

MM: Hopefully it should have come up on your screen now that we are recording.

JB: Yeah, I've got that.

MM: Perfect, so Jess yeah, thank you for joining us on a Friday afternoon. If I can please get you just to just give us a bit of a background as to who you are, you're playing and coaching experiences, the sport and the environment that you are currently in.

JB: Yeah, erm hi for anybody listening that's picked me. Erm, well done firstly for picking me. Secondly, I'm Jess Bunyard. So I'm coaching in predominantly women's rugby, but I've done some men's guest coaching as well. Erm, usually around sort of grassroots and university level, I'm proud of that. Way back when, I also played at a grassroots level as well. Done some county coaching as well recently last year. And then I'm also a Rugby Development Officer, so going into schools really making sure that kids are loving everything and anything about the sport that they can.

0:52 MM: And what's your background? What's kind of brought you into coaching? Did you said, do you play the sport? Did you get coaching qualifications? What is it that entered you into the world of rugby coaching?

JB: Yeah, I mean it's a bit of a...it's a bit of a weird journey. So I have always been a rugby fan pretty much since year zero, courtesy of my dad, but didn't really see it as a natural career path for me. Um, probably, because the time growing up in the 90s, what rugby female role models was there out in the world for me to sort of readily see and identify out there? I mean, there were plenty of them, but we just weren't seeing enough of them out there. Erm, so I played rugby at university, but I studied arts, so I've got two arts degrees one is practical and then one's theoretical. And then when I had graduated from my Masters, I got sort of stuck in the university coaching and sort of found my path and then now Level 2 qualified, looking hopefully to start my Level 3, Corona depending.

MM: It's crazy, isn't it? It's mad the amount of change. So, coaching then it is something that's maybe relatively new to you over the over the last few years. Is that right to summarise?

2:08 JB: Yeah. So, I started, I started doing a bit of coaching when I was playing that would have been sort of the 2015 season. So when the coach couldn't attend sessions, I would take a little bit of a lead at the planning and delivering of that with support from the coach who couldn't make it. Erm, and we'd just do really fun, like little games and stuff. And then when I moved back up to Huddersfield, just where I am now, 2016 I was assistant coach for the university side and then the season after I became head coach. So it was quite like automatic step up really.

2:42 MM: I quick transition though from assistant to head coach within a two-year window.

2:46 JB: Yeah it was. It was really manic, but it was...I was really immersed in it. It was something I did, you know, sort of, I was aware I was taking a bit of a big plunge, but wanted to thrive in that environment and thrive in that challenge. And it was just best way of learning, really. Just learning on the job.

3:03 MM: Yeah, absolutely. So now, now you're in the mix of it with your Rugby Development Officer and the different roles you undertake. What's your biggest motivation to stay coaching because, you know, we know it's unsociable hours, we know it's cold, it's sometimes where it's early mornings, late nights? So, what's your biggest motivation to immerse yourself in coaching?

3:23 JB: Well first sometimes it is so cold. I mean we are Yorkshire so it can hail, snow and occasionally rare sunshine all in one session. But I think probably the best thing currently because I'm still predominantly grassroots coach through some of the women's coaching that I do, but I'd say that's where I get to have some of the greatest impacts, erm, and that's in players developing confidence where previously they haven't had any. And I know I always cite this example, but it's probably the greatest example I've had of mums come to the session, you know, they've just had kids, or they've got two kids and they're, and they're juggling that and a full time job and they've never played rugby in their life. They've seen it on the telly a couple of times, but they've seen it as a great way to get out and have fun and they want to try something new. And to see them develop over the course of a couple of sessions and see their confidence soar to when they finally step foot on the pitch for their first ever game and growing and take on this whole other family that supports them and nurtures them is truly impactful. And I've really found it a life changing experience, personally for me, because I get to see them grow and soar and develop, and grow their life and experience into something that's just outside of the standard sort of family, mum, home, work, life experience.

4:32 MM: Yeah amazing. Which kind of leads me now onto areas around your coaching philosophy, which I'm sure given the environment that you're in and that the type of athletes that you're working with would be very different to being in a professional or elite set up. So how would you summarise or describe your coaching philosophy?

4:58 JB: I think my coaching philosophy is predominantly games-based, but I think even if I wasn't in a grassroots level, I think even as I move, I hate to use this sort of term 'further up' because it creates this sort of hierarchy, but as I move along the pathway, I think I would like to think that I would stay true to my games-based philosophy because I generally believe it does work. It probably doesn't produce instant results, which is what the top level of the game want, but I think it's a slow burn of reduce, of results, sorry. Erm, because we don't play on a Saturday afternoon or Sunday afternoon, we don't play in a technical environment. We're not doing like a skill-based drill or a skill zone. You know, we're not looking to perfect that or necessarily looking to do the perfect type parcel kick every now and again. Those are obviously important aspects of the game, and we need to execute the pass and the kick well, but we, we're playing a game. So, if we can get players to think creatively and to think about how to control the game environment or to play within the rules, but stretch it and really think creatively within those rules, then the better at the game they're going to be. So everything is predominately game-based, even my skill zones. And that's something I've made a conscious effort to change or evolve over the last couple of weeks, actually, my skill zones used to be quite separate entities – this was a skill zone or this was a drill – and I'd add in a couple of like game-based variants or levels, some point scoring here, there, where players would have to guess what I'm point scoring for. But I've changed it slightly the last couple of weeks. I've made it more game-based, so I've almost viewed there are larger games here where will look at some of the game constraints and we'll develop some of the wider aspects of things when you think about game-based philosophy. And then instead of skill zones, almost just doing

them as slightly smaller games where we'll look to finesse technique. And we'll look to harness players identifying space and looking at spatial awareness and depth is a big thing at the moment. Coming out of lockdown that seems to have been lost, so we're really trying to finesse that at the moment. But it's just taking it into a smaller game because if they can execute technique in a game environment here a bit smaller, when they take it into the larger, it's going to be better. So I feel I rambled, but I've slightly evolved my technique over the last couple of weeks. I'm still sort of working out what that means in my head, but essentially game-based, but with skills going into smaller games.

7:37 MM: Yeah, some of the small-sided games and some of that almost like a whole part whole, but the parts section still being based in some variant of the game, yeah?

7:40 JB: Yeah, massively. You've got to make it fun. I mean players at my level, they're not getting paid, so if they're not getting paid, if it's not fun, there's no reason for them to turn up. So yes, they do want to work on skill and they will enjoy seeing those results. And yes, they do want to work on fitness and some of the ladies love to see when their fitness block element testing we do, they love to see those numbers go down. But if it's not fun, it's not going to, it's not going to, they're not going to rock up. And when do we as humans learn most? We learn at best through play, we have done since we were kids. So if they can learn their technique through play and through fun, that's all the better experience for them and for me. I've got to enjoy it as much, as much as a coach, as much as they have as a player.

8:23 MM: Yeah, absolutely, and that again leads quite nicely into my next question in terms of where do you think this philosophy is come from? So is it your experience as a player? Is it through trial and error? Like where do you think that this approach your coaching has come from? What are the foundations for it?

8:39 JB: Erm, that's a really interesting question because I haven't probably gone back to the origin of my coaching and really sort of seen where it's come from. I think mostly it's come through trial and error, and reflection and just trying things. I think when you transition from a player to a coach in those first couple of years you are going to be basically be a mirror reflection of every bit of coaching you've previously experienced. Erm, and I think I'm fortunate in fact, that I was exposed to coaches that liked us to do some games. We were, I think, back in the day, we were a bit more technique-based. Thinking back to those sessions were a bit more sort of skill zone and everything was broken down. Erm, so I think once I'd sort of used all of that that I had in my brain I then, had to try and think of actually way's that I could make the session good and ways that I could develop myself as a coach. And I think that's probably where the art degrees and the creative thinking came into play. And probably I'm at my most creative in the practice design elements of it. You know, still bearing in mind the purpose, we don't do like mad stuff just for no reason at all, it's got to have a purpose, but I think, the games are really fun to design. You can have, even if it's just one really good purposeful outcome, or you can have 10 slightly mini outcomes from the game. They're really good to design and they're really good to sort of stretch your skills and test your skillset as a coach. Like how good is your practice design and you can really put it to test in the game. So I think it's been a process of trial and error, almost like you would an artist's practice. I think coaches often we're probably viewed a bit too much as a science and I think sometimes we need to be viewed a bit more as an art as a practice, learning on our feet as we go, developing this sort of artistic coach's practice. Sometimes we're going to fail, but what bits can we take out of the failure that's really good? So it's just sort of this, this process of evolution and creativity.

10:40 MM: Yeah, perfect, absolutely. I genuinely couldn't agree more. And as you were saying that that's also coming, the involvement of your philosophy as you were saying, even as recent as a few weeks ago. So if I turned up to watch one of your sessions up in chilly Huddersfield next week, what would it look like? What would I see?

11:00 JB: I mean, it would probably look slightly chaotic, erm, because I am in favour of the chaos or the dynamic approach to coaching. Erm, so at the moment, with a group of ladies that I'm currently coaching with, we're doing themes, so we've got a Shrek theme going on and we've got that theme until Halloween where there will be like a Shrek themed session. And it's to help them connect more to the themes that I'm putting across as a coach and to help them connect with the purposes that I'm trying to get them to work towards within the games in the wider training environment. Erm, and you might see some games that are linked to the Shrek theme that are related to rugby, so we've essentially got tag, but with a little bit of an obstacle course featured in as like an S&C style game to get them dynamically moving. But there's a load of knights and then there's a Shrek and a donkey working as a team. It is just a game of tag but you bring in these themes, it helps them connect to it and suddenly they can probably understand my way of thinking a little bit more. I think one of the greatest barriers a coach can face is difficulty getting the players to understand where they're coming from. So the players will have probably a very similar goal in mind as the coaches. But if as a coach you don't develop the language to communicate your idea across, it doesn't matter how good the game is or how good your idea is or how good your practice design is. If you don't develop a language that effectively communicates your approach, you're not going to win anybody over. So the theme was to try and think of another way where I could get my language of coaching across to them so that they could understand it. And I think it's really worked and probably you know it's developed a lot more laughter in the session they're having some more fun and, as a side from that, their dynamic movements have improved as well from that game, so it's a win-win situation.

12:55 MM: I've gotta ask, what's the next theme after Halloween?

12:59 JB: I don't know. We're kicking some ideas around to be honest. James Bond. I suggested the other day. Erm, I'm also a massive fan of RuPaul's Drag Race and I know some of the girls are, so we might do a drag race theme. I'm really keen to see if there's any like tactical death drops or stuff in the training session during a game, but I don't know. We might have to, I don't know, it might be Star Wars. I keep pushing the Star Wars, but that might be my personal bias. But the girls, most of the girls, love Shrek. So the idea hopefully is picking something, most successful is probably been popular culture, but then picking something that everybody understands and relates to. So something like Star Wars, something like James Bond, where everybody is, even if you don't love it love it, everyone's familiar with the key themes in it and they can connect to it that way.

13:47 MM: This is just, almost leads on, but it's just a side note because there where you were saying you know you've thrown some ideas around so do your, do your athletes, your ladies get some input then in the theme that chosen? It's not purely directed from you, they've got a say and a voice in that, or...?

14:01 JB: Yeah, massively and erm, one of the ways I was, I said to them we were running a fitness block element when it was actually sunny, so there was a few of them stood around, we were timing each other, and I said, "Look, I'm really, I really want to do themes. Erm, I'm

really loving the idea of themes. Like I know it would seem really mad. Erm, and I know there's several of you that love Shrek", and they went quite excited at that point. I was and they went, "Yeah, let's do a Shrek theme!". And I was like, right, that's it, I've got instant buy-in, let's do it. Erm, so sometimes it can be a really conscious contribution like that was, or it can be something that's a little bit subtle of just knowing your players. I think that's probably the key message I can probably impart to anybody is first and foremost know your players and know how they work. And that's not just how they're going to respond in a situation, how they respond mentally, how they respond physically, but knowing their likes and dislikes. You know what they like to go home and watch on the telly, what music they like to listen to, what's their favorite food and understand that this person is a whole. Then you know if everyone likes pizza, and I know that everyone likes pizza, couple of weeks we might do a pizza theme. I don't know, but it just helps you communicate things in a different way. Erm, one of my junior girls said once in this great analogy, but it worked, it really communicated to the group. She said, "We're clumping. We need to sieve like flour". And I would never have thought of that analogy in my life, but she, she thought of it out of this mad crazy idea that she had, she thought of it and she communicated across the group and everybody immediately understood.

15:43 MM: It's that visual.

15:46 JB: Yeah, it's trying to create this shared language out of everybody's likes and dislikes so that when somebody does come up with a weird analogy, everybody gets it because we're all on the same page.

15:54 MM: Yeah, 100%. And that leads perfectly into the kind of the third area of our discussion here, which is around that player learning. So what would you say are the crucial elements that are required within sessions to enable player learning and development?

16:12 JB: Erm, I would say knowing it's going to come back and knowing players. But this time when you design something so when you're working on your practice design, have in mind the work-ons and strengths of your players. You're not going to design, you're not going to design a game or design a session, that is going to get everybody at that maximum, that key little stretch point to work on throughout the entire session. They will have peaks and troughs so, person A might be in that key stretch mode, person B might be feeling overstretched, and person C might not be feeling stretched enough. And sometimes you can design a game that works for the majority, but sometimes you need to be aware that key people might just need a little bit of a one-on-one conversation occasionally. So person C, if they're not being stretched enough, might need a little extra challenge, a bit of a points incentive. And person B that's feeling really overstretched, well, they might be feeling overstretched because of the practice design and it's overstressing them, or they might be feeling overstretched because of something that's happened outside, it might be university, it might be their job or whatever and they might just need a little five minutes with yourself or a two-second personal water break so they can just regather themselves. So it's just, it's knowing each of your players, and knowing when to give them little personal learning challenges and knowing when to sort of take the, take the heat off a little bit. Erm, and it comes back again, the themes, if you can get to a place where everybody knows the purpose, what we're driving towards in that session, and everybody knows the little, the team end goal as well as their own personal goals, everybody will start to chip in and improve each other. I think that's got to be the sort of perfect boiling point of the session where we're all united and

everybody is chipping in and helping each other. Erm, and I think you can most see it if you've created a player-led learning environment, you can see it at its full effect when somebody new comes in. So this might be somebody that's completely new to the game and so you're having to revisit some stuff and you'll get it, you're sensitive, you've hit that player-led learning environment where players will chip in before you've had the opportunity to do so. They'll sense that player needs a bit of support, a bit of helping here, there, correcting their technique, and the players will take over, and it's really good to see those leaders emerge.

18:34 MM: Absolutely, and that again ties in. But just to clarify, what do you view as head coach or the you know the Development Officer that's leading the sessions that you're currently running, what do you view your role as being in that learning journey?

18:51 JB: Erm, I would say it's as a coach you have a massive responsibility to, for the majority of time, take the lead on creating the right learning environment. You know, I, if I can take analogy of, you're not just setting the session that they've got to writing. So let's say your players are writing an essay in a classroom, for example. They're there sitting in the classroom, you not just setting the essay question as a coach, you're laying the bricks of the classroom building, you're doing the electrical in the lighting, you're hanging the whiteboard on the wall, you're putting the chairs and the tables in. You're doing everything to create the best learning environment for those players, as you possibly can, as well as setting the essay question. I think sometimes as coaches, especially if you're starting out, because I think I made this mistake myself when I was starting out, we focus too much on the essay question and not on the bricks and mortar that go in to building the classroom environment and the lighting and the whiteboard, and so forth that said in that rather long analogy. I think we need to focus on the classroom as well as just the essay question itself.

20:02 MM: Sometimes actually do we think the focus is more on the grade that this essay question might get us, let alone what the question is? Or how we're going to get there. We're already looking up here before...

20:13 JB: Yeah, massively, I think that's one of the reasons why you don't see a game-based philosophy in professional rugby coaching as often as we probably should do. Because we could sit and probably, reinforce each other's biases on why a games-based philosophy for a games-based sport, such as rugby, is the best environment for the players and the coaches. But we don't see it at a high level, probably because everyone is concerned on that, on that top grade, we've got to get the A, we got to get the A* rather than doing everything else to try and get there. And if we do a technique-based we'll probably get to the A quicker but actually is it sustainable in the long run?

20:55 MM: Yeah, so then. Establishing then your role so you touched upon actually your player-led environment and you know you get those almost 'buzz' moments when you see a player stepping in. So what do you expect from your players to support the learning of both them as an individual and as a team or as a collective?

JB: I think we try and have a as open conversation as possible about everybody's goals and strengths and work-ons, and that starts from setting an example from myself. So the key to getting this good player-led learning environment is actually as a coach myself to show vulnerability. And I can do this in a number of ways, but the way I like the most, erm and the

way that's best for then learning back as myself as a coach, is taking a game or an idea or something that's new, taking it to the players and not just throwing them in without explanation of the process, but actually taking them into the process behind it. So going, "Ladies, this is a new game", and me being really vulnerable. "It's a new game. This might not work. I had this crazy idea, I was in the shower, this idea popped into my head about how we could do X, Y and Z, so I grabbed a piece of paper, I wrote this down and now here we are on a cold Thursday night running this game. It might be mad but go with it". Erm, and then I'll often say, "If you've got any tweaks mid-game when we come in for little huddle or a water break that you think might make the game better for us, for you as a group of players, please, let's say and we'll probably try it". And I think it's just about showing vulnerability. If you can show vulnerability as a teacher as a coach, then everybody's guards come down as a player and they are then more likely to show their vulnerable sides as a player. They are more likely to say, "Actually coach, I'm struggling with X, Y and Z", and then if they can say that in a group then chances are player B will go, "Actually I struggled with that last week. Have you tried this?". And it's just making sure everybody's guards are lowered and we're all accepting that we're all learning in this environment and I'm still learning as well.

23:08 MM: Which brings me on to then my final question really, Jess, if that's OK. Erm, what's the biggest lesson that you've learned within your coaching so far?

23:22 JB: Don't be afraid to show yourself having fun in your session, you know. If I have laughed out loud, at something that's happened in a game or something that one of my players has said that's been absolutely bonkers, that has really tickled my funny bone, you can see everybody else in the session relax and go, "It's OK, coach is having fun. It's like it's OK, it's OK". And I'm like, "We're playing this to have fun. It is a game. It's OK to have fun and have, and laugh". And I think that was something that I wanted. I made the change really early on in my coaching. I had a great, a great coach when I was playing at university. You know we weren't in the best league. We know we were an arts university so. We played like in the lowest league. We had people that were on arts courses, English courses, bless them, they probably weren't suited to the world of rugby and the cold weather training as much as they would have liked to have been, but we went out every Sunday or Wednesday and we played and we played our role. And sometimes the coach, I love him dearly, he could be really strict with us and at times it was needed. You know, erm, he's trying to teach us new things about how to tackle and how to be safe, so sometimes you've got to be strict. But one of my greatest memories is of the times in training when he laughed and he had fun and everybody had fun with the session too. So that was one of the things I wanted to take really on early on in my coaching was you've got to make it fun, for me as a coach as well as for them for a player. So don't be afraid, if something is hilarious, as a coach, let down the wall and laugh out loud. I do. Nine times... I have to take myself away half the time because the girls have said something and I've giggled and I've gone, like I've lost it. And they're carrying on with the game and I'm trying to recompose myself because I've found something really hilarious. Don't be afraid to find things funny. We get to do this job where we get to go out and teach people a sport that we love and we get to share that love with them. We get share that love and laughter with them. Honestly, it's the greatest job in the world. So just have fun with it. It doesn't have to be so serious all the time.

25:38 MM: Yeah, I couldn't agree more Jess. So I'm just going to...