

## **Biography**

Mike Ashford is PhD Researcher at Leeds Beckett University, where he is also a Graduate Teaching Assistant on the BSc Sport Coaching Degree. He is also head coach of a local National League Rugby Union 1<sup>st</sup> team in North Yorkshire. Mike's research interests include decision making in team sports, tactical periodisation and skill acquisition. He has worked with a number of elite Gallagher Premiership and RFU Championship academies in coach education and curriculum design.

## **Coaching research abstract**

### **Stream – 1 High performance coaching**

#### Exploring coaching strategies to develop player decision-making in elite rugby union

Rugby Union players are required to coordinate their behaviour collectively and make effective decisions in an inherently complex environment. Thus, coaches are faced with an immensely difficult task of developing their player's decision making so their team performs optimally. As such, a practical problem is posed; how do coaches do this effectively? This study used a cognitive task analysis methodology and self-confrontation interviews with Gallagher Premiership Academy coaches (n = 8) and 1<sup>st</sup> team coaches (n = 2) to explore what strategies elite coaches are currently using.

Initially the coaches described how they constructed an ideal vision of what their team's performance would look like. This allowed each coach to form expectations of the decisions that players were required to make in order for successful performance. Some highlighted that developing decision making is a process of facilitation and exploration rather than a coach controlling behaviour through tactics and options. Yet, others described how creating tactical options guides players to relevant pieces of information. The observations (3-5 per coach) showed there was a disparity between the coach's beliefs in the way they coach and their practice. Coaches did explicitly educate their players through tactical information in off-field class-room based sessions, but also allowed players to find their own solutions in small sided rule constrained games. When confronted with the footage the coaches described the disparity between beliefs and practice as being driven by the context and moment of the game.

There are clear implications within these findings, it is essential for coaches to have a clear top-down vision of successful performance when considering decision making. Yet they should ensure that their players are free to make decisions in time constrained situations. Coaches should strike a balance between giving players clear options through drill based or classroom sessions, and allowing them to find solutions through on field non-linear pedagogical approaches. Coaches should develop strategies to develop decision making depending on the situation and context of the game, rather than adopting a specific coaching strategy. Future research should explore how players make decisions in a competitive match to better align coaching strategies to situations in the game.