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Equating Arthur Beetson or Polly Farmer with Einstein or Copernicus probably sounds far-fetched. But there’s reason in this madness.

All sports undergo revolutions in technique not dissimilar to the revolutions in technique that shape different sciences.

Revolution is not too strong a word. In a much celebrated, much condemned book on the history of science, published in 1962, Thomas Kuhn described the development of sciences using just this term.

I have no idea whether Kuhn is or was a sports fanatic; I don’t think it matters. His ideas have a great deal to offer an understanding of the way sports work.

Kuhn argued that scientists usually go about their business more or less in line with a particular ‘right way of doing things’, a particular dominant paradigm of technique. They judge their performances, and their performances are judged by others, in terms of this dominant paradigm.

Think of Rugby League before Beetson or Aussie Rules football before Farmer. The ‘right way’ of attacking as a front-row forward was to keep in close to the ruck, run straight and hard and, especially, keep the ball tucked in close to the chest to avoid having it dislodged by either ground or opponent.

The paradigm for all Australian Rules players in the pre-Farmer era was to kick the ball long to position. Handball was to be used only as a last resort.

This was ‘normal’ Rugby League and ‘normal’ Australian Rules. Players, coaches, commentators and spectators alike practised ‘normal’ Rugby League or Australian Rules as a community of Rugby League and a community of Australian Rules, just as Kuhn described the practice of ‘normal’ science among different scientific communities.

But normal science, according to Kuhn, has a habit of breaking down every now and again. This is the crux of his argument.

The normal way of doing things, the dominant paradigm, begins to be openly challenged, perhaps because it’s not doing too well at solving its own puzzles or perhaps because some mavericks working outside the dominant paradigm, on the edge of the community, using an alternative paradigm, start getting some spectacularly good results, or perhaps a combination of the two.

More or less quickly a scientific revolution occurs. An entire community starts doing things in the way of the mavericks.

The shockingly new way becomes the normal way, the alternative paradigm becomes the dominant paradigm. Anyone who stays loyal to the old way is left behind, a fool at best, a heretic at worst. Einstein’s paradigm of physics taking over from Newton’s is a good example, as is Copernicus’ paradigm of astronomy taking over from Aristotelie’s.

Back to football. In the 60s, Beetson starts standing in tackles, at the edge of rucks, often approached at a stroll, actually holding the ball out (sometimes even one-handed!) for other players to run off him rather than clutching it to his chest.

In the same period Farmer (and Cable and others) start using the hand-pass not as a means of getting out of a tight spot, but as an attacking weapon.

In both Rugby League and Australian Rules a revolution occurred; a dominant paradigm of playing technique shifted very dramatically. Not quite overnight, but over only a few seasons, what was wrong became right and vice versa.

Only the ‘old codgers’ stayed loyal to the old ways. During the brief revolutionary period just about everyone was converted (or sacked) - players, coaches, commentators and spectators.

Now, only 20 years later, nearly every Rugby League forward is expected to have unloading skills at least approaching the Beetsonesque, and nearly every Aussie Rules player is expected to have handballing skills at least approaching the Farmeresque. Every coach is expected to teach these skills and every commentator and spectator is expected to appreciate them.

All this, I believe, is evidence of the worth of the ‘paradigm shift’ or ‘technical revolution’ theory of sports. An example, not from football, but from high jumping.

In the space of just a few days’ competition - during the 1968 Olympics - everything about the ‘right way’ to high jump changed. American athlete Dick Fosbury’s ‘flop’ technique completely marginal before the Games - was so successful (Fosbury went from a world ranking of 56th in 1967 to gold medallist in 1968) it became dominant virtually straight away.

The straddle paradigm, which had dominated the scissors, eastern cut-off and western roll paradigms for years, itself became an alternative. The flop paradigm was completely ‘in’. No one even had a chance to defend the old dominant paradigm.

What exactly happened behind the scenes to make world tennis players opt for baseline play with double-handed backhands and massive topspin forehands in preference to the serve-and-volley game?

What exactly happened behind the scenes to make Bob McCarthy start running out wide in attack or to make Terry Wallace start kicking the ball so
quickly from the centre that its exact target didn't really matter?

Surely these events didn't happen without someone behind the scenes doing something?

We can usefully categorise these different revolutions in terms of the involvement of coaches and/or administrations.

Some revolutions in individual sports occur through genuine mavericks, individual playing revolutionaries, if you like, perhaps working quietly with a coach before bursting forth with their revolution at a public event, catching the administration of their sport completely off guard. The Fosbury revolution again provides a good example.

Some revolutions involve maverick play by individuals in team games which is either encouraged or at least tolerated by coaches but not necessarily directed by them. This category includes the McCarthy and Beetson revolutions in Rugby League and the Wallace and Farmer revolutions in Australian Rules. A bit of creative borrowing by players and/or coaches might go on, as in the way the Beetson revolution involved importing, modifying and perfecting a technique from English Rugby League but, where this occurs, there's no need for a separate 'behind the scenes' category. These two categories - softly directed or non-directed maverick play in individual and team sports - involve flexible, aware coaching techniques and either flexible, aware administration or administration which doesn't know what's going on.

Another category focuses on individual coaching mavericks, coaches who stand alone as sporting revolutionaries. This category includes the 'total defence' and 'total football' revolutions in Rugby League. Jack Gibson - it's hard to think of a better term than 'coaching genius' - was of course involved in both these revolutions. His 'total defence' paradigm changed the face of Rugby League in the 70s (when he coached St. George, Newtown and Easts). This paradigm introduced new patterns and new standards of defence.

The 'total defence' revolution was the basis for the 'total football' revolution.

Gibson experimented with 'total football' - total defence combined with total attack (many more players running to create options, much more adventurous passing, use of the chip kick, and so on) in the late 70s and pushed it further in the 80s when he coached Parramatta. Gibson, of course, had a co-revolutionary in the total football revolution throughout the 80s in Warren Ryan (Newtown, Canterbury and Balmain).

This category - coach-directed revolutions - necessarily involves flexible, aware administrations. One unfortunate spin-off of this category has been the emergence of a cult of the 'supercoach', a situation where sports administrators (and spectators) are constantly on the look-out for the new coach who can solve all the performance weaknesses displayed by the players they administer (or follow). More sensible administrations will realise that coach-directed revolutions require careful analysis of the new paradigms involved, not mindless 'super coach' worship.

There's still another category, one in which highly centralised administrations take the initiative and direct the revolution from the top. The tennis revolution is the ideal example. This revolution had its roots in the backrooms of European tennis, particularly in Sweden. Administrators decided, probably in the late 60s, that a European-style paradigm had to be developed to counter the serve-and-volley paradigm perfected in Australia and dominant throughout the world in the 50s and 60s.

Arms of coaches were trained in the new baseline paradigm and set about producing a 'new breed' of player. The success of this revolution barely needs mentioning. A string of tennis clones, from Borg to Lendl to Graf, have perfected the baseline game with double-handed backhands and topspin shots, fuelled by changes to racquet technology. The 'Aussie' paradigm and most of the Aussies have been left behind.

I think this example shows that revolutions can be manufactured by aware, powerful administrations. Whether this is the ideal type of sporting revolution should remain a matter for debate.

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