

## **Elite and Development Journeys – a commentary**

The UK seems to have found answers at the elite level at the moment (Olympics, Tour de France, Cricket, etc). Australia did the same in the 1990s and forged ahead in the international arena before government funding was reduced and assumptions failed to be questioned.

Planning for improved performance, such as these national performance strategies, can often lose sight of certain processes and very often continue to look for the 1% 'magic' spell' to make the difference. What we often see at the super-elite level is more 'science', more small detail, and many more actions that resemble spells, potions and gadgets. Now I am not saying that the delivery of improved elite performance by getting the details absolutely right is a flawed strategy – far from it. What I am alluding to is the failure to get the basics right strategically.

The elite layer of performance, although often well equipped to squeeze elite performance out of the chosen athletes, depends on 'what has gone before' at some stage. The 12 year-olds who were enthused by watching the 2004 Athens Olympic Games are probably going to make the 2024 Olympic team for their country. The question is – did each national strategy cater for their development optimally?

In their formative years the growing athlete is influenced by teachers and coaches in the school and club setting and what we often see is a focus on sports-specific and competition-specific development. If the thrust is to be towards improved performance in the international arena for the 'few' then the key must be to eradicate all limitations to future high-level performance - Technically, Tactically, Physically and Mentally.

Too often the session revolves around the technical and tactical elements of the chosen sport whereas the development needs of the athlete are across all four elements. Physical and mental development processes get relegated to a support role when, in many cases, these attributes need to be central to all activity. The ability of the strategy to create the correct balance of these four major pillars to the INDIVIDUAL is the key. For each athlete, the balance will be different and the training session (lesson or session) must be flexible enough to offer this individuality.

This means that coach education needs to have content that gives the coach the knowledge of what to do and how to do it with regard to all four pillars and to the unique adaptation and interpretation that each individual athlete will offer to the activities presented to them.

When I worked at the Queensland Academy of Sport (one of the most successful agencies for elite performance in Australia) the lack of balance became obvious once we commenced the journey to high performance. Athletes were selected for the QAS based on their ranking and perceived potential. Arriving in their mid-teens they would be expected to embark on a four to eight-year journey to high performance yet our initial steps were fraught with difficulty. Their 'ranking' may have been high but their inability to do the basic movements of Squat, Lunge, Push, Pull, Brace, Rotate and Hinge curtailed progress significantly. Exercise prescription had to undergo a major re-think before any progress could be made.

In the early days of the process, the Athletic Development practitioner (S&C Coach) tended to try to eradicate the movement limitations while the coach of the squad continued to push ahead with the usual frequency, density and intensity of technical and tactical work. Like 'oil and water' these two systems did not work together. A greater injury frequency was one of the results of this as the 'mechanically challenged' athlete succumbed to the load of technical and tactical training. The answer lay in getting the coaches to understand the problem. Their previous education (whether formal or informal) gave them little to go on and they had been forced to react to problems rather than be part of the long-term solution. What I found with nearly all the coaches at the QAS was that once they understood the integrated problem they were enthusiastic and creative with their reaction. We saw a shift in the balance between the four pillars on an individual athlete basis and although this added much complexity to everyone's planning and time, it soon became the norm. For some athletes the

shift was very distinct, for others more subtle but for all there was a 'building from the ground up' approach in these formative years of their journey to high performance.

With changes taking place to each training session the focus shifted from immediacy to patience and this change had to be reported to others 'on high' who perhaps were not as understanding of the change of pace in improvement. These 'decision-makers' who controlled strategy and, more importantly, budgets also needed to understand what was happening at the 'coal-face'. With patience being a new consideration it placed a different interpretation on the outcomes associated with the contracts of the coaches.

While we continue to look for those 'small detail' breakthroughs at the super-elite level and enjoy the current performance improvements it is opportune to remind strategists that 'what has gone before' will heavily influence 'what is yet to come'. Whether a child in a school or sports club is journeying towards simple well-being or complex high performance the road starts at the same point – getting the foundations done correctly at a level of permanent, repeatable excellence.

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