

The Competition Journey

Some facts:

- 20% of children aged 5-13 found sport too competitive and exclusive.
- Another 20% had reservations about sport being too authoritative and competitive – which takes the fun out of it.
- 17% are at risk of dropping out and need offerings that are inclusive regardless of skill level and are more social and fun.
- 10% of children aren't averse to competition but it isn't the key driver.
- 25% enjoy all facets of sport from the physical and mental to the social and competitive.

Shibli S and Barrett D. Bridging the gap. London: Sport Industry Research Centre for England Athletics, 2011, pp.1–66.

While I tend to agree with many of the statistics, particularly those that clarify the terrible attrition rate on participation, I know that there is no such thing as the average person or athlete. Every athlete will react to the journey differently and so we as teachers and coaches must be flexible and adaptable in the way we create and manage their journey. This flexibility must be seen in the way we approach competition along the journey. Use it appropriately and it could act as a catalyst for progression. Use it unwisely and it will be a reason for them to disappear from the sport.

Later, rather than sooner, the athlete must be prepared to carry out their tasks within a competition framework against others. There will be rules to contend with and outcomes to react to. These circumstances must be prepared for during the long-term journey to repeatable excellence and, like the journeys of technique, tactics, physical qualities and behavioural (mental) qualities, they have to be learned and progressed at an appropriate rate.

The current practice of exposing developing athletes to the rigours of watered-down adult competition rhythms and intensities as the sole system of progression is fraught with danger to the long-term journey.

"Most development programs are not designed to meet children's needs; they are designed entirely for adult ambitions." Richard Bailey

"The greatest enemy of progress is an environment that allows any kid to be defined as a high performer. That's just status anxiety masquerading as development." Al Smith

"The more we talk about learning stuff and the less we talk about winning stuff the better we get at developing excellence and the more likely we are to win." Al Smith

Generally speaking, progression in learning will result in progression in performance. This layer of the journey is certainly not linear. As the 'competition' process progresses from a more benign personal test, through to a contest with others present, and on to a direct outcome of ranking, so the athlete will experience some emotional reaction to the outcome. A sensible reaction to the athlete's interpretation of 'winning/losing' or 'success/less-success' needs to be cultivated. The challenge is, for those who only see the ranking outcome of the contest as being important, to shift the focus to using the many 'types' of competition for the benefit of progression.

When working with the developing athlete (6-16 years in particular) in an individual sport, use competition as a tool to manipulate within the long-term journey rather than it only being a tool used to rank the participants. The major aims for the development period should be:

1. Retention – keep 'em coming back for more.
2. Eradicate limitations in technical, physical and behavioural development.

The competition element should start as a personal test and not as a means of finding a winner or loser (plenty of time for this element to be developed). The competition can be created to find out the personal best in a variety of elements e.g.

1. The precision of a movement pattern
2. Consistency of a movement pattern
3. Accuracy of a run, jump, throw, kick, catch, strike
4. Time and distance / height of an effort

As time unfolds this quest for a personal best can be stimulated by encouraging it to be attempted in the presence of others. Even with others being involved in the environment the focus must remain on the personal best. The contest in the presence of others should see the 'opposition' acting as a further stimulus for the personal best. If the focus remains on the personal best as opposed to the ranking that results, then the competition remains a healthy, progressive one. The rules of the competition and other arena skills associated with a contest against others can be further developed whilst still managing the reaction to the outcome of the contest. By all means have the developing athlete participate in Club and local competitions (watch the fun and passion when 'relays' are in action!) but chasing 'National Champions' under the age of 15/16 years seems to be a waste of time and more a way of satisfying adult desires rather than the needs of the athlete.

I have an athlete learning the Discus throw and the associated 'turn' that comes with it. The contest at the moment focuses on the precision of body parts; consistency of movement patterns, consistency of balance when doing various spins and rotations, with video feedback being the judge. Every now and again the tape-measure comes out or the hoops come out as targets which form the contest environment. In other cases, each throw is followed by a series of related and unrelated activities before the next throw is attempted. This is an early form of arena skill development where long delays between attempts are often met in formal competition.

The athlete is slowly learning that she has absolutely no control over what others are doing, but all the control over what she does. She is taking on more and more responsibility to find an answer to the often-experienced errors in her learning. Yes, this takes time, this demands patience. By manipulating the constraints (e.g. standing throw; half-turn; quarter-turn; slinging sand-sacks; slinging Discus; target practice; long waits between throws; Golf Discus; etc) while maintaining the focus on the keystone movements, the learning encompasses variety and variability.

Here is an example of how I present the stimulus of competition to a young Shot-Putter. Every so often he is asked to do just 2 throws from standing with the 'goal' to get into the 'Chin-Knee-Toe' position each time; then to do 2 throws using a side-skip to the same 'Chin-Knee-Toe' position. He observes the video and gives his own marks out of 10 for each attempt. He is competing against himself and will have to handle the outcome. I have seen him frustrated with some results when things go wrong, and the answer is always to look forward to the next time he can get it right. There is always something coming up AFTER the result. Always another chance to get it right.

On a more specific level, every 3rd or 4th session he attempts to do a personal best in distance for (a) standing throw ('Can-do') (b) lateral skip ('Can-do') and (c) a half-rotational turn (Hard-to-Do'). If he is successful, then we move on. If there are degrees of being less successful, then we check out the errors and look forward to the next time he can put it right.

In each of these cases, he is having to face up to his technical performance as a form of contest. There are finite attempts and objective elements to face up to each time. Any errors seen in such personal contests become the focus for the next few sessions. These two illustrations I think are developmentally appropriate for this individual. Another athlete might deserve a slightly different process that suits their unique development rhythm.

Nearly every sporting organisation has the following statement written into its strategy – "Sport delivery should focus on fun and enjoyment rather than competition." While I agree with the foundations of this statement, I can't ignore that 'fun' gets accelerated when certain types of

competition are delivered. How many throws (Shot, Discus, Hammer, Javelin, Bean-bags, Sand-Bells, Quoits) does it take a team of 2 to reach a target 50m away with alternating throws done from the place of the previous landing? Who can win the 'Push- Back' game using Sand-sack throws (overhead, under-arm forward, side-slugs, backwards overhead, single-arm pushes, etc)? Which team of 3 can win the sprint and throw (over a high rope) relay using a bean bag. Which team of 3 can win the hole using Put, Discus sling and Javelin action throws with bean bags alternately?

While every young person should develop resilience to whatever outcomes life presents to them, they will only do it by being prepared for all the contests that life will bring. As parents, teachers and coaches we are in a prime position to carefully manage their exposure to 'winning and losing' so that the required robustness and resilience is learned at a rate suitable for the individual. We can't hide them from consequences. We need to encourage them to deal positively with these consequences.

April 2019
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