

Letter from  
**AMERICA**



# **Multi Skilled – Knowing the Brain**

I worked with our Under 10 soccer team recently and in our first session, I pulled a player to one side who was playing right back. I noticed that the whole time he was in the game he never left his little 'self-made area'. This only allowed him to move three or four yards in any direction, regardless of where the ball was and what was happening in the game.

'Andrew, what do we want to do when we get the ball?'

'Umm, pass? combine?'

'Yeah, pass, combine, but what else do we want to do?'

'Um....score a goal!'

'Yes, score a goal. So, when you get the ball, wouldn't you like to go and score?'

'Yes but, I'm not allowed to go up there!'

I was completely shocked and ever since then I haven't stopped thinking about it. Somewhere along the line this child has learned, that firstly, he is a defender, and secondly, as a defender he is not allowed to go forward. What a crying shame! And how many more kids have these restrictions put on them? How are they able to enjoy and express themselves under such conditions?

As coaches we have an enormous amount of influence over the players we work with, whether they are young or old. To aid us we also have so many resources for learning at our disposal.

Is it just enough to learn and practice the technical and tactical side of the game? There is no question that these areas are extremely important, but what if we can't communicate effectively what we want. Can we read our players? Is what we are seeing and hearing as coaches really what's going on? Do we know how to truly listen to them? What good is all this technical and tactical knowledge if we can't best help our players?

By Anthony Hudson

### The Multi Skilled Coach

Just as cross-training is invaluable to any particular sport that someone participates in, the same type of 'cross-training' is true with coaching. As coaches we must constantly seek to become much more 'multi-skilled'. Working and learning in areas such as psychology, physiology, nutrition, human development, learning languages, fitness, self development, mentoring, counseling are all areas that can help us have a more effective influence over the players we work with. Not only that, but I would say that learning about the ways these areas can assist you is one of the unique joys of being a coach.

### The Brain & How People Learn

We know today that people learn in many different ways. Some players are more 'visual' in their learning style. Others learn best via hearing, some by feeling and some by doing. For example, one player may be able to do exactly what you ask him or her to do the first time you ask, but another may need to see it performed a few times first, before giving it a go.

The brain is absolutely amazing; and in a learning, coaching environment - hugely underestimated! We can access so much insight about the brain and in particular - how players learn. Study of the conscious

and sub-conscious mind can go a long way in aiding us to become more effective as coaches. Dr Emile Donchin from the University of Illinois says 'that 99% of all learning is non-conscious. Your students are learning without knowing it.' Interesting.

That means that what we do, how we speak, what we say, how we dress, our body language, our facial expressions, the environment, the diagrammes we draw - all of these things affect the learning of the players we work with - without them even being aware of it!

So when I'm making a coaching point or giving a team talk to my players, I may think that what I'm saying sounds effective and constructive, but there are players that may not even be listening to my words. They're focused on my body language or the expression on my face. They're reacting to the tone of my voice, or taking notice of the other players around them. Perhaps they're thinking of something else or someone else. All the while, though, their sub-conscious mind is feeding off and taking in all that I am doing.

So, are you aware of all the factors that can influence our players to a better state of learning - the factors that can aid us into better 'teaching'? Are you doing enough to affect these variables and trying to accommodate all the different learning styles of our players?

As a child, people told me to keep practicing and practicing. And I did. But a Saturday afternoon visit to a live professional match with thousands of screaming fans - the emotion, the passion, the professional players - did something to me that no amount of words from anybody else could do. I would leave the stadium with an unbelievable enthusiasm and I couldn't wait to get out there to practice and play. So, for me, a situation where I'm emotionally involved, when I can hear and feel the crowd, and take in the 'smell' of a match day, is a much more powerful stimulus than someone telling me, 'if you want to be a professional and play in front of thousands of fans, in big stadiums, then you need to go and practice!'



The match stimulus has a much stronger effect because it has impacted upon all of the senses - visual, auditory, smell, feelings, etc.

Now, we don't all have the opportunity to affect all these learning senses so strongly, but if we can gain a better understanding of our players and how to really reach them, we will find creative ways to gain the desired, positive effect.

**Negativity / Confidence**

It's very interesting to watch players and see how they behave both on and off the field. Confidence can make a player and just as easily, the lack of confidence can break a player down. Is what you are saying to your players really helping them to build confidence?

I remember a time from my youth which taught me a great lesson. When I was a kid, my coach kept telling me that I used to make bad runs. He kept on and on - telling, pointing, pointing and telling. I used to hear him on the sideline say, 'he makes some terrible runs'. Well, not only did this affect me in a negative way (both psychologically and physically), it was totally inaccurate. I knew exactly where I should be going. I knew how to create space for myself. I knew where I needed to go to put myself in a good position to receive the ball - I knew all of this. The problem was, at certain times and in certain areas, I didn't want the ball. I didn't want it anywhere near me. Confidence and specific training - these were the areas that needed attention - not my understanding of the game. And the way to find that out is through awareness, a little curiosity and by communicating.

When asked his views on the qualities of a top coach, Portuguese

legend Eusebio said:

*'It is someone who is able to talk to the players and get the maximum out of them. The ability to communicate is essential!'*

In learning about the brain, it is the stem, or 'reptilian brain' that dominates our behavior under stress.

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*'Under threats, anxiety, negative stress and induced learner helplessness, the brain operates differently. There is increased blood flow and electrical activity in the brain stem and cerebellum area and decreased activity in the mid-brain and neo-cortex. That means the brain has 'minimized'. You get more predictable, rote, knee jerk reaction behaviors when the brain senses any threat.'*

*(Brain Based Learning, Eric Jensen).*

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Consider the characteristics in the last sentence of that quote – are these not the exact type of characteristics you least want your players to have when playing a game?

For soccer players this type of reaction can lead to restricted breathing, tensed muscles, impaired judgment and decision making - which always result in a negative outcome, i.e. losing the ball or 'messaging up'. These negative outcomes are more often than not labeled by the coach as 'poor technique' or 'they're just not good enough'. So we know now, there's a little more than meets the eye and we have to dig a bit deeper.

*'Young players need freedom of expression to develop as creative players... they should be encouraged to try skills without fear or failure.'*

*Arsene Wenger*

For better or worse, what we do know is that we have a very strong influence over the state of our players. Therefore, it's our responsibility to become more aware of all the different factors that play a part in bettering every player we work with.

As coaches we may want to ask ourselves:

- Do we engage enough curiosity in our players?
- Are we engaging them emotionally?
- How effective is our feedback? Do we give enough feedback. If so, when and to whom?
- Are we allowing our players to set goals for themselves?
- What kind of language are we using?
- Are we providing hope every time we are in contact with them?
- Do we reinforce positive beliefs and affirmations?

It is truly amazing - how fortunate we are, to be able to learn and to help others become better and to reach their dreams!



## PASSPORT

Name: **Anthony Hudson**

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Anthony Hudson started his playing career at West Ham United under Tony Carr and Harry Redknapp. He signed as a YTS and played for a successful Academy Team which had seen players such as Michael Carrick and Joe Cole. Hudson later played at Luton Town FC under manager Lenny Lawrence before moving on to Holland where he signed with Dutch 1st Division team NEC Nijmegen.

Anthony has coached at all levels ranging from the Youth Level up through to the Professional ranks. Since moving into coaching he has obtained several licenses including the UEFA "A" License, which made Hudson one of the youngest coaches to have achieved the prestigious award from the English Football Association.

*A special thanks to Malcolm Cook, Director of FreeFlow Coaching, a mentor/coach educator that really lives everything that he preaches and inspires coaches like myself to become better.*

**Thank you!**