

John Buchanan: Coaching the Best to be Better Still?

David Turner
and
Ricky Boxall

Aims

- Profile most successful international cricket coach ever.
- Highlight some of Buchanan's coaching principles, philosophies and practices.
- Consider Buchanan's legacy, and future for him and cricket Australia.
- Review criticism of + praise for Buchanan's approach.

Questions for Reflection

- Similarities or differences with philosophies of other famous coaches (or your own)?
- To what extent was Buchanan a successful or an effective coach?
- Is it more difficult to coach a team at lower performance levels, or a team at the top?
- How can we evidence value added by the coach?
- What are advantages and disadvantages of being an ex-elite athlete moving into coaching?

Record

- Appointed Australia coach 1999, won...
 - First 15 Test matches
 - Ashes three times
 - Cricket WC twice
 - ICC Champions Trophy
- Statistically best international cricket coach ever.
 - Winning 77% of Test matches, 74% in ODI's
- In 2007 guided Australia to 3rd successive Cricket WC, then departed as arguably most successful coach of era.
- Nonetheless, Buchanan's unusual background and unorthodox methods led to criticism.

Overview

- Limited Playing Experience
- Process Over Product
- Vision
- Make Coach Redundant!
- External Influences
- Know Your Enemy
- Buchanan's Legacy
- Critical Considerations

Limited Playing Experience

- No international playing experience
 - 7 first-class matches for Queensland Bulls
- Realising further playing progress was unrealistic
 - gained Sports Administration MA
 - lectured in Sports Studies
 - National Director of Volleyball
- First major cricket coaching position with Univ of Queensland (OD title 1st season).

Limited Playing Experience

- Applied for Queensland Bulls coaching position.
- After discussion with captain Ian Healy regards lack of successful playing experience, Buchanan took post.
- In 5 yr tenure, Bulls gained reputation for playing excellent cricket, and winning trophies.
- Achievements inspired Cricket Australia to select Buchanan to coach national side.
- Nonetheless, many questioned likely success having never played international cricket himself.

Limited Playing Experience

- Although ex-elite athletes *can* make good coaches
 - employers often exaggerate positive transfer from playing to coaching
 - even though roles involve considerably different skill sets (Turner, 2003).
- Buchanan may not have possessed athletic ability to play at top level
 - but communication, organisational, and motivational skills may have been of sufficient quality to positively influence behaviours and performance of elite others?
- Limited playing experience might even be argued as potentially beneficial
 - ability to look at game from fresh perspectives.

Limited Playing Experience

- *To be a good coach, to understand things technically, you don't have to have played at the highest level. Sometimes, you can introduce better plans having viewed everything from afar, looking in, rather than being in it, having played test cricket all your life and having blinkers on.*
- *Could well be that when you haven't done it, you learn and understand the game more than those who took it for granted and were natural players.*

Duncan Fletcher

Process Over Product

- Phenomenal competitive coaching record, but not driven by results
- Seems to consider results as merely a by-product of effective processes.
 - Similar to Phil Jackson who considers winning an epiphenomenon – outcome only ever arising when correct procedures are in place (Turner, 2007).
- Put processes and systems in place to dominate cricket for decades to come.
- Drawbacks of this approach?

Process Over Product

- *I've never been a person driven by results*
- *It's fantastic to get them, and ultimately they keep you in a job, but for me it is all about dealing with the process.*
- *If I can get that right, and if I can instil that mentally into my team, then we are in the best position to achieve our goals.*

Vision

- A vision is fundamental in coaching (business + parenting).
 - taking people where they have never been before
 - determining where you want to be, planning back from there
 - putting the processes in place to attain goals
- Vision for Australia
 - becoming truly great (rather than just very good) side
 - have other national sides in awe of cricketing ability
 - leave a legacy or benchmark to be remembered by
- Being first team to have truly multi-dimensional players
 - who can use both sides of bodies effectively.
 - Benefits?

Vision

- Buchanan called the vision *Everest*
 - symbolic analogy of scaling a mountain towards team's goals.
- Extremely difficult to achieve, yet feasibly within reach.
- By constantly monitoring progress may be possible to *accelerate climb* at times.
- If route becomes difficult leaders must be prepared to regroup to *base camp* and assess when ascent towards excellence should recommence.

Vision

- Just as great athletes shift efficiently between broad and narrow attentional focus during performance (Nideffer, 1976) ...
- ... Buchanan balances long-term visionary planning, against emphasis on needing to be *fully in the present moment*.
 - individual cricketers having to adopt leadership responsibilities in making decisions on behalf of team
 - compartmentalisation of distractions during performance to promote mental toughness
 - giving full attention when listening to athlete concerns.

Make Coach Redundant!

- Claims main role as coach is to attempt to make himself partly redundant
 - utilising principles which focus around players becoming own best coaches.
- Encourages players to intimately understand own game
 - allowing Buchanan more time for strategic planning + understanding opposition threats.
- Attitude altered in reflecting on 2005 Ashes defeat
 - recognised requirement to periodically be more individually supportive and accessible in times of need.
 - concedes should have been *"in the moment with the players and not distracted by the challenging external environment"* (Buchanan, 2007, p.22).

Make Coach Redundant!

- Vygotsky (1978) proposed learning space called *Zone of Proximal Development* comprised by range of ability with and without help from *'more capable other'*.
- Scaffolding of facilitation, alternating between providing direct support, and allowing periods of independent self-monitoring and analysis.
- Coach-athlete relationship continually renegotiated
 - critical balance between assistance and self-responsibility
 - as athletes become more able, or encounter new problems
- Buchanan regards cricket as individual sport dressed up in team clothing
 - aims to cultivate players who can make own ball-by-ball decisions on behalf of team in heat of battle, unencumbered by coach dependence.

External Influences

- Influenced by variety of interactions with successful people.
 - Multidimensional players - Alex Ferguson.
 - Fielding innovations – appointed baseball coach
 - Keep low scoring opposition batsman in for as long as possible – Edward De Bono

Coaches Coach as Coaches Are

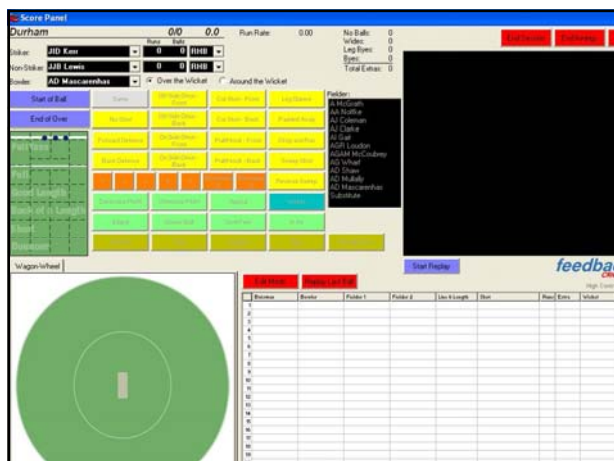
- *Life experience, inside and outside of sport has shaped me most.*
- *My life as a sportsman, my life with my parents and other people in my life – how I was coached, and continue to be coached, is very much part of how I coach.*
- *I guess there has been no singular influence, but I have always drawn on my own experiences and tried to be open to new ideas to develop my own philosophies and principles.*

Know Your Enemy

- Unconventional means to attempt to improve confidence and concentration of Australia players.
 - Pilates, juggling, poetry sessions, public speaking exercises, batting and catching with eyes closed, military-style prep camp.
 - Intriguingly coaching practices based on Sun Tzu's classic ancient military strategy text *The Art of War*.
- One quote Buchanan considered highly transferable to cricket was *"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles"* (Tzu, 2006, p.15).
- Introduced computer analysis – tendencies of opposition – adapt performance accordingly.
- Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) – **Numbers behind the numbers...**

Performance Profiling

- *Team performance can always be evaluated by results, but I think there are other key measures we can include to improve the system.*
 - *We work with a skills matrix, and this monitors a range of skills, as well as team orientation, which is aimed at giving players their best chance of performing at top level.*
- Complex computer system for precise analytical evaluation of own and opposition technique, pinpoints possible areas of weakness.
- Better targeting of player physical and mental requirements, and planning for individualised preparation programmes.
- *Strong involvement from players themselves as to how we approach games, both technically and tactically.*
 - *If they have an input into the system they have greater faith in what they are setting out to achieve as a group.*



Know Your Enemy

- Sun Tzu advises on use of spies
 - foreknowledge must be acquired from those who know enemy situation.
- Made *Ashes Regained* by Fletcher mandatory reading for all involved in helping Australia recover Ashes.
 - Valuable insights into how England set out to win 2005 series
 - Essential guidance to combat 'enemy' when re-engaged.
- Converted spy! Convinced England's bowling coach Troy Cooley (instrumental in identifying Australian batsman's weaknesses for 2005 Ashes) to join Australian coaching staff.
 - Inside information may have subsequently contributed to Australia winning 2006-07 Ashes.
- Several Australia squad members acted as overseas players for English County sides, enabling them to monitor emerging talent.

Controversial Methods

- Took players on military-style boot camp for 4 days where they were deprived food and sleep.
- Referred to as numbers, not names.
- Instructed to pack bare essentials only.

Buchanan on Boot Camp

"I was confident that it was handled appropriately. Yes, there were a couple of incidents with guys like MacGill and Kasprovicz taking spills. But rather than saying whether it was reckless, I would prefer to say that the camp achieved what we set out to achieve in terms of a bonding exercise. It was very physically demanding and it was designed to fatigue participants both mentally and physically"

Positive Motivation From Mistakes

- Ashes 2005
 - *We were playing an England side that wasn't typically English: they wanted to be in our face, they wanted to be like Australia, they wanted to be aggressive. They took it to us and in the end we just didn't respond.*
 - *But we came away from that series looking at ourselves and asking what was happening. We set about addressing what went wrong as quickly as we could.*

Buchanan's Legacy

- Post Australia, ambassadorial role for Cricket Coaches Australia (CCA) – Coach Ed
- Demand as speaker in both corporate and sporting sectors
 - underlying concept is **getting the best out of individuals you lead**, expanding people's horizons, and providing learning environment to help assist holistic development.
- Demand as business coach (see website – Buchanan Success Coaching)
- Television work?
 - Stunt double for...?

Buchanan's Legacy

If Buchanan was a character out of Star Wars...?

- Chewbacca!
 - Very tall
 - Took Australia to new heights
 - Bit of an outsider
 - Good to have on your side in a battle

Succession and Future

- Sustainability
 - *I hope I've created an environment that will facilitate the ongoing development of the national team. I'm proud of the fact that I have left behind a solid foundation to build on.*
- Transferability
 - *I want to take the lessons I've learned in life and sport and transfer them across into business*

Critical Considerations

- Did Buchanan make team great, or did team make Buchanan great?
- Gifted with exceptionally talented cricketers
 - Ostensibly better team than any in world even before he took over.
- Australia won ~ 75% of all competitive matches under Buchanan. Near maximal?
 - Nonetheless, effectiveness of coaching contributions called into doubt.

Critical Considerations

- Weaknesses?
 - Hit and miss strategies
 - Knowing whose buttons to push when
 - Time management

Critical Considerations

- “Everything that I have read that he says, he is living in pixieland. It just shows what us players had to put up with John Buchanan. We had to listen to his verbal diarrhoea all the time.
- He is just a goose and has no idea and lacks common sense.... I remember Buchanan said that he was there to improve us as people first and cricketers second. I'm not sure the responsibility of a coach stretches as far as life skills.”

Shane Warne

Criticism of Buchanan

- “A lot of people refer to John Buchanan's record as coach. How many wickets and how many catches and how many runs did he make? He didn't make any. His contribution to those victories in my opinion is absolutely nil. Is someone going to tell me that if my daughter had coached Australia, would the results have been any different? I am here to tell you the results wouldn't have been any different at all. In fact, they might have been better without him there.”

Ex Aussie Captain Ian Chappell

Critical Considerations

- Regards effectiveness - might compare successor coach's record over time.
 - However, limitation to this approach is resources available to successor.
 - Nielsen now leads an Australia team very much in period of transition following recent retirements of several world-class players.

Critical Considerations

- Although ‘coach’ was Buchanan's job title, appears time spent in what most people might view as ‘coaching’ role was minimal.
- Principal role with Australia that of coach, or process manager?
 - Buchanan brought in specialist bowling, fielding, and fitness coaches, and also introduced computer analysis into cricket.
- Now common practice in cricket to have specialist support team, but how much technical input should an international cricket coach have?
 - although ex-England coach Fletcher saw himself as merely consultant to captain, did also adopt role of specialist batting coach to maintain some degree of hands-on coaching.

Conclusion

- Regardless of physical resources available during time with Australia, Buchanan's success unparalleled.
- Maintained Australia's position as no 1 ranked international cricket team
 - only two notable failures; India 2001, Ashes 2005.
- Keeping nation at top of sport for 8 yrs is substantial accomplishment
 - far more subtle feat than getting a team there in first place?
- Culture of continuing success and **never being satisfied**.
 - *“His greatest strength is his vision and his courage to plant the seed of achievement in a very talented side. It's easy to go through the motions, but one thing that inspires very good players and successful people is to keep trying to extend them all the time.”*
 - *“It's not easy to make a very good team still strive to better itself and while a fair credit is due to players, much of it should go to John Buchanan. He has really pushed us into trying to better ourselves and that would be one of his long-standing legacies.”*

Justin Langer

Ricky Ponting

Conclusion

- Captains Ponting + Waugh, considered him an excellent mentor.
- However, Buchanan would have liked Australia to have gone further, changing nature of way cricket is played.
- Nevertheless, full extent of his effectiveness in coaching role would be hard to fully prove/disprove.
- Buchanan has not totally ruled out taking on another international coaching role in future - cultural transferability of philosophy?
 - Interestingly, Buchanan briefly coached in England at Middlesex in 1999, and had limited impact.

Buchanan On England

- *I made a few mistakes and learnt a lot about dealing with different organisations, and they re-emphasised the differences in sporting cultures.*
- *But it opened my eyes to the English system and made me see why England find it difficult to field competitive sides consistently.*
- *The talent and the numbers are there, but the county system is a real anchor on the players.*
- *There's no doubt they play too much cricket and that promotes mediocrity.*

Did Buchanan Influence Strauss?

- *I'm just looking for the players to take a little bit more responsibility in their preparation.*
- *I think we all want thinking cricketers who can adapt on the pitch and realise what the situation is and play accordingly.*
- *I think unless we trust them and give them an opportunity to think for themselves we're never going to get those sort of players.*
- *I think we need to challenge players to think for themselves a little bit more.*

ECBtv

Conclusion

- In our opinion, Buchanan's leadership of Australia provided supportive developmental environment that allowed the best to be better still.
- For example, during his tenure numerous records were set
 - 16 consecutive Test wins
 - first team to score 400 in ODI
 - first to win 3 consecutive World Cups
 - with 29 unbeaten matches, and 11 straight victories
- Words of wisdom from another ancient Chinese text, *Tao Te Ching*, remind us that a positive influence may be effective without necessarily being recognised/acknowledged.

Conclusion

*A leader is best
When people barely know that he exists,
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him,
Worst when they despise him.
'Fail to honour people,
They fail to honour you;'
But of a good leader, who talks little,
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,
They will all say, 'We did this ourselves.'*

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Related Reading

- Bolchover, D. & Brady, C. (2002). *The 90-Minute manager: Lessons from the sharp end of management.* Harlow: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Buchanan, J. (2007). *If better is possible: The winning strategies from the coach of Australia's most successful cricket team.* Victoria: Hardie Grant Books.
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- Fletcher, D. (2006). *Ashes regained: The coach's story.* London: Pocket Books.
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- Coming soon – *The Future of Cricket* by Buchanan