



Article: Kaizan Comes to Coaching

By Mick Owen, Project Manager in Sporting Contexts (July 2003)

The use of market research to improve performance of Glossop Rugby Club's senior coaching team.....

Coaching is about improving performance. Good coaches seek to improve both their players' performance and crucially their own. The drive to always be better is called in Japanese, "kaizan" – a very important word within the coaching team at Glossop Rugby Club.

At Glossop RUFC we coach in teams. An award winning Coach Development plan first drafted in 1995 promoted the use of team coaching at Mini, Junior and Youth level and the principle has been adhered to by successive administrations. At senior level the benefits of team coaching have been recognised for approximately 3 years and it was within this team that the search for kaizan has led to a ground breaking, and rather scary, initiative.

Coaching logs, self-reflection diaries, mentoring schemes, use of video, peer reviews: there are many ways to analyse your coaching and seek to improve it. Many of them are individual disciplines and those that involve other people usually only involve other coaches. At Glossop we have widened the net and are now asking our customers what they think by carrying out a market research exercise with the senior training squad. And it has revealed strengths, weaknesses and the odd little foible that we didn't know we had.

The first step in the process was to recognise that our performance as a coaching team could improve. Not hard you would think, given our 1st XV's league placing, but how many coaches actually consider that they, not the players (or the bloody referees) are to blame? And when you work within a coaching team of four, constantly under the microscope of a parlous league position, if the atmosphere in the "back room" is not 100% supportive, the number of people prepared to hold up their hand is going to be lower. Key to **our** process has been the acknowledgement that as a team and as individuals we could, and therefore should, do better.

The decision to ask the players for their views came from a chance conversation with the second team captain – a market research consultant – after a particularly disappointing training turn out. His assertion that everyone was either a customer or a supplier, no matter what area of human interaction, may have caused a few ribald comments but it led to a discussion of our coaching set up and the potential for researching exactly what players really thought about training. The proximity to the end of the season and his

company's very reasonable rates meant that the decision to retain his services to conduct research with the players was easily made.

The next step was for us to identify what we wanted to research and for him to advise on how best to go about it. What we started wanting to know was why attendance at training waxed and waned so alarmingly; what we really wanted to know (apparently) was whether we delivered the type and style of training "our" players' wanted – and if not, what did they want. *DJS Research* determined that the best mode of investigation (yes they really do talk like that) was a series of guided group discussions with as many of those players who regularly trained as possible being involved. The consultant facilitating the discussion had an agreed list of "trigger" questions such as:

- *What do you particularly like about the training session? – Which specific parts?*
- *Are there any parts of training that you feel should be improved/changed?*
- *Do you want different things at different times in the season? – Why?*
- *How should the sessions work? - Why do you feel that?*

These questions were organised into 8 timed sections and the resultant Research Topic Guide was used in 3 group discussions – each planned to have 9 –12 players in it. The Topic Guide was intended to be just that and in practice discussion flowed across all areas. To enable feedback to be accurately collected sessions were tape-recorded. All three groups took place on the same night and players were encouraged to attend by the promise of free beer and sandwiches and on the night 22 players were involved.

The results of the consultation were then processed by the consultant and presented using a PowerPoint presentation to the coaching team as a group. An edited version of the presentation is available by emailing danielsims@djsresearch.com.

It shows a number of general things:

- There are two main factors that we must continually consider throughout the season:

**Achieving good numbers;
Making sessions enjoyable.**

- Training becomes less effective without the right numbers.
- We *all* have a part to play in helping to achieve good numbers at training: coaches, captains, players, and other members of the club.
- The coaches' role is crucial. Sessions need to be enjoyable for us to continually achieve numbers throughout the season.

- So, what makes an enjoyable session?
 - ❖ Not 100% serious all of the time. *“We are not professionals”*
 - ❖ Accept everyone at training – whatever their ability
 - ❖ Variety (not repetition).
 - ❖ Shared aims for a session (What we will learn and why, what coaches expect from players)
 - ❖ Intense sessions
 - ❖ Coaches who are open, approachable and do **not** talk down to players

In addition some specific areas were identified:

- Training should be more personal/tailored: personal targets, individual positive/negative feedback
- Other people (e.g. experienced players/ex players) should be used for specific one-on-one/unit sessions/key skill sessions. Tuesdays and Thursdays do not necessarily have to be different
- Core elements of training are fitness but also ‘playing rugby’ (units, team work etc) at every opportunity.
- Ensure that all coaches take part in sessions to help with ‘tailored training’
- Set strategy/game plan/objectives right from the start (pre-season). Communicate it and re-enforce the message throughout the teams and throughout the season at every opportunity.
- Consider the individual comments that have been made about you.
[NB: *The final section of the Topic Guide addressed the strengths and weaknesses of individual coaches.*]

Of all the comments that came back from the consultation two in particular surprised the coaching team and informed their response to the exercise:

- **Remember that you have all got the full backing of all the players**
- **Understand players are a big commodity/make it work for them**

According to the consultant undertaking this piece of research was “*seen as a very positive step*” and his advice to the team was to “*listen*” to the research findings and respond.

With only two weeks of pre-season completed it is difficult to draw too many long term conclusions from the exercise but some changes to coaches behaviour have been implemented.

- Every session is introduced; every drill is explained both its content and its purpose.

- When players ask questions, coaches seek to answer in the spirit in which the question was asked
- After every session players are asked “How was it for you?”
- Players’ suggestions on warm down, fitness and the balance of sessions have all been assimilated into the programme.

And one particular change to attitude has been identified. Up until the consultant delivered his presentation the coaching team, influenced to a great extent by both the 1st XV Coach and the Chair of Rugby (who have coached the 1st XV for 2 and 3 seasons respectively), believed that **they** were a “big commodity” whose input went largely unappreciated. They believed there was an “us” and a “them”.

The consultation has challenged this mindset and demanded a less comfortable, but ultimately more rewarding, approach: coaches and players working together so that “we” can find success, however that is defined.

For more details of the consultation process please contact:

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