

Trying to do it Right

I have just finished a short adventure with a very young athlete, and it has been interesting to reflect on the ideas visited, decisions made, and outcomes achieved. Because my professional career in high-performance sport exposed me solely to young and maturing adults, dealing with 10 and 11-year-olds meant that I had to try to conduct the journey relative to all I have ever said about maturation, learning, fundamental movements, etc. Easy to do on a Powerpoint but far more demanding in real-life.

The athlete in question has parents who embrace the 'late specialisation' idea and keep their daughter sampling a variety of activities Swimming, Soccer, Netball, Athletics and, more importantly, the Athletic Development component. I am involved in the latter element and Athletics and, in the latest adventure, the Swimming component. She belongs to a Swim Club where a very experienced Coach runs squad sessions. He is an absolute delight to work with and has a wonderful holistic approach to his craft. He suffers as many other squad coaches with large numbers in the group and although the physiological progression is carefully presented, the delivery of individual technical development is under severe time restraints. She started the latest Swimming campaign in late November 2018 after a delightful Athletics campaign where she reached the Regional Championships in Long Jump, 100m, 200m, Discus and Shot and the State Championships in 100m, 200m and Discus.

While she continued development in all four swimming strokes, she did have a personal excitement about Freestyle and Backstroke and that early passion was explored when certain competitions arrived. She started to play a role in the decision-making of how the next 4 months would unfold, and we recognised some competitions as being for technical concentration and others for personal best attempts. Another facet that she brought to the table was a desire to reach the 'Nationals' – the final frontier at schools level competitions.

As the New Year arrived it was decided to strike a balance between the Squad training and an attempt to bring in to play some elements that could not be done in the squad environment. Two things were better served by the individual sessions – (a) technical learning (b) developing this technique at the required race-pace. I am a firm believer that during the formative years of skill development technique must be learned at a variety of speeds and complexities and not just explored within a volume environment. Sooner or later the technique that is being learned will have to be exposed to speed, fatigue and pressure and so the journey must involve appropriate exposure to these elements.

The modern world of Swimming still sees such large numbers being coached in sessions that many technical or individual needs can easily slip through the net. Add to this the propensity of many coaches to base progression on volume and it is easy to see why some technical and technical/physiological elements can be forgotten. The biggest element of such squad training is that individual learning can be compromised due to the lack of progressive feedback in large squads.

She also started to play a role in other elements, particularly the learning aspects. I had to adhere to what I was saying in all the workshops and conferences I was doing with sporting organisations – teach technique and arena skills using the entire explicit to implicit learning continuum. This meant that I had to assemble the language and vocabulary to deliver appropriate analogy cues, external focus cues and puzzles for her to solve. These learning opportunities were all built around the technical journey of: Posture – Arms – Legs (PAL) for 'entry, catch, pull, exit'; 'posture and connection' for each of the strokes.

I also encouraged her to understand and make decisions on the format and consequences of the sessions by giving her choices in the session structure. After she had experienced a number of repetition/sets, work/rest variations on a theme, she made decisions on the training prescription for some of the sessions.

I also ensured that within the Athletic Development sessions she was being exposed to movement patterns that would support the PAL of the swimming journey (without lessening the adaptation to the other patterns that Soccer, Netball and Athletics were demanding).

Finally, this whole 'physical' journey had to be woven into the fabric of her school, social and family life which demanded that she followed high-quality nutrition, rest and relaxation components. Without a serious commitment to this life balance there is no doubt that her early teen-age years will see her as just another kid who stopped participating.

She started her competition program in late November 2018 with the following times for her favourite events: 50m Freestyle – 36.03, 50m Backstroke – 42.07

By the end of January, as the shared squad / individual training started to settle in, she set the following times for her favourite strokes: 50m Freestyle – 33.86, 50m Backstroke – 39.82.

While this Swimming journey was taking place with all the inherent technical and arena-skill challenges, so other elements of the week threw up on-going challenges e.g. she was learning a full Discus turn; she was continuing to learn the foundations of her running mechanics; she was learning new types of Squat, Lunge, Pull, Push, Brace, Rotate, Hinge and Landing; she was experiencing different loads and speeds of many of these. Some were presented as puzzles to solve while others followed a load progression stimulus. Every one of these challenges became a mini-journey of discovery/learning and performance breakthroughs. For example, she would choose the Chin challenge for the week where she chose the grip and the repetition aim and then went out to get a personal best. We used the phrase 'win or learn' so if she failed to reach the standard she set she would try to find the solution herself by progressing or regressing the activity in some way. I would try not to keep on solving the problem for her (no matter how I was bursting to give her the solution) but would give her ideas from which to choose (my clumsy 'guided discovery' attempt).

Of course, all the sessions were written in pencil. Every day she would arrive in a different frame of mind or at a different level of readiness because at 11 the world throws different pressures and experiences at you daily. If she was up earlier in the morning for violin practice (Yep, she does that as well) she will be a little more fatigued by the end of the day. If she plays hard 'Tiggy' with her mates at recess on a hot day she will be more tired for training. While I had a good idea when to back the load off on these days, I also knew that variety would act as a stimulus. If the session was 'different' she could often overcome some of this fatigue and keep progressing her adaptation. An example of this was an 'elastic' session in her backyard pool. Rather than travelling to a 50m or 25m pool she would stay at home and be attached to strong elastic around her waist and do the session. I kept an appropriate pull on the elastic, and she had to do a variety of activities e.g. short and long recovery races for 33secs Freestyle or 39secs Backstroke. After a rest, she might reduce the time by 2 seconds and repeat in a 'down-the-clock' manner e.g. 33sec-31sec-29sec-27sec. After a worthwhile rest, she might then try to go 'up-the-clock'. Other sessions saw her using a number of strokes as the load e.g. Backstroke flat-out for 40 strokes, then 38, then 36, then 34, then 32, etc. This variety seemed to act as a stimulus that then allowed her technical and physiological load to be achieved and then progressed. Variety – Progression – Precision was the order of the day. She seldom went more than 400m in each of these sessions, but they were VERY fast (and very enjoyable for her).

By the end of February her times were: 50m Freestyle – 31.94, 50m Backstroke – 36.58. Now her eyes lifted to the State Titles and the lure of the 'Nationals'. My guidance kept on getting her and her parents to concentrate on her own personal best. Even when they were all told that 'we have no control on how fast the other girls will go' and 'many of your opposition are swimming 6-10 sessions per week compared to your two sessions' the lure of the 'Nationals' prevailed. Bless her for aiming at such a big mountain; bless her for having the nerve to aim high; bless her for knowing the consequences of such a high aim (I never let her stop knowing the reality of the journey and how she should approach success and failure – e.g. 'win or learn').

Last Monday, March 25th, 2019 she was in her Regional Medley relay team that won Gold at the State Titles. One hour later she was in the regional Freestyle Relay team that broke the State record to win Gold. She split with a new personal best of 31.19.

The next day she set a personal best in the heat of the 50m Backstroke with 35.98 and then one hour later set a new personal best of 35.72 to come 4th. She missed her dream of the "Nationals" by nineteen-hundredths of a second.

Then I watched an 11-year-old girl with a broken heart as she walked towards me after the race. Not much for me to say at this point apart from 'tomorrow you get to go back to the office and try again'. Tomorrow is another chance for us all. The next 12 hours would tell me and her, and her parents what character she had. How she viewed and handled those two imposters of winning and losing.

At 1.45pm on March 27th she set a new personal best on the 50m Freestyle of 31.06 to reach the final in an event she was not expected to do as well in. She finished 6th in the final with 31.19 but the personal best of 31.06 done following the debilitating disappointment of the Backstroke was an immense illustration of the human being she is and can be. This stuff is not all about times and championships but about the resilience of the human spirit to overcome and move onwards and upwards. This young lady has started her life's journey with some pretty decent foundations.

March 2019
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