



ANALYSING THE opposition

Finding the right balance between opposition analysis and focusing on your own structures and game style is crucial to success, as the Western Bulldogs' Rodney Eade, one of the best tacticians in the game, explains in the *AFL Record's* Coaches on Coaching series.

When I started at the Swans in 1996, the game styles of AFL clubs were not radically different and teams didn't change their style very often. In those days, you didn't focus as much on the way the opposition played, you mostly concentrated on your own game. There were nowhere near the rotations you have today through the bench, and teams were fairly predictable and reasonably structured in the way they would go about it.

Your whole planning process was about who might play on whom, with much more of a match-up emphasis on the opposition. You would look at their kick-ins and centre bounces, but not to the degree you do now.

Today, teams might modify their game depending on who they are playing and what they want to achieve. So you actually prepare your training around the way you think they are going to play – what their kicking patterns are, where they run to, what they do in certain situations.

Obviously, the focus on set-plays has really increased

at stoppages compared to 10 or 15 years ago, and the statistics you have now got access to can give an insight into trends and what teams try to focus on with the way they play.

I think the more information you have got, the more prepared you are going to be and the greater your chance of success.

I enjoy picking trends and what teams may be trying to do. You need to have a structure to deal with that, but at times you need to be flexible as well.

It's certainly not just me overseeing the Bulldogs' opposition analysis. We have a person in charge of

that area, and he has a team of people who will watch the opposition play.

He will pick up trends, look at vision, break down the key stats and then present to the match committee on that. We will involve most of the coaches, as well as the players, on who we need to play on whom, and the different scenarios that may occur in a game.

With so many rotations through the bench today, obviously your match-ups will change radically. Defenders, for example, need to be able to cope with an array of different opponents, »





so you need to take input from all the people concerned – you can never think you have all the answers and that it's all up to you.

It's a collaborative effort at the club, and people have got good ideas, so you need to delegate responsibility and take suggestions on board. Everybody looks for that little edge that can make a difference.

Finding the balance between opposition analysis and focusing on your own game is an important point, and it all comes down to the trust you have got in your own group.

Some coaches are all just about the way they play and their own style, while other teams are heavily focused on the opposition and trying to stop them.

You do need both aspects, but backing your own structures and style gives your group confidence – if you are wholly and solely focused on the opposition, it can wear away at the belief within the side.

How much difference good opposition analysis can make is an interesting one; some coaches have won premierships without worrying too much about the opposition. But if you can really shut down key areas of your opponent, they can get frustrated and it can have a real effect.

When I was at Sydney, we

used to flood a bit, which was mostly about opening up space for Tony Lockett and trying to create the counter-attack. But teams were starting to pick us off and be smarter with their use of the ball.

I remember going into a game against Port Adelaide at the SCG, and I knew they were thinking we were going to flood, so I thought, 'Let's not flood the back 50, but move up 20 or 30 metres and put those extra numbers in the midfield'.

We were able to get a lot more scoring opportunities from turning the ball over, because the Power were so drilled at looking to kick short and spot up someone outside 50. They thought our numbers were going to be back, but of course we had our numbers in that zone.

There was a lot of space inside their forward 50, but they never used it, because they were focused on trying to go short outside 50, and we were able to get them to turn the ball over.

From our planning and analysis, we were able to change our defensive mindset and adjust exactly where we applied pressure on the opposition.

When you have a game coming up against a certain side, you might see them on television six or eight weeks out. Without being too anal about

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it, you might look at an aspect and say, 'They seem to be doing something differently', or, 'How did that occur?', or, 'Why are they playing that way?'.

You make notes – it might even be on a certain individual – and then closer to the game you refer to them and try to find patterns in what they might do in certain situations.

It's an ongoing process, but you really narrow and sharpen your focus in the last two or three weeks before a match.

You also put the same amount of work into every club – leading into finals, you obviously do reconnaissance on the finals teams you may play, but you certainly pay everyone the same amount of respect.

We saw with West Coast a few weeks ago that any team can knock you off on any given day. Although we did the same preparation for the Eagles, the fact is that if you don't, the players can pick up on that and subconsciously relax. You need to be doing everything in your power to know the opponent inside out. Every coach analyses teams

differently. I try to look at what teams are trying to achieve with the way they move the ball – is there a pattern to their method? Do they get numbers back? What are their kicking patterns? How do they take the ball inside 50? Is there a general theme to it, and what do they do in certain situations?

You might keep an eye on match-ups, but they are reasonably easy to pick up.

There's a massive difference in watching a game live compared to on television. Live, you get the whole picture of the game, so you know where players are running when they are not involved in the play, what they are trying to achieve and how they are setting up off the ball.

Because football is played on such a big ground, television only gives you the scope of what is happening around the ball, so if you are playing a non-Victorian team in a few weeks' time, you will go and watch them to get an idea of how they are playing. You can have all the theories in the world to try to stop a particular team or tactic, but if a particular



UPSET: Although Rodney Eade said his players were well prepared for their round 19 clash, West Coast still caused a boilover.



EAGLE-EYE: Rodney Eade analyses every club regardless of ladder position.



KEYS TO COACHING

- 1 Opposition analysis should be a collaborative process, involving scouts, assistant coaches, players and club staff. Any idea that might help you win should be taken on board.
- 2 Being completely focused on the opposition can erode the confidence of the group, so always back your own structures and style.
- 3 Regardless of ladder position, put the same amount of analysis into every club you play, as complacency can come back to bite you.
- 4 Watch the opposition play live as much as possible to learn where players run when they are not involved, what they are trying to achieve and how they are setting up away from the ball.
- 5 All of the analysis and strategy in the world won't help you if the opposition is simply too good at what they do.

Someone might not have played well when you last saw them, or there are always plenty of younger players running around, and you don't know what they are like in certain situations and that can surprise you.

So you are learning all the time – especially if teams are flexible and modify things or play people in different positions. It's very much a fluid situation.

As for advancements in opposition analysis in the next decade or so, I think it will become more scientific.

Obviously, statistics have already gone to another level and can help you to pick patterns and what players will try to do in certain situations, so there doesn't seem to be a lot more we can learn in this area.

But you can guarantee the field will continue to evolve.

Maybe it will be scientific, and we will be able to work out an opposition side's fitness and fatigue levels, and ascertain that person 'X' is struggling at the present time.

At this stage, it's all very subjective, so are there actual measurements or ways that you may be able to gain an advantage by making a positional change?

Maybe we can have more cameras isolated on particular players so you can pick up how they are running and what they are doing.

We have the GPS devices at the moment, which track what we do, but maybe in the future there will be ways of being able to check the opposition. **Q**

AS TOLD TO ANDREW WALLACE

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side is very good with the way they go about it, it's a completely different kettle of fish to be able to shut it down.

And it's exactly the same with players – everyone puts a lot of homework into Gary Ablett and Chris Judd, but they overwhelmingly still play well, so it doesn't mean you are going to be able to stop talent or people being able to do what they want to do. That's always a fun issue.

Another requirement is being able to analyse the opposition during a match, and this applies as much to individuals as the team as a whole.

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