

Do the best players make the best coaches?

Published 28/08/18 by [Blake Richardson](#)

We get the views of one of the greatest rugby league players ever to have laced up a pair of boots, former Great Britain captain and current England Knights assistant coach Paul Sculthorpe MBE.

- **He tells us what challenges an accomplished player is likely to face when they make the transition from competitor to facilitator.**
- **Gives his opinion on the skills and character traits you need to be a great coach and whether they are the same as the ones that mark out an exceptional player.**
- **Lists some advantages that come with having been a great player and having had the opportunity to work with some great coaches.**
- **We ask him who had the biggest influence on his coaching career, what he learned from them and if it is fair that retiring professionals have a monopoly on the top coaching jobs.**

It is a line trotted out time and again in coaching circles: that the best and most successful coaches are, very often, those who were NOT the best players.

You will likely find just as many people who argue the opposite, of course.

Such a contentious question is anything but straightforward – no matter what the absolutists occupying both poles would have us believe – because it is highly subjective. We all have our own disparate and deep-rooted opinions, vested interests or individual biases that have been shaped over many years.

Purely and simply, there is no definitive answer to the question. The reality is you could point to numerous examples that lend weight to both arguments.

Admittedly the main headline is a bit of a tease, and what we should (and will), really be exploring are the underlying reasons why some great players make it (or don't make it) as a coach and why some self-confessed lower calibre players go from small-time playing careers to big-time coaching careers.

Natural progression

In rugby league, the path from player to coach is a well-trodden one, with the vast majority of top coaches having been professionals themselves.

Just look at the current England coaching structure, comprising head coach Wayne Bennett (a former Australian international), assistant coach Paul Wellens (31 international caps and 599 appearances for St Helens), team manager Jamie Peacock (47 internationals and 487 outings as a professional, predominantly for Leeds and Bradford) and head coach of England Knights – Paul Anderson (15 internationals and 237 games for Bradford and St Helens).

And then you have former Great Britain captain Paul Sculthorpe – one of the game's most decorated players, and the only person to win the coveted Man of Steel award twice. He played for his country on 30 occasions and scored more than 1200 points for St Helens in 247 appearances after signing from Warrington in a world record transfer back in 1998.

Sculthorpe is the England Knights assistant coach and part of a seven-man England Performance Unit that works – with varying degrees of input – across every level of the elite pathway, coaching England Youth, Academy, Knights, Women and Wheelchair squads, all the way through to the Senior England Performance Squad.

This scenario isn't unique to rugby league. Football too comes in for criticism for fast-tracking players into the top jobs. This season it is Steven Gerrard and Frank Lampard in the spotlight, having taken over the reins at Rangers and Derby County respectively a little over a year since they announced their retirement.

The opportunities for gifted and dedicated club coaches to rise to the very top are, to say the least, limited in these high-profile sports, with the top jobs being snaffled by the retiring pros. For every Jose Mourinho (a former PE teacher and modest footballer by his own admission, who played in the Portuguese Second Division), there are a hundred Pep Guardiolas (47 caps for Spain).

The value of formal coach education

The complaint is that the Frank Lampard's of the world have been allowed to miss some vital steps in the coach development journey – a point passionately argued by [Dr Ed Coughlan](#) in his well-written blog lamenting the scant regard nowadays for coach education. He says it is unfair that recently retired players regularly leapfrog coaches who have spent years working their way through their national governing body pathway.

Sculthorpe, understandably, has a slightly different, but not altogether conflicting, view on former pros being given preferential treatment and bypassing traditional coach education. He is sympathetic to the plight of coaches who feel they may never get a look-in for the most prestigious jobs, no matter how qualified or impressive their CV.

'It depends what you class as valuable coach education,' he begins. 'As far as I'm concerned you've had an education by playing and working under numerous elite coaches.'

'Over a career you pick up so many things, good and bad, and you can decide for yourself what you think works well and what you think doesn't.'

Sculthorpe says being a professional afforded him the opportunity to work with some incredible coaches. One of the most influential doubled up as a trusted mentor and role model. The relationship they forged was educational and empowering and stood Paul in great stead for a career in coaching.

'I worked with my hero as a player growing up, Ellery Hanley – when he coached Saints in 1999 and 2000. It wasn't so much what he taught me technically and tactically, Ellery's way of coaching was about work ethic and quality practice. He had an aura about him where players wanted to be at their best every day because you were doing it for Ellery Hanley as well as yourself.'

Does that mean coaches who haven't played at the highest level themselves may struggle to command as much respect from players?

'It doesn't make you a better or worse coach but, yes, I think with coaches who have been top players, it gives you a head start with the players you work with in terms of gaining that respect. Players know that you know exactly what is expected of them and how hard to push them physically and mentally. But obviously what you deliver has to be good as well as you can easily lose that respect.'

Sculthorpe scores a try for St Helens in the 2002 Challenge Cup final against Wigan. Pictures: Action Images

Transferable skills

Sculthorpe believes having dined at the top table as a player means he can now bring things to the coaching table that those who haven't played the game to a high standard can't, although he freely accepts that being immersed in such a culture does not automatically instil in players all the credentials they need to be a top coach.

Top players do not necessarily possess the leadership, man management or soft skills, for example, to make it as a successful coach.

'I agree there is no black and white answer to the question of whether the best players make the best coaches. It is very individual,' he says. 'Some great players might be just that: great at playing rugby. And sometimes players do walk into roles because of what they've done on the field and then don't suit the coaching environment.'

'Others may not have been the best players in terms of playing ability, but they might have fantastic leadership skills, people skills, work ethic, and they are things I believe you can transfer into coaching.'

Paul cites Daniel Anderson as a prime example of a coach who was not a well-known player but who earned respect as a coach. St Helens won the treble with him at the helm.

'He wasn't a player. He used to tell us about his time at Parramatta – when he started out literally as a boot cleaner. He worked his way up as a coach and learnt the game as he went.'

'He was very knowledgeable and had a great rapport with the players. He was certainly a coach who demanded respect.'

Skill-sets: Compare and contrast

Sculthorpe says he considers himself a people person, and lists this attribute as his biggest strength.

'When you talk about coaching qualities, I do think a lot of it comes from within. Maybe that's why I was a captain. And I think a lot of the leadership traits you need as a captain are the same as you need to be a good coach.'

'When you are a captain you have to lead with your own performance. It's hard to get stuck in to people off the pitch if you're not performing yourself. It comes from the standards you yourself set. That is a big part of leadership and inspiring others.'

‘I’ve got a great relationship with players I’ve worked with, either at senior level or youth level, and I treat players like I want to be treated. Don’t get me wrong, there are times you need to be forceful as a coach, but I think the best way is to be constructive and try and inspire the players.

‘Equally, it’s not always about what you do or what you say, it’s about how and when you say it at times.

‘In terms of that approach I learned from the best in Chris Joynt. He didn’t talk for the sake of talking. He spoke when it mattered.’

Sculthorpe does not believe the set of diverse skills related to playing expertise are radically different than those considered elemental to good coaching. While not an exact replica, he believes there is a significant crossover. The psychological characteristics he mentions are fundamental qualities every player and coach should possess, as are traits he honed as a professional such as decision-making, problem solving and adaptability. He highlights expert technical and tactical analysis as another quality the best players and the best coaches have in common.

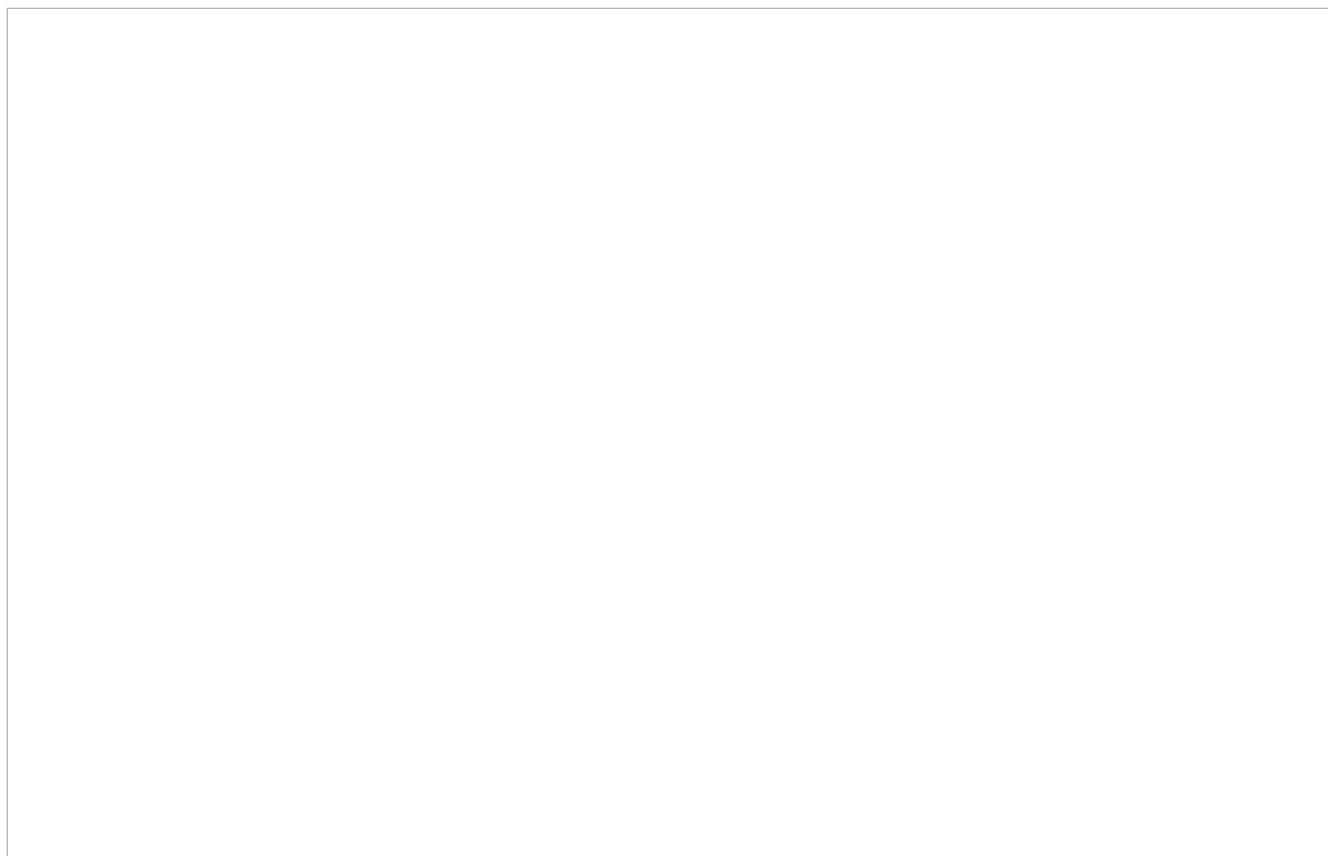
‘The technical and tactical stuff that you picked up as a player and saw worked – obviously you are going to take that into your own coaching if you believe in what you’ve done and seen,’ he begins.

The level of technical knowledge drilled into full-time professional players can give them an advantage over players who may not have been so meticulously well-schooled. Certainly when it comes to observing grass-roots and amateur coaches, Sculthorpe says their technical deficiencies are evident.

‘I’m a big believer in core skills, and I think core skills win games. There are a lot of coaches I have seen who over coach. You see it a lot in junior rugby, with parents who have put their hands up and become a coach of their child’s team. Where do they learn? It’s usually on a Friday or Saturday watching Sky on a screen at home. They copy what they see but don’t realize **why** they are doing it.

‘You watch the coaches at amateur clubs too and they don’t break the plays down in enough detail. It starts with a good play the ball, then a good dummy half pass, the width and depth of the players, the lines that they run, how to hold defenders. This has become second nature to us as players and we know how it’s done and why it’s done.’

That’s not to say moving into coaching didn’t pose some hefty challenges for Sculthorpe. Ones that, while he may have anticipated them, did not make them any less formidable.



Massive learning curve

It is easier if you have been a senior player in the squad or a captain ‘because you’ve had that taste of authority’, he begins. But again, don’t confuse that as an assessment that coaching is straightforward, or that professionals automatically make the best coaches.

You should have spotted the pattern by now. When it comes to the rules of transitioning between player and coach, nothing is clear-cut, and everyone should be judged on their own merits. Just as different playing styles suit different teams, so different personalities suit different environments and different skill-sets suit different roles.

Take former St Helens coach Ian Millward.

‘We had a great team under him and won everything, but what I remember is that every day at training was different. It was enjoyable. He organised events that brought everyone together and it was like a really close family. And he would let you express yourself on the field. I would say he was a great coach. Then the following year he went to Wigan and they nearly got relegated.’

One thing Sculthorpe can say for certain is that becoming a coach has been a massive learning curve – which he is still very much on.

‘I know I couldn’t have gone straight into a head coach’s role,’ says Paul of the culture shock.

‘I know rugby, I know about what goes on out on the field, I know what players do and what they need to do, but coaching is a whole new ball game in regard to how you watch games, how you plan and prepare for the games and the training sessions, how you get across how you want the team to play, and making sure you keep the players interested.

‘The main thing I remember being told going into coaching was: “Just because you were a good player, don’t expect everyone can see what you saw on the field. And just because something might be second nature to you, doesn’t mean it’s the same for those you are coaching”.

‘You have to learn not to become frustrated when they can’t quite appreciate what you’re telling them. You have got to be able to take a step back and put yourself in their shoes. Show some empathy.’

Concluding thoughts

In Sculthorpe’s case success as a player and a captain has bred success as a coach. But for another coach, a lack of success as a player will be no barrier to success as a coach whatsoever.

What **is** a barrier to achieving success as a coach is opportunity, or rather lack of opportunity.

Our industry works tirelessly to raise awareness among coaches of the need for equity and making sport open and accessible to everyone. The same rules of equality and impartiality should apply to those employed as a coach. In the spirit of fairness, the best coaches (regardless of the educational route they have taken) should not be excluded from the best jobs.

Do you agree with Sculthorpe or do you have a different view? Please share your opinion below.

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