

Taking the complexity out of games-based learning

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Games Based Approach

For this blog we have enlisted the help of three valued members of the ConnectedCoaches community, who provide examples of how games-based approaches to learning (GBA) can be used to increase participants' game sense by developing their powers of tactical and strategic thinking.

If games-based learning is to become more widely used by coaches to improve the skills of their participants, then a more simplified approach to educating coaches on the practical application of games-based theory must be found.

Zone of Proximal Development, Social Constructivism, Complex Learning Theory, Constraints-Led Approach: use of such scholarly terms only serves to put the frighteners on grass-roots coaches who may previously have been labouring under the misapprehension that GBA stood for the Great Britain athletics team!

If coach developers and online industry bloggers are to pique rather than erode coaches' interest, they must **provide multiple and varied examples** that illustrate clearly how games-based coaching – used, ideally, in conjunction with an [appropriate framework](#) as a handy reference tool – can work in practice.

The present state of affairs is that coaches lack confidence in their ability to design games that align with specific learning outcomes.

They may wholeheartedly champion the philosophy that participants should be encouraged to make decisions independently, but consider their bank of knowledge on learning theory inadequate, preventing them from successfully analysing individual development trajectories; and preventing them too from

knowing how and when to make appropriate modifications to games to make them more or less challenging to further optimise learning potential. Heck, even reading that paragraph will be enough to scare off many coaches, I would imagine.

And that's before they proceed to the second stage of the process – the use of constructive questioning – which is just as critical to the success or failure of achieving learning objectives.

In summary, unless more of a concerted effort is made to support coaches' understanding of GBA through the use of explicit examples, the chances of the practice becoming established at the lower end of the coaching pyramid will remain nothing more than a pipe dream.

Absorb, process, retain

UK Coaching provides a fantastic resource on GBA, entitled [Asking good questions and games-based activity](#), which goes into more depth about how knowledge is absorbed, processed and retained during learning.

It simplifies the academic language associated with GBA thus:

On social constructivism: 'People construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. Therefore, games and activities that encourage players to reflect on what they have just done will increase learning.'

On zone of proximal development: 'The most effective instruction aims at the zone just beyond existing knowledge... that stretches them beyond what they already know. To do this [requires] use of questions to generate debate and discussion.'

And on complex learning theory: 'Learning is the combination of mind and body – of action and then reflection on the meaning of that action. Put simply, the world is inseparable from us, and we can only understand it (and learn) by experiencing it.'

Greater game sense for game day

The upshot of this intellectual theory being that using games and play – and then manipulating the rules and the environment in which those games take place – maximises learning to a far greater degree than repetitive drills and traditional instruction can hope to achieve.

According to teacher, blogger and respected Twitter guru [ImSporticus](#), a commitment to this practice will give their techniques meaning and purpose. Long term this will cultivate [creative thinking](#) and the enviable ability to improvise and adapt to unaccustomed scenarios encountered in match situations.

In [Shaping the Game](#), he writes: 'Children are still practising their techniques, but in a dynamic way.

'The modification of games to shape play in order to focus the child's attention on specific tactics, movements, perceptual cues and skill learning is a key element in a games-based approach... It allows children to learn not only how to perform a technique but also when, where and why.'

So newly armed with a boiled down summary of GBA, along with the promise of its formidable power to transform the effectiveness of your coaching and the skill-set of your participants if used correctly, on to some examples.

We have enlisted the help of three coaches, who lay out below how you might construct a typical participant-centred game that places the onus for learning onto the player – and where the coach's job is to act as facilitator through the use of open-ended questions that stimulate thinking and encourage debate and discussion.

EXAMPLE 1 – Rugby Union

Four Corner Score

From [Richard Cheetham](#) MBE, RFU coach educator and Senior Fellow in Sports Coaching at the University of Winchester.

Coaching Rationale:

1. Explain the game and the desired learning outcome?
2. Some examples of questions you might use to get players to assess, evaluate and draw conclusions.
3. Some examples of when you might pause, prompt, probe, adapt etc in different scenarios and any final thoughts regarding feedback, reflection, outcomes that show how the coach's support role helps participants understand what learning has taken place?

The purpose of this game is to develop some of the principles of rugby union through a small sided game.

The key principles are possession, support, pressure, continuity and go-forward. It is these which form the game focus, design and which will form the basis of the reflection through questioning.

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- Set up a grid with a different coloured cone on each corner (10m x 10m for 4 to 6 a side for example)
- Teams will score by passing to a team-mate on any of the cones.
- Passing only is allowed and no running with the ball – this is to ensure greater inclusion of participants as this is the best way to develop the key principles of support, pressure, continuity, possession and go-forward.
- Players are not allowed to 'wait' on the cones – these must be kept free and only used when a clear pass will enable them to score on the cone.
- Once a point is scored the opposition receives the ball but cannot score on the same cone twice, therefore expanding the game through the area more.
- Only dropped balls, scoring and interceptions will change possession. It is important not to add a 'number' of passes to be performed as a minimum to score or maximum (when possession is turned

over) as this often generates unnecessary urgency among players and poor passing options are often taken.

- Passing must be below shoulder height in order to replicate a more authentic pass used in a match

Consider the following to reflect on with players:

- How could you ensure that the principle of go-forward is emphasised by modifying the game? (alternate scoring at each end – eg, they cannot score at the same cone or same side / end of the grid).
- In what way can we change the game to add realistic pressure?
- How can the defence be more effective in providing pressure?
- In which ways can players offer effective support to their team-mates?
- How could you measure the success of the continuity factor (ie, number of successful completed passes).
- How could you measure how effective support was? (number of players involved in the build-up to a score).

Game modifications:

- Add in a fifth cone anywhere on the fringes of the grid and call it double points to see how the players react – did they react quickly (both defence and attack), what influenced their decision to go for it or go for a different option.
- After off-loading players must do one tackle roll – this challenges them to get up and back into the game quickly (principle of support).
- Change the size and shape of the ball used. How much are the players challenged when you use a tennis ball as opposed to a rugby ball?

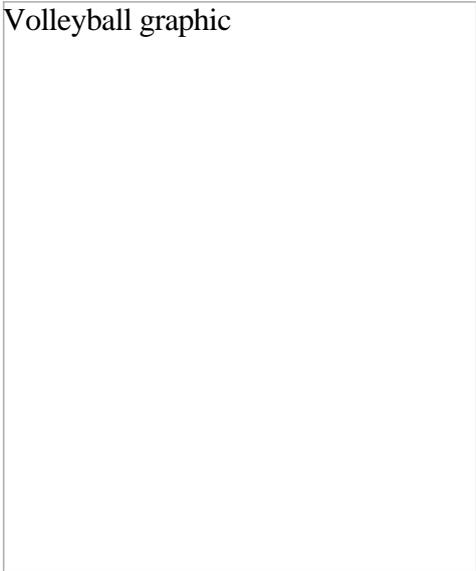
EXAMPLE 2 – Volleyball

From José Castro, volleyball coach and Programme Director Sport and Physical Education at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

Aims

1. To develop the players' ability to read the opposition's defence (decision-making).
2. To improve back-court attack.
3. To encourage attack to the corners (zone 1 and 5), in which the block tends to be less evident.

Volleyball graphic



Game-based activity

- 4v4 game, with 1 setter and 3 back-court defenders/attackers.
- Split back-court in three equal zones (zone 1, 6 and 5)
- After the set, but before the attack, the zone 6 defender needs to move to either zone 1 or zone 5, overloading that zone.
- Attackers can only attack to zone 1 or zone 5.

Following an initial moment of play, challenge the players to reflect on their decision-making when attacking, by asking the question: Why have you decided to attack to that zone?

- If the players haven't thought about it, let them go back to the game and reflect about it.
- In order to instigate such reflection, encourage them to look at the opposition before they attack. Then, ask them again about the reasons behind their decision to attack to a certain zone.
- The aim is to make them think about the advantages of attacking to the zone with just one defender.

Following this, **manipulate the rules of the game** so that attacking to the zone with just one player is rewarded with an extra point, whether or not they score. This promotes the attackers' ability to read where there is an overload of defenders, and attack to the most vulnerable zone.

Consider the following to promote the players' reflection throughout:

- Are you able to see the opposition before attacking?
- Do you think that you are using your peripheral vision? How?
- How is that impacting on your performance when attacking?
- What are you doing well when attacking, and what can you improve?
- How can this be useful in the formal version of the game (6v6)?

EXAMPLE 3 – Football

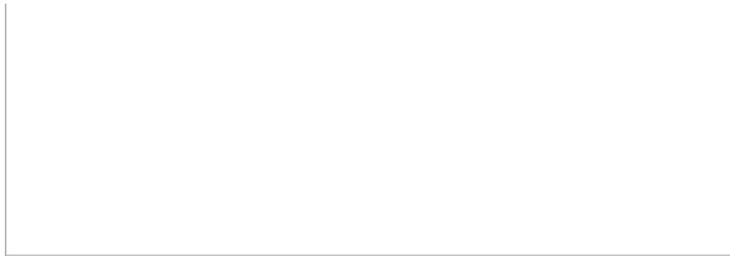
Three-zone Small-sided Football

From [Andy Grant](#), Sunderland Girls FA Regional Talent Club Manager and qualified football and multi-skills coach.

The zones provide constraints that encourage the players to use technical skills and make on and off-ball decisions that they are less likely to make if the constraints weren't imposed.

The use of in-game constraints such as the zones reduces the need for coaches to get their key coaching points across by 'freezing' play and modelling what they want to happen.

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Activity set-up

Game is played between two teams of 8 outfield players set up in a formation:

- three defenders (Players numbered 1, 2 and 3)
- three midfielders (Players numbered 4, 5 and 6)
- two attackers (Players numbered 7 and 8).

Goals are scored by one team having control of the ball (indicated by a player stopping the ball with the sole of their foot) in a Scoring Zone. This will be achieved through dribbling with the ball or receiving a pass and stopping it.

Play in a 60 x 40m pitch marked out with three zones of equal size. Preferably, if you have access to a full-size pitch you can use the width of the penalty box (44 yards) and play between the penalty boxes (between 64 - 94 yards). If you have less players it is recommended to remove a midfield player from each team.

Whenever the ball goes out of play the game restarts with the coach playing a ball to one of the teams in their defending area, creating more opportunities to build play from the defensive area.

Players are allocated a zone and must stay in it unless they are successful in meeting the specific constraint (see below)

Constraints-Led Approach

The use of zones allows constraints to be used that will encourage players to make the decisions on and off the ball and practice the techniques that are needed for building attacks from the defending area through midfield into the attacking area.

First conditioned game:

Constraint 1: The ball can only move from one zone to the next and must be dribbled.

Constraint 2: The player that dribbles the ball is the only one that can leave their zone and can stay in the next zone making an extra player (ie, 4 against 3 in midfield zone, 3 against 3 in attacking zone) until possession is lost.

Constraint 3: There must be a minimum of 3 consecutive passes in the defending third before the ball can be dribbled into the next zone.

The constraints put specific emphasis on:

- Teams using the extra player in the defending third to maintain possession and allowing midfield and attacking players time to take up effective possessions.
- The team in possession learn how to make the use of their extra defending player to build a structured attack in the midfield zone. By dribbling the ball into midfield zone an overload is created (4v3) which allows continued possession and a platform for entering the attacking third.
- The player dribbling into the attacking zone creates a 3v3 situation. This is a positive attacking

situation as the attacking team have possession of the ball and they have opportunity for executing individual 1v1 skills as well as 3-player combination plays.

Questions for game understanding

Prior to the activity starting it is important the coach knows that the players know why the constraints are being used and can check for understanding through the following questions:

What are the benefits of a team staying within your zone?

- Responses should cover the benefits of a team using positions to maximise the available space to maintain possession, team formation that balances the number of players committed to an attack with keeping players in position to defend potential counter-attack.

What are the benefits of the condition that you can only move up a zone through dribbling?

- Responses should include benefits of a) retaining controlled possession of the ball b) creating overloads in midfield and c) providing positive attacking platform by committing the first defender d) supporting midfield player allows range of combination plays to be executed.

What are the benefits of the defending team having to make 4 consecutive passes before the ball can be dribbled into the next zone?

- Responses can include that it provides time for the midfield players to make runs to create space for themselves and for the dribbling player, they can move into a wide position for to make it difficult for opponent to cover them and also challenge the dribbling player, to get into position where they are beyond their opponent so they can receive a pass and then dribble into attacking zone at speed and with no opposition to beat.

At natural intervals during the game the coach should ask the players the following questions to develop their game understanding:

Coach can ask defending players:

What is the best position to take up to make it hard for the opponents to win the ball from you?

- Responses should include making a triangle shape that has width and depth.

When is the best time for a player to dribble into the midfield area?

- Responses to include that they recognise when there is space in front of you.

When dribbling into the midfield area what should you be looking for?

- Responses could include where defenders are placed and where teammates are positioned to create a 2v1 situation, space that allows the opportunity to carry the ball straight through midfield into the attacking zone.

Coach can ask midfield players:

What is the best position to create space for the dribbling player?

- Responses could include moving wide and further away.

What is the best position to be able to combine with the dribbling player to create a 2v1 situation?

- Responses could include position at an appropriate distance (where the opponent can't cover both

players at once) and an angle to receive a pass that won't be intercepted but is in a forward direction to eliminate the defender from being able to make a recovery run.

What can you do to lose your opponent to create space for yourself?

- Response to include making a run away from the ball before checking back to receive, standing on the blind side (ie, where defender can't see you and the ball at the same time).

Why is it beneficial for retaining possession in midfield zone?

- Response to include that it allows time for attacking players to get into position and create space for themselves, eliminate opposing midfielders from disrupting the attacking play.

Why is it beneficial for a midfielder to carry the ball into the attacking zone?

- Responses to include the benefits of committing the defenders to the ball to move them out of position.

Coach can ask attacking players:

How can you lose your marker and create space for yourself:

- Response to include making a run away from the ball before checking back to receive, standing on the blind side (ie where defender can't see you and the ball at the same time).

What runs can you make to create space for your teammates?

- Response to include running from the centre of pitch to out wide, running behind defenders to take them away from the ball.

What runs can you make to receive the ball in the Scoring Zone?

- Responses can include diagonal runs from wide to the centre and from centre to the wings, runs behind defenders on their blind side and overlapping runs (ie running from behind the player on the ball).

Do you have any examples of the Games Based Approach to coaching. Please share them in the comments box below.

Further reading:

- [Why do coaches still shy away from using TGfU and CLA in their sessions?](#)
- [Do we really know how to utilise the constraints-led approach?](#)
- [Teaching Games for Understanding \(TGfU\) – Are all coaches playing the game?](#)
- [A discussion on coaches' use of Teaching Games for Understanding \(TGfU\)](#)
- [The E-Q Games Based Coaching Model](#)

tags : cla, constraints-led-approach, games-based-learning, constraints-led, games-based-approach, gba