are in the Grand Final. We won and yet it is not enough. A friend at the club once said to me: “It’s not that you win, it’s how you win.” Therein is the source of my melancholy – I didn’t give all the players a fair go. Some boys played only half a game although I had planned, in advance, to give all players a minimum of three quarters. Under pressure, I kept the older players on the longest to enhance our chances of winning.

“What a hypocrite,” I think to myself. I am under no obligation, according to the playing guidelines in finals, to play all for an equal amount of time. The issue is, does the needs of the majority and the club’s need for success outweigh the individual’s rights in a finals game?

The answer is ...

At training on the Wednesday, a parent approaches me. For some reason, I have already anticipated this. “My son was crying when he didn’t receive an award after the game.” “Yes, I thought he played well. In my pocket, I have a medallion to hand to your son at training for his terrific game.”

Clearly, this is not enough.

“We might not have won the game if it wasn’t for him.”

This is a bridge too far for me.

“He played well, but we would have won anyway,” I reply with conviction. I go on to point out that the awards are more a means of encouragement and are actually rotated so that all the boys share in the pizza and videos. I point out the dangers of players tying their worth to pizzas.

Privately, I am annoyed with myself that we have got this far into the season and some parents are still unaware of the basis for the awards. Next year, what I will do is ...

“People, watch your actions not your words.” (Lou Tice, CEO The Pacific Institute and a 20-year mentor to me).

*“Simon, you are a biological miracle.
You are the only player out there
who is playing without a heart.”*

Coach in the Amateurs delivering honest and direct feedback.

25 WEEK 18 – THE GRAND FINAL

The lead-up

With the weekend free, many of the players want to watch the preliminary final, Hadfield v West Coburg. Hadfield had defeated West Coburg twice this season and was certainly carrying the weight of expectation.

Hadfield controlled the first half, but couldn't score enough and was outplayed in the final quarter. Our players were a bit taken aback. West Coburg looked bigger, were certainly better marks than us and had three excellent on-ballers. A little self-doubt crept in. It was a nice wake-up call. Anything can happen in finals.

Lots of people stopped to tell me about all the teams they knew of that had gone through the season only to lose the final game. Thank you.

At training on Wednesday, Scott Lucas from the Essendon Football Club, attended and spoke to the boys about finals football and what to expect. He reinforced what we had already discussed: "You will run further, be under more pressure, chase and be chased more often, and if you want to have a great performance, you will need to run when you are tired, tackle when you are sore and chase when you really don't feel like it."

There were lots of helpers on both nights, which was good, and we concentrated on switching, front and centre, second efforts and moving the ball quickly. We did no contact work to avoid the risk of injury and we did a surprising amount of end-to-end kick-to-kick. I just wanted them to kick the ball as often as possible in between some of the moving-the-ball drills.

I also felt fitness shouldn't be an issue, although privately, I would have preferred not to have a week's break as I couldn't see any upside at this level.

I make the usual speech at the end. "Look after yourselves on Saturday. No skateboarding, ice-skating, base-jumping or hand-to-hand combat!" Some had chosen not to play in their usual Saturday basketball matches.

We wrapped up training on time and I went through how the day would unfold. I mentioned that at the local sports shop, I had seen the medals to be handed out to the premiers and the runners-up.

"What did they look like?" someone asked.

"The premiership medal was red and looked great."

"What about the other one?"

"I can't remember, but I did ask if I could buy one, and you know what the sales guy said?" (They are awake to this line of thinking now). "No. You have to earn it," they chorused.

"Before we go, thank you for this year. Whatever happens, it has been a privilege coaching you and I am proud to have been your coach. A group of boys like you comes along once every five years. Look forward to this Sunday. It should be a great challenge.

And that was it. No big finish. Everyone just moved off.

After a while, a group of them started wrestling. I kept an eye on them as it was very physical. The rugby scrum of wrestling continued so I headed out of the clubrooms to put an end to it. (I think every parent knows the signs when someone is about to cross

the line.) By the time I got to the group, a player was on his hands and knees with blood pouring from his nose. To be honest, I was more angry than sympathetic.

“He copped an elbow,” someone volunteered.

“Didn’t we just go over this? Look after yourselves?”

No response. If a picture is really worth a thousand words, the boys were in no doubt regarding my thoughts about this. I led Robbie into the rooms while trying to stem the steady flow of blood.

Match day

Gale-force winds are lashing Melbourne. We are playing at Keilor Village, so the winds are reduced to just ‘strong’. The effect is that one side of the ground will definitely be the defensive side.

There is a big crowd at the game because there are a number of teams playing finals, including our under-10s who have gone through the season undefeated and won their first-ever premiership. The players go through a light warm-up and the mood is controlled with light banter punctuating the preparation.

Before we go onto the ground for the actual warm-up and for the presentation of the league best and fairest, I use the questioning approach: “When do we switch?” “Where do you stand on the backline?”

If I was expecting crisp, purposeful, insightful answers I was sorely disappointed, and if I was expecting the parents to be infused with confidence listening to the coach leading the players to the promised land that never happened either. The boys’ answers were confused and scattered.

I realised they were more nervous than they had let on and feeling the weight of expectation and pressure that comes from going through the season undefeated. This was foreign territory for every one of them. None had ever played in a final before this season.

Nick led the team out and through the banner. The boys went through a warm-up using the balls and were then lined up to watch the presentation to the league B&F and runner-up. Robbie is awarded the runner-up medal, which is, aside from parental pride, strangely comforting if only that it indicates many others thought he had a great year too. (All right, I am a little sensitive!)

I remind the boys to just play the way they have played all year and remember what got them to this spot.

Everyone is set.

I don’t know if Nick won the toss, but we are kicking against the wind. The umpires bounce the ball. What?! I can’t believe it. The players have no experience in rucking to a ball bouncing 10 metres in the strong wind. I am gob-smacked. What on earth possessed them to bounce the ball in the under-12s?

West Coburg starts strongly and immediately we are under pressure. Its on-ballers have had 12 kicks in the first six minutes and only their failure to score is keeping the game even. Fergus, although an on-baller, has placed himself in the backline on his own volition and, with Tim, is repelling the attacks.

Already, there is a pattern in the play. We will switch to either side while West Coburg is

playing only the defensive side and is very disciplined about it. Although under extreme pressure, the players have retained their usual composure.

Two of our players collide and are on the ground for a few moments. Robbie is one of them. I think that at least it's his own players who are hitting and running through him!

West Coburg scores, followed by a scrambled goal by James. At quarter-time, there is nothing in it.

I can't remember what I actually said at the break. Mostly, I just moved from player to player.

Second quarter

The game continues to be an arm wrestle between the backlines, though now we are starting to launch attacks into the forward line. The strategy of playing only to one side is coming unstuck as we have the biggest player on the ground and the best mark.

Marcus has thoughtfully positioned himself in the area they need to go through and is not only stopping their drive but also launching attacks with long bombs into the forward zone.

Frankie kicks an inspiring goal followed by a remarkable goal by West Coburg's Brandon Ellis. At half-time, there is still nothing in it.

Half-time

The boys have been steady and have, as usual, not panicked, although some of the younger players are overwhelmed by the intensity. Sam O, who looked tired and jaded on the Friday night, has been fantastic on the half-back line.

The boys go into their groups to discuss the game and what they need to do next. I watch a parent who has joined one of the groups and is expressing his views loudly. No time for diplomacy this time. "Excuse me, X, but this is for the boys."

"Sorry." He steps back.

Third quarter

The momentum seems to be swinging our way. The on-ballers are playing closer, Nick is a road-block on the half-back line and Matt is playing a great game up forward putting in second and third efforts. West Coburg is having difficulty scoring against a backline that has had fewer than 16 points a game kicked against it through the season. Another goal to both teams and the siren sounds.

Three-quarter-time

Either side can win. I organise the rotations and walk out to the huddle. It is remarkably quiet. Both the parents and boys are silent. I check the scoreboard to see if we really are ahead. It's 3.2 to 2.2.

I get around to all the players and then clap my hands, "Boys, it all comes down to this last 15 minutes ..." Whatever else I said after this, I can't recall. Many parents said later it was an inspirational address. That's a worry. It's my experience that what turns parents on is not usually appropriate for kids. I finish with: "Whatever happens I am proud of you."

Last quarter

West Coburg needs goals – at least two – and continues to play just the one side, which suits us. We are getting on top in general play with no scoreboard result. In a sickening collision, Marcus and Robbie clash heads. Play stops for what seems like a couple of minutes. With no time-on, some supporters implore the umpires to get the boys off the ground. The boys recover and the game continues.

Everyone is contributing and their endeavour continues unabated. It is hard not to be impressed by both sides' persistence.

Robbie kicks a goal on the run and we edge ahead. John gains possession and cleverly holds the ball, waiting for leads to come. I shout to Marcus to run into the forward line, which he does. John waits, floats the ball perfectly for him and Marcus doesn't let him down – a towering mark and a great goal.

We are now three goals up and controlling the play. Some of the backline players are getting cold and are starting to jog on the spot – a good sign. I send the full-back, Pagito, to the forward line to try to steal another goal.

West Coburg scores again, but this generates little enthusiasm because they know that time has run out. From behind, I hear the time-keepers start the countdown: "Ten, nine, eight" The parents around me join in. Now the players on the bench are also counting down and getting louder as the numbers get lower.

The siren sounds and the players on the bench, the parents, and the club officials race onto the ground, arms in the air. People are shaking my hand. There's a great pack of dancing, jumping players and some of the boys who are usually very quiet are hugging each other. A few have taken off their jumpers and are waving them above their heads a la 'Sheedy'.

I'm not sure what I'm thinking at the time. Relief. Is it over, is it really over? I check the scoreboard one more time just in case. (Later, people say that I looked dazed.) I leave the boys to celebrate and begin to gather up the equipment. There is nothing glamorous about coaching juniors!

The boys go over to shake hands with the West Coburg players, many of whom they go to school with.

I chat with their coach, Dale, and he is really pleased with their performance and the game itself. It was played in a great spirit and was a terrific contest. (Later, I catch up with Dale and, in classic achievement style, he doesn't complain about the umpires, our team being bigger or the weather, but talks about what they learnt from the game and the specific need to teach their players the skill of switching.)

The premierships medals are handed out and the boys pose in true AFL style for a team photo – fingers up to indicate they are No. 1. (I point out to one boy that it's not the middle finger that is used to indicate No. 1!).

After more photos, they march off singing the club song and in the packed rooms I go through every player's contribution and affirm again how privileged I felt to have been their coach.

As I walk to the car, frequently stopping to talk to parents and either congratulating or thanking people, I reflect on an amazing year:

- A great improvement in the players and as a team.
- Minor premiers.
- Premiers.
- A best-on-ground in the Grand Final.
- A runner-up in the league B&F.
- Leading goalkicker in the competition.
- A style of play that was fantastic to watch and remarkable for under-12s.
- A level of training that a senior club would be proud of.
- Fantastic memories.

Did I ever think at the start of the season we would be this successful? Never entered my head.

Did I think that we could play a style of football that would be both effective and entertaining? Absolutely.

“What I will try to achieve more than anything else (as a coach) is that when they (the players) walk in the place and then go through the place, they come out a better person.”

Michael Malthouse in *What Makes Teams Work*,
Paul Bourke and David Parkin, Macmillan, 2004

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS (OR LESSONS LEARNT THE HARD WAY)

Managing parental expectations

Hand out the guidelines to the parents before the season and insist it be signed.

Reinforce this with an overview at a break in the first game.

All handouts sent home should have a slip that must be signed and returned to indicate they have been received.

Organise a duties roster for parents.

Player development

Players should complete a self-assessment form at the start of the year indicating their view of their skills and areas in which they want to improve.

Take the time at the start of the year to get the skills right, even if it means handballing for half of the session.

Monitor their fitness with a five-minute time trial at the start of the season and another six weeks later.

A minimum of eight players should play on the ball each game. No player should play more than three quarters on the ball.

No player should play fewer than three quarters.

Explain and walk out the field position.

Culture

Set the standard at the start regarding training uniforms.

Set up a process so that the boys are responsible for their own warm-up.

Ensure the players know the names of all the helpers and regularly have them appreciate them in some form.

Players to be responsible to gather the equipment at the end of training.

Addressing the players

Emphasis is on the will to excel, improve and the will to win.

Keep it short.

Single out players in public only for praise.

Have the junior coordinator monitor you and provide feedback.

Use lots of words like contest, challenge, test etc.

Questions for the junior coaches to discuss as a group

What will be our consistent approach to correcting skill errors?

What expectations will we communicate regarding:

- Training attire?
- Club rooms?

- Gathering of equipment?
- Cleaning up the rooms?

Will we have a consistent approach to pre-match and half-time addresses?

To what extent will the players have responsibility for their own warm-up?

What will we require of every team with regard to warm-ups and cool-downs?

What will be our consistent method of providing feedback to players?

When we lose, how should it be handled?

At what level and for what reasons may a player be removed from the ground?

How will we communicate our goals to parents and manage their expectations?

Do we provide the same attention and opportunity to every player?

How will we manage the star players?

How will we monitor ourselves?

What are our developmental needs? And, most importantly, what are our priorities for the juniors in order of importance?

THANKS

My thanks to the under-12 E coach, Dominic C., who was a wonderful support and displayed great patience when, after asking what the next drill was, I would say something vague like, "the kicking one." Dom also had the uncanny ability when I introduced a new drill to observe: "You've been to another coaching course, haven't you?" Dom's team had a great year and finished third.

Runner Tony R. not only offered good advice and often assisted at training, but had the ability to let me know with one doubtful look when I was about to cross a line.

Team manager John R. organised everything so I just had to swan in and coach and was always a good sounding board.

Junior president Peter F. was also a great sounding board, particularly in the finals, and was always supportive and positive.

Phil C., the junior coordinator, was forced to weather a weekly tirade against the under-16s and was like all the committee members – a tireless worker.

Jenny O. did so much behind the scenes and has a theory as to the location of the lost jumpers.

Meriti R. ensured we fielded registered teams and attended to all those thankless tasks such as league meetings.

Paul C. was not only very encouraging throughout the season, but was also the tactician in the Grand Final.

Pako, Nick, Frank and Frank – thanks for your support and for 'volunteering' for all those roles that ensure the game is played.

To the parents who were always there and offered great support, a special thanks.

To anyone I have inadvertently left out, that is entirely the fault of Sarina as she proofread this for errors – both grammatical and of omission.

Finally, to the boys, for providing such wonderful memories and for allowing me the privilege of being their coach – thank you!

26 ANOTHER SEASON

Preamble

It has been some years since I wrote about the Moonee Valley under-12s and my experiences as a coach. There has been a great deal of feedback on the concepts and approaches I discussed and many people were keen to share stories of their own.

An under-16 coach told me he once arrived at training to find his charges had designed and apparently successfully engineered a rocket launcher and were happily propelling lemons into neighbouring houses. A Tasmanian coach rang to inform me that he had read my book and had come to the conclusion that I was a charlatan. I commented that charlatan was an underused word like comeuppance and asked for an example. He replied that the book was “all smoke and mirrors” and the spiel of a snake oil salesman. Again I asked for an example to which he replied it all seemed a con. No real common ground so we left it there with my observation that the word charlatan shouldn't be exclusively used on *A Current Affair*.

It is still difficult for many, given the culture that has developed in junior sport, to grasp that there is a difference between wanting to win and needing to win.

What you will see on any given Sunday are borderline bullies who hide behind words like teamwork, commitment, accountability and discipline to visit all manner of sins upon the losing team and the hapless individual, which if repeated in the workplace would result at best in counselling or more likely a visit from Dyson, Dyson & Sons (a mythical legal firm).

I am more convinced than ever that the cause of the over-training of juniors, abuse of umpires, the poor treatment of the “lesser lights” and the tendency to focus on only those players who will bring us the success we crave is the result of competitive thinking.

Having said that, there are a tremendous number of highly effective coaches around who are what the AFL would call the unsung heroes. I was taken by a couple of Sydenham Hillside coaches this year, who talked like educators to the under-12s and treated the players with dignity and respect, and Greg Sharpe, a junior coach at St Marys, who after the game started, headed off to get a cup of tea causing a parent to ask: “Where are you going?”

“To get a cup of tea.”

“What about the game?”

“The boys know what to do,” Greg replied.

In this postscript, I am going to discuss how the team developed, some of the issues and incidents that transpired and will ruminate on culture, leadership and competitive thinking. For a big finish, I will discuss what the Greek philosopher Plato would think about junior coaching and the role coaches should play.

Pre-season

As usual, we are informed that the grounds are effectively closed because of their poor condition. So we start looking for a park, block of land, soccer field, to use and this time

settle on the BBQ area on the other side of the creek/open drain. It is about the size of a house block with only a few trees. The downside is the steep runoff to the creek which naturally causes players to disappear over the edge chasing the ball – something that happens often enough for the club to review the fine print regarding our liability. With the closure of grounds, everyone becomes a spotter for a training venue. There is an often-repeated belief by some of the older members that a mythical park exists between the freeway and the housing that has an excellent surface, doesn't appear on any map and could be our own Shangri-La. After much effort, I located what I hoped would be our own Eden which turned out to be a small uneven terrace with a heady mixture of broken glass, used condoms and freeway rubbish.

Every so often, we take a chance and train on the adjacent soccer ground to play touch football. The club bought touch football Velcro belts with the three tags to avoid any tackling and make it more challenging, although kids don't tackle or dive since the drought took hold. Most prefer to take the ball on the half volley rather than risk a gravel rash by diving. I like the process of touch football, particularly the way it requires the boys to switch, defend, look left and right, be in position to receive the next ball and make good decisions. You cannot use the long bomb in touch football so we play a surprising amount and it works well.

I contacted the local hockey club to let them know that we would be training on their field before they started their training.

“That will cost you \$66 per hour.”

“Sorry?”

“You will have to pay to use our facilities.”

However, the \$300 or so we spent was worth it, given hockey fields are perfect for many game-sense drills.

After four years, I wasn't sure I should coach again. I know some clubs have a three-year policy after which you must work with a different group of players. Some parents like this approach whereas others said they thought it taxed the coaching resources of clubs to the point they felt their kids had been coached less effectively. Some within the club, with good intent (I think), felt other kids should have the benefit of my experience and style. Some thought a different voice after four years might prove valuable to the boys (again, I am fairly sure, with good intent).

I suppose the question we need to answer as coaches, is why am I doing this? Am I just being selfish by hanging on to an excellent group of players? An Australian cricket coach resigned on the basis he personally felt he couldn't meet the criteria he believed were vital for effective coaching with integrity. I will paraphrase and put my own spin on this criteria, but basically, if you cannot answer yes to EVERY one of the following questions, you shouldn't be coaching:

1. Do the players still listen to me and respect me?
2. Are they still improving?
3. Do I still have the passion?
4. Am I still growing and developing?
5. Do I still make a difference?
6. Are the players better people for having been coached by me?

There is one more question that emerges, based on your answers to those questions. During the year, I became a little frustrated and irritable and felt I couldn't answer yes to all of the above which led me to ask: am I prepared to reinvent myself as a coach? I answered yes and radically changed my approach at training.

Just on the fourth question, it really comes down to a credibility issue. As coaches, every time we open our mouth, in a real sense, the players are looking at us and mentally saying: "If I do what you are saying will I become more like you?"

They are watching our actions more so than our words and so if we, as coaches, are not growing or developing, why should kids follow us or even listen? It is the difference between doing a Level 1 or 2 coaching course to get the certificate or to learn something new that you can apply.

Keep in mind credibility is not in our hands but their hands. We cannot just turn up and claim to be credible. The players decide that. In fact, kids are very good at checking your coaching credibility with a series of not so subtle questions such as:

"Did you play football yourself? Were you any good?"

"Have you ever coached before? Did you win?"

However, there is a lot to credibility if you are consistent, and do what you say you will do. And if you are personally growing, changing and can be relied upon, you are most of the way there.

I emphasised throughout pre-season that training time is "precious time" (which I stole from UCLA basketball coaching legend John Wooden). We never trained for more than 70 minutes. Everything we did was to be done crisply and with purpose. I get frustrated at times when I am watching some coaches conducting training and see the amount of time wasted. Equally frustrating is hearing of coaches training juniors for two hours.

In terms of the length of pre-season, it is hard to justify the under-10s training longer than three to four weeks before the first game, under-12s within five weeks and under-14s within six weeks of the first game. It is mind-numbing to hear of clubs who have started junior training in late January or even in November!

Given that pre-season and school holidays often coincide (and if I had the afternoon off), training on Wednesday would start at 2pm. For a while, we felt like we were professionals, training, retiring to the clubrooms for discussion then returning to the field. We did this later at Windy Hill and then again at Arden St. It was a great thrill for everyone to train at an AFL venue. Almost all players turned out.

The early start was important because, as a group, we needed to decide what our trademarks would be. We came up with the following, which developed from a sketch outline at our first attempt.

What we want to be known for and seen as:

- Skilful
- Underestimated
- Fast runners and movers of the ball
- Courageous
- Team players
- Hard to beat
- Relentless
- Passionate
- Intimidating
- Disciplined
- Good citizens (my input)

Our behaviours and approach at training:

- Enthusiastic
- Slick
- Disciplined
- Communicating
- Determined to improve
- Hard trainers
- Always encouraging
- Talkative

These trademarks became very important during the year when things were not going well (or were) because I could bring out these goals and strategies and ask how we were tracking against them. It was my strategy to keep the accountability with the players. I did intervene and veto one proposal that we wanted to be seen as “fully sick”.

It was also useful during games to trot out the club’s little whiteboard I had written them on. Given the trademarks were largely of their own design, I think it was more effective. And certainly removed was the “these are the coach’s goals not mine” plank.

This theme of player accountability crossed over to training as I tried to reduce the ‘witches hat’ mentality all of us have allowed to develop to the point that kids mindlessly jog through to the next hat, wait a minute before it was their turn and not even pick up a ball at their feet if it was not their turn. I started by placing tackle bags and/or had parents roll or toss a ball to anyone arriving at the station. From there, I organised a different exercise that would go at right angles from the first so that the ball could come from any direction and the task changed based on where you ended up. I explained that in a game the ball comes from anywhere and that our training should reflect that. I told them Stan Alves said good training should look chaotic.

Often after the introduction of a new exercise, I would ask: “Boys, if good training should look chaotic, how are we doing?”

“Terrific ... pretty close,” was some of the response. I chose to take this as praise, not sarcasm, but was never keen to delve further.

Style of play

What will it look like when we are playing well?

- Players are running all over the ground to assist and to support.
- Everyone is selfless and prepared to sacrifice their own game for the team.
- The forwards are leading hard and often and creating space.
- Everyone tackles well and smothers frequently.
- When we have the ball, players peel off and defenders stream down the ground.
- We are disciplined in our stoppage set-ups and forward strategies.
- Everyone knows their role.
- The opposition have trouble getting the ball out of their backline because of our pressure.
- Our switching is devastating and our movement of the ball into the key is causing havoc.
- Our second and third efforts are demoralising the other team.
- We are talking constantly and communicating to each other.
- When we have the ball, all players are in attacking mode.
- When they have the ball, everyone from full-forward back will defend.
- When the ball is free, we are in first.
- We make good decisions and will wait if required for the right option or a designated kicker to sweep past.

We spent time on what it would look like when we were playing well after I heard an AFL coach say they usually know why they lose but it is less clear why they have won. I wanted to emphasise that we would have a distinct style and game-plan.

The boys also developed forward strategies which became known as Plan A, B, C, D, E, which dictated where forwards would stand in different scenarios. They also had a Plan F, which meant the coach had run out of ideas and they should do what they think best. I didn't have the courage to ask what the 'F' in Plan F stood for. As you might have already guessed, I am big on never asking a question you don't want to hear the answer to.

We have bought a canvas with a football field painted on it. The mat measures around six metres by three metres and, although heavy, is infinitely better and safer than a few years ago when I would mark out the road with witches hats. The mat is a great tool for explaining positions, strategy or just where to stand.

It was particularly useful in stepping out the style of play I wanted and for demonstrating what I called the "balance of probability". Generally, we coach that there are three phases in the game: we have the ball, they have the ball, or the ball is in dispute.

It has struck me that the modern game has become reactionary, so I was encouraging the players to watch for cues to make a judgment call rather than wait. For example, if it was likely we would take possession, on the balance of probability, we should start peeling off, or if it was probable that the other side would, we should start looking for the player to cover in the most dangerous spot. The boys thought that if Nick Riewoldt was going for the ball one-out, the probability would be that nine times out of 10 he would

gain possession, so they should start making position for that outcome. The general rule we used to support the balance of probability, which we took from former Collingwood star Gavin Brown, was that if you thought you could make a difference to the contest, then you should leave your player.

During games, the mat was also useful to explain at a break what was happening or not happening and, if nothing else, at least gave the appearance of competence, although you can't fool all the kids all the time.

We did spend a lot of time practising movement of the ball. To demonstrate one aspect of what I wanted from them, one night I called for two volunteers, with one to lead and the other to defend. With the ball in my hands and everyone else watching, the forward started leading, dropping back, leading again with the defender hot on his heels but still I didn't kick it. Eventually, the forward led with less conviction and the defender gave up completely and just stood in the goalsquare staring at me. With a feeling of smugness at the profound point I was making, I turned to the group and asked them what they had learnt from the exercise, then mentally stepped back to wallow in their observations of my genius.

I waited. Complete silence. Eventually, one player offered his observation.

"Nothing."

Someone else chimed in: "Never volunteer?"

Finally someone with enough experience of my style and smart enough to affirm the coach said, "Keep moving and eventually the defender will give up."

Thank you.

Years of conditioning at school and at sporting clubs leads players to say what you want to hear or not say anything.

Footnote

One night, we trained at Arden St and, for what seemed like the first time in ages, it rained! A player 15 metres or so in front of a group would kick a low skimming pass to a leading player who would have to slide or dive for the mark. It was meant to be a "filler" drill while I organised the full ground drill, but the boys loved being able to dive and slide for the first time in a few years so it continued for 15 minutes. They would have happily continued for the rest of the night.

"We are going to rehearse".

Adelaide coach Neil Craig discussing the next Crows training session.

"I always thought we had a successful year if we were better at the end than we were at the start."

Bob Dwyer, Wallabies World Cup coach.

"I slept like a baby when I was coaching St Kilda. Every two hours I would wake up crying."

Tim Watson replying to a question regarding the stresses of AFL coaching.

“If youse kids don’t stop mucking around we will run all night. I am warning you. I don’t mind running. It’s up to you.”

A frustrated coach to a group of under-10s.

“You are in the under-14s now. This is adult cricket. Some of you won’t bowl this year. Some of you won’t bat. You will be picked on stats. You hear a lot about it’s not whether you win or lose it’s how you play the game. Well that’s bullshit.”

It must have come as a surprise to many of the players that under-14s is adult cricket.

“You know it’s amazing that they can put a man on the moon but none of you can hit a f..... target from 15 metres.”

A frustrated AFL coach lamenting the kicking skills of his players at training.

“If you boys keep making mistakes like this at training they will come back to haunt you like a bad girlfriend.”

An AFL player to the boys at a training session this year. I pointed out that, at 15, they were unlikely to be stalked like AFL players.

Practice matches

The club generally organises two practice matches, which I think is plenty. Each year, there has been a great deal of uncertainty as to when the season will start because of the ground conditions.

During a practice game one of the other coaches came up to me at a break and offered his observations about the game.

“Do you know what you and the boys are doing wrong?”

Great opening line which will always have an instant impact – I folded my arms across my chest and waited.

“You are going too wide.”

“I don’t mind where they go provided they have the ball,” I rationalised.

He gave me a look that an AFL coach in the 1980s must have had when asked about his team’s performance, he said: “I held my hand out to a drowning man and they refused to take it.”

Given we had two teams and we tend to play the first-year players in the first half and were probably struggling a little and then in the second half the older boys come on and take control of the game.

It was nice to get feedback from one of the parents from another team after the game. “Typical Moonee Valley. Drilled, skilled and relentless running.”

To combat abuse of umpires, the Essendon District Football League has introduced a zone around the coaching area limiting who can stand there. Free kicks are awarded against the team for any abuse of umpires they believe originates from that 20-metre zone. Clearly it is up to clubs to monitor and control who is in the area and

keep out the hotheads. For me, it is a walk in the park. Nobody stands near me. I am an island and, based on the penalty for abuse, it is not difficult to envisage why people are inclined to stand elsewhere.

At our ground, the coaches' boxes are only 30 metres apart, so I was able to observe the rule in action. The opposing coach shouted abuse and our team was given the ball and a 50-metre penalty. He repeated the strategy a few moments later for a similar result.

After the game, he kept the boys in the rooms for 20 minutes and locked out the parents. "What's going on?" I asked a frustrated parent waiting outside.

"The coach is talking to the boys about their lack of discipline."

Personally I would have liked to have had the opportunity to hear that speech. It would have been fascinating to hear how he verbalised such a speech although, in fairness, most coaches have the gift of being able to rationalise their way out of a tough spot.

There was one club issue at the time which caused some angst and reflection. A coach, after repeated warnings to a small group of players regarding their behaviour, ordered them to run laps for the rest of training. The parents of the players were incensed and put the coach under such pressure that he resigned.

It is this scenario that generally clubs have no set policy for. At what point is enough enough? My view is that this is a community club run by volunteer coaches and if, after a series of interventions, the boys still want to misbehave, I have no problem with their decision. "Here is a phone, ring your parents and ask them to come to the club and collect you." If we have to return the membership fee or if it means losing a star, so be it.

There needs to be a balance between the right to a fair go and the responsibility to train to the best of your ability.

I don't want to be a coach of a player who doesn't want to train and I don't want to be like a teacher at parent-teacher night who has to listen to parents explaining why their child, who has behaved badly, failed to hand any work in and treated the teacher with disrespect, is actually the victim in all this and is not responsible for their own performance.

The more disturbing issue is that, as a club and as coaches, we failed to provide this coach with support and guidance and essentially left an enthusiastic first-year coach to sink or swim.

Why is it that all junior coaches have this great propensity to stand and look agitated throughout a game? This question struck me as I watched Airport West senior coach Ian Denny coaching while sitting in a deck chair. Why can't coaches even stand together chatting and challenge each other during a game? "I am going to have the ruckman go to full-forward. What are you going to do about that?" I ran the concept of the coaches and benches sitting together during a game past Sarina, who after a moment of silence, said: "Are you completely stupid?" Honest and direct feedback I guess.

The only real concern from the practice games was the tendency of the players to run quicker towards goals than when chasing away from our goals (although that is not an issue peculiar to junior football). At a break, I lined all the players up and had them sprint 10 metres, stop and then sprint back to me.

"See you can run both ways at the same speed if you want to."

If I had been brighter, I would have left it there.

“So why don’t you?”

A hand went up. “Because everyone wants to kick a goal.”

I walked into that one.

“What happens on the field stays on the field”

One of the games was getting out of control to the point I was just about to call it off. During that moment of hesitation and discussion, Robbie is knocked out, possibly accidentally, although the player involved is the one causing us to discuss whether to call it quits. The player is standing over Robbie’s motionless body taunting him in a way reminiscent of when Muhammad Ali was standing over Sonny Liston.

A team’s behaviour is almost always a reflection of the coach and the prevailing club culture, so given all the incidents that player was involved in, why wouldn’t the coach at least send a message out to bring it down a notch? Because you effectively support what they are doing, whether it be the bullying or late tackling. As if to support the concept, the runner has now joined in and is verbally attacking our players. Fortunately, the game comes to an end but a melee occurs after the siren. To his credit, the president of the club jumps in, separates the boys and gives his own players a spray. He finishes with the line: “What happens on the field stays on the field.” I don’t agree with this for juniors or seniors.

The message you are sending is there is no line in the sand and all’s fair in love and war.

I have never been a believer in anything goes and then it’s shake hands and it’s all beer and skittles.

The upside is that the club does take action and requires the player to attend a meeting that week where he will be given his final warning. That is a great message to be sending.

Later we suspended two players for fighting against West Coburg, a terrific club, which also suspended a couple of their own. One of the players we suspended said to me that it wasn’t fair because the umpires hadn’t reported them. That was true I told him but I am not accountable for what the umpires do or don’t do but I am accountable for this team’s culture and behaviour.

Until clubs self-regulate and take swift action to stamp out inappropriate behaviour, incidents will continue and winning will be valued more than integrity. After one game, one of our players was threatened by a parent (the threat also included the boy’s parents). We contacted the club involved but nothing happened – in fact, when contacted again, they used the “Chicago defence”, that is “we didn’t get the email and if we did we couldn’t identify the parent of No. 15”. Anything goes.

When our player returned from the club suspension, I said to him before the game, “This is it. Any incidents and I will take the jumper and you will never play for this club again.”

“What if I don’t start it?”

“It won’t matter. You must run away from the trouble.”

“But I can’t control myself!” he replied.

“That’s not what I want to hear right now.”

“Go and tell Robbie that if he is going to play like that he can come off and stand next to me”

That’s the message I gave Dom our runner to deliver to Robbie. It is amazing the messages we send out to our own kids that we would never dream of sending to anyone else’s children. I asked Robbie after the game about the message Dom had delivered to him in the second quarter. To my surprise, Robbie was pretty relaxed about it.

“What did Dom actually say?” I asked.

“Dom said your Dad told me to tell you that you are playing really well.” Thanks Dom.

On one occasion, a parent, after seeing me send Dom out to the parent’s son who refused to pass, called out: “You wouldn’t send that message out if it was your son.”

If only he knew.

I was talking to an AFL coach at a program about managing parental expectations in junior football and he said one parent launched into him because his son was languishing at VFL level. The AFL coach said: “I told him I was a parent. That I too find it difficult to watch my own kids playing at club level and wanting the best for them. Thinking the coach should play them elsewhere and feeling helpless. I am a parent too.” He said that seemed to put things in perspective and they had a relaxed chat about their kids.

“You run around in your flashy \$50 boots...”

A frustrated Ian Denny to his players during a break. I would love to use this line because I could guarantee a look of disbelief, if not indignation, on the boys’ faces given the cost of boots today. I can only imagine the responses.

“Do you shop at the Reject Shop?”

“You think Spandau Ballet are still popular, don’t you?”

“I am sick to death of carrying youse kids week after week.”

Part of a half-time speech that Robbie and I listened to. Robbie asked what did the coach mean, given he doesn’t even play. “I don’t know,” I replied.

What I do know is that the more competitive you are, the more you take losing personally and see losing as an act of disloyalty. “After everything I have done for you, this is how you repay me.” For competitive coaches, it is all about “me”.

However, I did think the coach missed a great opportunity to finish with: “And I didn’t take the job of coach to have you play like this.”

“I never wanted to coach using fear and intimidation.”

Former Fitzroy and St Kilda player Tim Pekin writing in *The Age* about his coaching philosophy and experiences coaching in the bush.

“In junior football, he who has the biggest players usually wins.”

Me.

“It’s our job to make it hard for them and easy for us and to make it hard for them to make it hard for us.”

My half-time address. There was complete bewilderment as they quietly filed out.

“If you are not prepared to rotate all of your players then start giving back the membership fees of those who don’t get a fair go.”

Anthony Parkin addressing our coaches. It certainly had a few of us feeling like our collars had suddenly become tighter.

The season

We generally start training in early March so the pre-season doesn’t seem too long. We are always looking to bring variety into training and were at times assisted by Melbourne Storm staff who took the players through tackling skills and teaming skills (and it was inexpensive) or we would invite other coaches to take a session. We would also train with lower age group teams at times so they would experience our approach and so my players could develop their coaching skills. A couple of times we also trained with our challenged team. I regret not doing this more often.

We have two under-16 teams which are essentially divided along set guidelines but, basically, with a few exceptions, the second-year players are in the higher division and the first-year players in the lower division. The problem is that because the lower grade team decides to train on another night to have more room, there is effectively no interaction between the teams. This is a shame on a number of levels.

The allocation of space with over 100 players training on any given night is a challenge.

We have the worst of it with an area that also gets used by the Magpies, which is our challenged side, and the older players warming up on our patch. It is the most frustrating aspect of coaching for me. If you want to see me get fired up, come to a training night and observe my body language as I watch teams that are supposed to be off the ground, still training with seemingly a casual indifference by their coaches.

Steve Couch, the excellent coach of Kilcunda Bass under-15s, told me that at Bass there is no set ground space. You just roll up and start training and it generally works well. I was speechless. If that laissez faire approach was employed at Moonee Valley, I have no hesitation in suggesting that legal action would commence and injunctions would be applied for! I am surprised there has not been a reality show on Foxtel about coaches and ground allocation. Meercat Manor is pretty close. I still bristle when I recall the night I had to front the committee about two of my players having kick-to-kick on someone else’s area despite the fact they were not using it.

First up, we have Avondale which we had played in a practice match and played well against, if a little wide. There is a nice optimistic air given this is supposed to be our strong year with the majority of the boys in their second year. I have a formula about that for B Division. If you have 13 or so second-year players, you will play in the finals, and if you have 17, you will play in the Grand final. We have a good blend of size, hard runners and skill. We don’t have any solid ruck-rover types and that will be a problem if it rains, which right now looks unlikely.

Given I have been coaching the boys for a few years and they are largely self-managing, I have very little to do with them before the game, aside from a brief chat one-on-one with a couple of them. Two of the players take the warm-up outside the rooms when we are at home and at times when playing away they may be some distance from me.

After the umpires speak to them, I may ask if everyone is ready, then the captain leads them out where they finish their warm-up.

The two captains for the day toss the coin and select an end without any input from me. Marcus brings them together for a huddle and says something that I am not privy to and the game begins.

With only 18 to 20 players, everyone plays most of the game with few rotations during a quarter. This season we played with only 16 players at times, which makes rotating very easy.

Last week Ethan, who was sitting on the bench, offered an interesting observation on effective rotations during the third quarter. "If we have only 19 players today, how can we have two on the bench now?" Good point.

During the game, it is fulfilling to watch the boys try out the strategies we had rehearsed. The really heartening thing was the boys' willingness to share the ball and run away from the ball carrier to create space. It was surprising, to me at least, the number of times players like Matt 'Twin' would deliberately run to the boundary to open up a space for others only to end up with the ball, proving that sacrificial acts and gaining possessions are not mutually exclusive.

I am still surprised how the players can take our instructions so literally and the influence we can have. Connor came up to me at a break and said, "Sorry ... one kick."

I wasn't sure what he meant. Then he said, "My player has had one kick. You said the first job of a defender is to stop his player getting a kick. He has had one kick. I am just letting you know."

Thank you.

Over the season, we displayed the benefits of the game-sense drills with excellent defensive skills, hard running and rapid movement of the ball. The really heartening aspect of their game was their willingness to share the ball. I had mentioned to them that Carlton had success in the 1995 season using a model of playing with and for you. That is, if we can rely on each other to do what is expected of us, be where we are supposed to be and be prepared to sacrifice our own chances of getting the ball by doing the team things, then we will have a memorable year.

At times, I would just put on the whiteboard: 260/220. The boys knew that one AFL team had never lost a game when their players achieved 260 one per-centers and lost every game when those stats dropped below 220. I would tap the board and ask for comment. Someone would offer: "I think we are getting close to 220." This would become the catalyst for action. They also were aware that the Brisbane Lions never lost a game when 50 per cent of tackles held the ball in the tackle.

I also mentioned that Simon Black had 31 possessions in a Grand Final but only had the ball for 59 seconds – so what we do when we don't have the ball is equally important, if not more so. This also has implications for training, given most training is geared around our team having possession of the ball.

You are, of course, never really sure what effect any of these stories have on juniors. However, there is no doubt that when I told them about a number of players I met on a program who had all played more than 200 AFL games and what they said it took to do that, it did have impact. Every one of the 200-gamers said the same thing. That if you just do all the training the club requires of you, you are fooling yourself and will be lucky to play 40 games. Every one of them had a sprint coach or did extra goalkicking or additional weights.

At the end of the next training night, half the boys, of their own volition, ran 10 laps and constantly encouraged each other along the way. In all the years I have coached, I have never seen that before. This became a regular Friday night event for the rest of the year. I was concerned about them over-training and doing so on a Friday night, but it was hard to fault their enthusiasm and intent. Besides, you can't open a door then be surprised when they walk through it.

Before a game, I overheard the opposing coach geeing up his players outside the rooms, "Boys, we are going to kick their arses today."

It seemed an unrealistic expectation given the season they were having and the size of their players. They were a few short and were getting a couple of under-12s to fill in.

Just before the boys were to run out, I spoke to them. "I heard their coach talking before the game. He said he wanted their team to kick your backsides."

Darcy chimed in, "Did he really say backsides?"

"Well not exactly."

"He said arses didn't he?"

Now they were all chatting saying "arses" as if they had been given permission and enjoying my discomfort.

"Listen up. I have had a look at their team. They look pretty small. Don't hurt anyone. They are giving us a game so try not to hurt anyone."

They all looked at me for a moment, nodded, then filed out.

At quarter-time, the score was 62 points to zero and I could hear the spray being given to the players from 80 metres away. Given they were trying hard, I assume the coach was admonishing them for turning up to the game undersized.

The next week, one of the more memorable incidents occurred. An opposition supporter of a team we have done well against for some years had stationed himself a few metres behind me and via a mobile phone was relaying information about our plans to (presumably) assistants on the other side.

"He's got nothing. He has made no moves. He's said nothing. He's got nothing."

Personally, I thought it summed me and the situation up pretty well, although you would have to wonder about the value of espionage at junior level.

I am thinking of having a lockout at our next training session, particularly when we rehearse our unique "double, double" switch.

"Football is a game of inches. The difference between winning and losing is measured in inches ... it's the difference between living and dying."

Al Pacino's pre-match address in *Any Given Sunday*. Great film, great speech,

I loved the way in a pre-match address he was able to weave in his marital and financial problems, his general mental state and keep it inspirational and instructive.

“I was always very motivated. The coach just had to tell me whose skull to crush and I would go out and do it.”

Col Scott, one of the few Australians to play American football not as a punter.

“Are you challenging the players at the breaks or giving them a reason to tune out?”

AFL Victoria high performance manager Anton Grbac. Anton also challenged coaches to reflect on whether they were policing or coaching drills at training.

“I wasn’t at training on Wednesday because my school had a curriculum day so I didn’t have to go.”

Steve J’s excuse for missing training. The most thought provoking and intriguing for the year.

Crossing the line

Recently I was exposed to an interesting strategy. At the half-time break, the opposing coach gathered his players together near the players’ race as we were walking off and, in a calculated way, gestured towards us and said, “Look at them! They’re nothing! They are soft. They’re nothing.”

The boys were surprisingly annoyed about this and the game itself and couldn’t wait to get back on the ground. Robbie mentioned that every time he went past the coaches’ box, the coach would shout out: “You’re nothing No. 7. You’re shit.”

At the end of the game, there was no shaking of hands as the teams were kept apart by match-day officials concerned about the potential for an incident. Their runner came up to me to express his disappointment at our behaviour and lack of sportsmanship at refusing to shake hands. I explained I had nothing to do with the separation nor was it a strategy not to shake hands. He told me that their coach was furious.

I took the opportunity to remark that the coach’s actions at half-time were unacceptable and that I and the boys had taken the remarks personally and that a more likely source of his fury was that his team had lost a close game.

Unbeknown to me, two Moonee Valley officials separately contacted that coach later in the week to explain why the boys were kept apart after the game in an attempt to smooth over the tension. He was still angry and when the issue of the incident at half-time was raised, he said that his club had not experienced success for some time and it was his strategy to build up his team and lay the foundation for the future success of the team.

I will not repeat what I said when this was related to me but, if that’s how he intends to build the team’s culture, then he is on the wrong track. Later, his aggressive address to his players and incitement to attack players physically worked because, when we played them in the finals, their bullying and attack on individuals off the ball was appalling. I chose not to shake his hand. Again.

One more thing. I have had enough. I have had enough as a coach. I can no longer handle nor accept the unrelenting tagging that is occurring every game, with one of our key players, Robbie, as the preferred target. I can't watch without getting angry the holding off the ball, the bumping, the "accidental" falling on him in packs, the face-to-face blocking at stoppages, which has led to the tagger getting hit on the back of the head by the ball. He has had an aggressive tag every match. Even runners help the tagger out by abusing Robbie and supporting from a distance with remarks like, "You're killing him. He is nothing." I am finding it difficult to coach in any objective way. I confronted one coach after the game.

"Speaking as a coach, good luck for the rest of the year, but your strategy of tagging Robbie with rotating taggers was appalling."

"We didn't cross the line," the coach said.

"Where is this line?" I said. "He received two holding frees, two down fields, one 50-metre penalty for being hammered after he marked the ball and one of his taggers threatened to stab him after the game. Where is this line? What about the tagger who ran straight off the bench and gave away a free with a punch to the kidneys as soon as he was on the ground. The holding around the waist when he was resting in the forward line is illegal if not unethical."

"I didn't tell him to do that. The players decided to," was the reply. "Besides Robbie is too good a player not to tag."

"Did you ask the tagger to stop?"

Tagging is the new epidemic within junior football. I am not just talking about running with a player but face-to-face, aggressive tagging. We are seeing it in under-10s! Clubs have designated taggers in the under-10s!

Within our own club, some kids are being given the role of tagging. I mentioned to one coach that I was impressed by the skills of one of his players. "He is just a tagger." He is only 11 years old! How can he already be "just a tagger"?

And another thing. As a coach (or a parent), I don't want to hear from one more apologist that tagging is a mark of respect, toughens up kids, is a developmental tool for the tagger and is part of the game. Don't hide behind excuses and rationalisations to justify unethical behaviour.

As a coach, think about the message you are sending your players. What is your goal – to have a contest and a challenging game, or win without heeding any notions of spirit of the game and fair play? If the tagger is able to minimise a player's impact on the game through their physical attack and holding, would you lose any sleep? Not if you won.

Listen after the game to coaches announce the best player awards, invariably highlighting the performance of the tagger "who did the job for us on No. 7."

It's funny that they never highlight the holding, elbowing or the downfield free.

I would prefer more post-match honesty such as: "The coaches and parents thought your use of the kidney punch on their best player was inspiring and when you fell on No. 7 and gave him a corky, that was priceless." It's great the way the tagger has always done well despite the object of their intentions being best on the ground and kicking four goals.

Last week, Robbie said he hoped he made the Calder Cannons squad. “No one will know me or tag me. I will be nobody.” I defy any coach or parent to hear that and not be moved.

As coaches, surely we have a duty to not only be custodians of the game, but leave the game in better shape than when we arrived and also to develop young people into good citizens. Surely one way to do this is by modelling and expecting ethical behaviour.

Culture is everything that is done or not done, is said and is not said, so as parents of a team that encourages illegal tagging, you need to say to your club, “That’s enough. No more. If this is what this club thinks is right, then we need to think again.”

So, if you are coaching against me in the future and you employ these tactics, don’t bother coming over to shake hands. I have had enough.

The use of consultants

The Kilcunda Bass boys made the long trip from South Gippsland to watch us play.

We arranged for Essendon’s Scott Lucas to talk to them during the game and the AFL provided a show bag of goodies for each player. We have over-catered with about half a dozen doughnuts per boy, which the KB lads tackled with steely determination. The KB side made an interesting observation regarding the way we play – not everyone goes in. When it looks likely we will gain possession, the players fan out and generally only one goes in. I said that tactic suits some of the boys but it is also a practised strategy. Some of the KB players are amazed by this, given in the country everyone not only goes in hard but is expected to go in hard, regardless of size.

At quarter-time, we are playing well but I point out we are about to cross the line between attacking football and kick chasing. The general rule is you should leave your player when you feel you can make a difference to the contest. This fits in well with my overall belief that everything you do or don’t do makes a difference. A few weeks earlier, after we had been over-run in the last quarter, I went through every player, commenting on what they had done or not done.

“Connor, when you failed to punch from behind, that was a turning point.”

“Nick, when you didn’t chase in the second quarter, that was a turning point.”

“Darcy, when you centered the ball to a contest, that was a turning point.”

I really want to develop the mindset that their efforts or lack of effort makes a difference.

I finished off with the observation that I thought I had been out-coached and slow to react.

One of my assistants remarked that he didn’t think a coach should apologise because it might lower the confidence of the players in the coach. Not in my case, I observed, because the boys know that I am not tactically astute. I also apologised a few weeks earlier to Matt for giving him a fierce spray at half-time in front of everyone. Inexcusable.

You cannot give feedback and not be prepared to receive feedback or acknowledge when you have erred.

The following game, the coach’s strategy is to rough us up physically. Fergus is bumped after disposing of the ball and is slow to get up. Dom ran out to check on him. Fergus says

he is fine and can continue but one look at his wrist, which is now at an angle Pythagoras would be proud of, sees Fergus off to hospital. Moments later, James is smashed and heads off too, with a suspected ruptured spleen, to join Fergus at the Royal Children's Hospital. Later, one of the players from the other under-16s side joins them at the hospital. At this rate, we will have our own car spot.

Our kicking is improving as the season progresses following the club's decision to have each player's kicking analysed with the same software that is used by AFL clubs. Each player is videoed from the front and side and, following a one-on-one debrief, receives a DVD with comments and personalised remedial actions.

At training, the boys pair up to work on their kicking, using the drills specific to them. We should use their knowledge with the younger players, given they are now able to detect any major flaws in others' kicking actions and offer advice. It was an expensive process for a junior club but a great investment in the future.

Each training night, selected boys are given specific training to address skill deficiencies such as marking, ruckwork or leading. Like most clubs, our top six are outstanding and probably couldn't get any more kicks than they already get now, so the real potential for improvement will come from the other 14 or so. Having said that, how do we help the stars develop further? Our club has always been prepared to pay for knowledge to enhance the skills of the players. One of the things we did was to use what I termed the consultant's approach, that is, we sought out people with skills we didn't have. This season, for example, I contacted North Melbourne and asked if Daniel Harris would like to assist the club's elite onballers and specifically teach them stoppage skills. We were prepared to pay for his knowledge. However, like most AFL players, he was happy to help and refused any payment. We invited players from the under-14s, 16s and 18s for a one-hour session which was fantastic and had a great impact on the boys.

On two more occasions we organised players such as Ben Warren and Lachie Hansen to take training with specific target areas to address such as movement of the ball.

We also employed former Western Bulldogs star Rohan Smith this season to take four training sessions to teach a range of skills, particularly blocking for each other. It proved very effective with other coaches commenting on the boys' willingness to give and block. Rohan had a wonderful rapport with the players and lifted the intensity of training.

A real highlight was the opportunity to train at Arden St and have first-year North Melbourne players take training, followed by a tour of the rooms after which we were invited into the coach/player room to ask questions of the players. The most interesting thing was one of the players mentioned he had never played in a rep side as a junior and yet here he was on an AFL list.

I think a reasonable criticism of my coaching was that I hadn't been pulling up the guns on some of their areas for improvement. We had got to the point that they didn't like feedback that wasn't a positive. I am sure lesser players would have been given and acknowledged criticism but some of the stars looked like they took it as an affront given how hard they worked. I should have pulled them up years before.

A number of the players, as part of the self-management approach, are allowed to manage their own workloads, particularly given the amount of training they were doing for rep teams and other sports. Some would just take themselves out of training of their own volition, head up to the goals and have a few shots. I encouraged a couple to only train once a week, given their workloads and willingness to run themselves into the ground on match days.

Just on representative training, I found it hard to fathom and certainly justify why players were required to train for over two hours the day after their matches and in those training sessions include contact work. I was voicing my concerns to a friend who asked why did I allow my son to continue? He said, "If it was as bad as you are saying, why did you allow it to continue and did you say anything?"

"Robbie would have been furious if I had said anything and jeopardised his chances," I said.

"So placating your son and turning a blind eye to what you yourself believe to be borderline abuse was your preferred strategy?" he said. Mr High Moral Ground walked into that one. I should start wearing a mouthguard. It was a good wake-up call given I have been espousing a philosophy that everything you do or don't do makes a difference.

After last week's game, I felt I had no choice but to resign. Ultimately, the way the players play and behave is a reflection of the coach. Following Sunday's game, I didn't feel I could justify continuing. The background to my challenge was that the last time we played this team, there was a gale force wind. Some of the parents of the other side positioned themselves behind their team's goal when they had the wind and also took with them an extra ball to maximise their time with the wind and, not surprisingly, when we had the wind, the extra ball and parents disappeared. In the third quarter, the ball went through the points so a parent gave Robbie the spare ball rather than the match ball. Robbie pointed out was that not how it works and we should get back the match ball (I am certain he didn't word it as I have related the discussion). What is certain, he was told by the parent to mind his own (expletive) business and just get on with it. Not surprisingly, he took that advice personally.

On our way to the return game, he was still rankled by the incident and suggested that when the other team was kicking with the wind and a point had been scored, he should wait until the umpire called play on, wait again until the full-forward got close, then just turn around and handball through the goal.

Mr Ever Helpful Dad said, "That's silly. If you are going to waste time, you would be better off at the last moment kicking the ball through the goals as far as you can."

I didn't give it another thought until I saw Robbie with the ball about to kick in, which he seldom does. I am sure I called out "DON'T!" Too late. He has kicked it into the Maribyrnong River. At the ground, helpfully, there is a time clock which shows he has wasted one minute and 46 seconds. I send Dom out.

"Don't do that again!"

I sneak a look around. A number of people are genuinely dismayed that I have allowed this to happen. Surprisingly, there are a few who know about the earlier incident and feel the other team has got their comeuppance. And we were nine goals up.

At the end of the game I wearily head over to the other coach.

“I am sorry about that.”

The response is not printable. The assistant coach is squirting me with a water bottle and a physical clash seems imminent with the odds not looking favourable for me. Luckily Norm saves me.

I rang Lawrie, a good friend and mentor, and explained the situation and like an AFL coach told him my position was untenable.

“Don’t be silly. Did you tell him to do that?”

“No.”

“Did you kick it?”

“No.”

“Then resigning is ridiculous. You have done a lot of good things as a coach. This is one thing.” The only good thing to come out of the incident is the council has installed a 20-metre high fence to stop the ball going into the river which is of course now referred to in our club as the ‘Robbie Fence’. When the boys saw it they noticed that for whatever reason the meshing on the fence didn’t start until five metres from the ground so they thought that if you used a low torpedo...

“We won’t be tolerating any swearing or shit like that.”

The umpire addressing the players before the game. The players looked at me to check if it was OK to laugh but I refused to make eye contact.

Finals

The level of excitement with the finals starting increases markedly. There are more people watching training and there is a nice buzz of anticipation. Lots of strategies and potential outcomes are discussed. Guest speakers are suggested and some offer themselves. A local councillor offers to give the boys a motivational speech at the Friday night training session which I decline given, as far as I can tell, he has never seen a game (aside from the fact the boys wouldn’t have a clue who he is).

There is lots of reflecting on how successful we have been in the juniors this year, with almost all teams participating in the finals series. It must be annoying to those coaches who don’t have half a dozen stars or giants (in a back-handed way, it is disrespectful to their efforts). Some of our teams, including mine, would make the finals regardless of the coach and, in some cases, in spite of the coaching. Still, we continue to view pennants, premierships and success as the same thing. There are teams in our division that no coach in the universe could get into the finals. Have their coaches performed any worse than the coach of the team that is made up of giants?

Even at a recent junior coaches’ awards night, the 10 nominated coaches were presented to the audience with a quick overview of their resumes which invariably mentioned their success in the finals and number of premierships, until the last nominee who was introduced as “the only coach nominated whose team failed to make the finals”.

Thank you.

I am still surprised by the number of people who turn out for the finals. My view (which is shared by no one) is that you shouldn't attend if you haven't seen a game for the year. There should be a qualifying system for friends and extended family.

In preparation for finals over the last few seasons, we would frequently simulate the Hawthorn rolling defence at training. Essentially, six players form a rectangle defence – three in front 20 metres apart and three at the back 20 metres deep – set up 50 metres from goal. They are opposed to about 15 players who bring the ball in via a kick-in. When the ball is kicked in, the group rolls across the ground, causing the attacking players to make a decision. If they choose to switch the formation, they roll back across the ground, forcing another decision. At the start, the boys just kicked into the formation and turned the ball over or would switch a couple of times and then turn the ball over through frustration. The exercise was an important part of their development and our strategy because they needed to think their way through a disciplined defence and learn that moving the ball quickly is not a good strategy if you just move it to the opposing team. If the attacking team worked through the formation, the defenders would not chase but just set up again to form a zone to block the ball when it came back from the other end.

It was very hard work but the boys loved it and would often need to stop to discuss how to beat the zone. And those in the zone learnt the value of discipline and holding to a plan.

As you might have guessed, I am not an advocate of the big pre-match speech, although I like to listen to others. I really found engaging a speech I heard last year by a junior coach. "Attitude is what wins games. Attitude," he said.

He turns to the whiteboard and, as he repeats the word for dramatic effect, he starts writing. He writes 'A' then 'T' but now he is stuck. He looks to his assistant for help. The assistant shrugs and looks equally non-plussed. The coach continued writing while saying each letter, "Attitude ... A-T-I-T-U-D-E." One of the boys looks like he is about to comment then thinks better of it. The coach continued undaunted. "Belief in yourself will win you the game."

"Belief." It starts again "B-E-L ..." He again receives a shrug from the assistant when he looks over for spelling assistance. He is locked in now, so he goes for it.

"Belief ... B-E-L-I-V-E." At this point, the players are not looking at the board and have found their boots a source of wonderment.

I heard that John Kennedy once walked into the rooms at half-time in an interstate game and said, "One handball. One long kick." With that he walked out. Ideal for juniors.

My own finals speech? A little longer than normal, maybe 30 seconds to a minute.

"Boys, it's a final. You will run harder and farther than ever before, tackle more and be tackled more and, from the first bounce, everything you do or don't do will be the difference. They are a great team and so are you. You should look forward to the challenge. I don't care if we win or we lose. All of you have had a terrific year. Together we are unbreakable (see footnote). Let's go."

Footnote

During the lead-up to the finals I told the boys about something Robbie's grandfather had said shortly before he passed away. Vince said if you pick up a twig it is an easy thing to

break, but when you have a bundle of twigs in your hand, they are unbreakable. That is what family is, he said. Stick together and we are unbreakable. It became our motto.

PS

I watched an under-16 final last week in which a much bigger and heavier side consistently attacked the opposing players. It was like watching *Groundhog Day* as the runner would sprint out and the offending player would be wrestled and shoved off visibly angry. After a few minutes, the player would return to the fray to continue the attack. None of their supporters seemed dismayed by the behaviour. It must have been galling to the losing side to be outplayed, beaten up and be required to stand around as the winning team were individually named, presented with a medal to rousing cheers with the BOG medallion going to the worst culprit who the supporters have saved their biggest cheer for (the losing team get their medals in a bag to distribute back in the rooms). The league missed a great opportunity to make a statement by telling the winning team and thron that, yes, they are premiers, however, we are not happy about the way the game was played and the medals will be posted out next week. By continuing the presentation, they have effectively condoned the behaviour. Surely, how you win matters at any level.

Reflection and ruminations

I was pleased with the development of all the players and glad we spent time on individual development. The use of 'consultants' such as Melbourne Storm proved effective, as did the introduction of game-based training and themes for training. The warm-ups became more game specific in that, if the goal for the day was to increase the number of smothers, then that featured in the warm-up.

Training on AFL grounds was fun and relatively easy to organise during school holidays and the money spent on improving their kicking was a great investment.

Collectively, the boys kicked a remarkable number of goals and were outstanding defensively. We became known for our distinct style which was attractive to watch, disciplined and selfless.

Of the 17 eligible players, nine were invited to try out for the Calder Cannons junior squad.

I decided not to coach again for a range of reasons not the least being that it wouldn't hurt the boys to have a different coach and hear new ideas (although a new coach might prove a shock, given none had ever been taken off the ground for any reason in four years).

HAPPINESS

One final rumination. Plato outlined four levels of happiness.

Level One is very temporary such as a pizza – satisfies us momentarily but it is not lasting. For some, it is shopping, for others, it is a new hair style. For Imelda Marcos, it was shoes.

Level Two happiness is derived from our accomplishments and the recognition that

comes with that. We get our identity through our accomplishments. This is unhealthy when the only thing that gives us happiness and self worth is the feeling that comes when others see us as a “winner”. We need to beat and be better than others. Coaches with this mindset feel that they are *worthless* if the team doesn’t win and take the players’ failure to win as disloyalty or not trying. The boys are a means to an end. It is all about “me”. Every week brings with it opportunity for glory and defeat. You are on a rollercoaster on which you have little control. You are externally motivated and expect to be admired. Even when you realise that this competitive behaviour is counterproductive, you still find yourself saying things like, “I am better than others at not being competitive”.

Level Three happiness is the feeling you get from making a difference to others. You want to put something back into the sport that was good to you. You are intrinsically motivated and enjoy seeing all the kids grow and develop. You are equally excited by the number of boys who go on to bigger things as you are by the number who return to play each year, bringing their friends with them. You are giving without thought of what you will get back (unlike politics). It is not about this year but that you can play a role in their overall football journey.

I think most coaches are Level Three. We are doing it not for recognition and the admiration we may get but because we want the boys to be better people. If now and again someone says thank you or something complimentary, we are grateful, but that is the bonus not the driver.

Level Four is way out there and I am still pondering it. We are all part of something bigger than ourselves.

I hope you enjoyed these ramblings. Make a difference.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Ball has coached at senior level in the Amateurs and in South Gippsland and at junior level at Moonee Valley in Victoria's Essendon District Football League. He is currently a presenter of AFL Level 2 and 3 coaching accreditation programs.

Steven provided leadership programs to the Sydney Swans in 2003. He has analysed the culture of an AFL club and measured the behavioural styles of Brownlow Medallists at two clubs.

He has worked with the South Australian Redbacks cricket team and has delivered leadership programs to many current AFL assistant coaches, senior coaches and clubs, including Port Adelaide, Fremantle and Brisbane (under Peter Knights).

In the corporate area, he has delivered leadership, teamwork and cultural change programs to more than 200 organisations, including WMC, Westpac, RAAF, Kraft, the Australian Defence Force, ING, RAN, Telstra and BHP Billiton.

Steven has also worked with male and female prisoners, in children's homes, schools and youth training centres.

He has been the keynote speaker at many conferences, including the AFL Coach of the Year Awards in 2003 and at the Australian Army Officer School.

He has coached under-10s, under-12s and under-14s in cricket and is captain of the Moonee Valley Cricket Club sixths (that is not a misprint).

Steven was a teacher for 12 years and devised a personal development program for students. He has been an associate of the Pacific Institute and delivered its Investment in Excellence curriculum for more than 20 years.

Steven was the 2007 AFCA Youth Coach of the Year and is currently assistant coach of the Coburg Tigers in the VFL.

