

Tournament Contests – there is a difference

In recent days, as part of my exchange of thoughts with fellow coaches, I have found myself offering some thoughts on the skills required to set the lifetime / season-best performance in the arena when it matters the most. In a recent Tweet I said:

Preparing for a tournament (Commonwealth Games, Olympics, World Champs) is usually very different to regular Club competitions. Use training to rehearse the difference e.g. lane draw; 2 races (PB's?) in one day; 2 days of PB's; foul throws / jumps; long waits between efforts; location.

As it is always difficult to set out all the context in a 'Tweet' I thought it best to make some further observations about this aspect of the performance continuum. A tournament-type of competition structure sees several distinct changes in circumstances for the coach and athlete to consider. While these differences appear to be benign because they seem so normal and certainly not difficult elements to understand and recognise, they are sufficiently different to warrant some rehearsal. Handled well the different processes can have some positive effect on the outcome. Handled poorly the opposite will prevail.

The key issue in all this is that while much of the tournament emphasis occurs in the high-performance layers with the seasoned athlete, some of the groundwork must be laid during the development years. There is one critical quality that starts its journey during the formative years – the independence of the athlete. Our job is to give them the '*roots to grow and the wings to fly*' so when they are flying solo in the tournament arena they are equipped technically, tactically, physically and mentally to take charge of their destiny and react mindfully to anything different that might occur. Some of the finer points of these 'arena skills' will only be appropriate in the high-performance layers so not all the detail will need to appear in the development years. The development years are for securing repeatable excellence in the foundations and fundamentals – after all, there is little value in taking limitations in the basics forward into the high-performance setting. The development years, however, are the start of the journey to independence and so we should expect to see an appropriate and progressive change in some of the coach – athlete relationship. This might be illustrated by there being a subtle shift from simple 'instruction' to more 'questions' as part of the feedback from the coach. It might also be illustrated by greater variability in skill acquisition to encourage greater adaptability along the learning pathway. The overall aim is to have the athlete robust and resilient technically, tactically, physically and mentally – this must be planned for and the tools to create these adaptations must be in the coach's toolbox.

Some other differences

The time of day that the competition occurs is seldom a surprise and so there should be plenty of rehearsal of the required daily rhythms. We already know that the Doha World Athletics Championships will be in late September 2019 and that the Tokyo Olympic Games will be in late July 2020 so we have some broad notice one when the best performance will be necessary. Once the detailed timetable is known more changes in preparation timing, type and rhythm can take place to account for this detail.

Domestic competitions usually start and finish at a regularly occurring time as the season progresses, but the tournament rhythm is usually completely different. For the first time an athlete may have to compete relatively early in the morning, and relatively late at night – a far cry from the normal afternoon rhythm seen in domestic competition. It is not just the time of competition that needs to be considered but the effect on all the other elements linked to this time change e.g. sleep, waking time, meals, travel to the arena, warm-up start and finish.

In practical terms, the athlete must learn the skills of independence by knowing how to assess the environment and react well to unexpected changes.

One of the big differences is the warm-up timeline and rhythm alongside the access to a personal coach. Let's start with the latter. Unless the personal coach is accredited by the team management

they won't be there on the day of the competition. The warm-up arena is 'by invitation only' and it is likely that an athlete will have to commence a relationship with another coaching identity in the warm-up arena just before the competition. Not the best time to make a first contact. The timeline of the warm-up will also be different to the usual, less than formal, process seen in the domestic competition. After a warm-up period the athletes will be taken to a 'call-room' for final assembly. This can be up to 30min before the event starts so the 'call-room' may also have to double as part of the athletes physical and mental preparation. Some facilities have warm-up space at the 'call-room' but others just have the room itself. Formal gear-checking takes place here, so athletes need to be prepared for officials to carry out their administrative duties with a certain formality. Part of the 'call-room' experience may well include sitting opposite World and Olympic champions and having other athletes engage in conversation.

Weather conditions can change which affect approach runs in the Jumps and some Throws. As I have said on many occasions – "the approach run is the event" – so changing wind conditions must be considered. Has the direction changed? Has the wind strength altered? Is it different at the take-off area as well as the approach run start? The key decision then is – how much to alter the approach run start? Only experience (and learned from mistakes) in training will give the athlete this experience. Why only train in favourable wind conditions?

Disqualification of an athlete in the lane outside you in a circular track event might alter the athlete's spatial awareness and judgement as they are confronted with a large empty space where another runner would have usually been. Drawing an inside or outside lane in a circular track event may also need some rehearsal as vision and pace judgement are often very different from drawing a middle lane.

Qualification rules for progressing to the next round in track events will have certain effects on the tactical awareness needed e.g. what has been happening in the other rounds?; what pace-judgement will be required as the race unfolds?; what position do you need to finish in a heat to get the best lane in the next round? – so – how to react? What to change? How much to change it?

The 'disqualification' element is also worth a mention here. The usual places for disqualification are: starts, leaving the lane, impeding another competitor, relay change-overs. Useful to regularly go over the rules for all of these – assume nothing!

After each attempt in the Jumps and Throws the athlete must learn to give themselves their own feedback and to make appropriate decisions with this information. If all they have ever done is look to the coach for answers, then decision-making will suffer at the exact time that appropriate decisions are necessary.

The principle overview is that a multi-round contest will bring about distinct requirements that are different to the usual single-contest day as often seen in inter-Club domestic competition. While the latter might demand a specific fitness level for the once-weekly effort, so the former will demand fitness for repeated efforts in short to mid-range time periods. While an inter-Club competition cycle might see maximum efforts separated by several days, the multi-round contest might demand a personal best twice in a single day followed by another two personal bests the next day.

Imagine the specific fitness required by those athletes who want to 'double-up' such as seen with 100m and 200m sprinters or those doing their individual event alongside relays. The 'doubling-up' decision requires a lot of thought and even more special preparation.

Throws and Jumps bring their own unique frequency and density of energy requirements. In the inter-Club environment efforts can be spaced every few minutes, particularly in the often-seen small fields of local competition. In the tournament situation it is often the case that these efforts are nearly 30min apart which demands a longer cyclic build-up to each effort. For example, if an athlete passes a certain height when there are still several competitors in the competition, the time between attempts can be a considerable one. In some cases, an appropriate re-warm-up is required prior to each effort.

Add to this the qualifying laws that often prevail and further stress can become apparent. Where you may have 6 attempts in the Throws and some Jumps in the domestic competition, so you might find yourself with only 3 attempts in some qualifying rounds. The ability to 'build' performance through the rounds in the domestic competition often disappears when faced with needing to qualify with just one attempt if energy is to be saved for a subsequent final the next day.

These elements are not just for the coach to know but for the athlete to learn and adapt to. The training session, therefore, needs to be planned to account for this adaptation. Well in advance of the tournament the coach/athlete unit should have created a work/rest-cycle (intensity and load manipulation) that consistently creates a high-performance outcome on a chosen day. Repeating 3 and 4-day cycles are known to be effective in the competition season but only trial and error will ascertain the most accurate, repeatable outcomes for the unique individuality of the athlete. Once this cycle is determined it should then be exposed to any of the 'differences' illustrated previously and re-calibrated as necessary. It is well known that some athletes have created cycles of preparation that fit for a variety of scenarios encountered in the competition season. See all this as the 'arena-skill' toolbox that the coach-athlete unit must fill appropriately along the journey.

I have probably missed loads of these elements but hopefully others will chip in with some other important 'differences'. There are plenty of issues to discuss such as travel; sleep; culture; language; warm-up meets; etc.

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