Do we really know how to utilise the constraints led approach?

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- Constraints are intrinsically linked to driving high performance
- Players are motivated by restrictions and challenges, especially ones that are game realistic
- Knowing your players and more importantly the person is essential to utilising the constraints led approach
- Coaches can identify behaviours in their players and how they emotionally respond to challenges

A definition

In my short time in football coaching I have played around with many interventions to accelerate the learning of players within my sessions. One area that fascinates me is the constraints led approach. Now at some point, we all use constraints; whether it be conditions, rules, questioning linked to the TGFU model. But I'd like to discuss do we actually know the impact of our constraints?

"Constraints Led Coaching is a style of coaching where the coach takes a particular technique, skill or tactic from the ‘whole’ game, isolates it in a Small Sided Game and lets the players find the answers to solve the problem”.

Implementation

This above statement really underpins the definition of constraints. For example, when you watch a game, do you notice what players are doing, feeling or thinking? Extracting and isolating an element in a small sided game can be one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences for players. If you watch the how Barcelona play, do you notice how many times the centre backs and holding midfielder either run with the ball or play off one touch to play out? Noticing this and implementing it within a small sided game would look like this:

Challenge: You must either run with the ball or play off one touch to break the halfway line

This will automatically challenge players thinking, allowing them to come up with the solutions to the problem with some detailed questioning through the TGFU model. Allowing the players to experience and feel the practice is key, and our role as coaches is to intently observe players behaviours and emotional responses.

Barcelona 1 touch passing
“It’s the design of games using different scoring systems that require the players to use particular techniques or strategies to win the game. Simply tell the players the scoring system and then just let them play. Allow them time to determine the most appropriate strategy/response rather than explicitly telling them the solution.”

Another way to implement constraints is the use of rules. Recently, I wanted players to keep the ball in play for as long as possible. How do I do this? Think of a consequence that allows players to learn from their actions and behaviours. I implemented a sin - bin rule (similar to Rugby, Ice Hockey) where players had to stand on a line for 10 seconds if they kicked the ball out of play. Suddenly this changed the whole landscape of the game, as players were playing at a really high intensity and doing everything they possibly could to stay on the ball.

Know your players, the task and the environment

It's important to know your players. What makes them tick? What are they motivated by, and how are you going to do it? Some players thrive of limiting the task, for example restricting them to a one touch finish to work on their body position, and their efficiency receiving the ball. But does it work for all? We have to create an environment where players are stimulated and have tasks just out of their reach, but also just within their reach. It really is a balancing act! Some challenges may not be suitable for all your players, but knowing their work programmes is key. For example, I worked with an U18 player last year who was one of the most imaginative and creative players I've ever coached. And he was a right back! So how did I challenge him? He loved doing Rabona chips in practice, I observed this when he did it in pre-training kick abouts. Yet I had never seen him apply it in practice.

Challenge: Can you get as many assists as possible with a Rabona?

His eyes lit up when he heard this. Now it may not seem possible to do Rabona's all the time, that's where his decision making comes in. How do I do it? Whens the right time? What do I do if a defender closes me down quickly? Why would this be useful in a game?

Restricting players environment automatically promotes creativity.

But beware!

What we sometimes think will work for players, won't always pan out how you wanted them to...

We need to know why we're doing what we're doing. Often I hear coaches say "Right, two - touch from now on". Why? Probably because it seems like they're coaching, but what are the reasons behind it? If you want to encourage players to quickly support the player with the ball, then one or two touch is a clever way to promote this. But always know why you're doing what you're doing. Will it benefit the players, challenge them tactically, technically or psychologically and have relevance to them and the game?

Further use of constraints:

- You can only do this with the ball
- Powerplays (Award goals in time periods)
- Game scenarios (You're 2-0 down with 1 minute to go, how might you respond?)
- Sin - Bins
- Rules, such as rewarding goals for certain behaviours, or saying you must dribble or pass the ball back in play (encourages players to have more opportunities at the learning task, which may be when to pass or dribble)
- Challenges
- Staggering the scoring system to manipulate what you want
• Time limits
• Overloads / Underloads
• Bad officiating (play with their emotions)
• Use of free kicks awarded to the other team when players go against the constraint
• Questioning
• Trial and Error
• Guided Discovery

Understanding the needs and demands of your players is absolutely key. Sometimes if we don't challenge our players, we may never discover their true potential, and just how spectacular they can be.

My final thoughts are does the CLA link with TGFU?

Thanks for reading. This is just from my experience in football, so I welcome any thoughts and comments from your experiences :-)

Rich