WE HAVE LIFT-OFF: Balloon play with Richard Cheetham

ConnectedCoaches attended an interactive presentation on learning through play by Senior Fellow in Sports Coaching at the University of Winchester Richard Cheetham, in which coaches and coach educators were encouraged to think like a child in order to harness the full power of creative thinking.

- Unleashing your inner child can form an important part of the learning journey.
- Put yourself in a child’s shoes when devising innovative new games. Would you have found the exercise fun at their age?
- Include your participants in the ideas process, and remember that ideas flow faster when you have sustained enthusiasm.
- A captivated audience is a malleable audience that is wired for learning.
- Don’t ask ‘Do I make my participants work hard in my sessions?’ but ‘Do my sessions have the appeal to make my participants want to work harder?’
- Don’t be put off if a creative idea falls flat. The whole process is trial and error, but when one does work, the rewards are tremendous.

The humble balloon is synonymous with fun. They are a staple feature at birthday parties, wedding anniversaries and other special occasions, while helium-filled balloons are the souvenir of choice among children at fetes and fairgrounds.
They are visually attractive, sound hilarious when you let them go full of air, cost pennies and are incredibly versatile. You can make balloon animals out of them, if you are that way inclined, rub them on your jumper and make them stick to the ceiling using static electricity, bounce them violently/lovingly off your husband, wife or child’s head without fear of reprisal (guilty as charged) or play a zany version of keepy uppy or piggy in the middle with them. When balloons fill a room, so does laughter.

But the humble balloon as an effective coach education tool? Are you for real?

Richard Cheetham has successfully added this to the long list of useful things you can do with these small, multicoloured rubber bags.

They featured heavily in his interactive presentation delivered to coaches and coach educators at Hartpury College, near Gloucester, intriguingly titled ‘Welcome to the Party’.

Through a series of role-playing games, those who attended were encouraged to tap in to their inner child and discover the benefits of learning through play.

The evidence was clear. By harnessing your imagination and actively seeking to develop creativity in yourself and your participants through simple game-based activities that a six-year-old could devise (and did, as it turns out), watch as engagement levels suddenly expand and commitment to learning takes off – a hot-air balloon approach to learning, if you like.

**Adult mode to child mode**

ConnectedCoaches Content Champion Richard began by providing some thought-provoking context.

He demonstrated the importance of coaches having a strong sense of purpose, and an awareness of the tremendous impact they have on people’s lives.

After being told to leave the room, we picked up a balloon before re-entering ‘the party’, under instruction to blow it up and tie a knot in the end.

‘The only condition, when introducing yourself at the party, is that your balloon is blown up and you can’t hold on to it, and it has to be kept in the air.’

Cue a cacophony of noise as 34 people all began talking at once, shouting to be heard over the racket while tapping their balloons frantically in front of their face. The adult play had begun.

‘This idea came from my six-year-old daughter, as I am always interested in hearing and thinking of creative new ideas and constantly challenging myself,’ said Richard, who was awarded an MBE for services to coaching and community sport in the New Year’s Honours list.

While everyone else in the room was introducing themselves informally by their job title, the company they work for or the course they are studying, Richard was busy telling people: ‘Hello, my name is Richard, and I unlock people’s creative potential.’

‘We define ourselves in a group of people by what we do,’ he added. ‘And there can be a fear among a group of people that what you do is “just” this.’

We were told to answer five questions on a laminated card: Who am I? What do I (love to) do? Who do I do it for? What are their wants or needs? How have those people changed as a result? Answering them would enable us to ‘discover our purpose’, and appreciate that we don’t ‘just’ do anything.

The answers to the final question were transcribed on to a mural (pictured below), and here is a selection:
• My children have all grown up to be caring and respectful and to help others.
• Became independent lifelong learners.
• Attitude change from negative to positive: more engaged; happier; less stressed.
• They change in their own unique way, along with their own unique character. Some find they have what they need, some need what they find. All have an understanding of their own intrinsic value and have a place they can belong.
• They are confident, they believe, they grow, they own, they enjoy their passion, and it grows with every conversation they have. In summary, they walk a path to their own fulfilment.

Mural

Captivate to stimulate learning

The moral of the story then, as spelled out by Richard: ‘This is a powerful room of superheroes.’

He added: ‘In front of me are people with such positive influence, but we don’t often sit and think about that.’

The idea behind the exercise was to encourage coaches and coach educators to re-evaluate the tremendous impact they have on people’s lives.

‘So what I do is develop confidence in young people at a time in their life when they are going through change. And at the end of that transition process, I see the difference it makes in their careers, their friendships, their life and their sport. That’s what I do. And that’s how I define myself.

‘So, yes, I work for the University of Winchester, but I also help people by guiding them through life.’

This powerful message was delivered using some fun and simple techniques intended to stimulate and inspire educators and coaches to think up their own innovative learning ideas that will captivate a group.

After all, an enraptured audience is a malleable audience that is wired for learning.

Furthermore, by steering clear of monotonous, rigidly structured sessions, and involving and inspiring
your participants, they will be more amenable to providing their own input and ideas, and become adept at thinking for themselves.

Richard holds court at Hartpury College

**Included, engaged, involved**

So how committed is your learning, how committed are your players to getting better, and how can you tell?

Richard’s 30-second balloon challenge – devised, once again, by a young child – is an example of an unconventional game that challenges and engages, and which inspires people to want to achieve.

The ‘partygoers’, who had now filed out of the conference room into the main hallway of Hartpury House mansion, were challenged to keep 50 inflated balloons in the air for 30 seconds.

Look at the photo. The balloons aren’t the only things pumped up. A picture of fun, intensity and commitment.

Balloons
And a great exercise too for developing children’s fundamental movement skills as, like an under-the-cosh club badminton player struggling desperately to return a professional’s full repertoire of shots, they bend, stretch and twist themselves into a range of awkward positions.

You may well make your participants work hard in your sessions. But a more important question to ask yourself is, do your sessions have the appeal to make them want to work harder?

Put yourself in the shoes of the children you coach, says Richard, and remember what it was like when you were a child. Would you have found the exercise fun?

Children learn through being adventurous, and they should be encouraged to test the parameters of their ability and push the boundaries, in the knowledge that training is a safe place to fail, with mistakes an integral part of the learning process.

A good test if you want to see close up what a ‘committed face’ looks like involves grabbing a (you guessed it) balloon. Ask for a volunteer; tell them to pick a number between 1 and 10 and then inflate the balloon with that many breaths; then ask them to try to catch the balloon before it hits the floor and let it go.

‘You should not be interested in if they catch the balloon but rather pay attention to the look on their face,’ says Richard.

The intent, wide-eyed expression should tell you everything you need to know.

Floating on air

Creativity, as Richard is always happy to impart, is the catalyst that inspires positive change. Blended with fun play, and with the opportunity for autonomous as well as guided learning, the upshot is flexible and adaptable performers who relish risk taking and problem solving, and who will unfailingly develop into better decision-makers.

And key in the creative thinking process is not to be put off if one or two bright ideas fall short of expectations.

‘Sometimes, these ideas fail, but sometimes, they work. It is trial and error,’ says Richard, who encourages coaches to try things out, no matter how crazy the ideas may seem, as they strive to achieve this dynamic and motivational climate.

‘As with all the great films, there are plenty of pieces left on the cutting room floor which didn’t work out as expected.’

So don’t allow your enthusiasm to be deflated if one of your bright ideas falls a bit flat. Be bursting with ideas, as the next one might take off – and when it does, you will be floating on air.
Now, where can I get my hands on a packet of balloons?

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tags: creativity, coach-education