SHOW NOTES

Fat Questions, Skinny Answers

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Episode 5 | Season 3 | *Coaching Research To Results Podcast*

EPISODE AT A GLANCE

Paper	Questioning for learning in game-based approaches to teaching and coaching
Author	Harvey, S., & Light, R. L
Published	Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education, 6(2), 175-190, 2015
Episode Length	Under 15 minutes
Tags	questioning, game-based approaches, GBA, TGfU, Game Sense, decision-making, coaching pedagogy, learner-centred, reflection, dialogue

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.

The Skinny 2-7%

Across physical education, nursing, classroom teaching, and coaching research, questioning makes up only 2 to 7 percent of what practitioners actually do, and most of what little questioning happens is low-order and closed, requiring only recall or a yes/no answer. In one physical education study, just 6.7 percent of questions were open enough to build tactical understanding. The pattern holds across contexts: coaches question rarely, and when they do, it rarely asks players to think.

Fat Questions

Fat questions are open and low-consensus: they require evaluation and synthesis rather than a single correct recall, and different players will answer them differently based on their own experience and position on the field. A skinny question like "did you pass at the right time?" can be rewritten as a fat one: "how are you deciding when it is the best moment to pass?" The paper recommends preparing question starters and stems in advance so this kind of questioning does not have to be improvised under pressure.

Six Ps for Thinking

The Six Ps offer a structured sequence for turning a fat question into an actual learning moment: set a purpose question before play begins, let players play long enough to wrestle with it, then pause, use prepared question stems, probe with follow-up prompts, and land on a plan the players test in the next round. The sequence matters because a good question asked at the wrong moment, with no plan to test it, does not change anything on its own.

TWO ACTIONS FOR TOMORROW

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

To audit your questions in advance

Before your next session, audit your planned questions by checking the first word: if a question starts with "Did," "Was," "Is," or "Can," rewrite it to open with "What" or "How" instead. This quick five-minute edit forces open, thinking questions into the plan before you even step onto the field.

To design a debate of ideas structure for your next full planning cycle

For your next planning cycle, design a debate of ideas structure: pick a small-sided game and write four set questions players use to run their own three-minute tactical timeout, without the coach directing it. This shifts the coach role from evaluator to facilitator, and hands players ownership of working out what needs to change and how.

RESEARCH REFERENCE

Primary Source: Harvey, S., & Light, R. L. (2015). Questioning for learning in game-based approaches to teaching and coaching. Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education, 6(2), 175-190.

Counterpoint Sources:

Renshaw, I., Chow, J. Y., Davids, K., & Hammond, J. (2010). A constraints-led perspective to understanding skill acquisition and game play: A basis for integration of motor learning theory and physical education praxis? Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy, 15, 117-137.

LINKS AND RESOURCES

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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

"Was that the right decision?" The athlete says yes or no. You say "correct" or "not quite." And then everyone moves on to the next step of practice. You asked a question. You got an answer. The job is done… based on what you know about asking questions in training.

Yet here's the thing: that exchange had almost nothing to do with learning. Because, in this case, the player didn't think. They guessed based on how you constructed the question…or they read your face, which already gave the answer away. And the moment you said, "correct," the conversation was over before it even started.

This episode's research is about the difference between questions that open up thinking and questions that shut it down. And the numbers are pretty uncomfortable. Most of what coaches call questioning is not really questioning at all. Hear this, and this could shift your perspective for good.

Intro and Show ID

The Paper

The paper is called, "Questioning for Learning in Game-Based Approaches to Teaching and Coaching," published in the Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport and Physical Education in 2015. The lead author is Stephen Harvey, Associate Professor in the Department of Coaching Teaching Studies at West Virginia University. His co-author is Richard Light, Professor and Head of School at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand.

This is not a study with participants and data tables. It is a conceptual and practice-focused paper: Harvey and Light are bringing together a decade of research on game-based coaching, pulling out what the evidence says about questioning, and giving coaches a practical framework for doing it better. What prompted it was a clear pattern in the literature: game-based approaches were gaining traction, but coaches kept struggling with implementation. Questioning came up again and again as the sticking point. This paper exists to address that gap directly.

Big Idea #1

The big idea could be called "The Skinny 2-7%".

Research across multiple contexts, including physical education, nursing education, classroom teaching, and sport coaching, consistently shows the same thing: most questions asked by practitioners are low-order, closed questions. They require exact recall or a yes/no answer. They don't require any thinking. And in coaching specifically, the picture is even more striking: questioning accounts for somewhere between 2 and 7 percent of all observed coaching behaviours. Most of what coaches do is instruct, demonstrate, and give feedback. Questioning barely features in coaching observation analysis.

And when coaches do ask questions, the research shows they're predominantly what the paper calls convergent and technical: closed questions with one right answer, focused on technique

rather than decision-making. In a physical education study in Singapore, only 6.7% were open-ended or capable of developing tactical awareness or understanding.

So here is the question for you: in your last training session, what percentage of your time was spent on genuine questioning? And of those questions, how many required your players to deeply think, evaluate, or discuss something with one another?

If 93% of coaching questions only require a yes or a no, we are NOT coaching athletes who think. Instead, we're coaching parrots.

Ideas #2 and #3

So, big idea number one begets big idea number two. Call this one "Fat Questions." If most questions are skinny, what does a fat question actually look like?

Researcher Spencer Kagan, cited in this paper, talks about questions being skinny or fat, and high-consensus or low-consensus. Skinny questions get you a one-word answer. Fat questions require evaluation, synthesis, and thought, and require more words to answer the question. High-consensus questions will get roughly the same answer from everyone. Low-consensus questions open up genuine differences of perspective because players are coming from different positions on the field, diverse levels of experience, and various reads of the same moment.

The paper gives a brilliant example using a simple 3-versus-1 possession activity: instead of asking, 'did you pass at the right time?' you could ask, 'How are you deciding when it is the best moment to pass and use the overload?' That is a FAT question. It is open. It has no single right answer. And players will have genuinely different responses to it based on where they were standing and what they were seeing.

Here is what makes this immediately useful: fat questions can be prepared in advance. You can write question stems into your session plan before training. Sentence beginnings like, 'How are you deciding...' or, 'What might happen if...' or, 'What's the most important thing...' These starters cue higher-order thinking without requiring you to improvise in the moment. The paper calls these question starters, and the suggestion is to build a small bank of them for each training activity.

The third Big Idea for today, call this one "Six Ps for Thinking." So, now you've written some fat questions. Where do you actually put them?

The paper offers a sequence for this, adapted from Kidman, Light, and Piggott, and it happens to spell out a pretty P alliteration: purpose, play, pause, prepared, probing, plan. Six steps that take a question from something you say into something that produces a learning moment.

It starts with purpose. Before the game even begins, you set a purpose question: something like "how can we defend the space so the opponent doesn't score?" This isn't a question you expect an answer to yet. It's simply a lens. It tells players what to pay attention to once play starts.

Then you let them play. Long enough to get a feel for the activity and start wrestling with the problem you have set up. The paper is clear that this is not a quick in-and-out; you are waiting for evidence that players have adapted to the constraints and are genuinely grappling with the challenge.

Then you pause. Not randomly: at the moment the group has enough experience to have something worth discussing. This is where your prepared question starters come in: the fat questions you built in advance, ready to deploy rather than invented on the spot under pressure.

That is where probing happens: you are not handing out answers, you are using follow-up prompts like, "tell me more about that" to keep the discussion moving and to pull more voices in.

And it all lands on a plan: the group has to land somewhere. Not a lecture from you, but an action they agree on together and go out to test in the next round of play.

Here is what I like about this sequence: it gives the purpose question and the pause, a job to do. A fat question asked at the wrong moment, with no plan to test it, is still just a nice question sitting on its own. The six Ps are what turn it into something that changes the events for the next sequence of play.

The Counterpoint

So, that's one take, but not the only one.

Harvey and Light are advocates for game-based approaches and for questioning as the engine of learning within them. But there is a parallel line of research, cited in this very paper, that offers a different lens. Renshaw and colleagues, in a 2010 paper on constraints-led theory, argue that learning emerges primarily through the design of the task and the environment, and not through language and dialogue. In a constraints-led perspective, you shape learning by changing the rules, the space, or the equipment. The environment asks the question; the player simply answers it with their body.

This matters practically because not every coaching context is conversation-friendly. In high-intensity training environments, or with very young players, or in cultures where verbal dialogue between players feels uncomfortable, a heavy reliance on questioning episodes may not land. The paper does acknowledge this briefly.

The Anecdote

A group of coaches I was working with were introduced to skinny and fat questions and then asked to lead a training session while using questions as a practice design strategy. One coach in particular was a little skeptical at the idea of asking questions, but gamely decided to give it a go.

He did want some ideas to follow in case his mind went blank, or if he got stuck only seeing the solution he was trying to get the athletes to work out themselves. I suggested writing down some question stems so that he wouldn't have to think as quickly on his feet and he and his co-coach wrote down four questions similar to others mentioned earlier in this episode. He went with several stems including these, "What changes for you when..." and "How did you see..."

When the coach tried it in the session, he was surprised! Once he asked the question, the conversation that followed was not what he expected: players gave answers the coach had not anticipated, and the coach had to genuinely listen and respond rather than evaluate. The question started something the athletes could control to support their own learning, which turned out to be the whole point.

On debrief, the coach mentioned his relief at having the question stems in his pocket since he went a bit blank the first time he called the players in to talk. The stems saved him and led to some deeper learning conversations and movement solutions that he hadn't seen from athletes before.

Two Actions

Action one is to audit your questions in advance. Before your next training session, take five minutes and do this.

Do a word-swap on your own session plan. Go through every question you have written down and check the first word. If it starts with "Did," "Was," "Is," or "Can," that's a strong signal you have written a skinny, closed question. Rewrite each one so it starts with "What" or "How": "Did you pass at the right time?" becomes "How did you decide when to pass?" "Was that the best space?" becomes "What made that space better than the others?" This is a five-minute editing pass, not a redesign of your whole plan, and it forces the open structure before you even step onto the field.

You don't need to rewrite every question and the goal is not to never ask a skinny question. The goal is to notice what you are doing and make a deliberate choice about it.

Action two is to design a debate of ideas structure for your next full planning cycle. Pick a small-sided game or modified activity for one session, and write four questions your players will use to run their own tactical timeout, without you. The questions follow a pattern: What did the other team do well? What did your team do well against that? What needs to change? How will you make that change happen?

Give these questions to the players before the game starts. Let them know that after the first round of play, they will have a three-minute tactical timeout to work through these questions as a group. Your job during that timeout is to circulate, listen, and only ask probing questions if the conversation stalls. 'Tell me more about that.' 'What did others notice?' You are not the evaluator here; instead, you're the facilitator of the discussion.

After the session, ask one player what they learned from the timeout. Not what you told them. What they figured out. The answer will tell you whether the structure worked. Adjust it for next time. This is a skill you are building over multiple sessions, not a switch you flip only once.

Close

So, let's bring it back together.

Harvey and Light's paper gives us an uncomfortable but important number: somewhere between 2 and 7 percent of what coaches do involves questioning. And of that small slice, the majority are questions that close thinking down rather than open it up. Recognize the trap of asking a skinny question, getting an answer, saying it is correct or incorrect, and then moving on. That's where coach stays in control and the player stays passive.

The alternative is not complicated but it DOES require change from the coach. It starts with a simple distinction: fat questions versus skinny questions. Fat questions are open, low-consensus, and divergent. They create genuine discussion because there is no single right answer and different players, from different positions with different experiences, will bring different perspectives to the table. That disagreement is not a problem; it IS the learning.

Here is the sharp nugget from this paper that I want you to carry: a skinny question tells your players what you already think the answer is. A fat question tells your players that you trust them to find it.