

The Development of Coaching in Welsh Rugby Union Football

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Abstract

Men's rugby union in Wales is often thought of as part of the embodiment of a particular kind of Welshness and has been a source of considerable national pride. The most successful recent period for the Welsh national team was during the 1970s; a time, coincidentally, when the framework for a national coaching system was also introduced. This paper is a chronological overview of the development in Welsh rugby. Oral history accounts from sixteen of the key coaching activists since the mid 1960s are presented – men who had overall responsibility for coaching throughout the Principality. There are three important emerging themes: inception and institutional intransigence; the development and recognition of a coaching infrastructure; and expansion limited by financial constraints.

Introduction

The recent history of the performance of the Welsh international men's rugby union team has evidenced a gradual decline since the peerless successes of the 1970s. The tradition of the physicality of imposing Welsh forwards complemented by backs with sublime skill and vision no longer exists, at least in relative terms, on the international stage. There are, of course, notable exceptions – contemporary players who, notwithstanding the hypothetical and abstract historicism of comparative analyses of different eras, would have graced any historical epoch.¹ Yet if Welsh rugby operates as a barometer for the social and economic prosperity of the nation (cf. Davies & Morgan, 1985; Richards, 1980; Williams, 1983, 1985), then, to pursue the meteorological metaphor, the outlook has been generally gloomy, with scattered showers of optimism of the early part of the Graham Henry era around the turn of the century (Henry, 1999; S4C TV, 1999), and there has been persistent and increasing depression, especially from the east as England has gone from strength to strength. This is significant because even though the patterns of player migration to rugby league (and during the 1990s both *to* and *from* rugby league) are symptomatic of some competing forces between the two codes, it is men's rugby union that provides an embodiment of a particular form of Welsh national identity (Pritchard, 1999; Williams, 1991).

In this article we set out an historical analysis of the origins and development of coaching in Welsh rugby. It is also an historically informed organisational critique of policy and practice of a major national governing

body – the Welsh Rugby Union [WRU]. In doing so, we draw upon some of the rich and illuminating academic (and other) discourses that have addressed these themes. Importantly too, we present an account of the views of some of the principal 'actors' in Welsh rugby coaching: men who have been instrumental in guiding coaching in rugby since 1964. In the discussion that follows the substantive developmental points are organised chronologically around three key themes: (i) inception; (ii) infrastructure; and (iii) expansion. These are illuminated by comments from participants contributing to the empirical thrust of the study. These are identifiable in the text by the absence of explicit attribution to a source. We begin, however, with some brief methodological observations.

A Note on Data Collection

In the exploration of the development of coaching in Welsh rugby, and in the tradition of oral history (Yow, 1994), a series of sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted during 1998 with many of the individuals who have occupied or currently occupy the roles and posts with responsibility for coaching in Welsh rugby. The epistemological and ontological bases for this approach are well established, so too are the practicalities of undertaking such work (see, for example, Gilbert, 1993; Hammersley, 1993; Silverman, 1993), and will not be explicated here. There are, however, two features of the data collection process that are worthy of particular mention.

First, there was privileged access provided to archive sources and to willing participants. A brief biographical contextualisation serves to clarify. At the time of the data collection, one of us [LM] had been a practising rugby coach in Wales for nearly ten years. Since 1996 he had also been employed by the WRU as a District Director of Rugby with responsibility for West Carmarthenshire. This research was undertaken with the support of the WRU, and access to its archives was readily available. In addition, as a coach, many of the participants were known personally as part of the 'practice community' of coaches (cf. Sheridan, 2002) and were both eager to take part and generous with their time. In this regard, the research was focused on the views of the 'cultural insiders' facilitated by an 'insider to the context' (cf. Pink Dandelion, 1997). The list of participants reads like a 'who's who' of elite level coaching in Wales since the mid 1960s: Terry Cobner, Alan Davies, Cadfan Davies, John Dawes, Ieuan Evans, Tony Gray, David Harries, Malcolm Lewis, David Nash, Chris Padfield, Mostyn Richards, Clive Rowlands, John Ryan, John Schropper, Ron Waldron and Ray Williams.

Second, rather as investigative journalists are clear that their interviewees are 'on the record' and therefore that comments are remarks are attributable, the participants in this study agreed that their anonymity did not need to be protected. This is a departure from the convention in much social science research (cf. Homan, 1992), but because of the status of the

constituency of people involved, this is considered to add to the power of the substantive points made.

Inception

Throughout its history rugby has been firmly entrenched in the larger field of social forces that engaged the Welsh populace, and has reflected the class divisions of Welsh society (Andrews & Howell, 1993; Smith, 1984). It is rather shallow rhetoric (as well as wild exaggeration) to comment, as David Parry-Jones (1989: 12) has, that 'rugby may be just a game, but in Wales it is all things to all people', but as David Andrews and Jeremy Howell (1993) have observed, rugby provides an opportunity to bring out the sparkle of a proud and historically downtrodden and subjugated people. Its significance is profound.

'Coaching' and those who practise it have existed for as long as people have engaged in any form of physical competition (Gummerson, 1992), and certainly since the Olympic Games in antiquity (Golden, 1998; Sinn, 2000). In the early 1890s there were protests about Welsh teams rehearsing tactics, and concerns about teams 'planning'. Only a few years later, the 1905 New Zealand touring team was keen to practise in order to achieve maximum performance (Richards, 1980). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, rugby flourished in Welsh schools – especially the public schools (Richards, 1980). Inevitably, the same also occurred in the Welsh universities (Smith & Williams, 1980). Indeed it was the organisation of, and opportunity for regular coaching that fostered the development of an abundance of talented young players (Thomas & Nicholson, 1980).² The paradox was, however, that while the schools (aided and abetted by forms of coaching) continued to produce talented players, there was relatively little attention to the coaching and preparation of senior players. Clive Rowlands made the distinction transparent:

When I say there wasn't coaching in Wales, every school side in Wales was heavily coached. Every school had a school teacher, didn't have to be the P.E. teacher, but they would be involved in rugby football over seventy, eighty years ago.

The reasons for this separation of 'practice' in schools and clubs may have been connected to the importance of public school sport, the cult of athleticism (Holt, 1990; Mason, 1988), and the recognition of teaching as a 'profession' (coaching in Wales enjoyed no such status). Whatever the reason, performance on the rugby field became an important and very visible display of a school's success. Chris Padfield recalled the words of the Headmaster at a grammar school at which he once taught: 'There are only two things they want to know about this grammar school in this village – the first is how well the First XV are doing at the grammar school – the second is how many people we get to Oxford or Cambridge'.

Indeed the grammar schools are often associated with the successes of the 1970s for developing excellence in back play (Smith & Williams, 1980), as John Dawes explained:

Don't ask me why all this came about, I couldn't tell you, but traditionally it seemed that all the backs came from the grammar schools and the bulk of, not all the Welsh forwards, but the bulk of Welsh forwards came from the coal mines and the iron works.

Whether this prevalent perception is a reflection of the effectiveness of coaching in the grammar schools is a source of some debate. Mostyn Richards has observed that: 'I think that the grammar schools played a lot of rugby. From my experience there wasn't that much coaching going on in the early '70s'. He continued: 'I was told what it was like in Bassaleg school in the '50s. They were pointed in the right direction. So I don't think it was necessarily the coaching [but] the coming together of like-minded boys'. The point is that by frequently bringing together young men in a favourable environment, the talent found expression and thrived. Outside the schools, in the clubs, the climate was less conducive and there were fewer opportunities. There was also a more negative perception of coaches and of coaching.

In 1935 the Central Council for Physical Recreative Training (later renamed the Central Council for Physical Recreation [CCPR]) was formed. It had full time technical staff whose remit was to develop all sports throughout the UK and under the auspices of CCPR organised the early coaching courses for the WRU (Williams, 1976). The support of the CCPR had a major impact on the development of coaching in Wales (Reason & James, 1979). In 1949 the WRU appointed a Coaching Supervisory Sub-Committee to give instruction and advise clubs in order to bring about a better standard of play throughout Wales. In that same year a certificated coaching course was also introduced (Williams, 1976; Smith & Williams, 1980; Thomas & Nicholson, 1980). The CCPR was thus proactive in generating interest in coaching. The WRU, by contrast, was more ambivalent. Cadfan Davies explained that the WRU was told that unless consideration was given to supporting the concept of coaching, the CCPR would be obliged to offer this kind of support to Rugby League. The response from the WRU was 'luke-warm' encouragement to the CCPR to develop whatever was felt to be appropriate. In the end, it was Davies and two friends, Cliff Jones and Alun Thomas (both members of the WRU General Committee) who were the main architects of the emergence of coaching. Davies explained: 'It would be in 1964, we achieved a great deal. I approached friends of mine Cliff Jones was one, Alun Thomas was another, and tried to persuade them that *they had to set an example*' [emphasis added].

Perversely, for a long time there was a resistance to coaching at the top of Welsh rugby's hierarchy. This resistance was founded on the notion about

the non-seriousness of the game. As the incoming President of the Welsh Rugby Union [WRU], Nathan Rocyn Jones, remarked in 1964 that: 'the game was essentially played for enjoyment and that too much emphasis could be placed on technical and tactical skill' (Smith & Williams, 1980: 368).

David Nash, the first National Coach appointed in Welsh rugby recalled the spirit of intransigence and counter-innovation: 'Oh no we don't want coaching, no need to coach clubs ... Oh we've never had coaching, you know, we all pick it up, we're all natural players you know; oh no you'll stifle flair, no we don't want coaching'. The resistance to change was compounded by an atmosphere of suspicion bordering on paranoia that existed amongst the national team selectors. It seemed a step in the right direction when Cadfan Davies, supported by the team's captain and vice captain, had been invited to 'prepare' the Wales team before an international match. The team won the game, but the self-perpetuating oligarchy of the selectors took a different view. Davies described a conversation the then Chairman [*sic*] of selectors: "'I'm sorry'" he said "we were delighted with the last match but one or two of my colleagues are concerned that the coach will become the selectors and the team and therefore we won't be continuing this experiment".

There was a wider global context that soon became an irresistible force for change. Throughout the 1960s the Welsh national team and Welsh players selected for the British Lions had been exposed to rugby from the Southern Hemisphere. The need to compete effectively with Australia, New Zealand and South Africa in particular, and to a lesser extent with Argentina, acted as a catalyst for further change. As Terry Cobner remarked, 'the national team provided that impetus for coaching within Welsh rugby'.

Most significantly, there was a turning point in the urgency of coaching development in Wales. The Welsh national team was beaten comprehensively 24-3 in the Test match played in South Africa in 1964. This defeat had far-reaching repercussions and at the 1964 Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the WRU the General Committee was charged with the responsibility of 'examining the state of the game and to make recommendations for the future'. The retiring president in 1964, D. Edward Davies, an ardent supporter of youth rugby, was determined to leave on a provocative note. He remarked that:

It was evident from the experiences of the South African Tour that a much more positive attitude to the game was required in Wales. Players must be prepared to learn and re-learn, to the point of absolute mastery, the basic principles of rugby union football. In this connection the importance of correct coaching at all levels cannot be over emphasised. The Schools and Youth Union shoulder a special responsibility in this connection (qf. Smith & Williams, 1980: 369).

In this same meeting the Chairman of the Coaching Committee, V.J. Parfitt, complained about the lack of interest being shown by clubs towards the coaching courses that were available. Elvet Jones, a British Lion of 1938, gave a tremendous boost to the Coaching Committee when he got up to speak. The thrust of his remarks was that clubs and the WRU had shown scant attention to coaching; and that unless there was a far more radical approach, future AGMs would degenerate into a gathering of *social* not rugby clubs (Smith & Williams, 1980; Thomas & Nicholson, 1980). In the current sporting parlance of 'taking the positives' out of heavy defeat, David Harries commented that: 'Alun Thomas returned from a tour which they regarded as a defeat for them, but better than that, they saw it as a way of going forward in Wales'.

Infrastructure

The outcome of the post-mortem of the tour of South Africa was to set up a working party on coaching, which was made up of Union members, ex-players and coaches (Williams, 1976; Smith & Williams, 1980; Thomas & Nicholson, 1980). This was the beginning of a nationally organised and accepted coaching scheme in Welsh rugby (Williams, 1976). The first recommendation was that clubs should accept the principle of coaching and immediately appoint suitably qualified coaches. At the WRU AGM a year later it was reported that a number of clubs had embraced the principle of appointing coaches and that a Coaching Advisory Committee had been established to examine the technical aspects of the game. As the level of interest in coaching increased the administrative workload expanded to the point where, in December 1965, a recommendation was presented from the Coaching Advisory Committee to the General Committee that a full time Coaching Administrator should be appointed (Smith & Williams, 1980). The recommendation was accepted, the post was two-thirds grant funded by central government, and Ray Williams took up his position on 1 June 1967. As Clem Thomas noted:

The appointment of Ray Williams in 1967 was the best decision made by the W.R.U. in my lifetime, and in my view, was fundamental to the ensuing success of Welsh rugby. Admittedly, he arrived at a time when the framework and enthusiasm had already been established, but it was now apparent that there was a need for a professional with considerable ability to guide and structure the new conceptions of coaching (qf. Thomas & Nicholson, 1980:20).

Despite the appointment of Williams the legacy of entrenched institutional conservatism lingered. Prompted by Williams' tireless commitment as well as the selfless and principled action of some individuals, the dominant view began to shift, though there were still some mixed messages. When the touring party

to tour Argentina was announced in 1968 there was room for a Tour Manager and Assistant, but it was not considered necessary to include a coach, even though David Nash had operated in that capacity in the Five Nations championship during the previous season. Alun Thomas, a member of the coaching committee, was not prepared to accept this lack of support for coaching and resigned. This was, of course, a paradoxical situation. For whilst on the one hand, the WRU employed Ray Williams, a powerful and persuasive advocate for coaching; on the other, there was an implicit contempt and disregard for the involvement of a coach for the national team. At the subsequent WRU AGM the clubs flexed their collective political muscle and had the decision reversed. Clive Rowlands remembered the circumstances: 'the clubs were up in arms that there wasn't a coach going to Argentina, so they fought the Union to change their minds and so they appointed me to go then as a coach to Argentina'. The tide was beginning to turn.

One of the first things that the new coaching organiser set out to do was liaise with all existing bodies in Wales (from Sports Councils to education bodies to clubs) in order to identify a common development plan. Courses, conferences and teach-ins were established for players, coaches and referees. In 1968 a 'Coaching Register' was introduced and all coaches who attained the Welsh Coaching Award were entered onto this register. By the mid 1970s eighty per cent of all clubs affiliated to the WRU had appointed a coach (Thomas & Nicholson, 1980), the number of coaches registered was in excess of three hundred, and a basic pattern of coaching was being implemented throughout the schools and clubs of Wales (Smith & Williams, 1980).

The coaching register was not without its critics. Ray Williams was mindful of the concerns: 'I mean it's no good qualifying coaches, getting qualified coaches and they all disappear and then you ask somebody after three years "How many coaches have you got?"' Nevertheless, there was a sense of identifying and auditing coaches and later facilitating the 'grading' of coaches.

It was perhaps inevitable that the Welsh Youth system embraced the concept of coaching with the greatest eagerness. Cadfan Davies recalled the appointment of Ieuan Evans in 1962: 'Ieuan was the first coach appointed by the Youth Union, and a very successful one he was too'. Evans himself brought to mind those early events:

Well actually the coaching system started with the Welsh Youth as far as I can gather. That was in 1962 when the Youth formulated a squad and brought in the squad system. They were the first ones to initiate the squad system in Welsh rugby.

Nonetheless, it was thought that the national squad system that was introduced was the first of its kind in world rugby (Smith & Williams, 1980), though John Dawes and Ray Williams were aware of similar developments in New Zealand.

As Alan Davies remarked, 'Where you think you are first, of course, other things are happening around the rest of the world'. Whether it was *the* first, or amongst the first, is largely immaterial. More importantly, it produced a consistency of approach at all levels and enabled players to adapt to the challenges of international rugby more easily. Wales was also the first country to appoint a National Coach with David Nash's appointment in 1967 (Thomas & Nicholson, 1980; Smith & Williams, 1980; Davies & Morgan, 1985).

The unparalleled international success achieved by Wales followed almost immediately after the appointment of Ray Williams and the introduction of the national squad system. It was suggested that this was as much happy coincidence as causal linkage. As John Reason and Carwyn James (1979) have commented, the players now recognised as 'greats' (even icons) of the 1970s were not themselves products of the system that was introduced. Indeed since the national team was only able to assemble for a couple of days before every international match during the 'amateur' era, the extent to which team preparation was ever much more than mere organisation is a moot point. Clive Rowlands, national coach from 1968 to 1974, explained rather self-effacingly:

You know, my first year as national coach, you had a Triple Crown and we were champions, we drew with France, so immediately there was a bit of success in the air. Whether it was my coaching or not, which I don't think it was, I certainly helped.

The most sensible analysis was from Terry Cobner: 'The success of the national team, albeit whether it was a happy circumstance of world class players coming together at the same time; or it was the advent of coaching; or it was a coincidence of both, you know'.

By 1974, the infrastructure that had been developed was being recognised as sophisticated and influential. Ray Williams was even invited to Australia to assist in setting up a similar system: 'this was 1974 and I went there for a month, and I went to the main centres, Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra, Brisbane and Queensland'. Coaching courses and conferences were attended by delegates from the southern hemisphere too. Chris Padfield recalled: 'We used to have the Australians on our summer courses. We'd have the New Zealanders on it, from all over the world they would come. They went back and then worked out all the good things that were happening in Wales'. There was, however, no reciprocal visiting at that time; such visits were seen as expensive and/or unnecessary. John Ryan explained: 'It's finance, but it's also the culture of the trip. Once you go past the ruddy traffic lights in Chepstow Bridge,³ you're going abroad, it's a trip. But that is the culture of the trip'. Paradoxically, the benefits of such 'trips' were experienced by both Ray Williams and Malcolm Lewis who were beneficiaries of a Churchill Scholarship and were able to visit Australia and New Zealand during the 1970s.

Lewis explained:

When you go into the hot seat of rugby, you know, such as New Zealand and South Africa at this moment you're going to hear a lot of sense, and you're going to pick up a lot of ideas, and what you've got to do then is come back and implement them *in a Welsh way*. [Emphasis added]

It was important not merely to replicate established practice from elsewhere, but to appreciate the ethos, after Pierre Bourdieu (1993), of the practice community in Welsh rugby and to adapt accordingly. Whether it was insularity or arrogance, the WRU failed to see the potential for enhancement and development and did not invest shrewdly in this experientially rich opportunity.

Expansion

Throughout the 1970s the coaching infrastructure was consolidated with the appointment of an Assistant Coaching Organiser with a remit for both developing the game at under-nineteen level and below and for referees (Reason & James, 1979). In 1989 a Technical Department was established and three Development Officers were recruited (Parry-Jones, 1989). This was a significant financial outlay, but was limited by the predicament of the WRU at the time. The construction of the old National Stadium in Cardiff had left a legacy of debt into the 1980s,⁴ and the result was under-investment in player and coach development. Clive Rowlands summarised the situation: 'I remember I spoke very strongly about Development Officers throughout Wales, and we got as many as we could financially afford'. Chris Padfield was a little more diagnostic about the consequences: 'They hadn't been feeding, they hadn't put any fertiliser anywhere, so as a result we were going down and we were going down rapidly'.

There was a recognition that there were some benefits to the 'grass-roots' of the game in Wales, though these were probably offset by the effects on rugby of the changes to secondary school physical education (the introduction through the National Curriculum of a wider set of curricular experiences) and the industrial action taken by teachers during the early 1980s. John Dawes offered a simplified (and apolitical) description of the prevailing situation:

You had schoolmasters [*sic*] who would willingly do after school activities, and rugby football was one of the main choices then, and they would do it on weekends, and then after the teachers' strike they said, 'Oh hang on, we're not doing that unless we get paid for it' and of course they weren't paid for it, and therefore it died.

In the early 1990s a Technical Director was appointed and an additional two Assistant Technical Director positions were established. Further Development Officer appointments were also made, four in 1991 and three more in 1992. This expansion moved in parallel with the introduction of a Coach Education Programme. Links with external agencies, the National Coaching Foundation and Sports Council for Wales, were also forged for the delivery of 'tutor coach training' and a Sport Science Support Programme respectively.

Despite these developments, the current situation has moved on only a little since then. Tony Gray is realistic in his view of what has been achieved:

We have to acknowledge that these other sports and other agencies do have a function and are able to help us. I think we have moved a little way towards that in the last few years, but I think that we've still got a long way to go.

The coaching system continues its 'grass-roots' work effectively, and coach development programmes are providing a clear career path. Yet Chris Padfield was not optimistic:

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. We haven't developed them to the strength that we should have. We've spent a lot of money on this Technical Department – but what are we doing? We're looking to the southern hemisphere for our national coach.

There are also collaborative partnerships with Higher Education Institutions to extend the breadth of expertise of the most qualified coaches to include competencies that enable full coach involvement and integration in the professional era. Terry Cobner explained that the idea is, through academic accreditation, to produce:

the modern coach who not only has a full grounding in the coaching elements, but is also *au fait* with things like contracts, sponsorship, man-management, all the things which are so important in the day-to-day running of a professional club.

Conclusion

This study has provided insights from those who were centrally involved in the development of coaching in Welsh rugby. There are particular themes that have emerged that cast light on the extant literature. First, as the national governing body, the WRU showed organisational resistance to change in the early stages. The failure to embrace innovation lingered until the point where lack of success on the field prompted a reactive response. Even then, there was further reluctance amongst the self-perpetuating oligarchies of selection committees.

Second, coaching in Welsh rugby made real progress during the 1970s, and was recognised widely for being visionary. The irony is that the infrastructure that had been developed was probably held in higher regard outside Wales than within the Principality. Third, developments in the coaching infrastructure in Welsh rugby were significant but not optimal because they were limited by financial constraints. Fourth, considerable successes have been achieved in identifying coaching talent, nurturing it and providing a coherent career structure for aspiring and talented coaches. Most recently, the two-year 'level four' course for elite level coaches that is has been developed in collaboration with the University of Wales Institute Cardiff may be considered as a model of good practice. Its multidisciplinary emphasis within four core modules (the coaching process, sports performance, management studies and sport psychology) in conjunction with rigorous practical assessments (including multi-media diagnostic and evaluative feedback) ensure that quality standards are assured and that professional development is enhanced and enriched. Finally, and most significantly in terms of the prevailing perception of the present position of coaching in Wales, is that 'shop-window' of Welsh rugby, the senior men's national team, is managed and coached by a group whose main influence emanates from the southern hemisphere.

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NOTES

1. We refer here to the modern 'greats' of forwards Scott Quinnell and David Young, and backs Ieuan Evans, Scott Gibbs and Robert Howley.
2. It is interesting to speculate, as Samuel (1986) has done, whether the changing organisation and structure of secondary education in Wales had an adverse effect on the development of rugby talent in Wales.
3. For many years, Chepstow Bridge was the only arterial road link across the Severn Estuary to England. Symbolically, it represented a national boundary. In 1996 a second Severn Crossing bridge was opened south of Chepstow Bridge.
4. At the time of writing, there is a sense of *déjà-vu* about this episode. The funding arrangements for the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, which was built on the site of the old National Stadium, has placed a huge financial burden on the WRU. Part of the strategy to address the debt has been to cutback on some of the WRU activities. In addition to reducing the number of full-time Rugby Development Officers, some of the other casualties include the men's senior 'A' team which has been withdrawn from competition in 2002/03, and the senior women's team.

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