The first experience in athletics 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 and raise motivation. It will also serve to promote adult participation in athletics.

**Psychological considerations**

Fundamental to all other considerations with the beginning athlete are those dealing with psychological issues. Perhaps the most basic of these is the issue of providing an experience that 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 favourably to correction or criticism.

The most sound method of enhancing self esteem in the young athlete is to emphasize the intrinsic reward of participation, rather than competing for medals, records, trophies, etc.
sic 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.

To establish a good 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.

The biggest psychological issue the young athlete will have to deal with as success is achieved is that of pressure. Consequently it is important to educate the youngster from the beginning as to what pressure is and how to best cope with it. 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 that their expectations can have on the young beginner. This relates to the issue of intrinsic rewards, encouraging the athlete to participate for the joy of movement and letting the extrinsic rewards come as a by-product of the experience.

**Competition**

The biggest danger with competition 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, and stone or stick throws. The more variety the better 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 performance measured against their previous best. They must experience success in order to feel comfortable and maintain motivation.

Competition will assume a large role as skill and conditioning advance. When the young athlete reaches this stage, competition serves as feedback and a learning experience to measure progress. 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 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 that talent is identified early, nurtured, and developed to its fullest extent then 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 is readily apparent on the world lists, particularly in events where a high level of skill development is necessary.

The very successful model utilized by the GDR is an 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 is closely tied to the educational system through mandatory physical education taught by highly trained specialists. Their philosophy is that training will 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 same 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. This 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 2) to 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 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 - practice) [Piscopo & Baley, 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
<table>
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<th>Period of Participation</th>
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| **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 bodyweight 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 behaviour.  
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. |
of development. I have adapted this model to include psychological as well as competition objectives for each stage (Table 1).

Coaching/Teaching

Perhaps the most profound influence on the beginner is that of the 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 often the least prepared and competent in terms of coaching/teaching ability. It is thought that working at this level is less prestigious, requiring fewer teaching skills and knowledge. The opposite is the case. Working with the beginner is very demanding and the enthusiasm and joy of learning is most rewarding.

Having coached athletes from twelve years of age up to the elite level I am very concerned about the number who leave athletics because of a poor learning environment, unrealistic expectations placed upon them, or 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.

REFERENCES


SMITH, S., “Talent Identification and Development”, Track Technique Annual '81 Vern Gambetta Editor, pp. 41-45.