

## **The Participation Problem – Controlling the Controllables**

Another healthy discussion continues on the British Athletics Coaches Association (BACA) site with Malcolm Wallace offering some statistical observations on the problem of participation in the sport. This is a major problem with the younger generations and not simply because it reduces the depth of performance in the participation continuum but, more importantly, sees an increase in the horrible effects of sedentary living. If our job as teachers and coaches is to “first, do no harm” then surely to be able to create a journey that leads to permanent physical and emotional well-being is a priority.

It just so happens that physical and emotional well-being is a cornerstone of athletic performance so the journey for both high performance and well-being starts at the same place with the same outcomes being sought.

While we as coaches struggle with creating such a journey it might be pertinent to offer a position that might help those who are at the coal-face of delivery. The idea is this – control what you can control and keep your fingers crossed. You have very little chance of outgunning all those other influences on young people (Peers, Parents, other Adults, Social Media, Celebrity, Technology) but the one thing that you can do is be brilliant for the time that you are the main influence in the young person’s life.

*“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but they will never forget how you made them feel.” Maya Angelou*

Here are a few things to consider as part of that magical couple of hours you will create in the next session at your training venue.

*Precision, Progression and Variety*

*No laps, lines or lectures*

*Fit the program to the athlete (the opposite has never worked)*

*Spend some personal time with each athlete before, during and after.*

While it is really easy for me to write these phrases it will take considerable investment and change in Coach and Coaching Development to see these words turned into actions and behaviours that create the outcomes that we desire.

The listed phrases open the door to the actual prescription and learning that the session will contain.

**'Precision'** should stimulate skill acquisition in every General to Related to Specific movement pattern being encountered.

**'Progression'** should stimulate the use of all the tools available e.g. Explicit to Implicit learning opportunity; Static to Dynamic, Slow to Fast, Simple to Complex, Unloaded to Loaded, "Can-do, Can-do, Can't-do, Can-do" etc.

**'Variety'** implicates not only the complexity of challenges within the session but the use of 'variability' in the learning process.

**'Laps, Lines and Lectures'** illustrates the coaching pedagogy employed in terms of session preparation and management.

**'Fitting the Program'** illustrates knowing the answers to 'Who are they? Where are they? How are they?

The **'Personal'** element incorporates in the individualisation of the session, especially the skills utilised in giving feedback to the athlete.

The results of these phrases must eventually be seen in the adaptation of the athlete to the stimulus they are purported to contain. While I would be content to hear these words being used, I am convinced that the actions and behaviour created by them are far more critical. Their existence must result in measurable outcomes.

Unfortunately, seldom do we see the topics described by these phrases being delivered in our education packages. More importantly, seldom do we see these topics being translated into practical learning exposure for coaches. They are skills that need repeated practice and mentoring as part of the coach education journey and not just some jargonistic piece of wordsmithery.

In reality, each one of these statements should reflect a learning tool or sequence of learning processes in use by the coach. This is not the place to even attempt to flesh out the phrases into practical learning tools – they require hands-on workshopping and mentoring to get the message across. What is important is that however one interprets them and delivers them into the athlete's journey, they will go a long way to holding the athlete's attention and interest. We won't win every 'participation' battle but sound coaching practice will go a long way.