

# From Outside the Box to Orthodox

Coaching ideas and practice originally thought to be different often become orthodox and embraced by the majority – but how does this happen? **Ricky Boxall** and **David Turner** explain what we can learn from coaches like John Buchanan, whose coaching approach was very different from the norm.

Buchanan was probably the least likely, but most successful, international cricket coach ever; his record for Australia speaks for itself.

Yet almost everything normally acceptable in a coach counted against this success. Buchanan came from an unusual background and his methods were unorthodox for the time, yet, ultimately, his influence on modern coaching practice is probably greater than that of many other coaches, whatever the sport. He is the example of how, in many walks of life, the unorthodox becomes the orthodox.

## Limited playing experience

Buchanan was the first non-international player to be appointed as coach by both Queensland and Australia. His inglorious playing career consisted of just seven first-class matches. He gained an MA in Sports Administration, became a university lecturer, and then National Volleyball Director, before accepting his first cricket-coaching position in Queensland. Despite his lack of playing experience and a concern that the players would not respect him, Buchanan quickly became recognised as a talented coach whose teams played excellent cricket and won trophies. Cricket Australia decided to appoint Buchanan as national coach, but his appointment was again questioned because of his lack of international playing experience.

Buchanan, however, rapidly became known for his superior communication, organisational and motivational skills; all of which positively influenced the behaviours and performance of elite players. It can be argued that his own limited playing experience and background were potentially beneficial to his coaching role, because they gave him an ability to look at the game from a different perspective. Buchanan also drew upon his links with successful people, and his own life experiences both inside and outside sport. He recognised that cricketers needed to be able to use both sides of their bodies effectively; an idea he adopted from Sir Alex Ferguson, and he applied baseball coaching principles to improve team fielding.

He sought ideas from the psychologist and lateral thinker Edward de Bono, who, despite having no cricket expertise, proposed trying to keep low-scoring opposing batsmen at the crease when their team were chasing runs. Since, in cricket, each ball bowled has some intention of removing a batsman from the game, this was *outside the box* thinking that challenged tradition. It also potentially provided a means of changing how the game is played, which Buchanan asserts is a legacy of excellent teams.

## The importance of process over product, and having vision

It could be assumed that Buchanan is highly win-driven, but, importantly, he considers results to be a by-product of effective processes, with success coming only when the correct conditions exist. He asserted his objective was to build-in practices that would allow his teams to dominate cricket for a decade, not merely to win immediate matches. The major drawback of such an approach is that if results are not achieved in the short term, the coach's position can be jeopardised. But, by adhering to 'long-view' philosophies and by never being satisfied, Buchanan achieved substantial success, keeping Australia 'ahead of the game' during his years as coach.

Buchanan insists vision is fundamental to quality coaching. The coach must determine the goal and then plan back from there. When he was appointed, he stated his vision for Australia was to become a truly great (not just good) side, and have other national teams in awe of their ability. He called the vision *Everest* – a symbolic analogy to the goal of scaling a mountain; an extremely demanding and difficult goal to achieve, but also feasible. By constantly monitoring progress to *Everest*, the climb can be accelerated occasionally, whereas if the route becomes difficult, coaches must consider regrouping to base camp and assessing when the ascent towards excellence should recommence.

Buchanan balances planning for the long-term vision with an emphasis on being fully in the present. For example, he ensured players adopted leadership responsibilities in making decisions on the team's behalf, and encouraged compartmentalising distractions during performance to promote mental toughness.

## Making the coach redundant

According to Buchanan, the role of the coach is to become redundant, by focusing on players becoming their own best coaches. In encouraging players to understand their own game intimately, the coach has more time for strategic planning and opposition threats. However, after the 2005 Ashes defeat, he recognised the need to be more individually supportive and accessible to players in times of need. He also recognised the coach must be constantly seeking to adapt to the uniqueness of situations because no two series are identical in opposition threats and conditions.

Since Buchanan regards cricket as an individual sport dressed in team clothing, his aim is to develop players who can make ball-by-ball decisions on behalf of the team in the heat of battle, unencumbered by coach dependence.

## BUCHANAN

### Won

77% of Test matches (including first 15 Test matches in charge)

74% of one-day internationals (ODIs)

Second and third successive World Cups (2003 and 2007)

Ashes three times (2001, 2002–2003 and 2006–2007) and lost only once (2005)

ICC Champions Trophy (2006)





Australia's captain Ricky Ponting holds aloft the Ashes trophy, surrounded by his teammates, after they won the fifth and final Test against England to win the series 5–0 at the Sydney Cricket Ground in January 2007.

## Knowing the enemy

Buchanan used unconventional means to try and improve Australian players' confidence and concentration. He used Pilates, juggling, public-speaking exercises, a military-style preparation camp and, intriguingly, coaching practices based on Sun Tzu's ancient military strategy text, *The Art of War*. One quote he considered transferable to cricket was: 'If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.' Buchanan implemented 'knowing the enemy' by pioneering computer analysis in cricket. He reasoned that, if opposition tendencies and particular threats can be studied, planning is simplified and the likelihood of defeat is reduced. Buchanan also used computer analysis to help Australian players – going beyond mere statistics to develop key performance indicators, providing contextualised numbers such as scoring shot percentages, rather than just accumulated batting totals.

Sun Tzu also advised on the use of spies, recommending foreknowledge must be acquired from those knowing the enemy. So, Buchanan made Duncan Fletcher's book, *The Ashes Regained*, mandatory reading for everyone helping Australia regain the Ashes. The insights gained into how England had set out to win in 2005 gave valuable guidance to combat the 'enemy'. Buchanan also brought England's 2005 bowling coach Troy Cooley on to his coaching staff. Cooley's inside information may have contributed to Australia winning the 2006–2007 Ashes. In addition, several Australian squad members have been overseas players for English counties, enabling them to monitor emerging talent. Buchanan, though, declined the opportunity to become the ultimate spy, when he was recently approached for the vacant England coaching position!

## The present

Having left his coaching position with Australia, Buchanan has adopted other coach-education positions and is in demand as a speaker at corporate and sporting events. He talks about the overlap between leadership in sport, business and life in general, and how to get the best out of individuals. His corporate involvement highlights that international sports coaches and business managers may have analogous roles, and he applies coaching ideas to business to promote optimal performance. Buchanan's approach parallels the coaching principles of knowing the whole person and encouraging self-ownership and responsibility in decision making, to promote top performance with consistent messages from contemporary business literature.

Post-Buchanan, Australia have lost their number one status following Test defeats in India and, most notably, suffering a first home series defeat for 16 years at the hands of South Africa, as well as the 2009 Ashes to England. Buchanan has described this loss of form as a fantastic opportunity to reassess systems, consistent with his search for the silver-lining approach.

## Has the unorthodox become accepted practice?

Analysis shows Buchanan's investment in conventional 'coaching' was minimal, and so questions were raised about whether his principal role with Australia was actually that of process manager, rather than coach. It is also questionable how much hands-on technical-coaching input a contemporary international coach should have.

Yet Buchanan initiated the use of specialist bowling, fielding and fitness coaches, and introduced computer analysis as a tool for improvement. He used sports psychologists and adopted ideas from other sports, refuted accepted practice on how to play the game, and 'proved' that personal performance is not always necessary to become an international coach. He planned for the long term, set goals and scouted the opposition. All of these factors are now common practice in coaching and, so, are orthodox coaching practice.

In cricket terms, regardless of players available during his term, he maintained Australia as the top-ranked international cricket team for eight years, and his success is unparalleled. Buchanan's approach encapsulates a relentless improvement culture. With Buchanan as coach, Australia won 75% of their matches. Such an achievement is probably near maximal, given sporting uncertainties, inevitable human error and weather restrictions affecting Test matches. Buchanan would have liked Australia to have gone further, taking the game to a new level and changing the nature of the way cricket is played.

Inevitably there were doubters. Shane Warne asserted Australia had to endure Buchanan's 'pixieland' ideas, and were talented enough not to need a coach. Ex-Australia captain Ian Chappell claimed Buchanan's contribution to competitive success was nil, and Australia might have been better without him.

On the other hand, captains Ricky Ponting and Steve Waugh considered him a mentor who made important contributions to the team. Buchanan's leadership of Australia ostensibly provided a supportive developmental environment that allowed the best to be better. During his tenure, numerous records were set (16 consecutive Test wins, first team to score 400 in an ODI, and first to win three consecutive World Cups). Another classic Chinese text, the *Tao Te Ching*, reminds us that a positive influence may be effective without necessarily being acknowledged:

*A leader is best,  
When people barely know that he exists,  
But of a good leader, who talks little,  
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,  
They will all say, 'We did this ourselves'.*

## References

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## Profile

**Ricky Boxall** has a BSc (Hons) in Sports Studies with Psychology from the University of Hertfordshire, and is currently undertaking a taught Master's in Sports Coaching at Loughborough University.

**David Turner** is a Principal Lecturer in Sports Coaching at the University of Hertfordshire.

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