



COACHING young players

MAKING A POINT: Dean Bailey wants his young players to understand his game-plan and team structures.

Preparing and developing young players to maximise their potential is a team effort as Melbourne coach Dean Bailey explains in the seventh part of the *AFL Record's* Coaches on Coaching series.

‘When you get a young player into your club, it's important to evaluate their skill set immediately, so you can address any technical flaws and improve their strengths.

At Melbourne, I've got a whole team of experts to help me do this. There are our assistant coaches Mark Williams, Sean Wellman and Josh Mahoney, development coaches Kelly O'Donnell and Scott West, VFL coach Peter German and biomechanics coach Kevin Ball.

In particular, we'll analyse a player's kicking technique. O'Donnell is our designated kicking coach and Ball looks at the mechanics of a player's technique.

If a young fella has a poor ball drop, then we've got to come up

with ball-handling exercises that get him to hold the ball longer and guide it closer to his foot.

In terms of your team's game-plan, young players need to understand your structures and set-ups, so that's something we teach all our young guys. We might get a couple of senior players to speak to them initially, and then an assistant coach, or I will walk them through these strategies until they feel comfortable practising them at training.

It's important for them to understand these things early on because most come out of the TAC Cup with some idea of how they work, but we take it to another level.

The other thing we do straight away is have our medical and fitness staff set a tailored program for each new player.

If our fitness manager Joel Hocking or athletic development coach Bohdan Babijczuk see

a flaw in a player's running technique, they will spend time with them to correct that.

If there's a flaw in how they do their weights training, our strength and conditioning coach Valeri Stoimenov will correct that.

We want to fix any technique problems early so players have no ongoing problems and can continue their physical development in the correct manner.

As a senior coach, you have got a vital teaching role to play with young players. There are three teaching methods you can, and should, utilise – verbal, written and physical (practical training drills).

When teaching strategy, it should not be a one-way discussion. At meetings, ask the players questions – for example, what experience have they had with zones?

When I was an assistant

coach at Port Adelaide (from 2002-07) under Mark Williams, this was something he was very strong on. By doing this, you will ensure players are alert and concentrating, while they will often surprise you with their existing knowledge.

If we identify players with little knowledge of a particular area, obviously we have got to spend more time teaching them.

As senior coach, I like to get involved in as many areas of a young player's development as I can. In this regard, my experience as a development coach at Essendon (in 2000-01) and at Port Adelaide was invaluable.

At Essendon, in particular, I was able to learn a lot about physical conditioning from fitness coaches John Quinn, Andrew Russell and Justin Cordy.

Kevin Sheedy gave me a great opportunity to be





experimental in my role, so I could test new things with the young players and I found that really interesting.

Working with them and listening to what they had to say made me challenge the views I had thought were right and identify a better way of doing things.

But as hands-on as I like to be, you have to empower your team of coaches and experts to do their jobs, so you can best utilise their expertise. Then by debating and questioning their recommendations, you hope to come up with the best strategy for developing the particular young player.

How do you know when that youngster is ready to play senior football?

Well, if I take Jack Watts as an example, we looked at him and said unless he could meet certain physical requirements – in bench pressing, squatting, running and training volume – we wouldn't play him.

Obviously, there was the added dimension of him still being at school, and trying to ensure his training load did not affect his schooling. This was very important.

Then, he had to demonstrate at training and in VFL games with Casey that he was ready to play and could play a certain role for us.

Only when he meet all of these requirements did he make his debut against Collingwood in round 11 – and that's the case with any young player.

That said, when a youngster's form has been good enough for us to give him a chance, we hope to be able to pick him for at least two games, and a third if possible. Hopefully, this will give him the time he needs to adjust to the pace of the AFL and find some confidence.

With any young players who come into the senior side for extended stints, you have to watch them closely to ensure they don't become worn out, because if they do, they become susceptible to soft-tissue and other injuries.

For instance, in his debut season last year, Cale Morton managed 19 games, which was an outstanding effort, but



LEARNING CURVE: Dean Bailey is overseeing a very young group at Melbourne, including No. 1 draft pick Jack Watts (pictured in background).

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by round 12 he had started to look tired and his intensity at training was dropping off.

He wasn't injured but I looked at him and thought, ‘This bloke has all the symptoms of being a bit tired’.

We dropped him and sent him away for that whole weekend for a rest. He came back the following Monday and was right for the rest of the year. This year, we've done the same thing with Neville Jetta, Jamie Bennell and Liam Jurrah.

You sometimes hear people say that younger players are more inconsistent than experienced players, but I think if you manage them in this manner, the difference between their good and bad games is usually no greater than senior players' form fluctuations.

Managing your younger players like this is also important to ensure you get the right balance between developing your list and fielding a competitive side each week. You only want to expose youngsters to senior footy when

they're reasonably fresh and mentally ready to go.

I think if you're doing that and you rotate them through the VFL – one in, one out – then you are developing them the right way and getting the best player mix for the senior team.

Your senior players can also be a fantastic asset in fast-tracking the development of your club's youth. They're not only invaluable role models but they can help their younger teammates tactically and direct them at training and in games.

Melbourne's leaders have been fantastic at helping to develop our young players and, by doing so, they can see they are also fast-tracking the development of what should soon be a very competitive team.

As a coach, I get enormous excitement out of seeing our young players develop. A key part of coaching is wanting your

KEYS TO COACHING

- 1 Immediately evaluate young players' skills, understanding of game strategies and physical fitness to identify weaknesses that need work.
- 2 As a coach, you have got a vital teaching role with players and should utilise verbal, written and practical teaching methods.
- 3 At meetings, ask players questions. You will ensure they are alert and concentrating and they will often surprise you with their knowledge.
- 4 Empower your team of coaches and experts to do their jobs, so you can best utilise their specialised knowledge.
- 5 Set physical and form parameters your younger players must meet before they are rewarded with a senior game.
- 6 Rest your young players if they are showing signs of fatigue. This decreases their risk of injury and should improve their consistency.
- 7 Utilise your senior players to help fast-track your youngsters' development. They are fantastic role models.

players to have great careers, wanting them to be successful.

Not all of them will be, but when you sit there after a game and analyse it, you find yourself saying, ‘Wasn't that a great kick from Neville Jetta? Wasn't that a great goal from Liam Jurrah? Isn't it great to see Cale Morton still developing?’

It's one of the best feelings a coach can have. As is knowing your coaching and fitness team has provided these youngsters with an environment in which they can reach their potential. ”

AS TOLD TO NICK BOWEN