SHOW NOTES

Tom Hartley

Season 3 Finale Interview: On coach development and practice session design strategies

Episode 8 | Season 3 | *Coaching Research to Results Podcast*

LONG-FORM GUEST EPISODE

This is the longer form edition of Coaching Research to Results, where I bring in a guest to reflect on the researched topics we've been exploring throughout the season.

Today I'm chatting with Tom Hartley who I met when he was working with UK Coaching and have continued to work with through many other stops in his journey. Today I found out more about his journey and all about the connections he makes with and between the sports, contexts, and people with whom he works.

Tom's level of connection, learning, and enjoyment of sport as a coach and coach developer is second to none. I hope you enjoy this interview!

LINKS AND RESOURCES

- Full episode library: thecoachdeveloper.com
- Show notes: thecoachdeveloper.com/coaching-research-to-results-podcast-notes
- Subscribe and leave a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your preferred platform

Share this episode with one coach this week, since that's how research actually travels.

PEOPLE

- Tom Hartley - guest; football/coach development background (Arsenal, Oxford United, Swindon Town, FA), now works across motorsport, gymnastics, rowing. Host of The Game Plan Coaching Podcast.
- Pete Sturgess - coach known for foundation-phase work with the FA; ran the constraint-based session Tom describes (backwards-passing game).
- Craig Morris - coach/researcher; "prepared, not planned" and "skilled intentionality" concept.
- Keith Sharpe – Head of Coaching and Leadership Development for Great Britian Cycling Team; source of the "normalness" idea.
- Rob Gray - podcast guest (his own show); "make the mistakes loud" quote.
- Austin Kleon - author of Steal Like an Artist (and a second unnamed book Tom holds up, Show Your Work!).

RESOURCES

- The Game Plan Coaching Podcast (Tom's show)
- Four Cs framework: Developing the 4Cs: Competence, Connection, Character, Confidence

SHOW NOTES

- Four Ds (appreciative inquiry): Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver
- Constraints-Led Approach (CLA) / ecological dynamics via Rob Gray's website

FULL TRANSCRIPT

(edited for clarity and our collective sanity, timestamps are approximate)

S3 Ep 8 Coach R2R

Beth: [00:00:00] Welcome to Coaching Research to Results. I'm Beth Barz, The Coach Developer.

Today's guest has spent over 20 years working across the athlete and coach development pathway, and he's done it in places most of us never think to look. Tom Hartley started in football as Arsenal's Academy Head Coach, and later their Women's Development Manager, with other roles at Oxford United, Swindon Town, and the FA.

From there, he moved into coach development more broadly in motorsport, gymnastics, and rowing. He also hosts his own show, The Game Plan Coaching Podcast, where guests add their own ideas to a shared coaching playbook. What I admire most about Tom is his curiosity, his willingness to say he doesn't have all the answers, and to keep learning anyway, whether that's in a sport he's coached for decades or one he's just stepping into.

Today, we're talking about practice session design, and I can't wait to hear how that shows up across the [00:01:00] very different worlds he's worked in

Hi, Tom. Please introduce yourself in the way that you find most authentic.

Tom: Okay, I'll start off. I'm a dad first and foremost. I'm a newly found dog owner. I push back to anybody who says I'm a doggy daddy. I'm not buying into that. I've been coaching and supporting coaches for many years now. So, my home sport is football. I still coach the Oxford United under 12s girls in their academy, and started coaching, well, I did my work experience at a football club when I was 15 years old, and it was always about finding a career as a coach.

I left full-time role in football at a professional club in 2020 and started working for an organization called UK Coaching, which is a cross-sport, cross-level, [00:02:00] body in England, from playground to podium, I would describe it to people. We're supporting coaches across all stages of the pathway, and for me, coming out of football and going into sport was the most eye-opening experience ever.

I felt like I was peak idiot. I just realized that there were plenty of things I didn't know, and there was a brilliant opportunity to just learn from being with coaches in lots of different environments, and that's where my passion of what I would describe as really authentic, pure coach development started to, to, to kind of emerge.

It's where we met, Beth, online on one of the conversations. And then, I've kind of moved into a few different roles over the last couple of years where I found myself taking on a role in motorsport at the national governing body for motorsport in the UK, supporting the growth and the pathway for competitors, from drivers coming through, but then trying to establish a coaching pathway too.

Coaching doesn't exist in motorsport in the way that we might know [00:03:00] it in traditional sports, which was just a fascinating journey, and I continue to do some work with a racing team at the moment. I've worked in British gymnastics, as well as, British rowing, so I'm continuing to be a tourist and a, a visitor to all these different environments, and I love it.

It's just incredible to be able to be exposed to all these different worlds. And I've also coached in prison as well. It's kind of one of those environments I've worked in which has been some of the richest experiences on my coaching journey because, well, you can at firsthand see the difference effective coaching can make to people.

Beth: Absolutely. What a wonderful introduction. I just learned a lot, and I've known you for several years, Tom, so this is fantastic. I didn't know where you got your start and, yes, the, the prison connection is certainly a new one as well! So, you just have such a wide breadth of experience and, and something that we'll talk about hopefully, [00:04:00] a little later on is something I think I really admire about you, is your level of curiosity and interest in learning and, and just this real deep-seated need to figure out what the next thing is and what you could try and, and how you can help other people be better as a result of it.

So, that's probably where I'll start with my first question. You've coached and developed coaches across all the sports that you just mentioned, football, gymnastics, motorsport, other, a whole bunch of sports that really don't look alike on the surface. So, when you walk into a session where they're designing a practice plan and they're having a conversation about it, what stays the same and what has to change completely within those sports?

Tom: Hmm. Well, I think some sports, or, or from my experiences I can see that some sports have more tolerance [00:05:00] for variability within practice. And I've been really weighing up recently how the constraints-led approach or an ecological dynamics approach plays out in sports which are performance-based- Hmm such as gymnastics. I see it in motorsport, where coaches almost offer a prescription to the driver of what to do and what to follow, because there's hardly any room for error. And I think more than the normal I'm starting to see in more team-based sports is the opportunity to move between the environment and the task and the athlete, and coaches to be slightly more adaptable in the moment.

And, I've been really curious in all the sports that I've worked in that how do coaches design practice that then becomes transferable into competition? And I've really noticed that [00:06:00] there are some sports I've spent time in which are quite traditional with their coaching approaches, which don't always prepare the athlete fully for when they step into the arena.

Potentially because the environment doesn't necessarily look, feel, or represent the arena, and the behaviors of the coach change drastically from a very supportive person in a practice

environment to somebody who visibly looks just really stressed out in a competition environment, and how that ripples onto the athlete.

What stays the same though is the human being, is the person. You reminded me, Beth, the other week when we caught up about the four Cs. Ah. Competence, connection, character, confidence. And I suppose for me, that underpins and is the foundation to any good work of a coach, because we're developing the person before the athlete, and I think that that remains the same [00:07:00] across all sports and environments.

And look, coaches are experts in their own world. They've been influenced by all the culture of the system that they're working in. So as a coach developer, when I've found myself going into sports which are not my own, I see things that clash with my own values and beliefs. But, I've had to be really mindful about holding off and holding back with what do I think, because I'm not that coach and I'm not from that sport.

And I genuinely think every coach I've ever met is, is doing everything they can for the benefit of the athlete or the participant that they're supporting. It just emerges in slightly different ways because of the norms and the cultures of those sports.

Beth: Wow. Yeah. There's just so many layers that you've just mentioned to be able to navigate and to dig into.

You mentioned the constraints-led approach, so we're going to maybe head there first because that's... A few of the episodes in, in season three are looking at constraints and the constraints-led approach in [00:08:00] general. So, the CLA research basically says that the practice environment is doing as much teaching as the coach is actually doing.

So, across your different sports, what's an example of a constraint you changed deliberately that completely shifted what athletes learned without you actually saying something about it? And then maybe could also be, have you seen a coach do something like that? Maybe it wasn't you specifically.

Tom: Hmm. Yeah. I was working with a masterful coach a few weeks ago, a chap called Pete Sturgess - Mm ... who in the UK is just renowned for his approach, and he did a lot of work with the Football Association really developing what he would describe as the foundation phase, players age five upwards coming through the football pathway.

And Pete and I were talking before the session that he delivered, and I... well, I was just his wing man. I felt very much, uh, [00:09:00] in his shadow- It's a fabulous role ... in a team. And, Pete was explaining to me that a challenge he sees in the, in the academy football is that players aren't scanning and taking in as much information as they can as frequently as they could.

And coaches he's working with are really grappling with, “how do I encourage players to scan?” apart from saying, "Scan," and telling them to scan. So, Pete was playing a game where it was kind of three vs. three, four v four, and the team was attacking an end zone. But we- he started the game with the ball in hand, which I often think is a really helpful way for players to learn something that feels new, because it frees them up in a different way to the ball being at their feet.

But the constraint that Pete added to the session was that you can only pass the ball when you are facing backwards. So, the players had to physically turn their body 180 degrees and then throw it back and over their head to their teammate. And to start [00:10:00] with, it looked really clunky, and the error count was incredibly high, and there were a few puzzled looks from the players in the group.

But it worked, and all of a sudden you could just see players checking over both shoulders to see where their mate was before they sent the ball, and then he stayed with the trouble. And as the errors just started to diminish and the players started to join the dots, there was more fluidity. And to use a word that comes from constraints-led, like, it, the skill emerged.

He didn't tell them to look over their shoulder. He didn't tell them to scan. He just, he just applied a constraint that encouraged that behavior to happen. Brilliant. And you got it to happen and watch it in real time. Yeah, absolutely. I was a proper fanboy.

Beth: I love that.

Tom: It, it's interesting because it picks up on, uh, one of the other papers in the season where we're looking at basically the coaches missing a, a manual per se, [00:11:00] where they're told to manipulate constraints and then reflect on what they're doing.

Beth: But they're not actually given a very clear framework to know if it's working or, or even a menu of ideas to select from. So, you've worked with a ton of coaches. Is that a real gap that you're seeing with coaches, that they want to use constraints, but they feel like they need more guidance or a manual or menu to be able to do that?

Tom: I, I do believe that is a gap, and I think coaches need help to understand what's really happening in front of them, what are they noticing within the game or within the activity the athletes are doing, so then they can be more skillful at applying or in introducing a constraint. Somebody explained this to me a few years ago around a coach who's maybe earlier in their journey or who has been exposed less to a constraint-set approach might see the game a bit like when you were [00:12:00] playing FIFA 96 and it's all pixelated, and you don't really get the detail.

But the more expertise you develop, the more you can see the game in full high definition and I really appreciate that analogy, and I think it really applies to this situation because I've worked with coaches who will add a rule or change a task or change an activity, but not quite know what the output is or not quite know what they were hoping to get from that tweak or that change.

It felt like something helpful to do, but they weren't able to maybe measure the impact of it or really check for understanding with the players. So,for me, this notion of a coach moving from an instructor to a designer, problem solver to a problem setter, I mean, that's useful language, but I really think coaches need help to work with that concept, to work with that idea, because it's easily said.

But if you've only... If you've been exposed to more instruction [00:13:00] and more of a “follow what I say approach,” it's really difficult to get into this; to get into it in a meaningful way rather than a superficial way.

Absolutely.

And I think, maybe to continue that conversation, one of the things that, that we've discussed and we know is, is really important for coaches to be able to do is to ask great questions as part of the checking for understanding process and problem setting by asking the question and creating the environment.

Beth: So, one of the research papers that we looked at had done some breaking down of coaching behaviors that found that questioning makes up only 2 to 7% of coaching behaviors, which we know is pretty low, but maybe is a surprise for folks that it's THAT low. And most of those questions are termed skinny or closed questions, those yes/no questions, the which, rather than bigger open questions.

So, when you're working with [00:14:00] coaches and, and helping them develop, how do you actually get a coach to ask better questions in the moment and not just understand the theory behind sort of fat and skinny questions?

Tom: I really appreciate, um, the language of fat and skinny questions. I've not heard that before.

Beth: I mean, I would love to claim it, but it's from the paper, so....

Tom: Ah, okay. Again, this resonates. I've seen coaches who almost are asking questions, which is an instruction in disguise, and... In terms of how to help coaches develop their skills at becoming better at asking questions. I think there's a huge exercise here in self-awareness.

There's a huge opportunity to help coaches understand what they're doing by holding a mirror up to their practice. Now, I'm a real advocate of using technology and audio equipment and video recording to be able to play back to the coach what's happened in their coaching [00:15:00] practice. But not, "Let's just watch everything," or, "Let's pick up on the, quote unquote, 'bad stuff,'" which obviously people are drawn to, but where could I get better? But to look at it really objectively and really thoughtfully and with a lens of asking questions as an example.

I was doing a piece of work recently with some engineers from a racing team, and I'd noticed from watching their practice that there was a considerable amount of instruction or skinny

questions. So introduced almost this very kind of open framework of what, how, why, who, and when type questions, which are pretty normal and, and isn't too much of a stretch for them to imagine how that might play out in practice. But then used an appreciative inquiry framework of Discover, so almost analyzing past performance Dream, so looking at where we'd like to get to, the future state.

Design, how do we plan the steps to get there? And then Deliver, what should we [00:16:00] do to go and execute? Because there's that balance within the work that lots of coaches do between development and performance. So I felt this almost collaboration of those kind of styles of questions, who, how, why, and what, alongside appreciative inquiry, created a really nice scaffold for them to think about, “how do I design questions?”

And not just work with questions in the moment, but to be able to put some thought into the questions I'd like to plan to ask during the session. Not that I might use all of them, and not that I might be artificial with them, but to almost just have some in my back pocket that I've thought about rather than having to act in the moment all the time.

Beth: I like that, because I think it's especially important with folks who are starting to ask questions. It's very difficult when you've got a whole bunch of sets of eyeballs looking at you in the moment to come up with the question that is the right one, or at least is close to the right one. Uh, so thinking about what those look like and sound like ahead of [00:17:00] time, or, or even have some question stems, which is something that they suggest in the episode could be really helpful, so that, you know, you can fill in the blank at the end, depending on the activity, but you've got a starter kind of question to run from.

What were the four Ds that you just had there?

Tom: The four Ds, discover, dream, design, and deliver. Yeah. Where you've taken my mind, actually, and I've been guilty of this many times, is asking players a question with a predetermined answer already in my head, where we're just playing a game of “guess what Tom's thinking,” which, well, I've done it! I've seen other coaches do it, all with the best intent. And I found myself spending time with coaches kind of talking about the virtue of, “when was the last time you asked a question to an athlete with genuine curiosity?” Not because you had something in mind, because you genuinely wanted to know what they were thinking or seeing or experiencing in that moment, and [00:18:00] how freeing yourself up to being open to what they share is so valuable.

And I suppose if we can use questions in a way to build rapport and relationships and an understanding of the person, as well as their understanding of the game or what we're trying to help them get better at, there's questions that can be used thoughtfully for lots of different things.

Beth: I have a build-on question, then, from what you've just mentioned, because you're mentioning that you're using this in a pretty high-performance environment, and you've had an opportunity to work with coaches from the grassroots area all the way to high performance and even prepping some of those coaches for roles in Olympic level or world level competition.

So, along the lines of questioning, does the way that you'd coach someone to question change depending on the level that they're coaching at?

Tom: Without sounding [00:19:00] completely annoying, it depends on what they're trying to achieve, and it depends on who they're working with, and it depends what resources they have, if time, or pressure, or- Yeah, sure the the expectations of the person they're working with. And I've worked in a few sports now where parents are such a huge stakeholder, and they're paying money for this coach to do their work, and if we spend more time opening stuff up rather than closing it down and having certainty, then some parents, I'm sure, would think, "Well, what value am I getting for this if the coach isn't really helping my child get the answers, get the certainty?"

And as we both know, and as I'm sure many of the listeners to your podcast know, that we work in so much uncertainty as coaches; nd we've got to be able to navigate that, and-

Beth: Mm-hmm

Tom: ... being able to develop a dialogue through questions with our athletes can help us really explore things. And the way we might go [00:20:00] about asking questions, I would imagine, is completely consistent across any level of sport, but the purpose of why we're asking those questions; to what is the end goal, I suppose, maybe then changes it slightly.

Beth: We'll switch gears. We'll talk about intentional focus here a little bit. It was a paper from Wolf and Leuthwaite, on optimal theory, optimal being optimizing performance through intrinsic motivation and attention for learning, because it's a mouthful. So optimal being the focus, and they basically named this theory after the OPTIMAL acronym.

It says that external focus cues consistently beat internal body-focused ones, things like “push the ground away” instead of “bend your knees.” Do you have a favorite example of an external focus cue from one of your sports or any other sport that's completely changed how an athlete moved?

Tom: I do actually. By the way push the [00:21:00] ground away...I heard it this morning in CrossFit class that I was in.

The instructor- Oh, there you go ... the instructor was using it in the class, so, it's funny that you say that. Yeah, there's two that really come to mind. I don't know if I thought these up or stole them off another coach, so credit to who, if someone's listening who said this before me, then fair enough.

I was really grappling with how do I get younger footballers to be in a position to receive the ball effectively. Mm-hmm. And I found myself fed up with my own voice saying, "Look for the space. Get into a space." 'Cause that doesn't mean anything really when you say them. So, the language that I found myself starting to use was, "Let your feet see the ball."

And with some of the children, and, and this was particularly coming to life in a professional football club pre-academy, I bought some of those little bug eyes that you can kind of use with kids' arts and craft. [00:22:00] And at the start of training, we put little bug eyes on the kids' feet. It brought the external focus to life beautifully. Well, I thought it was cool.

Beth: That's amazing. I can just picture it!

Tom: Now, that, that might not work with your firsts team. Or it might, maybe it will.

Beth: I mean, it also might, Tom, let's be honest.

Tom: But yeah, let your feet see the ball, and the picture painted a thousand words. The other one that I remember working with consistently was again, it goes back to youth football or youth soccer, where I'm sure coaches can visualize this, you see little people who are following a football, and the idea of moving away from the ball just seems completely alien because I'm egocentric and it's all about me, so why would I move away from it? So, the language I used to use was around, balancing the pitch, and I told a story to the players [00:23:00] that imagine that our football pitch is balanced on the peak of a mountain, and if we all move over to the same spot on the field, what will happen to our pitch?

It'll fall off, it'll tip, we'll lose balance. So if you notice that our football pitch might fall off the top of the mountain- Where could you go to balance it?

Beth: Love that. How did you come up with that?

Tom: Do you know what? You asking that question has dusted off some cobwebs in my brain. I think it was one of those things that just came to me in the moment. That's definitely my one that I used. The feet see the ball I think I stole from somewhere else.

Beth: Hey, some of our best ideas are things we've been able to see while working with coaches, right?

Tom: I mean, that's, that's such a bonus to be able to be privy to seeing people up close and personal when we are invited into their space to be able to work with them. So yeah, beg, borrow and steal, right?

Beth: Yeah, absolutely. Let's switch over to some feedback ideas. We talk a lot about feedback, giving feedback as coach developers, but also how do we get [00:24:00] coaches to do a better job with feedback. So, I wonder, how do you help a coach hear their own feedback patterns? Is it something that they can do or self-diagnose on their own, or does it take somebody else watching and naming it?

Tom: I would love to reframe this slightly.

Beth: Sure ...

Tom: ...because I think there's a real difference here between giving feedback and generating feedback. And- I like this ... when I'm working with coaches, I often like to find myself in a position where we generate feedback, so we can almost look at their performance or their work as the third person, the centerpiece of the conversation.

I've noticed myself being out and about in gymnastics clubs recently, where I'm not from the sport, watching coaching sessions, and the coach at the end saying to me, "Well, can you tell me what was good and bad then about my coaching session?" Uh, and I've said, "Well, I'm in absolutely [00:25:00] no position to tell you what's good or bad about your coaching session, but why don't we look at this together?"

So, where we filmed a coach, we've looked at the footage, and we've been curious about it. We've been thoughtful about it. It might be the whole session, it might be a slice of it. It might be a particular skill or coaching behavior that we're looking to draw out. But, that for me is generating feedback rather than giving feedback.

I think the other thing I'd like to kind of add to that is, and this, I suppose this is connected. It really is. I don't want to deviate and wander too far from your question, Beth. The difference between assessment OF learning and assessment FOR learning. So many coaches are recipients of assessment of learning because of the nature of coaching qualifications.

And I completely understand that. But so many coaches' norms are meeting a predetermined criteria which is imposed on them. [00:26:00] Whereas for coaches who are more experienced, developing expertise to be able to build their own sense of what good looks like in their practice, their own gold standard, if you like, and then use that as a filter to be able to watch their practice through, just feels so much more ethical and helpful and applied than, assessment of learning or giving feedback.

And again, like to link to that point before around watching a coaching session back alongside the coach, if they've got their own lens of, "This is what good looks like for me," then it just transforms the conversation. It becomes a... Well, I would use the word it's more transformational than it is evaluative. It also helps that longer term engagement in their own coach development or their own development as a coach because, um, they're involved in the process. They're an [00:27:00] active ingredient in the development process. Right.

Beth: In a sense, you get to work alongside them to generate that feedback, and that is a transferable skill that they can take on themselves eventually in whatever way feels most authentic or fits in a certain amount of time for them to be able to do even more work on thinking about their feedback patterns.

Tom: Yes. Absolutely. It potentially, over a period of time, changes the role of the coach developer. I hear language in coaching so often about the difference of coaching for redundancy or coaching for dependency. I have noticed coaches in my journey who perhaps coach for dependency.

They hold the knowledge, they hold the ideas, and they might lend them to the person that they're working with. But if we hold onto the notion of coaching for redundancy, it doesn't mean as a coach developer, you make yourself redundant to the coach. [00:28:00] It perhaps frees you up to work with a coach in a different way.

And if the coach is better at being able to think about their own practice thoughtfully, then the coach developer can be used as a resource differently to how they were before.

Beth: Absolutely. And I think we're still trying to figure out what coach developers do and are doing along the way, right? I mean, we're still in such an infancy for the role that it's going change over time to be able to serve the coaches that we're working with.

Can we talk about your curiosity for a little while?

Tom: My curiosity?

Beth: Yes. One of the things that I think makes you a great coach developer.

Tom: Yeah, sure.

Beth Okay. I love it. You've moved through a ton of different sports with completely different cultures and language and jargon and all of those things.

What's it like to keep showing up as a beginner in some sense? Having to ask, you know, super basic questions when you're actually a senior coach [00:29:00] developer in other areas.

Tom: I love feeling like a beginner because it gives just this brilliant opportunity to show up as a rookie. You can ask rookie questions.

You can ask questions that people who have been in that environment forever, they're so deep in their river of thinking, wouldn't think to ask for themselves, and sometimes it's the simplest prompt or cue that just helps the penny drop or turns something on in their brain that they haven't considered in that way before.

And I must admit, I have been into some environments in the last few years where people have been allergic to my ideas, or people have pushed back on the rookie question because they're very- Mmm...certain about the way they like to do stuff around here. And I felt quite put out, I think, when I first started to notice that.

But I think as time has gone on, I've, I've just realized that [00:30:00] this will sound really fluffy, right? I said it to somebody on a, on a community of practice not so long ago. Every question leaves a mark. And I coin that phrase, because by asking a question in, in an environment, all of a sudden you're being disruptive even if you don't mean to be.

Sometimes I felt that asking questions did more harm than good. So I just found myself wanting to step back, to get out of the way, to observe and be thoughtful. But I, I suppose there's a balance here between "I feel a rookie because I'm in a new environment" and "I don't know the language." I'm not in the game. But I feel really like I have some real expertise because I'm able to develop my craft as a coach developer in these different environments, which is shaping me as we go. All of these environments I've spent time in have just helped me broaden and deepen my knowledge of supporting people, supporting coaches, but I've almost [00:31:00] passed through these different sports and cultures to, to get to that point. Some which really resonate with me, and some feel very different to my own experiences.

Beth: Right. Yeah, embracing that beginner feeling, rookie, or like you said at the beginning, peak idiot, is such a, such a gift because most of us don't feel comfortable being in that place, especially when we've developed a large amount of expertise in a particular area that feels good and feels comfortable. So, I love that you can say that.

Tom: And just to add to that, I'm really comfortable in saying to coaches, "I don't know," or- "You tell me." I read something somewhere saying that none of us ever really live long to become an expert at anything, but I'm keen that I can spend time deliberately developing my expertise.

And I think sometimes being able to say to a coach, "I'm not sure. What do you think?" Because I'm not from this sport, A, it positions there's now two experts in the room. [00:32:00] And we can both look at the sport through different lenses. When I've told people in the current role I'm in in gymnastics, that I'm not from the sport, I would say 80% of people's eyes gloss over, and 20% of people's eyes light up.

Because what I don't have in the sport is any type of technical credibility. In so many sports, those professional skills, that professional coaching knowledge, is currency. I've got to find different ways to build my capital within the sport. For me, and this is playing to my strengths and my beliefs I will build my currency through relationships and through helping coaches develop over time.

I read something recently, and I've been thinking about this notion of learning happening only in the room. Well, of course, learning doesn't just happen in the room. It happens everywhere if you're open to it, if you're reflecting, if you're aware of what's going on around you, and- I was talking to a [00:33:00] coach I'm supporting recently, and I we were trying to say, "Well, what are we going to work on for the next six months?"

WE, by the way. Right. Not me. We, what are WE going to work on? And, and she said, "I don't know. I really don't know. But the fact that we're meeting every two or three weeks is just helping me remember to think about what I'm doing." So, it's the process rather than the outcome that's really come to the fore...and the accountability, and report for her ... yeah, knowing that you're going to have a moment to talk about something with someone keeps it forefront of your mind, rather than kind of shoved somewhere in the back to deal with later when you know that you don't have enough time to deal with it.

Beth: Yeah. Yes! Well said. I think one of the cool things about you being a coach developer is you're also a coach. You haven't stopped coaching through this whole process. I also know you like to experiment when you're coaching, because you like to try to apply the things you're suggesting to other coaches to try. So, part of experimentation is failure, and [00:34:00] I wonder when you've tried something in a session that's completely failed and just hasn't gone to plan, what's your process? What do you do after that? And then also, how do you stay curious about that failure when it happens?

Tom: Yeah. I guess on a small scale, I'm failing all the time. Like, I'm forever trying small things in my coaching sessions, and none of it ever works perfectly. And it's not like some big catastrophic failure, but it's a series of things that doesn't quite work.

Right. It's kind of, uh, being able to adapt. I was talking to a brilliant coach recently called Craig Morris- who has done some wonderful research and talks, talks about being prepared, not planned. So on one end of this continuum, you have this rigid plan you stick to as a coach. On the other end of the continuum, it's just chaos, which might even be disrespectful to the sport.

And he has this thing in the middle which he would describe as skilled intentionality, [00:35:00] working with what's in front of you and adapting. And I feel, I'd like to think that that's the way I approach my coaching practice, that I'm forever noticing and adapting based on what's going on in front of me. I did try something about 18 months ago with some players.

It was our last game of the season, and we were playing. The team that we have, it's not in a league, it's, it's almost a development squad, which is a collection of players from different teams who come together. And we were playing a team who, on paper, they're better than us.

I would imagine a younger version of myself as a coach would've wanted to control loads of stuff. But, now I was thinking about how can we use this as an opportunity for the players to really own the moment. So the players were given full agency and autonomy to manage the game, and I was there fully as a facilitator of the environment.

They worked out the substitutions every quarter, who was being replaced, the shape of the team. And I [00:36:00] would say in a 60-minute game, we had some brilliant moments where they worked really collaboratively. They made decisions that really affected the game in a positive way. And we had moments when they were looking at me saying, "What do we do? I need some help. I'm completely lost." Which you could term perhaps as a failure, because we the idea was this was about it being child-centered, athlete-centered. They had loads of voice and autonomy and agency in the practice, and I would say that they probably weren't ready for it at some points in the game.

They weren't ready to make decisions in the moment. So, it left me reflecting on, well, next season when I work with a group, how can I better equip them for moments like that? I suppose it wasn't, it wasn't a good thing or a bad thing. It was just something that highlighted what we could do differently next time.

Beth: Love that. It, it wasn't an abject failure. It was just thinking about the next step. So it wasn't about being perfect. It was about just thinking about how [00:37:00] can I improve upon this the next time? I love what you said there too. I'm failing all the time, right? And it's, it's kind of what we ask athletes to do, is to fail a bunch so that they get better at it.

So, you know, it's a great expectation for coaches to have, and yet coaches are portrayed as having all the answers and doing all the right things all the time. So accepting that and almost to an extent embracing that can go a long way.

Tom: Can I share one more story?

Beth: Please.

Tom: In my work in gymnastics, I've been supporting the development of coaches from rhythmic gymnastics, which is a discipline that I found myself falling in love with.

What an incredibly skillful and elegant and beautiful part of the sport. I was asked to run a workshop for a group of about 12 coaches in the pathway who hadn't had much support outside of coach education. And with the best will in the world, as a coach developer, coach educator, [00:38:00] I pulled together a workshop about psychological safety. We sat in a classroom at the National Sports Centre, and I've never seen so many bored faces in all my life- Oh of people who just wanted to kind of go, literally just looking at their watch, "How many more minutes do we have of this before we can just go and do what we want to do?" And yeah, I was really comfortable in, well, admitting's the wrong word, but talking to others, kind of in that wider team who support the athletes and the coaches, about how rubbish it felt, like it was clunky and awkward and... The content was fine, but my reflection was they didn't need content. They didn't want content. They probably just wanted somebody to talk to and connect with, because we'd never met before, and who's this guy coming in who doesn't know who or what rhythmic gymnastics is trying to tell us about psychological safety?

So the big learning I took from that [00:39:00] was it wouldn't be appropriate all the time every time, but biography is so important. The relationships and the connection you have with people is almost a precursor to any learning that can take place. In that moment, I found it the hard way, because I felt really nervous. I felt really nervous about doing something with a group of people I didn't know, who were a little bit skeptical about help. So I resorted to some control. I did some stuff where I could control the slides and talk about something I felt like I was confident in talking about. But at that moment in time, it probably wasn't the most effective way to work with them.

Beth: Right. Yeah, it, it is incredible what we do in order to feel control. We revert more to that planned rather than prepared kind of piece and focus more on ourselves rather than the coaches in front of us or the group in front of us. So it, in a sense, it's reassuring to know that someone with the same amount of experience as you, Tom, [00:40:00] still gets caught in that trap every once in a while, because I've certainly been there myself, too.

Tom: It's not an easy place to be especially when you feel like you need to be the one who's providing answers or a chunk of information for folks when maybe they're not in the head space to hear it. And do you know what I'm striving for? I've got a coaching friend in the UK called Keith Sharpe, who I have to thank for making me aware of this, is just bringing a sense of normalness to my work.

We all wear lots of hats. We all step into different roles, and of course, there's part of coaching and part of supporting coaches, which is a performance to a degree. I hope that as time goes on and I feel more comfortable in my craft as a coach developer, I can just bring more normal Tom, that I can just be my real self in more interactions, and then if there's a problem or a challenge or a point of friction, I can just handle it like Tom, not handle it in a way that I'm trying to play [00:41:00] to a certain role.

And of course, there's intricacies to that. But because I found myself... Well, I, like I said earlier, I have expertise, but I'm not an expert, and I think the role of coach developer can be unhelpful sometimes, just the naming of that, because it implies hierarchy, and that makes it challenging sometimes.

I would just like to feel like I can just be cool and calm, and just be myself in more interactions, and I've been actively practicing it and being intentional with it recently, and I just feel happier, and like I've got more energy in my work. So yeah, like bringing more normalness to our work is something that I think just links to all the threads that we've spoken about so far.

Beth: That could be, as one of my coaching colleagues says, the next level of nirvana in terms of what we do as coaches and, and what we do as coach developers, getting to that actual level of where we feel like we can just be in it, and are fully ourselves showing up.

I've one last question for you, and it links back to your podcast.[00:42:00] So you usually ask coaches about adding something to the game plan, a shared playbook from other people's stories and ideas. What's the piece of session design wisdom, or something else if you choose, you'd add to the playbook today?

Tom: Great question. Episode I recorded recently was with Rob Gray-

Beth: Oh, I just listened to that So good.

Tom: He just takes complex stuff and makes it sound so straightforward. And he said, "Make the mistakes loud. Make it really obvious." And almost as the subtext of that, he highlighted that every mistake has got information in it that helps the athlete solve it for themselves. Now, like, that's really, really interesting.

That's gold. And if...I think this comes [00:43:00] back to being really aware, and your question about the constraints-led approach. Like, being aware of the different constraints you might bring into an activity, and the actual impact that they have. Now, if we can help athletes recognize what's actually happening in front of them so they're not relying on us to fix things for

them or point out what the error was and how to fix it, and they can then start to find that information for themselves, and then be able to adapt for themselves in the moment, again, it's not coaching for redundancy in the respect that we're not needed anymore.

It then frees us up as coaches to work in a different way with our athletes.

Beth: Love that. Tom, a wealth of knowledge and quotes from others, as per usual. I love that, uh, you're so able to walk through, "I heard this from this person, and I took this from this person," and it reminds me of something I learned when I was a teenager, that you get to take a little part of a person every time you meet them with you.

[00:44:00] I think you've really done that and demonstrated that in terms of what you shared.

Tom: Thank you, Beth. It's been a pleasure to come on. It- I was privileged that you, I felt privileged that you asked me to be on. And I'm gonna hold two books up, right, that inspire me to be like that. Steal Like an Artist, which is about, yeah, like when, when you, when you're borrowing someone else's ideas, credit them with it, and showing your work, being happy to share the stuff that's gone wrong as well as the stuff that's gone right.

Beth: And who is the author on both of those books?

Tom: Austin Kleon. And they're brilliant. They're kind of very visual books. Oh, yes. Very much so. Yeah, highly recommend. Fantastic. I will definitely have to add them to my, as usual, growing pile on my bedside table for what to read. Oh, fabulous. Thanks so much for taking the time, Tom.

Thank you.