

Teaching Games for Understanding / Games Sense

ROD THORPE recently retired from Loughborough University where he taught for 35 years. Always interested in how best to provide people with an enjoyable and effective sport experience Rod has contributed to the development of Leadership, Teaching and Coaching innovations throughout the UK and indeed internationally. Rod always stresses that many of his thoughts come from the leaders, teachers and coaches he and his colleagues work with.

INTRODUCTION

Physical education teachers in a wide range of countries may have come across the phrase 'Teaching Games for Understanding'. A coach from Australia and New Zealand might be more familiar with the phrase 'Games Sense'. Are they the same? Not quite. A brief outline of the development of the approaches might help clarify the terms used.

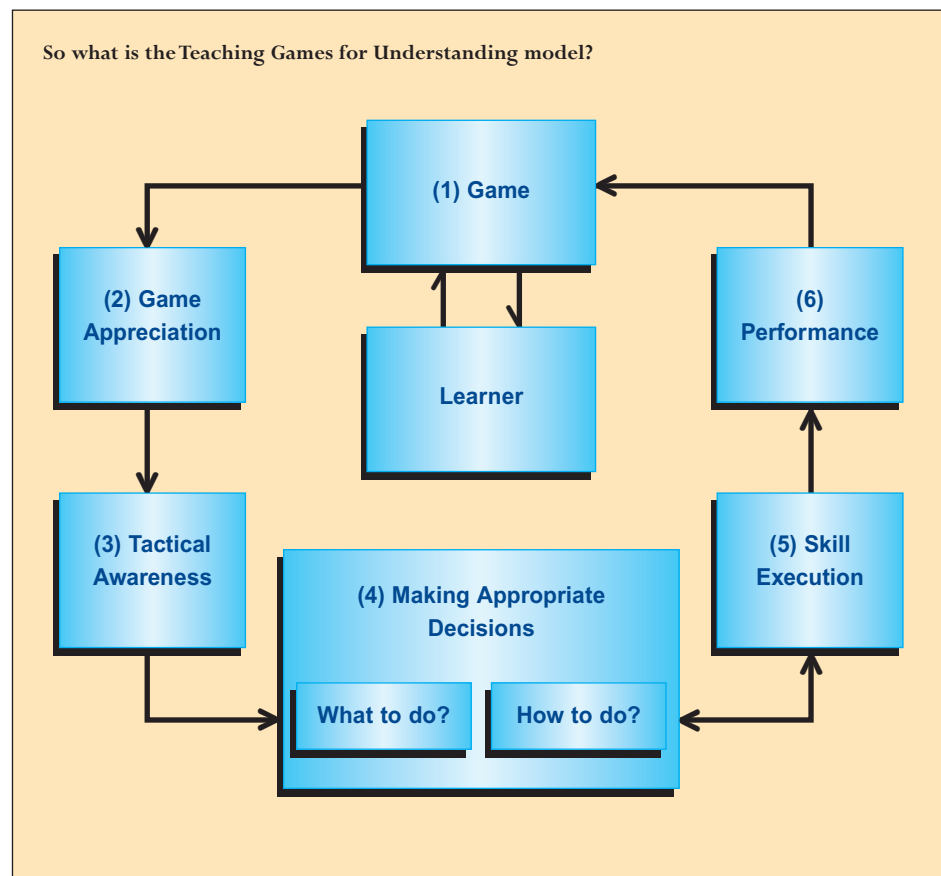
In the mid 1960s, as a Physical Education teacher, I moved away from the traditional 'Warm Up, Skill, Game' lesson structure with its emphasis on the 'skill' part and a game to follow (sometimes, if time allowed). I was very influenced by a movement called 'Educational Gymnastics'. Ed Gym recognised that not all children could do complex 'sport' gymnastics movements, so posed challenges that allowed children to provide an answer commensurate with their abilities. Hence in the same class a child could be doing a handstand, whilst another might be challenged by a balance on one foot and a hand. Both are doing a two point balance. A problem arose, however, because some teachers found it difficult to set challenges that excited or interested children.

This is interesting when one considers that every time we play a 'game' we are faced with challenges and problems to solve - where shall I hit the ball? how shall I get past that defender? who shall I pass to? (the term games here is used to indicate those activities like foot ball, cricket, tennis, badminton, not athletics, swimming, gymnastics, etc. although the underlying principles apply to these activities as well).

I have no doubt I was greatly influenced by my lecturers at Loughborough in the early '60s' because whilst the 'warm up, skill, games' lesson structure was encouraged, so also was modifying games, not least to small sided and simplified games.

Returning to Loughborough as a lecturer in the late 60s and throughout the 70s, a large number of people influenced my thoughts, not least the many lecturers, advisors, teachers and students who contributed to the development of the approach. Together with fellow lecturer, David Bunker, I presented a 'model' that we felt summarised this work. When we presented it to teachers, initial responses to the approach varied from - 'Thanks for that, I have been doing something similar, but always felt a bit guilty at not using the Warm Up, Skill, Game model' to 'Interesting, but you cannot teach cricket until you have mastered certain cricket techniques'. This last comment is not only interesting, but pivotal - if we expect children to master specific techniques before a realistic game is possible, some children will never play the game. It is my opinion that if the 'bowler' becomes a feeder on the side of the batter for a considerable time, far more of cricket, e.g. fielding, field placement, well placed shots, etc. come into play.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?



Lessons may differ but we always start with the game. Depending on the skills of the players, we may spend the whole lesson on Game Appreciation, Tactical Awareness and What to do (with no mention of skills). Three lessons later we may be passing through these phases quickly and the coach/teacher may be able to spend more time developing skill execution with some of the group, whilst others continue to work in the game. At the top end, a previously well coached child may have already grasped the technique and now needs more practice within the game. A key point here is that a less experienced teacher may not be able to help skill development in the talented player, but that youngster can still be challenged productively in the context of the game. At the opposite end of the continuum a barely adequate skill still allows the game to be played, perhaps as mentioned earlier if the bowler becomes a feeder. Maximising the fact that this less able player can play is also key and can make valued decisions. Confidence is an essential issue.

Simply, we feel that all children could play games successfully if we find the right game and develop at the pace of the individual. Modifications to meet quite serious disabilities illustrate the point.

Teaching Games for Understanding is essentially a practical approach and best understood by a 'practical' demonstration. In the absence of such I will indicate some of the major rationale for taking this approach.

- Children like playing games (until the point at which they realise they are no good - sometimes as a result of misguided coaching).
- To become skilful requires considerable practice - we have to maximise a player's intrinsic motivation, because much practice will occur away from the teacher or coach. We firmly believe if people understand the reason for something it will be motivating.
- We can structure games so that we convince all people that they can play, rather than cannot play - the tee in cricket & the modified tennis racket are good examples of equipment designed to enable people to play.
- Often we have small teams who work things out together, so we also maximise the 'affiliation' factors and enjoyment of interacting with others.
- By placing tactical awareness and decision making as key outcomes of any lesson, it became possible for youngsters with different 'physical abilities' to succeed - additionally we hoped to produce thinking spectators, officials and administrators.
- We realise that it takes many years to develop the skills of a top class performer, it is our contention that if we wish to develop good decision makers, capable of 'reading the game' & making a decision commensurate with their skill, we must start early. The game at top levels is too fast for all but fairly 'reactive' actions.