Game Sense

Developing Thinking Players
Reference: Australian Coaching Council

What is "Game Sense?"

Game sense is an approach to coaching and teaching which uses games as a learning tool to
- Increase the motivation of players
- Develop tactical & strategic thinking as well as skill development

This approach to coaching and teaching is "game centered" rather than "technique centered" Traditionally, technique has been the focus of training sessions – often taught in isolation, without requiring players to think and bearing little resemblance to the skill required in the game. We have all seen players practicing technique

Example: undertaking numerous repetitions of a tennis swing, or religiously practicing shots for goal

While the technique itself is an important part of the overall skill, there is limited value in technique practice that doesn't take into account the other factors involved in executing the skill

Example: making a decision on which shot to play; or deceiving the goal keeper on the shot for goal

The game centred approach focuses on the coach designing practices that progressively challenge and motivate players to develop an understanding of the strategies, skills and rules required to succeed in games

It makes the game the focus of the practice session (rather than the technique), and challenges the players to think about what they are actually doing and why.

The players must first establish an understanding of what the game is about. The technique follows when the need is established.

What role does the Coach take in the game centred approach?

Traditionally training sessions have been "coach dominated" with players being told where to stand, how to defend a situation etc.

The emphasis with the game centred approach is on the players making decisions within the game, rather than the coach telling the players where to run and who to throw to. The coach becomes more of a facilitator, creating situations where players have to find the solutions for themselves (problem solving / decision making). This approach also assists in developing skills in areas such as communication, leadership and team work.

Why use a game centered approach?

People (especially children) love to play games. How often do we hear our players saying "when can we play a game". The game centered approach promotes maximum participation – a key to children remaining involved in sport. Other reasons include
- Promoting long term learning (if players discover things for themselves, then they are more likely to learn from the experience and retain the information longer)
- Catering for all levels of ability by encouraging players to choose the level they wish to play at (e.g. player may choose to bat off a tee) less emphasis on text book execution of technique and more on understanding of tactical aspects
- Assists the beginner coach with limited technical knowledge of a sport and inexperience in group management. For instance
  - It is more appropriate to set challenges for players through games rather than conduct technique based sessions (which may be based on "unsound" interventions due to lack of knowledge)
  - Management is often easier if players are having fun
  - Positive social interaction between players and coaches is encouraged
  - Promotes affiliation (part of team or group)
  - Helps avoid developing players with inflexible techniques (ie: players who are unable to cope with change in their environment)
  - Encourages the players understanding of the need for rules (ie rules are there to make the game better, not to prevent us from doing things)

What is the difference between a technique and a skill?

A "technique" is a movement performed in isolation at practice. A "skill" is the performance of the technique in a game.

Ie: **Technique + game context = Skill** (game context = pressure, decision making, timing, use of space etc)

One of the key messages in game centered approach is that we can teach players skills that they actually use in a "real game". Using minor games that involve aspects such as time limits or opponents will help players to develop skills that are realistic to the game.

So when do you focus on technique?

The dilemma for coaches is when to concentrate on the tactical aspects, and when to assist a player with technique difficulty. As a guide the following model can be used
- Players are introduced to a game requiring skills that are both tactical (what to do) and technical (how to do it)
- The players develop an understanding of the game, and identify the technical and tactical skills required
- If necessary, the coach or teacher may intervene to assist players with technical skills (players can appreciate why a particular technique is valuable) or discuss tactical aspects
- Players again practice the skills in conditions that relate to the game.

When should you correct technique?

Before attempting to make technique changes the coach should consider:
- Player confidence as well as physical readiness (ie: is the player mentally ready to accept change as well as physically ready) This could be influenced by a variety of factors such as self esteem and the athletes perception of their own ability
- Whether the coach believes they can make a correction in the time available (ie: if you cannot fix it don't touch it!)
- The ability of the coach to "put it right" (avoid conveying errors if you cannot solve them)
- Whether changing the technique will actually effect the end result (does not have to be text book to be successful) Note: consider whether the unusual technique is safe

Correcting technique v teaching a new technique

An alternative is trying to change an existing technique is to teach the player a new technique (ie: add a new technique to the player's repertoire). If the old technique occurs under pressure for a time, there is no need to concern as the new technique will eventually become the dominant one.
This approach is a more positive one than focusing on a players perceived weaknesses. The young players self – esteem can often be quite fragile, and the coach needs to avoid turning a minor technique fault into a major mental block!

Implementing Game Centered Approach
Types of sports

Target Sports
Archery, golf, darts, lawn bowls, ten pin bowling, croquet, billiards & snooker

Net & wall games (divided & shared court)
Badminton, squash, tennis, table tennis & volleyball

Striking/ fielding games
Cricket, softball & baseball

Invasion games
Hockey, soccer, Aussie rules, league, rugby, touch, water polo, basketball, netball, lacrosse, handball & polo

Modification for exaggeration

Coach modifies the game to exaggerate or emphasise particular tactical aspects. Modifications can include

- Dimensions of playing area
- Positioning of goal posts (and number of goal posts per team)
- Equipment to be used
- Number of passes or shots allowed
- Number of players in attack & defence
- Scoring system – including penalty or bonus points for particular plays
- Time allowed
- Specific roles for players (ie: goal keeper)
- Adding or deleting game rules

Note: Often skills or rules from another sport can add a new dimension to a game

Examples of tactical aspects that can be emphasized

Tactical aspect	Question to pose
Deception	How can you lose your opponent to get onto the circle
Risk	Is the long shot worth the risk in this situation
Time	How can you give your team time to recover from last turnover
Stage of game	You are two goals down in closing stages of game, how do you attack next play
Space (creating or limiting)	Where are the best spaces to run to receive ball? How will this impact on where your team mates go?
Decision making	Should you go for the intercept or block opponents move?
Anticipation	What is the likely response from your opponent in this situation
Defensive patterns	Do you think you should use a zone defence, double team or 1 v1
Regaining possession	How can you regain possession after a turnover
Minimising angles of attack	How can you reduce the angle for the attacker moving towards circle / ball
Attacking & scoring	Would it be better to use the width of the field, or try to penetrate the line?
Keeping possession	Should you evade your opponent or pass the ball

Developing games

The key is adapting them to emphasise tactical aspects, and using a coaching style that challenges players to find the answers for themselves
- What are the tactics and skills you are trying to develop within the game
- What modifications/ exaggerations can you make to emphasise the above
- What will be the main challenge or problem for the players to solve
- What are the boundaries and safety rules
- How do you score goals or gain points in this game
- How do players move? How does the ball move?
- How will the game start and re start after scoring?
- What are some of the key questions you need to ask the players

- What progressions can you make to increase the complexity/ can you give the players some choices in these progressions?
- Are you catering for all individuals – do you need to give some choices in skill execution
- Will the game encourage maximum participation and communication between the players?
- How will you place the game within the training session?

Why use questions and challenges?

Questioning is a useful method of encouraging players to think about what they doing and to analyse their own actions. It is a good strategy to avoid the coach becoming overly directive, and promotes a joint approach to the game.

Asking a question does not always have to mean that the coach has the answer, challenging the players to find out themselves is an approach the coach should not be afraid of.

In many cases the coach may not be looking for the "one" right answer to a question. A response of "it depends" from the player could be the best answer.

How do you design questions and set challenges?
It is important to use open ended questions that will encourage the players to think.

Examples
- "Where will it be more difficult for your opponent to shoot from?" and "how can you force them to that position?'
- "What is the best way to defend this situation?"
- "If your opponent evades you, what will you do?"
- "Is it better to pass long or short in this situation?"

Questions will generally relate to a particular tactical aspect. As a rough guide questions relate to tactics as follows

Time   – *When will you?*
Space – *where is it?*
Risk   – *which option?*

Remember that the age and ability level of the players you are dealing with will influence the complexity of the questions you are asking. Make sure after you ask the question you give the player or group time to think and respond (don't answer the question for them!)

When do you ask questions and set challenges?
There is no definitive answer to this; the following can be used as a guide

- Start the game with some general challenges to the players
  Example*: "We want you to try and work out the best way to defend this situation" or "see if you can score more than five goals in the next two minutes."*

- You may have the opportunity to question individuals(s) during the game
  Example: *"Which player do you think was the best option to pass to?*

- Look for natural breaks in the play to do this. If possible, try to tie positive feedback to the player into this
  Example: *"Good shot Jane now think where the best space to move to next is"*

- Let the game be played uninterrupted as long as possible. This gives players chance to settle into game and gives you the opportunity to observe.
- During breaks to rotate players may be best time to speak to the group. Re – stating the original question / challenge in different way might be necessary if the players have not achieved the desired outcomes. Make sure players understand what is to be achieved
- If game is working well, it may be time to take the next step and add an additional challenge to the game. If not working well, be prepared to modify or simplify
- Don't be concerned if some players are responding as though "tactically aware" and others aren't. Consider individual readiness. You may want to devise different challenges for different players to cater for this.

Remember that by asking a question you are not necessarily seeking a verbal response from the players. At times you may pose a question which you want answered by the player's actions in the game.

Summary
The game centered approach to coaching and teaching uses games to develop tactical and strategic thinking as well as skill development. It challenges the players to think about what they are actually doing and why.