

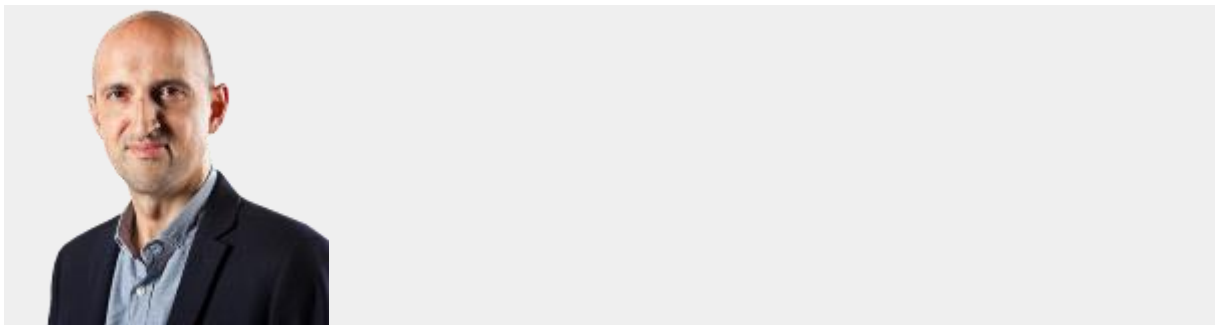
MATTHEW SYED

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Southampton show the worth of looking beyond football's borders

matthew syed | columnist of the year

South-coast club demonstrate how the knowledge of outside experts can take players out of comfort zone, Matthew Syed writes



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I visited Saracens rugby club last week. They are the holders of the Premiership, as well as the both the Anglo-Welsh Cup and the European Champions Cup, and it is not difficult to see why.

They are constantly looking to innovate. One change was the creation of a crèche at the club's training ground in St Albans. This may seem a bit of a leap for a sports club (I have rarely seen it elsewhere) but it is underpinned by powerful logic.

Southampton want their future stars to be involved in decision-making on training and rehab, to broaden their minds with education, to widen their social skills, rather than treating them like infants

“We wanted to provide an opportunity for the partners of the players to meet, to have a coffee and chat, to feel like part of a family,” Mark McCall, the head coach, said. “That leads to a broadening and deepening of relationships of the players, too. This has an impact on the culture of the club, the sense of togetherness, and, ultimately, upon performance.”

Saracens have measured the level of communication between the players by mic-ing them up in training matches. They have found that the quality and frequency of communication has increased over time, as the players have developed greater familiarity on and off the pitch. This, in turn, improves coordination and mutual anticipation.

They took me through other innovations, some inspired by visiting other sports teams, others by visiting other industries. “We bring in a philosopher on a regular basis to debate with the

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players, to make them think about issues within the game and beyond,” David Jones, the psychologist, said. “We want to develop more rounded people, stronger characters, and better leaders.”

During the team meeting to discuss the weekend’s match against Northampton (which Saracens won), the quality of the video analysis and tactical deliberations were impressive. “We are never comfortable with where we are,” Alex Sanderson, the attacking coach, said. During his briefing, he played Mozart and Metallica as a way of describing two different rhythms of forward play. The heads of the players were nodding.

The day after, I visited the celebrated academy at Southampton and was struck by the same bracing curiosity. This is the system that produced Gareth Bale, Theo Walcott, Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain, Adam Lallana and Luke Shaw, among many others. Just like Saracens, however, they don’t see success as a reason to stop innovating, but as an invitation to find new ways to improve.

“We visited the Yehudi Menuhin Music School to see how they think about purposeful practice,” Edd Vahid, the head of coaching, said. “We also visit Saracens a lot. They do not have the best facilities in the world, particularly when compared to some Premier League football clubs, but they are fantastic when it comes to culture and innovation.”

Partly inspired by Saracens, Southampton now have an educational and skills programme running alongside the usual academy functions. This is about building leadership qualities in their young players. They want their future stars to be involved in decision-making on training and rehab, to broaden their minds with education, to widen their social skills, rather than treating them like infants.

“If you want leaders on the pitch, you have to develop their qualities off the pitch,” Les Reed, the technical director, said. “In many academies, education is seen as a waste of time, a distraction from the game. We think that it is central to player development. We need England players who don’t crumble when they are on a big stage and go one-nil down.”

Southampton also have a Black Box Room, modelled on the aviation industry, so that they can constantly analyse the data from training and matches, just as aviation learns from the cockpit recorders. The analysts are striving to build better metrics to improve recruitment, despite the statistical challenges. They have studied a number of outside organisations, including Google.

And this really brings me to my point. Southampton aside, football has traditionally struggled to look beyond its own borders. Outside experts have seemed threatening to the natives. The tendency, when seeking to figure out, say, the underperformance of the England team over the past 50 years, has been to ask existing coaches, former players, the usual suspects. The reviews have therefore been rather predictable in their diagnoses.

This is not to denigrate football experts, for they often have insights that people outside the game cannot match. It is merely to say that to drive meaningful change, it sometimes pays to step beyond the comfort zone and find new ways of seeing the world. It is often by looking at problems afresh that you spot the connections that drive innovation. In academia much of the

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most interesting recent work has emerged when researchers have stepped beyond subject boundaries. Behavioural economics, for example, straddles psychology and formal economics.



McCall says that the introduction of a crèche at Saracens' training ground is having a positive impact on performances HARRY TRUMP/GETTY IMAGES

It is for this reason that I wasn't surprised when arriving at Southampton to see Eddie Jones, the England rugby coach. He had been there to see what he could glean about player development from English football's top academy. "If you are too arrogant to learn from other sports and industries, you shouldn't be a coach," he said. Jones is happy to admit that he has learnt a lot from football. "I have visited a number of clubs," he said. "The thing that football does very well is enable players to peak on a week-by-week basis. The matches come thick and fast, so they have to be good constantly through the season. That is why tactical periodisation [structured build-ups with a specific focus each day] is so important. This has changed the way the England rugby team prepare for big matches."

Football, it seems to me, should reach out more, and never be threatened by outside experts. There is always a danger of being distracted by vogue concepts, and of changing things not because it will help you win, but because it looks visionary. So long as a lid is kept on this temptation, however, it is the only sure route to innovation. England only win by reaching beyond the stale ideas of the past.

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- I am glad to see Gary Neville back as a pundit and commentator. He is eloquent, passionate and slick, and has that rare ability to take the viewer on to the pitch or into the dressing room, mixing personal anecdote with insight. Many feared that his disastrous spell at Valencia and an underwhelming record as assistant manager for England would undermine his credibility. It is fortunate that this hasn't materialised, despite the expected onslaught on Twitter when he first rejoined the team at Sky. But Neville's experience does at least hint that there is a sizeable difference between talking a good game, and actually delivering it in practice. It is a distinction that journalists like me, who invariably have slick answers to any given problem, should always bear in mind.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/southampton-show-the-worth-of-looking-beyond-footballs-borders-wcc6dbzlp>