

Working backwards...or forwards

Ness

Tiny little thing – only 5'7" tall – but a giant on the High Jump fan. Arrived in Canberra with a best of 1.81m. After a time of training and adapting she started to improve but we always kept hearing of her nemesis in Perth - Christine Stanton - who was a giant of an athlete over 6' tall and jumping well over 1.90. There came a time when Ness had cleared 1.91 and so we decided on one of those 'arena skill' ideas – 'Let's go to Perth, in Christine's own back yard, and beat her'.

Easier said than done but one of those magical challenges that was more than technical and tactical. We took most of the squad across for a meet but I knew this was a 'big one' for Ness and the result would indicate how she would handle more than jumping pressure. She showed her steely nerve and concentration that balmy evening in Perth and set a new Australian record of 1.94 – 24cm over her own standing height. Ready for the rest of the world!

Jumped out of her skin under pressure in the Olympic final in Los Angeles and, but for some early failures at lower heights, could have put more pressure on the medallists. One jump from a medal in an equal PB of 1.94. Tiny tot – big heart – great competitor and another 'jewel' to coach. (From 'This is not a Textbook', Movement Dynamics, UK)

When I was coaching Vanessa I recall how my mind worked things out (or didn't many times!). After trying to watch every sector of the jump (approach run, pre-take-off plant, plant, take-off, flight and landing) I soon realised that it was 'information overload' for me. What became clear after watching hundreds of jumps was that each sector (including the start of the run-up) was affected by something that had gone before it. If she was still rotating at landing then bar clearance showed the problem already in motion. If she had an asymmetrical hip line at the bar then the problem was already in motion at take-off. If she was in a poor take-off posture then the problem was often already evident prior to foot-plant.....and so on. The reason for this never-ending quest for perfection? She had only a tiny bandwidth for failure because she was only 1.7m tall. She was competing in a world of giants who need only jump 16-18cm above their standing height to be competitive for medals.

Finding the words and 'pictures' to overcome the posture / action problem then became the critical issue. What to say? What to ask for next? How to say it? When to say it?

(Note - my following terminology will, no doubt, be indecipherable for the reader but might be a little recognisable by High Jump coaches.)

The journey to the solution saw me use a variety of cues and clues many of which did not work. Finally, and thankfully, a phrase or word or demonstration would key a change in what Ness was doing and she moved forward. Sometimes the answer lay in a phase happening prior to the fault which, once improved, led to improvement in the next section. Other times we changed something later in the jump that positively changed something that was happening earlier – a strange old world is this coaching stuff!

One such 'backwards' step involved Ness assuming a different shape above the bar (even though the fault was starting when she was still on the floor). By trying to get into a 'frog' posture over the bar she had to drive the free leg higher at take-off. To allow this to happen she had to present the free leg to the front earlier in the pen-ultimate stride before 'plant'. To do this she had to adjust posture during the final 3 strides of the approach run.

By choosing just one (lucky) phrase e.g. '*frog position over the bar*' we found that this affected the chain of actions way back in the movement sequence.

This is not an illustration of what I know or don't know about the techniques of High Jumping but an example of the 'art' of coaching. What to say; when to say it; how to say it, are traits born of

experience and do not appear in many text-books. You may get it wrong many times but the key is to keep on trying different cues, clues and teaching / coaching techniques with the athlete. They each have different learning styles so ensure that your tool-box has a range of solutions to choose from. Ness jumped an Australian record of 1.98m.

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