

Junior Development – Structure and Development Plan

A practical guide to working with youth athletes
in track and field.

Jason Reindl

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Due to the lack of information regarding youth training programs the following is a practical guide that examines the training structure of the youth athlete. Coaches should try to internalize the information and adapt it to their situation so that the best training environment can be created. Coaching of the youth athlete is just as, if not, more important than the elite athlete due to the positive effects of long term participation in sport. As such, the proper programming must be in place to ensure optimum benefits.

Introduction

The following information is presented as a guide to working with junior development athletes based on practical experience with children, coaching, personal knowledge, and current research in the areas of junior (youth) development athletics. Freeman (2001) takes “the viewpoint of Yuri Verhoshansky who focuses on the importance of developing a training strategy that is based on a knowledge of physiology and of the biology of the athlete’s body” (p. 50). It is hoped then that this piece will provide the reader with useful information that can aid them in their development of a planned program for the youth athlete. This article should be viewed as another piece in the coach’s tool box that can help the coach do the best job possible for the athlete, or child in this case. It is not a structure relating to the aspects of specialization in track and field/athletics. Oppositely, it is a general sport development tool that examines all of the fundamental requirements that elite athletes (in all sports) require and must be developed as they mature and develop as youth athletes through the use of Athletics (as a core sport) by running, jumping, and throwing. “Tudor Bompá recommends that youths first practice track and field between the ages of 10 and 12” (Freeman, 2001, p.25). This importance is strengthened by the fact that “the peak of biological adaptability in children occurs between 10 and 15 years, at a time when physical capacity is far from approaching its maximum” (Dick, 1991, p. 30). Ideally, it would be best suited to work in conjunction with other fundamental movement programs in the areas of aquatics and gymnastics allowing for the development of an extremely broad base for future endeavours. A final note should be kept in the mind of the reader as they continue with this article and as they progress through their quest for never ending knowledge in the realm of coaching, “training systems are not religions, nor are they perfect science. The art of coaching is still a major factor of success. We should never stop experimenting and learning” (Freeman, 2001, p. 103).

Group Size, Training Duration & Number of Sessions

The ratio of coaches to athletes should be a maximum of 1:10. Due to the age and maturity level of the athletes anything greater than this poses serious safety concerns. I would recommend and prefer a 1:8 ratio as it allows for the right amount of personal contact and fun through numbers, while maintaining safety. The coach in any case must also be able to take on multiple roles within the group, from coach, instructor, and teacher one moment to demonstrator of skills or a team member during a relay because of odd numbers the next. The program guidelines have been set up to be applicable for any group or situation and can easily be adapted with some ingenuity and reflection; specifically it has been set up to a maximum time frame of 2 hours. The break down would be approximately 40 minutes warm up, 40 minutes specific work out, and 20 minutes of cool down. Ideally sessions would last from 75 to 100 minutes; noting the adage of ‘quality over quantity’. These 2 hour sessions would occur once or twice a

week. Depending on the number of alternative activities that the athlete takes part in, the athlete's participation in athletics would ideally be twice a week to a maximum of three times.

Learning

Learning is a topic that deserves special attention when dealing with this specific group of athletes, for “the imitative capacity, freedom from social inhibitions and the irresistible urge to dominate the body in every possible (or impossible) manner, endows the child between 8 and 10 with an almost immeasurable ability for motor learning” (Szmodis, 1976, p.14). That is they, as athletes, are learning about their bodies and discovering how certain actions create specific movement patterns. Learning occurs in a number of different ways and combinations accounting for the variety of individuals; some are visual, others verbal, and others need to feel or do the activity to truly grasp its intricacies. As Doherty (2007) points out, “most men are predominantly “motor-minded” as related to motor learning. That is they learn a movement best by doing that movement or by simulating it at slower speeds or in related actions” (p. 400). What we can take from this to the learning process of youth athletes is a need at some point to actively perform a skill. The athlete needs to repeat the actions and ‘feel’ (proprioceptively and kinaesthetically) the movements involved. They might not perform the movements correctly at first but after repeated efforts they will develop the skills and feelings necessary to complete the task. Doherty (2007) goes on to explain that some coaches choose to give beginners time to perform a skill alone, without the reinforcements of a coach. While others argue that errors can become ingrained during this time period and hard to overcome later on. Frank Dick (1991) adds that no matter which learning process occurs the coach must have a “thorough understanding of technique as faults that are developed in the learning stages are difficult to correct later on” (p. 4). No matter which method of learning occurs or is planned for there must be a period of reinforcement from the coach, self-exploration by the athlete, and a period of time to become accustomed to it all. Eventually this learning process will become the evolution of an athlete’s technique. However, technique is just a word and in no way explains the individual actions of a specific athlete but rather wide range of possible action possibilities. Doherty (2007) has this to comment on technique, “the goal of technique in training is not to develop flawless technique, but to find one that is simple, technically sound and suited to the individual athlete” (p. 378). Remember Michael Johnson and his unorthodox running style? Even though it was ‘incorrect’, he ran away with multiple world records. Freeman (2001) examines the role of positive feedback and its place with the young athlete. Positive feedback allows the young athlete to develop confidence and belief in them that success is attainable. This is not to say that criticism is not used but rather minimized so that the majority of feedback is of a positive nature. With that in mind when teaching and working with young athletes, there is no perfect

form but rather a range, so when dealing with the very big girl or the smaller boy try to find positive similarities between the two that will lay the best possible foundation down for the future.



As a conclusion to this introduction to learning I would like to examine a poem from the 2007 edition of the Track and Field OMNIBOOK (Doherty, p. 405) that summarizes how sometimes a coach can say the wrong word or words and its affect on the athlete can have disastrous effects. Sometimes an athlete will just get it and we must understand that some will understand, others won't, but it is the framework that is important not the minute details of the skill in the beginning.

A centipede was happy, quite

Until a frog in fun said,

“Pray tell, which leg goes after which?”

This worked her mind to such a pitch,

She lay distracted in the ditch,

And knew not how to run.

Identification of the Age Group

The information in this piece is presented as an overview of a non-periodized program for youth athletes. I have chosen the term *youth* and its meaning of the ages from 8-14 as the primary age group but the information presented can be applied to athletes *both younger and older*. The individuals' age can be looked at chronologically (the individuals' age according to birth) or biologically (the individuals' age according to growth and maturation). Either age group classification can lead a coach to a very diverse group of athletes that are either pre or post pubescent. For example the twelve-year-old boy could be the youngest in the group biologically but the oldest chronologically; oppositely a nine-year-old girl could be the youngest chronologically but the oldest biologically. The number of unique situations is endless. This age group could see both new athletes who are being introduced to Athletics for the first time and athletes that have already been involved in the program for a number of years. It is hoped that the coach will be able to adapt the information to his/her specific athletes, ages, environment, and his/her situation. From knowledge comes further knowledge that is a result of both insight and growth. Note that the term

athlete is used as both a meaning for the child participating in sport and its recurring effects on the child. For they, themselves, will internalize the recurring title of the athlete and see themselves as athletes. Even at the age of 8 years old a child will smile and be filled with a sense of pride when they see themselves as an athlete, the same as a Brienne Thiessen, Jenni Hucul, Joel Senick (all current Saskatchewan champions), or leaders in other sports such as Sydney Crosby or LeBron James. However, the athlete should be routinely made aware of the fact that their status as an athlete is a small part of their life. There are many other facets of life: child, friend, student, and countless others roles in life that the individual will always be and continue to evolve into.

Movements

In order to properly develop a physical training program one must identify the varying movement patterns that could be undertaken. In actuality when movement schemes are combined, the combinations are endless. When broken down there are seven fundamental movement patterns. These movement patterns make up the foundation of the following actions; landings, jumping, starting, sprinting, throwing, pole vault and medicine ball activities as examples. The formal movement patterns are:

- Landings – braking part of the body for safety
- Spring – overcoming the force of gravity to leave the ground
- Statics – a balanced state of equilibrium (static and dynamic balance)
- Locomotion – movement from one place to another
- Rotation – turning around an internal axis
- Swing – turning around an external axis
- Manipulative skills – sending and receiving of an object (manipulation)

(Nicky Donaldson, National Education Manager NZ, 2006)

Some definitions must be examined as they pertain to physical training of the athlete. A note that other words used in this piece are personal vocabulary that have been developed through experience and are merely words. Remember that vocabulary is just a word to describe an expression of more words.

- *Stamina (Endurance)* – is the ability to exert oneself through aerobic or anaerobic exercise for relatively long periods of time.
- *Strength* – the ability to generate force through a single maximum voluntary contraction.

- *Speed* –the ability to react to a stimulus or signal in the shortest possible time (speed of reaction), and/or to perform a movement at the highest tempo (speed of movement).
- *Skill* –the ability to carry out a task with maximum certainty and minimum expenditure of energy and time.
- *Suppleness (Flexibility)* – the ability to conduct movements about certain joints with an appropriate range of motion.

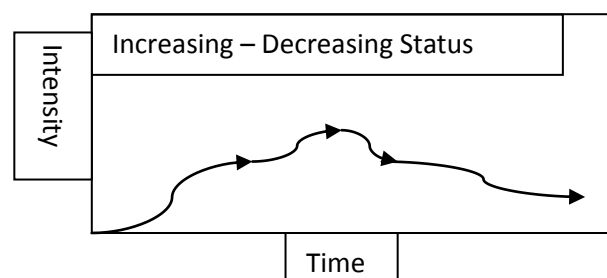
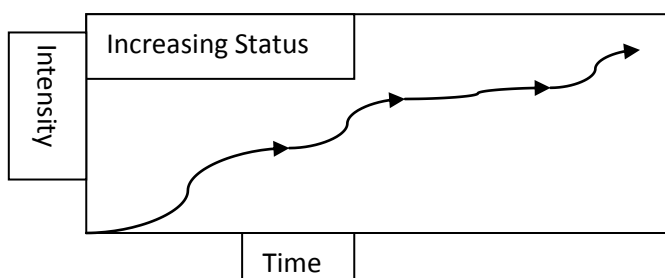
(Athletics Canada’s Long Term Athlete Development, 2006).

Program

The initial meeting with this unique age group begins with a solid foundation with the parents and guardians of the athletes. The track can be a chaotic and sometimes dangerous environment and having supportive parents who are confident in the coach and their abilities can provide great dividends in the way they communicate with their child. This can have long lasting impacts on the retention of the athletes in both sport as a general sense and more specifically, our primary sport of athletics.

Warm Up

The purpose of the warm up is to prepare the body for the actions that are going to be undertaken. This includes both physical and psychological. The physical preparation includes raising the body temperature, loosening the connective tissues in the body, releasing synovial fluid and increasing the range of motion of the joints, increasing blood supply to the muscles, and countless other physiological reasons. This relates to the definition of *Suppleness (Flexibility)* and its effects on prevention of injury and optimizing the body’s abilities to perform at maximum levels. The body must be prepped for maximal levels of exertion, thus it must be teased from sedation to that of a heightened level of physiological readiness. From a psychological perspective, the warm up allows the mind to transition from rest to a period of optimum level intensity. The body is nothing without the mind and vice versa. For a body to train at near maximum levels of performance the mind must be accordingly prepared and warmed up and the two are consequently linked. I, personally, place great importance in the role of the warm up for all age groups and as such the majority of this discussion will be centered on the warm up.



Jogging: The warm up should begin with steady state jogging. This jogging should be a minimum of 5 minutes and distance should have no bearing. This allows for the individual to choose what an appropriate pace is for them. This preliminary warm up jog should increase by 1 minute in length for every month of the program to a maximum of 10 minutes. Eventually the term steady state changes to increasing tempo but this does not mean a sprint to the finish but rather a gradual increase in intensity as comfort (loosening of the body) increases. Too many athletes are scared to jog for extended periods of time. All too often I see extremely talented (older) athletes jog 200 meters and stop because “they are not distance runners!” Where is the increase in core body temperature? Where is the perspiration on the forehead? An athlete, especially one in Athletics (no matter the discipline), should not be afraid to run, or jog for that matter. There is also an aerobic or *Stamina (Endurance)* training effect that occurs from the jogging. Remember that this youth age group’s abilities are far reduced than that of their adult counterparts. This jogging can also be viewed as training for running. Although biomechanically different at higher rates of speed through increased force application the flexions and extensions of the foot, ankle, knee, and hip are for the youth athlete’s sake comparable and equal. Thus points of interest should be placed on the previous movements, such as a flowing heel – toe roll, Dorsi flexion, lifting the knees, minimizing the recovery phase, a fluid stride pattern, minimizing hip movement (both in the frontal (forward/backward) and sagittal (side to side) planes) thus working on core stability; all of these traits make great runners. Consequently, improvements can be made in something as ‘insignificant’ as the warm up jog. *Note: All of this will not occur on the first day. It occurs over time through repetition, development, and a positive relationship between the athlete, fellow training partners, and the coach.

Dynamic Movements: Following the jogging the athletes will gather as a group and begin their dynamic warm up. The dynamic portion of it is the key. The warm up should be developed so that it is unique and constant. There should be some variability in the warm up but pieces and parts of it should be the same. As the athletes will be lead by the coach it is up to the coach to determine the appropriate sequencing in the beginning. The consistency should be noticeable to the athlete so they can distinguish between their consistent warm up and an alternated one. This allows the athlete to increase their relationship with their body and make appropriate judgements as to their readiness as it relates to risk of possible injury. Staleness is avoided by changing small aspects of the warm up but a general routine, theme, and/or order should be kept constant. The following is a list of exercises that either stretch or loosen the joints. They are merely examples that I have found useful. During which, the athlete should keep the foot Dorsi flexed and think about the heel-toe walk, core stability, and proper posture during their drills with the thoughts eventually becoming ingrained into the athlete’s subconscious. Skipping or slow jogging can also be used in order to maintain the increase in core body temperature.

- Arm circles, hugs and claps, side twists, and running arms
- Pickup sticks (calf stretch), lunges, and side lunges
- Side shuffle, karaoke, backwards running, straight leg pull through, hopping (single leg or double leg & in all directions)

The sequencing of the dynamic warm up is one of the aspects that the athlete will either respond to positively or negatively. As such no order can be laid out as the correct one and refinement is a constant process. A small period of *strength* exercises can and should be placed in the warm up at this time. Push-ups, sit-ups, calf raises, lunges, and squats are all body weight activities that pose no harm on the athlete's structural development; and will consequently enhance development. Doing one set of 10 of each and increasing this by 1 set a month to a maximum of 3 sets can develop a significant amount of strength gains. These strength gains can add much developmental possibility to the athlete and their training. One must remember that in training it is not how far, fast, or high but rather how the action is performed which is the opposite of competition where "it's what you do that counts, not how you do it" (Doherty, p. 408, 2007). It is hoped that the proper training for the 'how' results in the 'do' later on when performance is a goal. As performance in training is not a primary concern for this age group in training any taxing effects should be disregarded and seen as just another piece in the development of the athlete in this learning phase. A very short period of static stretching with the athletes can be beneficial in laying out the information, days plan, schedule, key pointers, and general information. For example:

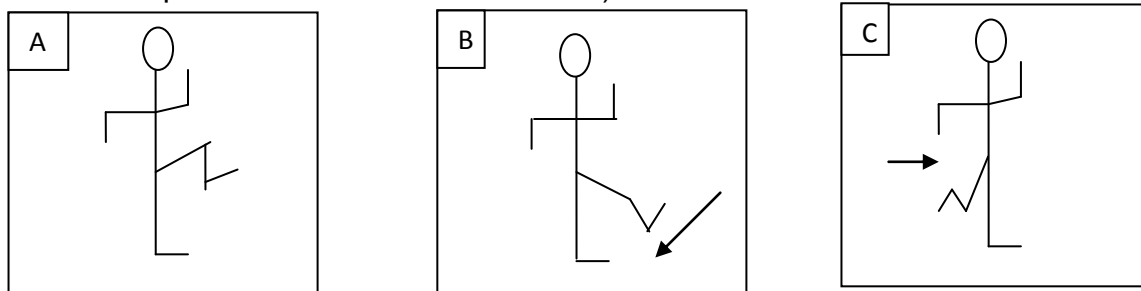
- Muscles – their names and actions. Ex) Biceps – flexing the elbow.
- Why do we warm up?
- Basic Rules – Both technical and ethical
- Respect for officials, coaches, fellow athletes, etc
- Why do we Dorsi flex our foot?
- Proper nutrition? What it means and what should be done.
- Healthy Lifestyle – i.e. Not smoking and making smart choices
- Injury Prevention and Rehab – i.e. Icing, hot tub, stretching at night



- High Jump: Think about take off because that is what matters most
- Stories about sport and positive experiences gained from it – i.e. Travel & friends

This should not turn into school or a lecture on life but information is a tool for the coach in promoting knowledgeable athletes and well rounded human beings. Although knowledge of the event/sport is a small piece of competition; a knowledgeable athlete does have an advantage. When looking at the all time greats in sport a similarity of a higher level of understanding can be seen when compared to the average participant. Once again this process is lengthy but beneficial for if five minutes of the stretching and talking time occurs but once or twice a week (depending on how many times the athlete comes out) then this could work out to be hours by the end of the year. This time also serves as a little breather time for the athletes to once again maintain hydration status.

Machs: Still part of our general warm up is a series of exercises known as Mach's. Named after Polish coach Gerard Mach who was head coach of Canada's national team in the 1970's, they are a breakdown of the running motion into three phases and continue to be practiced by athletes all over the world today (Note: Another question that can be placed in the static stretch time).



The first phase is the A, which is a lifting action of the knee with the foot Dorsi flexed and lifted underneath the flexed knee. The second phase is the B, which is an extension or slight pawing action of the foot out, down, and underneath the body. Dorsi flexion is extremely important at this stage and should be watched for extensively as any pointing of the foot can lead to blocking thereby reducing ground mechanics and increasing the risk of injury. It should be noted that the use of the B exercise although beneficial for hurdlers, the training of it is not appropriate or required. The extension of the leg from the A position to the static hold underneath the body is innate and any training of it could negatively alter an athlete's running ability as an increase in extension most likely results in a ground contact further ahead of the body, which causes increased blocking, decreased speed, and increased risk of injury. Thus if it does remain in the coaches program careful planning and a watchful eye are extremely important. The third phase is the C or recovery phase. Previously taught as a 'butt kick' it should be taught as rather the recovery action in bringing the heel close to and under the gluteus. The butt kick does still have a place in the warm up as a dynamic

quadriceps stretch but should not be taught as part of the running motion as it changes the orientation of the hips causing increased forward tilt resulting in an increased arching of the back and placing more strain on the hamstrings. The progression of the Mach's starts with standing, marching, skipping, and ends with running. As this is a rather difficult motor skill for a beginner, regardless of age a deal of patience and time should be placed on proper technique. Remember practice makes permanent, not perfect. It is perfect practice that makes perfect permanent. A whole workouts Mach section might only be standing A's and developing the proper lifting technique, Dorsi flexion of the foot, arm actions, balance, posture, and over all synergy of movements in alteration of the limbs. Once mastery has occurred then moving on to the next phase can occur. Motor Learning contributes that Part vs. Whole practice can also be manipulated during the learning phases of the Machs. For instance demonstrating, both verbally and physically, the running A and having the athlete jump right into it can lead to a quicker gain in proficiency but this must be done with a plan and in small bouts or it can regress the learning process by picking up incorrect actions.

Athletes no matter the age, from eight-year-old new comers to twenty-eight year old Olympians, perform Machs or aspects of similarity. As such a great deal of knowledge and benefits can be gained from them. Variations can also be made with the Machs, such as quick feet drills. These are combinations, of A, AA, AC, AAC, which are used as a tool to generate *speed* of movement throughout the limbs. It takes a great deal of control through the body and cognitive thought to perform the actions correctly. As such they are the end of the progression of the developing youth athlete but I have routinely had success in the quick feet exercises through the use of proper sequencing.

Drills: Following the technical work of the Machs, a number of other drills can be undertaken to enhance the warm up and the general physical capabilities of the athlete. Although the athlete is warmed up I chose to still keep the term warm up in place. As the day's session consists of the warm up – workout – cool down. The workout is the small isolated piece of for example, high jump or hurdles. These drills can include any number of items that the coach sees fit. They can be classified as general conditioning drills. There is no specific relation to athletics but aspects and benefits can be found to apply to the general athleticism of all sports. They include:

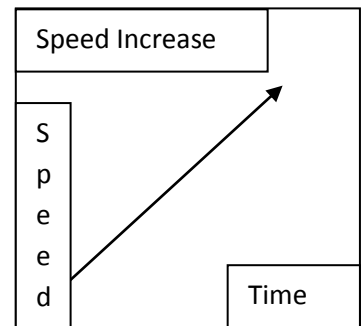
- Quick Feet Drills – Multi-direction quick feet motions.
 - Ladders, line drills, agility squares (increases neural activation through quickness of movement)
- Hopping & Jumping – Both multi directional and multi lateral of a single and/or double leg
- Skipping – Various heights and distances

- Straight leg pull through – Activates the hamstrings
- Push running – Emphasizes the toe-off extension of running
- Heel – Toe walks (straight, pigeon, penguin)
- Backwards running - Not a back pedal but running with large range of motion

Note that the jumping activities are not meant as plyometric workouts as one would have an elite jumper undertaking but rather a method to increase the *power* and reactive capabilities of the athlete. An example is 'easy jumps', where the athlete attempts to jump as forcefully as they can handle while being as soft and gentle on the ground as possible thereby working on the ability to make contact with the ground in a short amount of time while still being easy on the joints. Once again this is not a workout but rather another piece of the warm up. For example:

- 2x5xSingle Leg EASY hops (2 sets of 5 contacts each with each leg thus a total of 20 hops, 10 on each foot).

Accelerations: The last phase of the warm up, most specific to athletics is the Acceleration. Accelerations are a gradual increase in running velocity in a controlled execution of movement. In terms of intensity the athlete goes from a rolling start with a velocity of 0m/s and increases this in a controlled and systematic manner to their maximum velocity. I have tried to refer to the acceleration as a metronome that has an ever increasing tempo as it goes back and forth never reaching its limit. The length of an acceleration will vary depending on the facilities available. Indoors this is usually 60m which is more than enough distance for the youth age group. Outdoors through the use of added parks and fields in addition to the outdoor track, the distance of the acceleration can be increased to distances upwards of 100m. Now for an eight-year-old this distance is daunting for a sprint but the athlete needs to be reminded that if they need to travel the 100m length that they should start off slower and gradually increase their speed over a greater period of time. The number of repetitions at this stage would be between three and five, depending on the workout to follow. The learning and coaching side of things should not be forgotten either. Key points such as: smooth running, use of the arms, staying 'extended' (note: the term 'tall' can be a mental block during the drive phase). The use of the accelerations not only trains general sprinting and running technique but when the intensity reaches a high enough rate a *speed* component is involved.



At this stage the warm up is complete. The athlete should be warm, perspiring, a little short of breath, and needing a bathroom/water break. This break will allow for a break

before the ‘workout’ portion of the day. Giving both the child a break to rest and recover and the coach a chance to set up for the next activity.

Sample Warm Up:

5 Minute run	10 contacts easy jumps
Water Break	2x10m Mach A’s (march)
30m skipping arm circles, claps, twists	10 contacts easy hops (each leg)
30m back and forth – Carioca	2x10m Mach A’s (Skip)
30m ‘pick up’ sticks – calf stretch	30m accel
30m back and forth – Side Shuffle	Water
30m running arms	1x10xPush up, sit up, squat
30m lunges – front and then side	Water
30m backwards run	2x50m accel
Water Break – sit stretch	Ready for the remainder of workout...

The warm up that has been laid out can be intense and taxing on the body. A senior level athlete could do something like this or they could do something completely different in regards to their daily training requirements. The youth athlete requires a general level of conditioning that the senior athlete already possesses; consequently a taxing warm up is of more benefit to the youth in regards to general physical preparation. However, this taxing warm up must still be examined and altered for if it is too taxing the athlete will not enjoy their time at practice and could risk drop out.

Workout

Specific event area training is a reflection of the personal coach. The general principals of the event area should be the focus:

Jumps – take off

Throws – speed of release

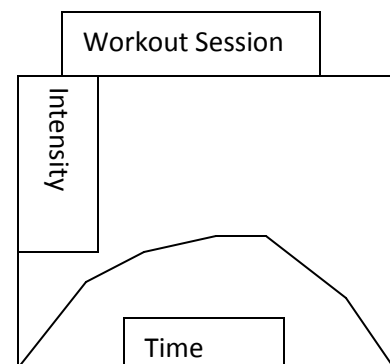
Running – Speed (ease of running – technique)

As different coaches place varying emphasis on related skill sets I believe that interpretation should be open to the coach, however principals should be kept constant in terms of the development of the athlete. If we keep in mind that there are many great coaches in the world and each program has bits of commonality but also varying

differences. The rights and wrongs of coaching and training are few and individual but the maybes or gray area are vast in number. As such a coach's interpretation of technique is sometimes as varying as the coach. However, this interpretation of technique must take into account as Doherty (2007) puts it, "Men are much more alike in every way than they are different. Within a range of tolerable variation, the biomechanics of 'vaulting' are the same for everyone" (p. 258). As vaulting is merely, an example the biomechanics and technique of any event are allowed some variation as long as this variation does not break biomechanical principals. In terms of event coaching, an interesting question arises as I see it in terms of what the coach does. Some coaches follow the previous teachings of their instructors and mentors to the letter; others branch off and attempt brand new exercises and variations. Either case can be argued for and both have had success; however, I believe a moulding of the two is what creates a truly successful workout scheme and program. With that in mind the knowledge from the level 1 technical and run, jump, throw courses are great starting points in terms of providing the coach with the technical tools needed to appropriately *coach* the youth athlete and combined with a sense of ingenuity can create a very successful program. The program must also be based around the concept of variety. As Doherty (2007) puts it, "variety in all phases of the training program is essential to good planning. Such variety maintains enthusiasm and motivation, but also ensures development of all related muscle groups, as well as full recovery and neuromuscular growth" (p.394).

Cool Down

A cool down period at the end of the day's workout should be included; Freeman (2001) feels that the cool down is an area that is often neglected by coaches but it is critical to enhancing the body's recovery. This should be a time of lower intensity activity where the body can slowly return to a resting rate. Although physiologically the athlete continues to feel the effects of the workout for a long period of time, psychologically it brings a time of closure to the day. This while being led by the coach can also lead to some reflection on the day's practice. It should be understood by the athletes the importance of the cool down in regards to injury prevention as well. Perhaps some light skipping, jogging, or heel-toe walks could be included with some static stretching. The cool down should conclude the day and let the athlete relax before travelling home. Once again the goal of the cool down for the youth athlete is not for performance enhancement as with the elite athlete but rather to continue the foundational base of learning that the athlete is generating. If the cool down becomes a constant part of their sporting career in the beginning they will, hopefully, keep it as part of their routine as they are progressing through the age group ranks to the senior level.



Competition

Competition is not only at the heart of sport but it is also at the heart of life as everything is a competition. Just look at the general world; it is one big competition. Who has the bigger house, newer car or better paying job? Truly, this is too philosophical a question for an article dealing on youth training development but even the youth athlete takes pride and joy in competing. Competition should be explained to the athlete that it is not only about them against others but the true heart of competition especially in athletics is the battle between the athlete and them self. One cannot control how their fellow competitors will perform on the day and stressing about the gold medal can have disastrous effects on the future development of the athlete. Rather a personal competition against prior achievements, PB's (Personal Bests), or finally mastering a given skill set (landing in long jump) that had been plaguing the athlete for some time is far more rewarding for the athlete in the long run. This method of performance criteria leads to practice performance where the athlete has a great level of commitment to mastery. The athlete can never be perfect; therefore they can never become stale as there is always something that can be improved, another centimetre or another tenth or another point in the multi event competition. Informal competitions in practice should be a regular part of the program. Relay races, how far one can jump or throw, or how far one can run in 2 minutes can be the highlight of a youth athlete's day; note that the focus is on training but when that training becomes a fun game or competition the athlete will change his/her focus and this can be seen quite easily. Keeping a book to record such performances and letting the athlete see the previous time or distance can allow the athlete to see how they are improving, which builds confidence in themselves and increased enjoyment for sport and activity. Formal competitions should be a special time for the athlete in that they should not happen every weekend. Freeman (2001) feels that there is too much emphasis on competition, "in the long run, most athletes will not realize their full potential because of the overemphasis on competition. Elite success comes from long periods of careful preparation, not from competing for six to seven months of a nine month school calendar" (p. 81). The role of competition in various parts of world takes on varying degrees of meaning. For some, competition means winning, for others it can be a time to see what one athlete can do against others, and for others it is to see how they can perform a skill under a degree of pressure. In any case competition should be used as a time to learn and have fun. It is an occasion that can break up the monotony of training and generate excitement and energy. Remember the focus is on training and there should be no lowering of intensity in pre-meet workouts. This is due both to the emphasis on training but also the youth athlete's body will not respond like their adult counterparts in terms of compensation so there is reduced need. These formal competitions should also be of the multi-event nature such as triathlons (60m, LJ, SP) or quadrathalons (60m, LJ, SP, 800). There a number of different competitions with

some even taking specific focus i.e. a jumps event or throws event, or speed/power. Once again the goal is to avoid specialization and allow the athlete to see the multitude of possibilities available. It happens all too often when a young athlete due to their smaller or larger size is told that they should be a distance runner or thrower only to go through puberty a number of years later and have great success in alternative events, but how much time did they lose, how much better could they have been if they were not told to specialize. There are norms for events but there are just as many individuals who fit outside the norms and as such a youth athlete should be given the broadest base possible so that when their bodies have reached adulthood they will have the biggest quantity of resources available to them to succeed.

Coaching Theory

What is a coach? It could be said a coach is an individual who works with athletes in a particular sport to help them and their team attain greater levels of success. A coach is also involved in training, planning, recruiting, selling, executing, teaching, and toiling. Subsequently, the role and job of the coach is constantly changing and the changes are unique to the situation created by the coach and athletes. The coach is an individual who usually donates their time to help others. Some coaches are remembered for their achievements in assisting athlete to win championships, medals, and set record performances. Their names frequently arise on trophies and in books and articles; their names include Tellez, Bowerman, Pfaff, and Sanderson. But why did/do these greats coach. What drives/drove them to work with athletes? Freeman (2001) believes that one coaches because, “the challenge never ends, because every athlete comes to us with a new combination of strengths and weaknesses. While we can take elements of training that we have used with other athletes, we can never simply use one athlete’s training to develop another athlete to his or her full potential. In short, as trite as it may seem, athletes are like snowflakes—no two are exactly alike” (p. 13). This is especially true when dealing with the youth athlete. Although their individual qualities are different from their adult counterparts they are still individuals and are as different as they are similar. Can you train the pre-pubescent boy the same as a post-pubescent girl? No! And this is where the joy of coaching such a diverse and fun group of athletes can be seen. However, it is here that a paradox occurs, specifically when it comes to coaching the youth age group. Usually our ‘best’ coaches coach our elite athletes at the pinnacle of sport; where they, the coach, work with a very small number of athletes. In contrast our developing youth athletes are vast in numbers and being coached in very large groups, are left to develop in the hands of the young, inexperienced coach. I am not showing negativity towards younger, novice coaches working with youth athletes as that is how many, including myself, got started. I will personally for ever be thankful for the opportunities that I got to learn and develop as a coach with the youth athletes. There can be concerns with the

information out there regarding the proper development of this age group as it can be complicated for the novice coach. It is hoped that this piece can help fill the void for this coach and give them more insight as to the needs of the athlete and the importance of their position. They might not be working with Olympians, yet, but who knows how many of these youth could develop into future greats if the time, care, and benefit of a quality environment and coaching are in place. Freeman (2001) reminds us that, “each step of the training process is built on the foundation of the previous training steps” (p. 77). There is also a need for the senior level coach and athlete with varying experiences to drop in from time to time to talk to the athletes. Imagine the smiles on their faces when a coach from the local university/club shows up with his/her athlete that just won an international or national medal (that they could also bring to show the young athletes) come to practice and take part in some of the drills while being led by youth coach. This will raise the confidence level of the athlete to say their coach has worked with an elite athlete. All the while the senior level coach can give pointers on the side to the athletes as he/she sees fit. Perhaps one day as the coaching world continues to advance and develop there will be a name that will be regarded as one of the greats for their work with youth athletes. The books are not written and the greats are not named, but with the right development and dedication anyone can be a part of that list.

Conclusion:

In conclusion I would encourage all readers to continue their pursuit for knowledge. It is a pursuit that, just like the athlete who pursues perfection, can never be concluded. The knowledge that one gains at one instant will continually evolve. Through mentorships, books, audio, video, academics, conferences, or even discussions in a social settings the quest for knowledge can never be completed. This is why a coach will carry out at one instant what they believe to be the ideal training program for their current situation only to look back a day, month, or years later and wonder why they did that. Coaches all over the world will continue to ask the question, ‘why did I do that?’ In the end a coach needs to be confident in them self and their abilities. Never go beyond what you are comfortable doing. It is hoped that this piece will help the coach feel more confident when working, in particular, with the youth athlete. In conclusion, the job of a coach can be well worth the time and effort. However, it can become a monstrous task on occasions. When this occurs simply do as the following would ask:

The minute you become aware of a sense of dullness toward your coaching, take a sharp look-not at what’s wrong with the sport but at yourself. It is you who is losing your shine, not the team members, not the sport. It is you who needs polishing, whether by way of a vacation, or from some new insight gained from seeing a record performance, or from exposing yourself to the enthusiasm of other coaches at a clinic, or from reading an inspirational book. Above all, remind yourself that enthusiasm and work grow on the

same stalk, gain from strength from each other. When enthusiasm lags, concentration on some new phase of your job may restore it.

(Doherty, p. 9, 2007)

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