SHOW NOTES

Play the Whole Game

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Episode 4 | Season 3 | *Coaching Research To Results Podcast*

EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	Critical application of TGfU in sports coaching
Author	Castro, J., & Morgan, K
Published	Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy, 2025
Episode Length	Under 14 minutes
Tags	TGfU, game-based coaching, whole-part-whole, decision-making, questioning, reflection, volleyball, competitive coaching

THE THREE STICKY IDEAS

These are the labels to remember from this episode. They are designed to stick with you long after the research fades.

Play the Whole Game

Teaching a technique in isolation, without the game, gives players a skill they cannot use -- a key with no lock. Over an eight-month volleyball season, players who were consistently coached inside real or modified game contexts developed a deeper, functional understanding of positioning and tactics than those drilled outside the game. The whole-part-whole cycle -- play, identify problems, work on them, return to the game -- is not just a session structure, it is how understanding actually forms.

The Cook or the Recipe Follower

Not all game-based coaching is equal: 'safe' adaptation copies the surface features of a game-based approach (small-sided games, letting players 'just play') without any learning intent or questioning behind it. 'Critical' adaptation, by contrast, means understanding the approach well enough to flex it intelligently -- for example, using a genuine prior match as the session's starting 'game' rather than forcing an artificial one. The coach who understands why each element matters can adapt; the coach who is just following steps cannot.

The Junction Box

TGfU works less through the game itself and more through the quality of interaction between coach and players, especially the coach's questioning. When the lead researcher moved from

general, whole-group questions to specific questions planned in advance and directed at individuals, player thinking sharpened and players eventually began having tactical conversations among themselves unprompted. The coach acts as a junction box: without quality questioning connecting players' thinking, the learning circuit does not complete.

TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

Take one or more of these actions into your next coaching session.

To decide how the game will contribute to your session's outcomes before you plan anything else

Before planning anything else for your next session, decide how a real or game-like activity will surface the specific tactical problem you want players to work on, then let them play it out before intervening. This puts the whole-part-whole sequence in the right order, so the problems you teach are the ones the game itself reveals rather than ones you assumed in advance.

To audit your questions

Over your next three or four sessions, track how many questions versus instructions you give, and whether those questions are closed (yes/no) or open ('what' and 'how' questions that require thinking). Planning two or three specific questions in advance and directing them at individuals rather than the group was the single biggest lever for developing deeper player understanding in this study.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Primary Source: Castro, J., & Morgan, K. (2025). Critical application of TGfU in sports coaching. Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy.

Secondary Source: Castro, J., & Morgan, K. (2026). Reflecting on the challenges of first-person action research in sport coaching. *Sport Coaching Review, 15, (1),* 158-178.

Counterpoint Sources:

Evans, J., and R. Light. 2008. "Coach Development Through Collaborative Action Research: A Rugby Coach's Implementation of Game Sense Pedagogy." Asian Journal of Exercise and Sport Science 5 (1): 31-37.

LINKS AND RESOURCES

- Full episode library: thecoachdeveloper.com
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Share this episode with one coach this week, since that's how research actually travels.

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FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

The following is the complete script for this episode of *Coaching Research To Results*.

Cold Open

You have almost certainly been on a coaching course where someone told you to 'start with the game'. Maybe they drew a diagram with arrows, maybe they used the phrase 'game-based approach', and maybe you nodded along and thought: yes, that sounds right. And then you went back to your training session, set up your usual drills, and carried on as before. Not because you disagreed. But because you didn't quite know how to make it work.

Well... This week's research spent an entire competitive season finding out. Eight months of a real team in a real league. And a coach, who was also a researcher, writing everything down. And what they found is that the secret isn't just in the game. It's in what the coach does inside the game. Stick around.

Intro and Show ID

The Paper

The paper is called, "Critical Application of TGfU in Sports Coaching", published in Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy in January 2025. The lead author, Jose Castro from Cardiff Metropolitan University, spent an entire eight-month volleyball season coaching a women's national league team using Teaching Games for Understanding, while simultaneously studying what was happening. Castro kept detailed reflective notes after every session and match. He also ran focus groups with the players three times across the season.

This is important: the research was not conducted by an observer. Castro was the coach. He was IN it. And that makes the findings unusually honest. The study was prompted by a troubling gap in the literature: all the previous TGfU research had been done in school PE or with young players. Nobody had properly tested it with adult competitive athletes over a full season. Until now.

Big Idea #1

If you teach a technique without the game, you are handing your player a key with no lock.

The big idea could be called "Play the Whole Game".

And it's the foundation that everything else in this paper sits on.

TGfU is built on a simple but radical premise: start with the game, not the drill. Every session begins with a game form. Players play. Problems emerge. Those problems become the learning agenda. Then you work on those problems, and then return to the game to test whether the understanding has improved. That cycle, from whole to part to whole, is not just a session structure. It is a theory of how human beings learn in complex, dynamic environments.

In this study, Castro found that players who were consistently placed inside the game context, even modified or reduced versions of it, developed a qualitatively different kind of understanding than players who were drilled in isolation. One player, Patricia, had been playing volleyball for sixteen years. She knew her positioning. But she said, for the first time, she

understood why she had to be there. That is the difference between knowing a technique and understanding a game.

Think about your own coaching. When your players execute a skill perfectly in a drill and then seem to forget it the moment the game starts, is it a skill problem? Or is it that they have only ever learned the key, never the lock?

Ideas #2 and #3

The second idea extends the first. Not all game-based coaching is equal. This paper makes a crucial distinction between what the authors call 'safe' adaptation and 'critical' adaptation.

Safe adaptation is what happens when a coach has heard of TGfU, likes the idea, but doesn't fully understand it. They play a few small-sided games. They let the players 'just play'. They feel like they are doing it right. But there is no learning intent behind the game design. There is no questioning. There is no connection between the game and the tactical problem they are trying to solve. The coach is following the recipe without knowing why any of the ingredients are there.

Critical adaptation is what you see in this study. When the league season started in October, Castro realised that starting every session with a game form made less sense, because the players had just played a real match two days earlier. That match was the game form. So he adapted: sessions could open with a discussion of what happened on the weekend. Step one of the six-step model became the previous league match. That is not lazy coaching. That is knowing the approach well enough to flex it intelligently.

The sticky label here is "The Cook or the Recipe Follower".

A good cook understands why each ingredient is there, so they can substitute when necessary. A recipe follower is lost without the exact instructions. Which one are you?

The third idea might be the most practical.

Call this one "The Junction Box".

The paper argues that TGfU is not really 'player-centred' in the way we usually mean it. It is better described as 'interaction-centred'.

What that means in practice is this: the players' learning does not happen in spite of the coach, or independently of the coach. It happens through the quality of the interaction between the coach and the players. And the single most important component of that interaction is questioning.

In this study, Castro found that his early questions were too general. Players were nodding but not thinking. When he started planning specific questions in advance, phrasing them precisely, and crucially, asking questions to individuals rather than the whole group, something shifted. Players started answering with precision, correcting each other, raising their own questions. By the end of the season, players were having player-led tactical conversations during water breaks. The moment your players start asking questions you haven't thought of yet, your coaching has worked.

The coach is the point where all the players' thinking connects. Without a quality Junction Box, the circuit does not complete. The game is live, but the lights are not on.

The Counterpoint

Now, this is where it gets a little messy....

This paper is honest about something that other advocates of game-based approaches sometimes gloss over: it is slow. Players in this study actually got worse before they got better. They were so busy thinking about the game that their execution suffered. Halfway through the season, one player knew exactly what she needed to do on court yet couldn't connect that thinking to her body fast enough to do it.

Evans and Light (2008), in a study of rugby coaches implementing Game Sense over eight weeks, found that coaches felt the approach was insufficient to produce significant changes in performance in the short term, even while they believed in its long-term potential. In a competitive coaching environment where results matter now, this is a real tension. Boards, parents, club executives, and even players can lose faith before the approach has had time to work.

So the counterpoint is not that TGfU fails. It's that it fails on a short timeline. And coaches who use it need to be honest with themselves and with their players about what the first few months might look like.

The Anecdote

I can't tell you how often I hear a variation of this comment from coaches, "my players just don't have any game IQ or a good understanding of the game."

After a coach made a similar comment about their athletes, I was able to attend one of their training sessions. In an hour-long session, I counted the coach asking one question and giving forty-seven instructions.

So, after sharing and discussing that question vs instruction ratio with the Coach, we agreed on an experiment. For the next session, except for explaining the first activity, the coach would not give any other instructions. Instead, they could only ask questions.

As you might expect, the coach found it agonizing! But during that time, two players who had barely talked all season spoke and started solving a problem relevant to the practice outcomes. So, there was an immediate payoff between telling and asking, that allowed the coach to see the game understanding developing in real time and the game IQ of the athletes became much more obvious when they were asked to solve a problem rather than simply being told the answer.

Invariably, when I have followed up with coaches who have complained the athletes can't think for themselves, I've seen a similar practice pattern.

Two Actions

Action one is to decide how the game will contribute to your session's outcomes before you plan anything else. Before you plan anything else, decide how the game will contribute to the specific outcomes you want. Not the warm-up. Not the drill. The actual game, or the most game-like thing you can create given your resources and group size. This is the whole in your whole-part-whole sequence, and it has to come first.

Here is what that looks like in practice. Whatever tactical problem you want your players to work on today, design a game or a game-related activity where that problem will naturally appear. If you want to work on transition, create a game where transition matters. If you want to develop decision-making in defence, create a situation where decisions have consequences. Then let them play. Do not intervene immediately. Watch. Let problems emerge. The problems they encounter in the first five to ten minutes of that game will become your teaching agenda for

the whole session. You did not plan those problems. The game found them for you. That's the point.

Then, and only then, do you isolate a part. You address one of those problems. You design a shorter activity that focuses on it. And then you return to the game to test whether the understanding has changed. This is whole-part-whole. This action works across any sport and any level. Start from the game. The game is not the reward at the end of the session. It IS all three - the beginning, the middle, and the end.

Action two is to audit your questions. This is a longer investment, and it WILL change your coaching.

For your next three or four sessions, have someone count your instructions and your questions. Alternatively, if you record your sessions, listen back. You are looking for two things: how many questions you actually ask, and what kind they are. Closed questions, those with a yes or no answer, or a single correct response, are lower order. They confirm. They do not develop. Open questions, ones that ask 'what do you think would happen if', 'how would you approach this differently', are higher order. "What" and "How" questions are the gold standard as they build understanding without being too aggressive.

Once you know your ratio, you can set a target. In this study, Castro found that planning his questions in advance was the single biggest lever. Before each session, he identified two or three specific questions linked to the tactical theme of the day. He also found that asking questions to individuals rather than the whole group produced better quality thinking. The quieter players, the ones who normally let someone else answer, had nowhere to hide...in a good way. This habit of using questions takes time to build. But when it lands, and it will, it changes the dynamic of your sessions permanently.

Close and Invite

So. Three ideas from this research. First: play the whole game. Not as a reward, not as a finishing activity. As the container for all learning. The whole-part-whole sequence only works if the whole is genuinely in charge. Second: be the Cook not the Recipe Follower': adapt critically, not safely. Know your approach well enough to adapt it. Third: you are a junction box. The quality of your interaction with your players, and especially the quality of your questions, is what connects their thinking and turns it into understanding.

And here is the one thing to carry with you this week. Patricia had been playing volleyball for sixteen years and never understood why she needed be in a particular position. Eight months of questioning and game-based learning later, she did. TGfU unlocks game IQ and player understanding in the ways that coaches want and need.

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