

Back to Basics

by Vern Gambetta

Personally having coached athletes from twelve years of age on up to the elite level I am very concerned about the number who leave athletics and sports in general because a poor learning environment, unrealistic expectations placed upon them, too much intense competition beginning at an early age. Getting the beginner off to the best possible start is the most important job in athletics. The emphasis must be multi-faceted emphasizing psychological considerations, competition, talent identification, training, and proper coaching/teaching. The athlete should be a main focus of a national development scheme and a major emphasis of any national coaching scheme.

The first experience in sport for the beginning athlete is the most important. Therefore, this experience should emphasize the basics to provide a sound foundation for further progress and development. This experience will serve to maintain interest, raise motivation and serve to promote adult participation in athletics either as a participant, coach, parent of an athlete or informed spectator.

Psychological Considerations

Fundamental to all other considerations with the beginner are those dealing with psychological issues. The most basic is the issue of providing an experience that is positive and will enhance self esteem. Without a well developed self image the athlete will have a difficult time handling success or failure and will not react favorably to correction or criticism.

Emphasis on the intrinsic reward of participation, rather than competing for medals, records, trophies etc. is the most sound method of enhancing self esteem. Extrinsic rewards can give a distorted sense of self-worth and focus attention away from performance. Often, the emphasis placed on extrinsic rewards results in an unhealthy emphasis on winning and records at a young age.

Establishing a system of intrinsic rewards requires much work on the part of the coach/teacher. Much of this work should be directed toward guiding the young athlete toward realistic goals (expectations). It is preferable that these goals be process goals that are appropriate to the age and skill development level of the athlete. For example "hitting the board," "finishing the race," "six fair throws," etc.

As success is achieved the young athlete will have to deal with increasing pressure. Consequently it is important to educate the youngster from the beginning what pressure is and how to cope. Most often pressure is the expectations placed on an athlete by others, in most cases the parents and/or the coach. It is important that these people be aware of the effect their expectations can have on the young beginner. It relates to what was said earlier concerning the intrinsic rewards, encouraging the athlete to participate for the joy of movement and letting the extrinsic rewards come as they may as a by-product of the experience.

Competition

The biggest danger for the beginner is too much formal competition, too soon. Competition for the beginner should consist of informal "playdays" of relay races, jumping and hopping games, throwing contests for distance and accuracy, small sided games. The more variety the better in order to accommodate the short attention spans, different interests, and competencies. This is also true of the training at this age. The challenge here is for each child to strive to better their

performance measured against their previous best. They must experience success in order to feel comfortable and to maintain motivation.

Competition will assume more of a role as skill and conditioning advance. When the young athlete reaches this stage, competition can be feedback to measure progress as well as to test limits. The ratio of training to competition should still remain high, somewhere in the range of three or four to one. A cautionary note must be mentioned: success in competition at age group competition is not a guarantee for results at the national and international levels. In fact it is this author's opinion that early success has little or no relationship to later success.

It will be interesting to observe the long term progress of the young performers from the Junior World Championships and see if this high level competition at a relatively young age accelerates or retards development. Competition in itself is not negative, but it becomes a negative when too much importance is placed upon it and the outcome.

Talent Identification and Development

The fundamental assumption is that if the talent is identified early, nurtured, and developed to its fullest extent those athletes will continue on to the highest levels of competition. The issue is one of nature versus nurture. If a large, healthy, population base is available then a "Darwinian" process of competition, letting the strong survive, might be acceptable. This system worked well for the U.S. until other nations began a systematic approach to the nurture of the young athlete. The contrast between the two methods was readily apparent in recent Olympic games, particularly in events where a high level of skill development is necessary.

The very successful model utilized by the GDR is good example of a gradual progression that continually strives to select and match the young athlete to an event or sport that is suited to their body type and abilities. Their system was closely tied to their educational system through mandatory physical education taught by highly trained specialists. Their philosophy was that training must progress over a six to ten year period to achieve top results. Through a planned progression ultimate success will come in the adult years.

It is unrealistic to expect progress at the same rate and level for all children. A danger of early identification of talent is a narrowing of skills through early tracking. This can easily occur if the initial identification of talent is based on a dominant physical characteristic biased by accelerated growth and maturation. Specialization should be discouraged and general development stressed as a basis for later improvement.

Training

The fundamental goal is: 1) to enhance development of the mechanism of force production and force reduction 2) develop motor control. To achieve this at the beginning stages it is necessary to stress fundamental conditioning encompassing the basic biomotor abilities of speed, strength, endurance coordination, and mobility/flexibility. Remember, children are not miniature adults therefore the biomotor abilities must be developed in a manner appropriate to maturation level and stage of development The more a play element is introduced utilizing natural terrain and obstacles the more interest will be stimulated and the more progress shown. Also the use of natural terrain and obstacles makes equipment and facilities less of a limitation.

The critical years for motor learning are the so called "Skill Hungry" years from three to nine. This is when sound fundamental motor skills should be taught to establish basic technical models to provide a foundation for more specialized skills that will follow at an older age. "Optimum motor learning develops in children when skills are taught at the right time (maturation-readiness) and in the proper manner (experience-practices)" [Piscopo & Baly p.152]. Big muscle skills should

precede fine motor skills. Strength and endurance will increase with growth and maturity. Motor skill and the learning process relate more to maturity than any other single variable.

Effective training for the beginner should encompass all of the following: 1) proper conditioning 2) good competent coaching 3) grouping according to skill, body size, and physical maturation (Chronological age is the least accurate means of assessing maturation), 4) safe equipment and 5) rules and equipment modified to meet the physical limitations and skills.

The periods of sports participation model outlined by Brook is an excellent guide to determine the direction and content of the training process as progression is made through the stages of development. I have adapted this model to include psychological objectives for each stage as well as competition objectives.

Perhaps the most profound influence on the beginner is that of the first coach/teacher who provides the introduction to athletics. This person should be the best teacher available because this is the person who will teach the basics of conditioning, technique, self image, goal setting, and competitive attitude. Unfortunately in many situations this is not the case. The coach for the beginner is too often the least prepared and competent in terms of coaching /teaching ability. The prevalent thought is that working with these beginning athletes is less prestigious. It is felt to be less demanding, requiring fewer teaching skills and less knowledge. The opposite is the case. Working at this level is very demanding and the enthusiasm and joy of learning is most rewarding.

Foundation Period

- Begins in a range from nine to eleven years.
- Three to four years in duration.
- Games and fun activities, wide variety designed to enhance self-image.
- General training, speed development, skill development.
- Develop body weight strength, mobility, and aerobic endurance.
- Develop basic skills and rhythm.
- One training session per week increasing to three per week.
- Competition should be limited and confined to playful situations.

Developmental Period

- Begins in a range from thirteen to fourteen years.
- Four to six years in duration.
- Emphasize general training in the first years.
- Percentage of specific training should increase gradually over the last two years.
- Develop appropriate training and competition behavior.
- Begin goal setting appropriate to level of development.
- Teach weight training techniques with 60% maximum loading.
- Three training sessions per week increasing to six in later years.
- Undertake more formal competition increasing in difficulty as the athlete advances through the developmental period.

Period of Mature Participation

- Begins in a range from seventeen to twenty two years.
- Not before seventeen or after twenty two.
- Percentage of specific training increases.
- The time spent in training increases significantly, especially for the elite athlete.
- Frequency and difficulty increases significantly.

References

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