

THE COACH'S FIELD MANUAL TO CLA

A practical guide to the Constraints-Led Approach

TOMMY BLOM

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Free two-chapter preview

About Tommy Blom

Tommy Blom has coached since 1996, close to thirty years, across the full range, from beginners to professional elites and special forces operators. He was the first non-Israeli to reach Master level in Krav Maga Global, held global instructor and director roles in the field, and helped introduce close-combat training into the Swedish Armed Forces. He competed professionally in mixed martial arts, and is a StrongFirst Master Emeritus.

His work now centres on coaching coaches, and not only in combatives. He mentors and certifies coaches in kettlebells, barbells, bodyweight, movement practice, and Buteyko breathing, among others. Together, Hybrid Krav-Maga and Hybrid Combatives have over a hundred coaches across fourteen countries.

Some years ago Tommy rebuilt his entire approach on the Constraints-Led Approach and Ecological Dynamics. Where most self-defence and combatives training still runs on technique repetition, his systems train the way this book describes: representative games, live opposition, and skill that emerges and holds up under real pressure. This book is the general, sport-agnostic account of the method those systems run on.

You'll find the systems, the courses, and the instructor pathway at hybridkravmaga.com, and Tommy at [@tommyblom](https://twitter.com/tommyblom).

This is a free two-chapter preview of The Coach's Field Manual to CLA. The chapters that follow, Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, are taken straight from the book.

About the book

This is the book I wish I'd had when I started out with CLA, the one that would have saved me years of piecing it together alone. It also explains the hard words of the method in plain language, so once you have them you can move on to the deeper books on the further-reading page and follow them with ease.

Most coaching still runs on instruction, showing the correct technique and correcting the athlete toward it. This book argues that skill doesn't form that way. Skill emerges when an athlete solves representative problems in a well-designed environment, and the coach's real job is designing those problems, not handing over answers. That's the Constraints-Led Approach, grounded in Ecological Dynamics, written for working coaches rather than researchers. The through-line is one shift: stop installing, start designing, move from starting with the solution to starting with the problem.

The book is built as a deliberate arc across four parts, each a stage in taking a coach from why to how.

- **Part 1, The shift**, changes how you see skill. The theory foundation, and the case that the classical model underdelivers. The why.
- **Part 2, The language**, gives you the method's vocabulary and tools: constraints, affordances and information, representative design, attunement. The what.
- **Part 3, The method**, is the operational core, a step-by-step system from reading your sport to building and running the games that grow the skill. The how.
- **Part 4, Into practice**, puts it to work: a reusable session template, running the room, worked examples across sports, common mistakes, and how to migrate from classical coaching one reversible step at a time. The now what.

Every chapter ends on takeaways, a single defined vocabulary runs throughout, and the back matter gives you reusable tools, templates, a constraints menu, a glossary, and an index.

The two chapters that follow are the opening of Part 1, taken straight from the book.

Chapter 2

Skill isn't installed, it emerges.

Watch a new coach run a session, in any sport, and you'll see the same picture. The coach knows the correct *technique*. The session exists to move that *technique* into the athlete. Demonstrate it, break it into parts, have them copy each part, correct the errors, repeat until it sticks. The model underneath is simple and it feels obvious. The coach has the skill, the athlete doesn't, and classical instruction is the pipe between them. But skill doesn't transfer like that.

Skill doesn't travel from a coach into an athlete the way water travels through a pipe. It's something the athlete builds, by and for themselves, by solving problems in an environment you design. You don't install it, it **emerges**.

That word is going to do a lot of work in this book, so let's fix its meaning now. *Emergence* is functional skill arising out of the interaction between a learner and a designed environment, rather than being explicitly programmed or instructed. The *coordination*, the timing, the reading of the situation, none of it gets poured in. It appears, on its own, when a learner keeps meeting a problem worth solving. Your job is to build the conditions that make the right skill likely to appear.

This isn't a soft idea about letting athletes figure things out. It's a claim about how humans actually learn, and it holds for gymnasts, handball players, wrestlers, riders, shooters, fighters, and swimmers alike. It is species-specific, not sport-specific.

What you are actually coaching

Start with the unit you're coaching. The obvious answer is the athlete, and it's incomplete. An athlete alone, with nothing to perceive and nothing to act on, isn't doing anything you'd call skill. Real skill only shows up in

context: a ball arriving, an opponent shifting weight, a gap opening and closing. Without the context, there's nothing to be skilful at.

So the real thing you coach is bigger than the athlete. It's the **learner-environment system**. The learner and the environment together, coupled, each shaping the other. The player reads the environment and acts, the action changes the environment, the changed environment invites the next action. Round and round, with no clean break between perceiving and acting (Chapter 3). That coupled loop is the thing that gets better, the body in its environment rather than the body alone.

This reframes every problem you'll ever face as a coach. When something isn't working, the question stops being "what's wrong with this athlete" and becomes "what in this system is producing this behaviour." Those are very different questions, and they change how you as a coach relate to solving the problem. An athlete who looks hesitant might not have a confidence problem. They might be in an environment that gives them nothing clear to act on. Change the system and the behaviour changes, without a word about their character.

Why the classical model underdelivers

Once you see coaching as installation, a specific kind of session follows. The *technique* is isolated and the mess of the real game is stripped away so the athlete can rehearse the movement cleanly. Feed them the correct pattern to drill the solution, with low to no resistance, over and over, until it's grooved. It looks and feels productive, and the athlete gets visibly better at the thing they're rehearsing ... then the real game starts and it falls apart.

I'm sure you've seen this. The footballer who dribbles and passes flawlessly in cone drills and can't find the same pass against an *opposing* defender. The tennis player who looks crisp against the ball machine and freezes against a live opponent who won't feed the ball to their strengths. The *technique* was there in the rehearsal, in that context, with that *information*, and gone when it got real. Coaches usually read this as a nerve or focus

problem, something in the athlete, it isn't. The rehearsal built a skill for a world that doesn't exist, a world with no defender, no live opponent, no decision. What got grooved was the movement without the *perception-action coupling* that's supposed to steer it.

This is the deep cost of the classical model. It quietly removes the very thing that makes skill work, the tight link between reading a situation and acting on it, and then it's surprised when the athlete can't do in the game what they could do in the **drill**.

Hold that word, drill, lightly for now. In this book it names the old way, the isolated, repeat-the-technique rehearsal we're leaving behind. Every time you see it, it points at something not to do.

The shift

Instead of trying to install the correct *technique* in the students, the idea is to design environments based on the problem you are looking for them to solve (Chapter 6) to help them become *attuned* to the right *information* (Chapter 9), and adapt to it. You don't tell the athlete the answer. You build the problem so that solving it, again and again under conditions that keep it honest and grows the skill. The solution that comes out the other side is theirs, built to fit their body and their reading of the game, and it holds up in competition (the performance environment) because it was born in something *representative* of competition (Chapter 8).

That's the shift, moving from installing to designing, from starting with the solution to starting with the problem. Everything else in this book is based on that one idea, worked out for a different part of your job, session after session. How to read what your sport actually demands (Chapter 10). How to find what has to be trained and what can look after itself (Chapter 11). How to build games that grow the skill (Chapters 12 and 13). How to pitch the difficulty (Chapter 14), when to speak and when to be quiet (Chapter 16), and how to tell it's working (Chapter 17).

None of it asks you to care less about solutions. It asks you to stop treating "the perfect *technique*" as something you should chase to perfect and deposit, and start treating skill as something you grow the conditions for.

Two ways to coach

This shift has two other names, worth knowing because you'll meet them everywhere in this field, and together they draw the line between the old way and this one.

The first is about who the learning centres on. Classical instruction is **instructor-centred**. The instructor is the source, the holder of the correct answer, and the session runs on delivering it. This book's approach is **learner-centred**. The learner is the one doing the building, and the coach's job moves from delivering answers to designing the problems the learner solves. The centre of gravity shifts from the person teaching to the person learning.

The second is about how learning is thought to happen. Classical instruction is **linear**, has a reductionistic view, and assumes that learning climbs a staircase, master step one, then step two, then step three, *technique* before application and part before whole, in a fixed order meant to be the same for everyone. This book's approach is **non-linear**. Becoming skilful is not a staircase. It's messy and individual, full of plateaus where nothing seems to move and sudden jumps where everything does, and no two athletes take quite the same path, because a *learner-environment system* is self-organizing, and self-organizing systems don't develop in straight lines. Force a straight line onto a non-linear process and you tend to break it, which is part of why the drilled staircase so often leads nowhere.

Put the two together and you have the whole contrast. Classical instruction is *instructor-centred* and *linear*. What this book teaches is *learner-centred* and *non-linear*. Everything that follows is what those words look like on the floor.

The takeaways

- Skill isn't handed from coach to athlete. It emerges when a learner solves problems in an environment you design.
- The real unit you coach is the *learner-environment system*, the athlete and the situation coupled together, not the athlete alone.
- When something isn't working, ask what in the *learner-environment system* is producing the behaviour, not what's wrong with the athlete.
- The classical model grooves movement without the *perception-action coupling* that steers it, which is why drilled *technique* so often vanishes in the game.
- The whole method is one shift: from installing to designing, from starting with the solution to starting with the problem.
- The shift runs two ways: from *instructor-centred* to *learner-centred*, and from *linear* to *non-linear*, learning isn't a fixed staircase but a messy, individual, self-organizing path.

Chapter 5

Repetition without repetition

Bernstein gave us a phrase coaches love to quote, widely used across the CLA community. *Repetition without repetition* (sometimes put as *repetition with variation*). It sounds like a riddle, but it isn't one. It's a big part of helping students become adaptive problem solvers.

So let's take it apart, because getting it right changes how you run every session you'll ever coach.

What Bernstein actually meant

The last chapter showed that the body never produces the same movement twice, and doesn't need to, because many different movements reach the same outcome (Chapter 4). Bernstein saw this in his blacksmiths and built a principle on it. **Repetition without repetition** is the idea that skilled practice never repeats the same movement, it repeats the process of solving the same movement problem under conditions that keep changing.

Read the phrase again with that in mind. The repetition is real, but it's not the movement being repeated. It's the process of solving the problem. Every attempt, the athlete meets the same challenge in a slightly different form and has to solve it again. What gets trained by that isn't a fixed pattern. It's the ability to find a working solution under conditions that constantly change, which is the only ability that survives contact with a real game.

There's a short version worth carrying onto the floor. *Repeat the problem, not the solution.*

Why identical reps train the wrong thing

Let's look at what most practice does instead. Same ball, same spot, same distance, over and over, until the movement is grooved smooth. It feels like

progress because the reps get cleaner by the minute.

This is the trap. Grooving one fixed movement trains the athlete to solve a problem that doesn't change and has no *opposition*, and *opposition* is always present in real life, whether an opponent or the grip on a climbing wall. The drill where nothing changes builds a solution for a world that doesn't exist, and skips the thing that actually matters, the act of adapting the solution to a *co-adapting, opposing* target. The athlete looks like they're getting better, but what they're getting better at is the drill.

Watch a golfer on the range hit forty balls with the same club to the same flag. Beautiful, grooved, repeatable. Then watch them on the course, where every lie is different, every wind is different, and no shot is the range shot. The range created one answer, and the course keeps changing the question.

Practice should be about searching, not copying

If a student finds their own solutions to the problem you present, then what are they really doing? The short answer: they're actively *searching* and problem solving, not copying.

Search is the learner actively exploring possible solutions to find one that works. Practice should be a *search* process, not a copying process. Every attempt is a probe into the space of possible movements, keeping what works, discarding what doesn't, homing in on a solution that fits their body and the problem in front of them. This is why the same session produces different movements in different athletes, and why it should. They should not all try to repeat the one "correct" answer, they should all be *searching* for their own way to a working one.

Your job as a coach isn't to hand over the answer, your job is to shape the *search*. Set the problem well, keep it honest, keep it varied, and the *searching* does the building. If you hand over the answer too early you shut the *search* down, which leaves the athlete with a solution they were given rather than one they made their own.

The evidence that should unsettle you

The research here says something a lot of instructors don't want to hear. Vary the practice, mix the problems up, refuse to let the athlete settle into a groove, and their performance in the session gets worse, it looks messier, they miss more. Set the practice in tidy blocks of identical reps instead, and the session looks sharp. The problem is that it reverses later. When you test what actually stuck, in a new unpredictable situation, the varied practice wins and the blocked practice collapses. This is **contextual interference**, and it's one of the most reliable findings in the study of how people learn to move. The interference has to stay in context. You're adding *perturbations* the sport actually contains, not random noise, so the variation widens the skill base instead of just making practice harder. This is **constrained variability**: variation shaped by the *constraints* you set (Chapter 6), drawn from the sport, not random noise for its own sake.

Spacing helps in another way too, in how you spread practice across the sport. Isolating a domain isn't a problem in itself, as long as the practice stays CLA, it breaks the sport into parts but each part is still the sport in context. The trouble is spending a month on one domain while the others go cold. **Spaced practice**, touching the domains across sessions rather than blocking them into long solo stretches, keeps students connected to the whole sport and helps them see how the domains link. In Hybrid Krav-Maga the domains are striking, clinch, and grappling, and spending time on all three in one session keeps the sport whole. Greg Souders puts it simply: "play the whole game every day".

Put the two findings together and they tell one story, the story this whole first part of the book has been building towards. The conditions that make practice look good in the moment, blocked, crammed, identical, are often the conditions that build the least lasting skill. The ones that make it look messy, varied, spaced, searching, are the ones that hold up when it counts. Every session is really the same choice, short-term performance or long-term learning. If you judge your coaching by how good the session

looks while it's happening, you'll pick the wrong practice almost every time.

Closing Part 1

This is where the shift becomes something you can act on.

Skill emerges, it doesn't install. Perceiving and acting are one loop. The body solves its own movement problems, many ways, and its variability is a feature. So practice can't be the grooving of one correct movement. It has to be the repeating of a problem, varied and spaced, that the athlete *searches* their own way through. It'll look less tidy than the old way. It'll feel slower some days. And it builds the thing the old way only pretended to.

Repeat the problem, not the solution. Everything in the rest of this book is a way of doing that well, the language in Part 2 and the method in Part 3 (Chapters 10 to 17).

The takeaways

- *Repetition without repetition* means repeating the problem, not the solution. Every attempt is the same challenge met in a slightly different form.
- Identical, blocked reps groove a movement for a world that holds still. Real games never hold still, so that movement doesn't *transfer*.
- Practice is a *search*, not a copy. The athlete explores their own way to a working solution, so shape the *search* rather than handing over the answer.
- Varied practice performs worse in the session and better in retention and *transfer*. Blocked practice flatters the session, *contextual interference* is real.
- *Spaced practice* beats crammed, over time and across the sport's domains. Space the work through the week and touch the whole game

each session, keeping every domain live rather than blocking one for long stretches.

The full book

Part 1 - The shift

- 1. Where this comes from
- 2. Skill isn't installed, it emerges
- 3. Perception and action are one loop
- 4. Constantly changing problems
- 5. Repetition without repetition

Part 2 - The language

- 6. Constraints: the three families
- 7. Affordances and information
- 8. Representative design
- 9. Attunement and calibration

Part 3 - The method

- 10. Analyse your sport
- 11. Find the fundamentals
- 12. Design constraints to shape behaviour
- 13. Build the game
- 14. Manipulate constraints live
- 15. Scale the game
- 16. Step back and let them work
- 17. Assess without testing technique

Part 4 - Into practice

- 18. A session template you can reuse
- 19. Running the room

- 20. Some worked examples
- 21. Common mistakes and how to fix them
- 22. Migrating from classical instruction

The Coach's Field Manual to CLA is planned for release in Q4 of 2026.

Get the full book

You've read two chapters. The rest of the book turns this into a method you can run on Monday.

Part 1 lays the foundation, how skill actually forms. Part 2 gives you the language, constraints, affordances, representative design, the tools you shape practice with. Part 3 is the method itself, how to read your sport, find its fundamentals, and build the games that grow the skill, session by session. It closes with worked examples across individual, team, combat, and shooting sports, the common mistakes and how to fix them, and how to migrate from classical coaching one step at a time.

The Coach's Field Manual to CLA: A practical guide to the Constraints-Led Approach.

Find it, and the coaching systems built on it, at hybridkravmaga.com, and follow along at [@tommyblom](https://twitter.com/tommyblom).

Hybrid Krav-Maga and Hybrid Combatives help students and operators become adaptable problem solvers, we keep what makes people safe and let go of the rest.

THE CONSTRAINTS-LED APPROACH

COACH THE PROBLEM, NOT THE **TECHNIQUE**

Most coaching still runs on instruction, showing the correct technique and correcting the athlete toward it. This book takes the opposite path. Skill emerges when an athlete solves real problems in an environment you design, and the coach's job is designing those problems, not handing over answers.

Written for working coaches, not researchers, it turns the science of how people actually learn to move into a practical, do-it-Monday method. Read your sport, find what matters, build the games that grow the skill, and step back and let it happen.

“REPEAT THE PROBLEM, NOT THE SOLUTION.”

Tommy Blom is the founder of Hybrid Krav-Maga and Hybrid Combatives, built entirely on the Constraints-Led Approach. He has coached for nearly thirty years, from three-year-olds to special forces operators.