

**Developing Athletes
Why we are where we are
A Personal & Historical Perspective**

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Preface

We are at an interesting place in time sixteen years into a new millennium regarding developing athletes. This white paper is my attempt to look back at the past 100 years from a historical perspective to see the roots of why we are where we are. I also look at from a personal perspective based on my experiences during my life as an athlete and a coach and teacher. This is in no way meant to be a definitive work, rather it is intended to stimulate further research and provoke discussion to find solutions.

In order to better understand how athletes are developed it is important to look at society as a whole; sport does not exist isolated from society, it emerges from and reflects society. In the twentieth century and now in the new millennium various historical events and socio-cultural trends deeply impacted sport and consequently how athletes are developed. Lets start by looking at where we are now in terms of developing athletes. These are the major issues/obstacles/problems we face today in the process of developing athletes.

Increasing Early Specialization – There is a trend to identify and get the youngster into a sport earlier in the mistaken notion that it will take ten years and/or 10,000 hours to get the “head Start” they need to succeed. This 10,000 hours myth – The

popularization and misinterpretation of Ericsson's research by Gladwell and others has resulted in a trend to starting athletes training and specializing earlier.

Decline of General Health – This is generally attributed to the sedentary nature of modern society and lack of daily exercise. Currently in the US we spend 17% of GNP on health care. Adult onset diabetes and obesity are epidemic with no reversals in sight.

Commercialization of Youth Sports – In prior times sport was centered in the schools and free play on playgrounds was common. Today it highly organized as a commercial enterprise down to the youngest levels. We have moved almost entirely to a “pay to play model.”

Hypo Kinetic Sedentary Society - Today instead of walking we ride and sit. Daily physical activity has decreased dramatically over the past fifty years. This coupled with western “fast food” diets has resulted in an alarming decline of general fitness.

Twenty-four Hour Sports News – This has resulted in the rise spectatorism instead of participation. It also presents a distorted view of sport with the emphasis on the spectacular highlight play. The growth of the Internet and social media has also contributed to “fantasy” sport replacing actual sport participation

More sports/more choices

There are so many sport options to choose from today than there was as short a time as fifty years ago. It used to be football, basketball, baseball, swimming and track for boys and

volleyball, basketball, swimming, track and field and softball for the girls. Now there is soccer, lacrosse, water polo and many more. It certainly presents a myriad of opportunities to suit the varied interests and talents of the young developing athlete. This is not a negative as long as there are enough qualified coaches to teach youth the basics. Often this is not the case.

Declining pool of professionally trained coaches

The pool of trained coaches used to come from physical education teachers. With the decline of the physical education in the schools there is an alarming decline in the number of trained coaches. Today the main source of coaches is volunteer coaches who may or may not have gone through a cursory certification program.

Growth of Sport Science and Sports Medicine – Most of the sport science disciplines are relative latecomers on the sport scene. Just like anything new there has been a rush to justify their existence, which has at certain times led to an overemphasis and in certain areas of sport a marginalization of the coach.

Concern with Liability – We live in a litigious society that has resulted in everyone walking on eggshells for fear of a lawsuit. Consequently playground equipment has been removed from schoolyards and cost of insurance has made many other activities unsustainable.

The Self Esteem Movement – This has minimized the value of competition in order to make the youngster feel good. Everybody gets a trophy or medal so no one will feel bad.

Doing this sets them up for unrealistic expectations. Everyone does not win.

Growth of Sport Business – The 1984 Olympic games was a game changer in that it signaled a huge departure from the “amateur” ethos and raised the ante in terms of corporate sponsorship and involvement. International sport is now a multi billion-dollar business. There is a movement away from playing the games for sports sake to working the game for rewards sake, doing the sport to get a scholarship or a professional contract. The focus has moved away from intrinsic value of play to extrinsic rewards. We have moved away from winning as a motivating force for training and personal development to winning as the main focus and the only end worth striving for.

Most of these changes and problems have occurred in the last twenty years with the majority since the turn of the century. This warrants a look back at how we arrived at this point. This will allow us to frame how we look at athlete development going forward and we can derive some guiding principles from the lessons from the past.

Perhaps the biggest impact on developing athletes has been the changing role of physical education in the last ninety years. Physical education represents the foundation where the majority of athletes begin the development process through exposure to a variety of sports and the establishment of a base of general fitness. Physical education is a direct mirror of society and foreshadows what happens in the process of developing athletes. Historically trained physical

education teaches provided a pool of professionally trained coaches. By the 1920's physical education in the schools was an integral part of the curriculum for both boys and girls with the major influences from the Turnverein Movement, Swedish gymnastics and Educational gymnastics. It was physically demanding with an emphasis on fundamental movements and coordinative activities focused on better movement ability. By the late 1920's the emphasis began to change from general movement competencies called gymnastics toward an emphasis on dance, sport and games. The issue among physical educators at the time was should physical education be an education of the physical or an education through the physical. The vestiges of this debate still exist today. The element of physical fitness was still there but not to the extent it had been prior to this debate. Still society at that time was generally more active; most of the modern conveniences we know today did not exist. Children walked to school or rode bicycles. Free play was the norm; playgrounds and parks were open and available. There was no organized sport at the youth level outside of the schools. Manual labor was still the norm. This period coincided with the shift from a primarily agricultural, rural nation to an urban and industrialized nation. The industrial economy began to accelerate and along with this came the growth of the middle class. There was now some discretionary income and time to spend on sports so professional sport began to prosper.

Then came the 1930's and the Great Depression, a time of severe economic hardship with high rates of unemployment and economic cutbacks. This was reflected in sport and physical education. In the

late 1930's as the winds of war began to blow there was a realization that the youth of America were not physically fit to fight a war. This drove a change to emphasize fitness in physical education, but the games approach still dominated.

During the depression as part of the New Deal, government programs were started to create jobs and employ young men. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the National Youth Administration (NYA) were three programs that had a profound and direct effect on the sport, fitness, and physical education. The WPA had the most lasting influence through the construction of sport infrastructure. The WPA constructed gymnasiums, swimming pools, auditoriums, ski facilities, and stadiums. Many of these facilities are still in use today.

Needles to say WWII changed everything. On entry to military service the men and women were given physical exams where there was a high rate of failure. During basic training the young recruits proved to lack even the most basic fitness levels necessary to handle the training. Top coaches and physical educators were enlisted into the war effort in the US to train the troops, to coach military teams and run recreation programs for the armed services. Programs like the Navy V5 program were initiated to organize the physical training based on sound pedagogical principles. WW II also signaled a change in physical education research with a shift away from research on physical and motor testing to physical fitness and a shift to what later came to be called motor learning. This was driven by the

need to more effectively train pilots in decision-making skills and visual discrimination.

The US escaped the destruction and high loss of life in both civilians and combatants that devastated much of Europe and the Soviet Union as well as Japan. This played a major factor in our sporting dominance in Olympic games in the post war years through to 1960 Olympic games in Rome. There were no Olympic games in 1940 and 1944 due to the war, the games were started again in 1948 by then the world had changed profoundly and sport began to reflect these changes.

The takeover of the Eastern bloc countries by communism signaled the start of the Cold War. International sport became a battleground of political ideologies. The Iron Curtain countries made sport one of the cornerstones of the propaganda war. Success in sport was held up as a validation of their system. In the US we did not get that aspect of it. We continued doing what we had always done blinded by our continued success in international sport. The Eastern Bloc nations began systematic planning of athlete development that paralleled their five and ten year's economic development plans. They recognized that having fit youth was necessary for a strong military. They could not afford to leave anything to chance due their scarcity of human resources from the loss of what was essentially a whole generation during WWII. It is important to remember that it was not just the death of combatants but the civilian populations incurred a tremendous death rate. The United States did not suffer the losses

of life that the European and Asian countries incurred during the war and our infrastructure was intact because the war was fought overseas. We had a numerical advantage of a large healthy population as a talent base and sport in the schools as a structure to develop the athletes. We were able to dominate international sport without the systematic development programs that Eastern Bloc countries began to put into practice.

The Helsinki Olympic games in 1952 marked the first time that the Soviet Union competed in the Olympic games. This signaled the start of the Cold War in sport. Sport became an ideological battleground that the US was late to catch onto. Germany as a nation was not allowed to compete in 1948. Only what was then West German athletes competed in 1956. When East Germany (DDR) finally did compete as a separate nation in 1972 in Munich their results were borderline spectacular and their system became the model in international sport.

Due to the significant loss of life in Europe & Soviet Union and the destruction due to bombing the European countries were starting from scratch in terms of human resources and infrastructure. A whole generation had been effectively wiped out. They had to rebuild their sport infrastructure along with their industrial infrastructure. The key to rebuilding sport was obviously to develop their human resources to their fullest capabilities. In order to achieve this both the western European and the Eastern bloc nations took a methodical and systematic approach to developing their athlete's that did not show

immediate results but began to show up in performances at the Olympics games in 1960 and became clearly evident by the late 1960's twenty years after the war. Because the US did not suffer the same loss of life and massive destruction we were able to dominate in international sport based on sheer numbers and a healthy population. This success lulled us into complacency.

In the US after WWII there was an expansion of schools and period of relative prosperity, this was when the so-called baby boomers were born. They came of elementary school age in the early fifties and high school age in the sixties. By necessity schools expanded due to the increase in the number of school age children and subsequently sport participation increased. The coming of age of the baby-boom generation signaled the emergence of sport for children and youth. Age-group competitions and youth sport leagues began to appear for the first time in the 1950's.

In the US sport was centered in the schools and it was based upon and derived from physical education. There was mandatory physical education from kindergarten through twelfth grade nationally at the time I started coaching in 1969. Physical education teachers provided a trained cadre of coaches. Because the coaches were trained as educators with a strong foundation in pedagogical principles the coaching was fundamentally sound. With the comprehensive K – 12 physical education programs and the general activity level of society children grew up with a thorough foundation of physical literacy; they were well schooled in the ABC's of movement. In the US this was our

strength, it was our system, although not as clearly defined as the eastern European system it worked, some have called it a non-system. We had a large relatively healthy population of physically literate youth to serve as a deep pool of sporting talent.

A major factor in the changing climate of athlete development in the United States was the GI Bill that offered a paid college education to those who had served in the armed forces. It resulted in an influx of WWII veterans into the colleges after the war. These students were older and more physically mature and provided another pool of talent for the college and university sport programs. Many of the veterans who went to teacher training schools participated in sports and after graduation these veterans of military service formed the core of the physical education teachers and coaches through the 1970's.

We must also take into account the effect of supreme courts decision in Brown v Board of Education of Topeka Kansas in 1954 and ten years later the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the effect they had on providing the black athlete access to facilities, coaching and competition. This significantly changed the landscape of sport in the US. Before that the black athlete was limited to separate schools, facilities, competition and coaching. Subsequently after the slow start in the 1950's and then a significant step up in the 60's and 70's the black athlete gained access to the same schools and colleges, facilities and competition as the white athlete. In essence the pool of talent was significantly increased.

President Dwight Eisenhower established the *Presidents Council on Youth Fitness* in 1956 in reaction to the decline of fitness in our youth as evidenced by the poor fitness standards of military recruits in WWII and the Korean War. It later was renamed *President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports*. It was formed in large part due the attention on our youth physical fitness based on a study by Dr Hans Kraus and Ruth Hirschland comparing American school children with their European counterparts at the same age. The study was published in the **Journal of Health, Physical Education and Recreation** titled "Minimum Muscular Fitness Tests in School Children." The results showed that 60 percent of the American children failed, compared with only 9 percent of the European children. The Presidents fitness test and the associated Presidents Physical Fitness Award was established in 1966. It continues today is a very modified form.

In 1969 when I started coaching was probably the height of the school based sport system in the US. For many reasons into the 1970's and definitely by the early 1980's much changed. Perhaps the biggest change was the gradual erosion of the mandatory daily physical requirement in the schools. There was more time devoted to academic subjects. The first subject cut was physical education because it was deemed non-academic. With cuts in physical education there were no longer jobs for specialist physical education teachers, consequently fewer and fewer PE teachers were hired. This quickly affected sports coaching, as the physical education teachers who had been the pool of sport coaches had their jobs

eliminated. Schools now had to go outside the faculty to hire coaches. Many of these coaches had no background in pedagogy or any actual coaching experience; it was not long before a noticeable drop off in the quality of coaching in the schools occurred. In addition there was little continuity in the coaching from year to year because coaching stipends were minimal. Certainly it was not long before you began to see the effects in the young developing athlete. Those teachers that had entered the profession on completion of their schooling through the GI Bill were retiring and were not replaced as they retired. Over the forty plus years since I started coaching we have arrived at the point where today only two states have mandatory K-12 physical education and that requirement is somewhat watered down. In sports we are at the point where the majority of coaches in the schools are not faculty members. This has many implications that I will go into detail on later.

This resulted in the rise of outside sport teams that began in the late 1980's grew in the 1990's and has exploded in the new millennium. In basketball, baseball, soccer, softball, volleyball, lacrosse and to some extent track & Field and swimming sports outside the schools has taken precedence. Competition is no longer local but national in scope. Seasons are extended to mimic adult competition seasons with youngsters as young as 12 years old playing 100 plus baseball games a year and competing for national championships.

Until the 1970's interscholastic and intercollegiate sport participation was almost the exclusive domain of the male athlete in the secondary

schools and in the colleges and universities. Athletic participation for girls was limited to clubs in gymnastics, track & field and swimming and a few other sports. Basically girl's sports were recreational in nature rather than competitive. This began to change with the rise of the Eastern European nations where male and female participation were given equal emphasis. Both genders had access to top coaches and the same facilities, this led to early dominance of the eastern European females in the international arena. With the advent of women's liberation movement and different societal norms and mores women in the US began to demand equal opportunities for participation in sport. All of this was formalized in 1972 by the Title IX legislation passed by the US Congress that gave legal basis for equal opportunity for the female athlete to the same competition, coaching and facilities as their male counterparts. This was huge change in the whole athlete development scene. Unfortunately this coincided with the time when older coaches were beginning to retire and PE was being cut due to budget restrictions and a renewed emphasis on academics. Before Title IX where there had been one team, a boy's team, now there were two, additional coaches were needed and facilities were inadequate. It took time and a significant reallocation of resources. We are still not 100% there today as there is still a lack of qualified female coaches relative to the number of positions available.

The fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 was one of the most profound changes in the international sport scene in the last fifty years. With the breakup of the Soviet Union there were now more nations competing internationally which had a profound change on the

competitive landscape in certain sports, most notably track & field and swimming. Suddenly there was open access to the previously secret information and training methods of the former eastern bloc countries. What we found out was their methods were really not that advanced. Essentially they had strict control over their athletes in terms of training and their lives in general and in many of the countries most notably East Germany there was a comprehensive systematic doping program. In addition their athletes were now free to compete anywhere they wanted when they wanted and they were free to make money. Needless to say this changed the sporting landscape in many of the traditional Olympic sports. The breakup of the eastern bloc also confirmed what many had suspected regarding systematic doping. As the facts emerged it was very clear how tainted the training information actually was and the effect this systematic doping had on the development of the young athlete. The literature and subsequent methodology of long-term athlete development was heavily influenced by the systematic doping some of which was begun at very young ages. We need to be cognizant of this when we look at the Eastern European models of Long Term Athlete Development. We will address in greater detail as we look at proposed models of long-term athlete development.

The effect of globalization is as profound in sport as in any field. It is so trite but so true to say that the world has shrunk significantly over the last forty years and especially in the last ten years. Athletes and coaches can now access information on the Internet in a click of a mouse that used to take months to get. Our foreign aid and outreach

programs like the Peace Corps and various state department sponsored projects as well work from the international federations in Soccer, Swimming and Track & Field have increased the number of nations competing in World championship events and obviously the number of athletes. Look at Track & Field from the first IAAF World Championships in 1983 to 2011.

IAAF World Championships (1)

Olympic Stadium

Helsinki, Finland – August 7-14, 1983

Contested by 1333 athletes from 153 countries

Number of countries providing champions: 14;

Medallists: 25;

Finalists/top 8: 44

IAAF World Championships (13)

Daegu Stadium

Daegu, Korea – August 27-September 4, 2011

Contested by 1742 athletes from 199 countries

Number of countries providing champions: 16;

Medallists: 41

Finalists/top 8: 70

There are now Youth World Championships, Youth Olympics, and Junior World Championships that have signaled a profound change in the emphasis on how we develop athletes and how we look at talent identification. This has hastened the trend toward early specialization and harder training at younger ages in order to get results in these

competitions. There are pluses and minuses to this that will examine further in other chapters.

Technology has also had a huge impact on the process of developing athletes. Easy access to video, on site computer analysis has significantly changed how we teach and share information. The easy availability of video of training and competition to performers and performances on YouTube has had a huge impact on developing athletes. Kershan Walcott, 2012 Olympic Champion in the Javelin from Trinidad & Tobago said that his first coach was You Tube! The effect has been positive and negative, positive because athletes have access to high quality training advice and video; negative because there is no filter to separate the quality from the junk. What took weeks with film analysis in the 1970's can now be done on the iPad in minutes. The young athletes have grown up with technology so they know how to use and in fact expect it. This is a positive effect of technology that has opened up a whole new vista in teaching and learning sport skill. Facilities and Equipment have significantly improved with high schools, community centers and private facilities of the highest quality. Shoes, clothing and protective gear have advanced significantly

Starting in the 1950's television has had an increasingly bigger impact on sport. Where in the 1950's there was one baseball, basketball or football game on a week, now there is sport on multiple channels 24 hours a day worldwide. 24-hour sports beginning with ESPN in the early 1980's have had a huge impact on sport at all

levels. The networks continually need more competitions to feed the beast of more programming. So it was logical to find sponsors and begin to show youth national championships games and showcases. This also led to a decline in fundamentals because youngsters started trying to imitate highlight plays instead of focusing on the average play that happened all the time.

Sport drinks and supplements has become a major industry in the later half of the twentieth century. In the name of progress and with the advent of factory farming our diet began to change. At first it was a gradual change but starting in the 1980's increasingly more processed foods were brought to market. This is also when high fructose corn syrup began to be a major ingredient in many products. This significantly increased the junk calories, which many experts feel is a direct contributing factor to the epidemic of obesity and the high incidence of adult onset diabetes in children. As lifestyles began to change in the 1990's fast food became the norm rather than the exception. This coincided with the reduction/elimination of required physical education and a more sedentary lifestyle in general. This has had a profound effect on the ability to develop athletes. BMI crept up to levels never seen before. Today the emphasis in beginning an athlete in training and in a sport is much different that it was forty years ago. The young athlete is fatter and lacks general fitness due to poor dietary habits and a lack of physical literacy.

Much of the rest of the world relies on government funding and support for sport. Sometimes it is from lottery money like the UK and

in other nations it is from tax money distributed to sports through a government Ministry of Sport. In the US until the Amateur Sport act of 1978 our efforts in Olympic sports was very de-centralized. The Amateur Sport of 1978 brought some order from the chaos but frankly it still has many deficiencies. The Act chartered the U.S. Olympic Committee, which in turn charters a national governing body (NGB) for each individual Olympic sport. All funding is from fund raising; there is no monetary support from government in the US. In addition the USOC has no mandate to work on athlete development especially at the youth and emerging elite levels, that task is left to the National Governing bodies. Some do an exemplary job and other do very little or nothing. We have been spoiled by the production of our “non-system.” The schools and colleges have done the job but as we have seen in this chapter those foundations are changing and the alternative may not be as good what was in place before.

The professionalization of youth sports began to accelerate in the last two decades of the twentieth century and has exploded in the last fifteen years. Some of this has been in an effort to fill the void due to funding cutbacks in the schools and recreation departments. Parents have driven for this for the following reasons: There is the perception sometimes real that the coaching provided by the schools is substandard so they seek out private” expert coaching” for their children. The explosion of travel teams that play nationally and even in some cases internationally. There is no way the typical school can compete with this. Parents and children are lured by the chance of earning a college scholarship; the perception is that the increased

exposure from the traveling teams will help to insure this. The number of national youth and age group championships, the youth Olympics and other international competitions has contributed greatly to the professionalization of youth sport to the point where it is a billion dollar plus industry with no prospect of shrinking.

In the last decade of the twentieth century there was an increased emphasis on sport and exercise science. Some of this attention came from the perceived success of the Australian system that put a heavy emphasis on sport science support. This has continued in the new millennium with teams and colleges hiring sport science specialists. From my view this is fine as long as the coach is not marginalized in the process. Coaching the development of an athlete is an art and a science. You can learn the science but you must practice the art.

The young developing athletes of today have grown up in a digital world, a world of instant access to all types of information, a world of cell phones and text messaging. In working to develop upcoming generations of athletes we must be sensitive to these societal changes. This has a direct impact on how we teach and coach, how we communicate. The world has shrunk. Athletes in remote countries can grow up seeing NBA basketball or English Premier League soccer. It affords them the opportunity to see great athletes perform and to mimic and model their technique. It is changing sport. The same with sport video games. Children grow up with video games, they see the stars make moves and execute skills and they mimic them. As coaches we have to deal with this as a reality, it will not

change; we must adapt and use the changes to make the athlete better.

Conclusion

All of these issues/problems offer tremendous opportunities for solutions. My wish is that by putting this in a historical perspective we will find ways within the context of society and sporting to cultures to make the necessary changes. Change is not easy or comfortable but it is constant. The changes can be made with a united effort of all professionals involved in sport. Let not let another generation go by.