

# Recruiting and retaining track and field athletes

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13:1; 21-24, 1998

by Lyle Sanderson

“ Today track and field athletics is competing with a wide range of distractions and alternatives. Computer games provide easily accessible challenges. Children spend many hours watching TV. Commercial sport employs modern promotion techniques to sell their activity and create “Sport Heroes”. More and more children even hold part-time jobs. And last but not least single parents and parents in two income families have limited time to support their children’s involvement in sport. Against this background the author of this article asks the following question: (1) How can we make track and field athletics attractive to the children of the nineties? (2) What programmes will retain large numbers of potential athletes and encourage them to progress through the stages of athletic development to the senior level? (3) What strategies can coaches, clubs and federations adopt to attract and retain athletes? He arrives at the conclusion that changes are necessary to keep pace with the times and meet the needs of athletes of the computer age so that athletics can regain its popularity. If, however, things are done as they have always been done athletics will fall further and further behind. ”

*This contribution was presented to the North American Central American and Caribbean Track and Field Coaches Association Congress, Miami USA, October 9-10, 1997*

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## 1 Introduction

In recent years I have had the opportunity to study athletic programmes in a number of countries. Without exception concern, has been expressed at the high drop out rate, particularly in the teenage years. To ensure the continued success of our sport we must not only get the potential athletes involved but we must also keep them involved.

Attracting large numbers of children to our sport is obviously important, but the failure to keep those that have been attracted involved through adolescence and early adulthood is the real problem in most nations and systems.

We must ask ourselves:

- How can we make track and field athletics attractive to the children of the nineties;
- What programmes will retain large numbers of potential athletes and encourage them to progress through the stages of athletic development to the senior level; and
- What strategies can coaches, clubs and federations adopt to attract and retain athletes.

## 2 Factors contributing to loss of participants

Before we examine the foregoing questions we must understand the factors that have led to the current situation of reduced involvement and low retention rates in Track and Field Athletics. We must understand what some of the factors are that motivate children and youth. We must also understand where we have failed to meet the needs of potential athletes.

We are competing with a wide range of distractions and alternatives. These are computer age kids. Computer games provide easily accessible challenges. Children spend many hours watching TV. Commercial sport employs modern promotion techniques to sell their activity and create “Sport Heroes.” In many countries it has become fashionable for teenagers to hold part time jobs. Single parents and parents in two income families have limited time to devote to

helping support their children's involvement in sport. Different cultures have unique problems. Suffice to say that there are many competing distractions in all countries.

We must also examine the things that we do in our coaching that may be contributing to drop out.

Many coaches fail to understand and apply the knowledge of growth and development. As a result late developers are "turned off" and early developers are ill prepared for the times when they will no longer dominate just because they are "big and strong for their age."

There is no evidence that early developers will be better athletes than late developers when they reach adulthood. In fact there is some evidence that late developers have more long term potential. Such things as a higher centre of gravity in adulthood due to differential rates of growth of body segments give an advantage to late developers.

It has been known, since MARSHALL and TANNER (1969) published the results of the first longitudinal growth and development study, that there is a high degree of variability among prepubescent and pubescent children. Studies in a number of countries including the Saskatchewan Growth and Development study have obtained similar results. We know that the stages of development are established and occur in a predictable order but we cannot predict when any given individual will enter each stage or how long it will take to progress through the stage.

Figure 1 based on the data published by MARSHALL and TANNER (1969, 1970), illustrates the wide variation in development of both males and females. In both instances the late developer had not entered puberty at the chronological age where the early developer had completed puberty.

In addition to physical growth and development, motor development, cognitive develop-

ment and socio/emotional development are all taking place through predictable phases but at independent rates in each pre-pubescent and pubescent individual.

We have had the essential knowledge concerning growth and development available for almost thirty years and yet:

- Chronological age is still the major method of classifying participants in age class competition, resulting in the bigger stronger early developers dominating.
- Most talent identification systems are based on measurements that favour early developers; and
- In many instances little is done to help children and teenagers understand the quite normal changes that are taking place that have significant impact on performance.

We often see a talented girl drop out of sport when performance temporarily stagnates or deteriorates as her body develops toward womanhood. Proper counselling and encouragement is needed but often not provided.

I recall a private conversation with a highly placed official in the GDR. He told me that the well regarded East German talent development programme was flawed because the talent identification system missed potential high level athletes that were late developers.

Perhaps the most striking example of a late developer being missed comes from basketball where Michael Jordan, arguably the greatest player in history, was cut from a team that he tried out for as a child.

Fun and enjoyment are the most powerful motivators in attracting the retaining participants. We must ask ourselves *how can we make the work required for success a more enjoyable experience for all those involved?*

We often fail to recognize the importance of the "group" in our organization and approach to

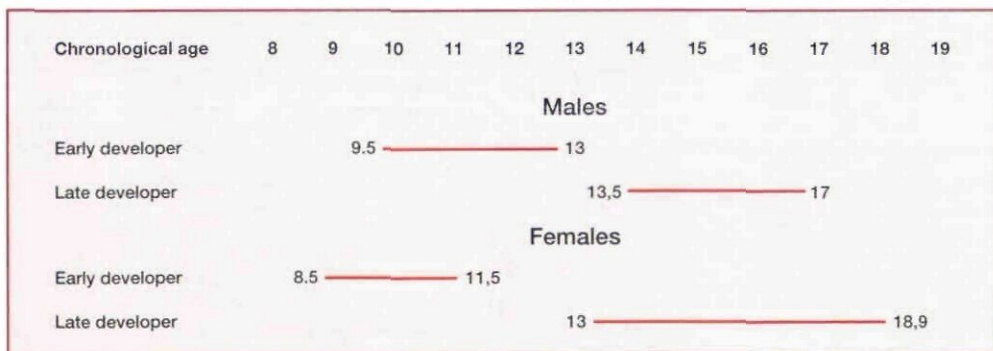


Figure 1: Length of puberty for earliest and latest developers  
Based on data published by MARSHALL and TANNER (1969, 1970), Institute of Child Health, University of London.

athletics. By emphasizing and rewarding the best performers we send a subtle message to the less talented that their participation is not valued. As a result only the more talented continue.

This leads to disintegration of the training group. As a result it is less enjoyable for the remaining athlete(s).

My experience in several countries, when asking obviously talented teenagers and young adults why they are no longer doing athletics, suggests that many stopped because *the enjoyment of participating with a group that was a powerful motivator in the athletes early involvement was lost when less talented group members dropped out.*

We must find ways to structure programmes so that athletes of a wide range of abilities can experience success and are motivated to continue in the sport.

### **3 What can be done to make track and field athletics attractive to the children of the nineties and beyond**

1) It must be recognized that technology is moving forward and we are dealing with computer age children. Athletics must keep pace with technological development. Such things as Web Pages on the Internet giving information about the sport are needed. We may not be far from the use of "virtual reality" in skill learning.

2) We must train our coaches to better equip them to deal with the needs of children. Coaching styles can either develop or destroy self-esteem. We can no longer afford to ignore growth and development in our programme organization and coaching practices.

3) We must actively endeavour to provide information to coaches, teachers and parents. The following are two examples of the type of material that is designed to provide information in a useful manner.

The Coaching Association of Canada has recently released "Straight talk about children and sport – advice for parents, teachers and coaches". This book is presented in an easy to use manner. The hope is that better informed parents, teachers and coaches will lead to a better experience for kids in sport.\*

The powerful video "Coaching the Spirit of Sport – Building Self-Esteem" distributed by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport is another example of an attempt to educate through technology.

\* A review of the book was planned for this issue but due to the limited number of pages we had to move it to the next issue. - the Editors

A programme in Puerto Rico could serve as a model for other countries. Government money is used to pay for highly qualified professionals who conduct seminars for parents and coaches of children's sports.

4) Innovative strategies must be adopted to reduce the problems associated with chronological age based programmes.

Competitions where athletes are grouped by ability rather than chronological age can provide a challenge for early developers who move up to compete against older athletes. This type of competition also increases the likelihood of success by late developers who now compete against children of similar ability.

Darren Wensor of "Little Athletics", New South Wales in Australia has developed the *Athletic Skills Award Programme*. This programme rewards children for technical development rather than absolute performance. This idea has great potential.

Combined Event programmes can be used to emphasize individual improvement. Participants have more opportunities for success in a combined event competition. There are three times as many chances for satisfying performance in at least one Triathlon event than in a single event. Any programme that emphasizes comparison with the participants own previous results has a much higher likelihood of the athlete achieving success.

5) We must use innovative ideas to make training sessions fun. The work required can be accomplished in many ways. Variety is important.

6) Athletics must work to develop and maintain strong links with the schools at all levels. Teachers influence children and have an important role in motivating children to become involved in sport. We must work to make track and field a sport that teachers will guide children toward.

7) The sport at all levels must strive to develop better promotional techniques to create our own *Sport Heroes*.

Since the victories of Donovan Bailey and the Canadian men's 4x100m relay at the Atlanta Olympics, interest in track and field and participation in meets in Canada have increased. The fact that Donovan and the other relay team members are working hard to promote the sport has certainly contributed to this.

8) Programmes that involve parents in the child's sport have great potential.

The "Little Athletics Program" in Australia is an example of such a programme. The philosophy of Little Athletics is "Family Fun and Fitness through

Track and Field." Children from age 6 to age 14 take part in parent organized training sessions and competitions. Over seventy thousand children took part in Little Athletics in 1995. This programme is independent of Athletics Australia and there are those who speak against it. Yet more than 50% of the current Australian Senior team were introduced to Athletics through Little Athletics. A number of these successful senior athletes credit the *enjoyment* that they experienced in Little Athletics to be an important factor in their development. It should also be noted that, with a few exceptions, these successful seniors were not the most successful Little Athletics participants.

#### 4 Programmes to retain athletes

If the participants have had a good experience at the entry level and in the early years of development, it is much more likely that they will continue in the sport.

Progressive programmes where each level builds on the previous level are much more likely to retain athletes.

1) Team competition can provide incentive to athletes of a wide range of abilities. Programmes like the school and university programmes in North America and interclub programmes in many parts of the world provide meaningful competition that motivates athletes to stay in the sport.

2) Programmes must be designed to meet the various needs of a wide range of individuals. We must recognize that not all participants aspire to become high level athletes. We must strive to develop athletes who take part for the love of the sport and provide programmes for them.

3) The social side of group involvement must be enhanced. Group interaction adds to enjoyment and also motivates athletes to train at higher levels. Coaches and clubs must work to develop and retain training groups.

#### 5 Strategies that coaches, clubs and federations can adopt to attract and retain athletes

Many of the suggestions given in the previous sections apply here.

1) Federations must recognize the needs of athletes throughout their development and provide meaningful programmes that meet these needs.

2) Coach Education must place more emphasis on the needs of children and young adults.

3) Clubs must strive to meet the needs of a wide range of athletes not just the talented few.

4) Coaches must understand and respect the needs of a wide range of athletes.

5) Parent education and involvement must be a major focus of clubs that involve children and teenagers.

6) We must use modern promotional techniques to ensure that the achievements of athletes at all levels receive recognition. We must create our own *Sport Heroes*.

#### 6 Conclusion

If track and field athletics can make the changes needed to keep pace with the times and meet the needs of athletes of the computer age, the sport can regain its popularity. If we continue to "do things as we have always done them" we will fall further and further behind. The choice is ours to make.

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