

## “Some Answers to Think Better Football”

Interview given to *Voice of Assam* by the Argentine Football Coach, *Prof. Roberto A. Rodrigo*.

### 1. What things come to your mind when a Football Club, Association or Federation hire you to improve their team's performance?

In the first place, I must say a football institution represents something that by far transcends the singularity of the people who hire me.

These people, who have the enormous responsibility of choosing and deciding the best option when hiring a football coach, are ultimately representing the interests of the people and sport they love.

Similarly, when a coach formalizes his connection with an institution, he is also accepting, albeit indirectly, a commitment towards the expectations raised by those people.

Now, if we consider this in more detail, each society, which the players themselves are a part of, has its own particularities.

There are traits and features typical of each culture, habits and customs that can clearly enhance or undermine the achievement of an aim - which is why it is so important to rapidly recognise which features should be leveraged in each culture.

Countries that have so far been unable to achieve international objectives in football, have a very different attitude towards triumph compared to those who have already managed to attain it; I would say more expectant.

The inability to choose the right path recursover and over again in different ways in a variety of guises, always leading to exactly the same place: failure.

For it is the imprint of sporting triumph that has as yet not been founded as experience.

Everything is therefore reduced to no more than a yearning, as though accepting that such is life and cannot be otherwise, thus renouncing to any right to achieving victory.

I believe commitment should aim at building up that imprint, that founding of the first experience.

In this situation, what will enable a new attitude, a new vision and eventually an identity, are the concepts.

If as coaches we give ourselves up to indifference or even to the anxiety of those who seek to attain today what they have been unable to achieve after sleeping for so long, then all will be lost to us.

There must be a concept, no matter which, to use as a yardstick for our actions as a team. But what we should not do is fail to live up to that concept.

For if we forget everything this concept offers us, if we forget its content, we will soon find ourselves faced with the very thing we are trying to escape from.

The teams that play best are not the ones that run the most but rather those who know what to do, both when they have the ball and when they don't. This, then, is a concept.

Going back to your question, just think of the enormous quantity of people directly or indirectly involved at the beginning of a new work process.

I think of the joy and happiness all these people have a right to enjoy, and that football can give them as a result of a job well done.

A society is all it can be, but in the midst of it I celebrate and give thanks that there are still people who defend the quality of what they do, even in the face of the overwhelming trends in this world, a world I have long seen becoming increasingly degraded.

**2. Which is the most difficult situation you could find yourself in to be able to carry out your work?**

I think a lack of passion and honesty is the worst scenario any coach could encounter because in either of these cases it is simply impossible to do anything.

Unawareness is not a deterrent, because there are limitations everywhere and it is absolutely normal it should be so.

Yet, even in unfavourable situations, think of the thousands of examples of people who have turned their weaknesses into their greatest strengths.

However, for this to be possible, what can never be lacking is one of the most important virtues I expect from any player: his own need to improve.

Conversely, what hampers any kind of growth is when someone assumes that what he has is enough. And the truth is, it is not enough... neither what he has nor what he has done. It is always necessary to improve some aspect, even if we want to maintain what has already been achieved.

At the very moment a player, a team or an institution considers that what they have done is enough, they will have decided on their own decline.

This is why I say that each problem has a solution, provided the interest or need to solve it exists.

But if this interest is absent, or if no real intention exists, something that will be evident soon after the task has begun, this means the severity of the problem is such that no coach will ever be able to solve it.

**3. On the basis of your experience as a coach, what are the first decisions you would make before starting to work with a squad?**

Well, I've already mentioned something about this, about the values I would bring onto our side. Passion and honesty are the ones I mentioned first, but determination and intelligence in a football player are qualities that should also be chosen to integrate in any process which seeks to be successful.

A player's intelligence can rapidly be seen reflected in the quality of the decisions he makes.

Another of these qualities, which I also feel is decisive, is a passion for teamwork.

It is one thing to have 11 virtuosos playing their own game for themselves, which means the idea of teamwork is entirely lacking, and it is quite another when these virtues are applied to enhancing the work of the team as a whole.

I could add here that the player who interests me is the one who considers his mate as important, or more important, than himself.

Intelligence, honesty or solidarity are virtues a person either has or does not have.

It is like speed. The margins for improvement are practically non-existent.

By the time an elite player meets his coach, honesty or solidarity as attitudes should already be a part of him.

As you can see, working on these aspects would be impossible with high-performance players given the lack of proportion there is between the time available for this and the demand for results.

It is possible to improve efficacy, it is possible to get better organised in the field, it is possible to strengthen confidence, but it is simply impossible to create solidarity, emotional stability or intelligence in a player.

This is why I believe these virtues must be in-built in the players we choose - and this is what the initial choice is about.

For any work to have the chance to achieve results in the short time available to a coach, these virtues must already exist in a player's mind, in other words, they should be the essence of his very being.

All it involves is simply trying to recognise them and take them in the player we eventually choose to go ahead with our idea.

When César Luis Menotti was chosen to coach F.C. Barcelona, he told the managers they had a player among their young squads who played like Maradona.

When asked where he was, Menotti told them this was something they themselves would have to find out.

My task as a coach, then, starts with this initial choice, undoubtedly one of the most important. What comes next is the work on more specific aspects such as physical-technical preparation and tactical organization on the playing field.

What now begins involves developing actions inherent both to our idea of the game, and how to go about achieving it.

The way in which an idea is actually implemented is what will eventually become a style and will give us an identity.

Just as an idea cannot be realized simply anyhow, because each idea has its own extremely specific requirements, any exercises put into practice and any players chosen to carry it out must identify strongly with that idea.

It is the idea that organises actions and not the other way round.

When we are developing an idea, what we do is to incorporate concepts based on training, conceptual training.

When we work on the distance between different lines we are working on part of the idea of how I want my team to work: where to put on pressure, when to put on pressure, etc. This will require a concept that explains how to do it, and why it is advisable to do it in one way or another.

And if I play at putting on pressure, it is because what I ultimately want is for my team to take ownership and control of the game to be able to achieve what we are in search of.

There is the idea about how to make it work.

What makes no sense is to carry out actions that are not related to our idea of the game. This would mean a complete waste of time and energy.

Each segment of the work must be strongly linked to growing that idea.

The more aspects of the idea are worked on, the stronger will be the way in which it is accomplished.

But, I insist, the decision of all that is to follow lies right at the beginning, precisely with the initial choice.

**4. Is it possible to improve the performance of a team without star players, or to put it differently, if all you have are players with limitations?**

I'd like to say something in this connection, at least to establish the difference between two things: one is limitation, and another is limit, in other words, something that will not allow us to go any further.

A limitation relates to all those aspects it is possible to act on, and which can lead to improvement.

A limit, instead, appears when having done one's best there is nothing more to be done.

I'd like to give you an example: Holland's national team played in the F.I.F.A. World Cup final in '74, and gave its best, during those 90 minutes they played against Germany.

Led from the outside by the great maestro Rinus Michels and by Johan Cruyff on the inside, the team had managed to get as far as the final.

Yet, even so, they were unable to reverse the 1-2 end result. Why? Because they came up against their limit. A limit is always an encounter, an encounter with something impossible, something beyond our possibilities that we can neither decide on nor anticipate, no matter the effort we put into it.

In this example, all we have to understand is that in that final there was another team that outplayed them, no more than that. This was the limit that marvellous team from Holland came up against.

I have chosen the example of this wonderful team to show clearly that in this case, it was not about what they had yet to improve.

Going back to your question about the relationship between individual quality and group performance, even having players with strong limitations, it is always possible to improve a team's performance and also achieve satisfactory aims that will make many people happy - there is no doubt about that.

We coaches work on the limitations of our team, overcoming a certain amount of them to increase the possibilities of what that team can achieve. However, if the football team representing my local fire brigade plays a match against F.C. Barcelona, the limit will not take long to appear.

This is why I say that our maximum effort will never be enough when we come up against our limit, whether it is the local fire brigade team or F.C. Barcelona itself.

This is something we should be aware of so as not to fill our minds with things that are on plane we can neither act nor decide on.

Because the limit is... the limit, and there is no team that doesn't have one.

Once again: as coaches we work to overcome what is possible, such as improving one aspect or another.

## **5. What is your idea about success, how do you envisage it?**

Success is the end result of a process that has finished satisfactorily.

We have established an aim and achieved it.

But seeing that the word success relates to an end and says little else to us, it might be more productive to relate it to what I was saying earlier: to all those things it has been possible to act on and that have led to that ending.

In this connection I would like to mention something I feel is important: the condition for actually achieving this success is undoubtedly the desire or the need to do so, which are practically the same thing.

It should be kept in mind that this desire or need does not appear very frequently.

This desire, which takes the form of unconditional enthusiasm, offers coaches the opportunity to do our task.

We could say this is the starting point of a logical period devoted to building something new, to incorporating concepts, so to say, which must then be consolidated with the search for efficacy. While we're on the subject of efficacy, I think any work process should include it as one of the most important aspects of output, because it is what decides whether everything we have done concludes satisfactorily or not.

A certain period of work may have been very productive in itself, but if later we are unable to transfer the training concepts to the competition, all the prior effort will not have been worthwhile, which is not acceptable.

The classical example of this is that often heard saying: "we deserved to win, but we were out of luck".

Of course we can all achieve and enjoy success if we have worked towards it.

There may be small successes, aims that can be achieved on a day to day basis and others that will require somewhat more time.

I hold that when a team becomes a champion or achieves the aim it has set itself, the first thing they should celebrate, or what I think it is fairest to celebrate, is the effort each one has made to overcome their own limitations.

What this team has achieved in its confrontations with successive rival teams should be considered the result of their overcoming their own drawbacks and surpassing themselves, at individual and group level, and this happens long before they confront rival teams.

What I personally celebrated in this 2012 Euro Cup is that Spain should have won by playing extremely high-quality football, but I also celebrated their generosity and lack of speculation. Because if it had been won by Italy - or any other team with the same playing style-, what would have won is a vision of football with arguments resting on absolutely valid strategic resources, as is speculation, but which would have left nothing to the millions of people and future generations of young football players who watched that final.

At this point, I would say strategy was incorporated into football to level off teams that have no talent.

And if you were to remind me of the fact that Italy won the F.I.F.A World Cup four times by playing with this style, I would answer that the joy was only for the Italians, for we were not allowed to share in or enjoy the wonder of football played in another way, that is, not only thinking of the result but also of the way that result is achieved, which is that plus people can enjoy and youngsters can learn with.

From my own personal point of view, the kind of football played by Spain in this Euro Cup, or Holland in '74, Brazil in '70 or F.C. Barcelona now, is the sole reason why I will never lose interest in working as a coach.

## **6. What attracts you in a job proposal?**

Essentially, it is the ideas that should concur.

We either look outwards or we look inwards, we either prioritize only "what" or also "how". The question is where we put the cart and where we put the horse.

I find the sense in leading a work process lies in perfecting the most valuable features of my team, and in matching them to the idea that will represent us from now on, to the total detriment of any circumstance or event external to the development of our own resources.

The only thing the culmination of a competition period should evoke is the massive presence left by our own intervention, by what we have managed to do, and conversely, never the prominence of factors alien to it.

There is a world of truth in something I heard Johan Cruyff say when referring to the game played by the current F.C. Barcelona: If I have the ball I decide.

I think the concept is as clear as it is simple: beyond this concept, there is nothing to be found. If I have the ball and I decide, I simply can't discover the sense in adapting and even subsuming our behaviour to so many considerations that go beyond what we are actually capable of, such as the overrated analysis of the opponent team, so prevalent today, only to see later that those same analysts have lost by a difference of 4 goals.

What I mean to say is, there is nothing wrong with having this information available, because we aren't fools, but I would concentrate all the efforts of the work I am interested in entirely on our own possibilities; it is the rival team who should worry about us.

Either we decide, or we give our opponent the opportunity to do so.

## **7. What is the role of a coach, and what are the limits of his role?**

Well, in answer to this question I am going to provide 3 general lines about what I think the role of a coach involves: protecting, giving answers and making decisions.

In the closing words for a training course I gave at the Myanmar Football Federation I told the 35 coaches who were there: the first thing you have to do as coaches is protect your players. By protect I mean care for, because this is what a player expects of his coach.

Let me give you an example to illustrate this: if my team is going to play a match and I let them play barefoot, I would be doing nothing to protect them. They will do as much as they can do barefoot.

Well, in coaching it is the same.

If I allow them to go out and play without having coached all the aspects that should be coached to be in condition to beat the opponent team, whether I know it or not, this means I am incapable of protecting or caring for my players.

Instead, if my team goes out well prepared, the players will be strong enough to take on and beat their opponents.

Both during the formation and high performance periods, coaches must have the training required to be able to offer their players the best possible training experiences.

There may be differences in approach, but it is the quality of these experiences that cannot be negotiated.

Because the quality of the experiences we have given a player is identical to what he will give us later on the playing field. What doubts can there be about this?

Well, this is the way I protect my players.

On the other hand, the coach should be able to successfully interpret what is happening, supposing he has the training to be able to anticipate what the problems may be, or at least be capable of figuring out where they lie, or what is causing them.

And at this point he will offer a solution.

If this works thus, then we are describing what should actually occur, so that each thing is in place.

When a coach gives an answer that solves a problem for his team, this team will thank him by paying him as honestly as they can: they will pay him with the way they play.

So, I also said before a coach must make decisions.

In this connection I am going to say the following: I can accept asking a player what position on the playing field he feels most comfortable in or he considers would most benefit from his talent, which is like asking him about his preference regarding his responsibilities in the team, but to ask him what mates he feels more comfortable with, a question I once heard asked, is a question that can only be asked by those who will never be ashamed of what they are.

It is the coach who must choose and take the decisions.

Echoing a great coach and excellent person I once met, who used to say: "at the end of the day, you are the coach", to which I would add "and they will come for you".

This is why I say it is always better to decide for ourselves, even with the most mistaken of our most faithful beliefs.

You asked me about the limits of the role?

The limits of a coach appear on the plane of the singularity of each player.

As a coach one simply cannot intervene in the actual essence of each player, his talent, his creative capacity, his spontaneity, the way he solves a situation, if he does it in this way or that. It would be ridiculous to seek to act on that singularity, which is part of each player's intimacy. Quite the opposite, it is here where the player should freely express his talent and be himself, come to terms with what he really is because, otherwise, he would be like a robot.

That, then, is the limit.

The agreement or contract between a coach and his players is made on another plane, on the plane of things that are common to everyone and where everyone should be in agreement: principles, values, ideas, goals, etc.

But in no way would it be advisable to interfere in the plane belonging to the singularity of each player.

**8. Which is the greatest disappointment you could feel in connection with a squad of players?**

The only disappointment I could have is of an ethical nature, that is, when the values and ideas we have agreed to defend and represent are not respected.

The same thing happens in the face of betrayal or infidelity: it is impossible to recover from them.

An ethical person has principles he will never abandon, even in the face of adverse circumstances, because it is his identity which is lost there, and with it everything that gives sense to his life.

This is a very delicate subject, one that people have even given their life for.

**9. How do you see football in current times?**

In the answer to this question my opinion will not only refer to football.

There is an old Arabian tale that went more or less as follows:

On a certain occasion, a young Caliph asked his Great Visir: "How can I make someone believe I know whether a poem is good or bad?", to which the Great Visir answered "You must always say it's bad - you'll only be wrong one out of every hundred times".

I think this is a very attractive idea because it allows us to leave behind that deceitful illusion we are often so fascinated with.

It is likewise a very encouraging signal for those who feel the need of doing something well done.

I say one's personal aims should be really ambitious, because in our ordinary everyday life everything works systematically in the opposite direction, seeking to weaken our expectations. It is we ourselves who should care for them and defend them, sometimes against the lack of courage of certain established ideas, and others against the deviousmirage of the media model.

Coming back to your question about football today, there are two aspects I'd like to highlight and compare: what happens on the playing field, and what happens off the field.

You have probably noticed that today, like never before, there is a growing proliferation all over the world of training and updating courses on different aspects of football.

The growth of technology and InfoTech over the last few years has provided us with a broad range of multimedia tools to show and teach what football is about, from a simple DVD which we can watch and commit to memory as often as necessary, to programs designing 3D graphics.

This is wonderful, don't you think?

And what about all the football clinics and schools that didn't used to exist when I was a child, the number of specialized books, magazines and newspapers printed and distributed around the world, or the hours devoted to football on TV programs?

So, the other aspect is what happens on the playing field, and here is where both things do not go hand in hand.

What I see on the playing field is gradually getting worse, and each day we settle for less.

What to me is unacceptable is the abundant poverty of conceptual resources I see in top-level matches, on top-level playing fields, with the additional shortcoming of being unable to correctly perform technical actions pertaining to the very basics of football.

What I hold is that there is no feeling of shame in this connection, and, as though nothing had happened, the cycle is once again renewed.

Therefore, if what I see with such elemental examples is bad, imagine the boredom I must feel when I hope for other things to happen, or, conversely, how much satisfaction and joy it brings me to remember those teams that make up that one percent the Great Visir referred to, the percentage I need to be able to keep on breathing.

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