

## How to run a successful children and youth sport program

By: Tommi Paavola (first published in Athletic Business magazine in November 2006)

**Summary:** Developing sports training programs for youths requires more profound knowledge, a more involved mind-set and different tools than creating programs for adults.

The demand for services that teach young people sports skills — particularly those that help develop motor abilities and basic athletic techniques — is increasing steadily in the United States. Countless performance facilities and fitness centers are running programs for 7- to 16-year-olds, with the main emphasis on speed and agility programs for youths playing baseball, football, soccer and basketball.



Kids' lack of recreational activity and the alarming trend of early specialization in sports are two of the reasons why sports training programs for youths can be beneficial in terms of movement skill development, weight management and general fitness. However, the quality of the services and the child's interest are at risk if proper guidelines and specific approaches are neglected in the heat of a profitable moment. It is a fact that creating sports training programs for youths requires more profound knowledge, a more involved mind-set and different tools than creating programs for adults.

With that in mind, the following eight concepts should make up the core philosophy of any successful sports training program for youths:

### 1. Children Are Not Small Adults

Coaches often are not educated enough in children's and youth exercise physiology — added to which, they are pressured to always win. Too many of them design training programs according to the goals and abilities of adults. The intensity and duration of the drills, and the drills themselves, often resemble a training session for mature athletes.

I sometimes watch a football team of 10- to 12-year-olds conditioning in the field by my house. When I see the team running sprints in the heat in full gear, running lap after lap and falling to the ground, I begin to ponder the objective of the drill. My guess is that the goals are metabolic development and, possibly, mental toughness. Yet, because of the young body's inability to respond to the given training modality, it is not clear whether the goal of this training will translate to success on the gridiron. In other words, even if those young athletes develop physically and mentally through that drill, the lack of running technique and poor movement skills under fatigue won't likely translate in a positive way to the actual playing of the sport. The same drill might be excellent for the athletes who are able to utilize their advanced motor skills and reap the benefits metabolically, but not their younger counterparts. This example demonstrates only one situation in one sport, but it can be seen in one shape or form throughout youth sports.

### 2. Athletes First, Players Second

Coaches are often tempted to teach and practice game-specific skills more than general athletic skills, since game-specific skills are the ones that eventually determine which team wins and which loses. Limited training time and people's high expectations of success can also lead to this exaggerated emphasis on developing sport-specific skills. Development of general athletic skills, such as jumping, landing, skipping, lunging, twisting and hopping lay the foundation for game-

specific skills and is vital to becoming a healthy and successful athlete. Narrowing the variety of movement skills before the athletic foundation has been laid can risk a child's long-term development and suffocate his or her true potential.

Injuries — particularly overuse injuries — at an early age are often a sign of excessive game-specific training at the expense of general fitness and motor skills. Learning how to incorporate the components of athletic development in the training program is key to the creation of a successful, child-oriented sports program. It is good to remember that athletes practice these skills throughout their career to improve their game-specific performance and to prevent injuries.

### **3. An Age-Sensitive Approach**

Coordination, balance, speed, flexibility, agility, strength and endurance are all important components of human movement and sport performance. The different stages of a child's growth and development determine which motor skills should be emphasized in training programs. For example, speed and agility progress optimally during the "skill hungry" years of 8 to 12, whereas strength and endurance become important in subsequent years. A 10-year-old boy is at his peak period to enhance acceleration speed and change of direction through games like tag or short shuttle runs. Drills that incorporate multidirectional hops on a single leg are well absorbed by children age 8 to 12.

During puberty, on the other hand, some of the fine motor skills regress as the body adapts to huge changes in height and muscle mass. A primary objective during this awkward time should therefore be learning basic movement patterns and exercises for dynamic flexibility and foundational strength. Exercises such as lunging or single-leg squat variations in all planes combine the objectives of strength, flexibility and coordination, and help the body maintain and enhance athleticism even during the clumsier periods of physical maturation.

The developmental stages before and during puberty should focus on children's strengths, not weaknesses. Later, during the high school years, will be the time for youngsters to refine their athletic skills by incorporating all the areas of movement training into the program. Flexibility becomes much more important, and strength and endurance abilities are better absorbed at this stage than earlier.

It is important to recognize, also, that each individual has a different developmental pace. The aggressive push to "peaking" in high school sports, and even earlier, often neglects the physiological needs of potentially great athletes. As a matter of fact, many internationally successful athletes found their specific sport in college or even later.

### **4. It Must Be Fun**

The importance of fun is often neglected or misunderstood in youth sports. A persistent viewpoint in this country is that the only thing that brings results is hard work, even with respect to children and physical activity. Sometimes people's limited understanding is that fun means telling jokes between drills, or that everyone is laughing hysterically all the time. Often people want to separate result-oriented activity from fun because they cannot connect results and fun in their own minds. What is "fun" — and can it really be an important part of performance enhancement?

It is striking how much better one learns something if one has fun doing it. Emotions are a big part of multi-dimensional human systems. Emotions are tightly connected to physical performance and to the response generated by physical activity. Motivation or inspiration enhances learning on a cognitive as well as on a physiological level, and that is why fun is so important.

"Fun" can be defined as a balanced combination of skill and challenge. A positive, fun experience

can be created if the task is challenging enough but rewarding, as well. Sometimes fun is expressed by laughter, but it can also take the form of a deep feeling of inner satisfaction. How do you know if the program you are running is fun? Are the children coming back for more, week after week and month after month? Fun is really the only thing that is going to keep children coming back to practice.

Evaluate your program by the number of children who start and finish it. In addition, see how many come back, and how many refer others to future programs.

### **5. Long-Term Development, Not Short-Term Success**

Are you sure that your coaching philosophy will help the athletes in their careers beyond high school and college? Does your training approach as a coach of a young athlete vary depending on the planned age of peaking? Are your coaching and training methods an important part of the progressive development to athletic maturity? And if so, why?

Coaches might not always realize that the decisions they make in their training programs could be determining when the athletes reach the peak of their competitive careers. Youth coaches tend to look at success early in the athlete's career as the best measurement of their own efforts. The real challenge, ethically and professionally, is to acknowledge that the coach's actions today can decide the long-term future of the athlete, and to evaluate the training methods according to the years following high school and possibly college.

A youth coach should always choose training methods with the long-term career in mind, which sometimes might mean compromising short-term success. Are you ready to do this for the good of the child, or is it too important to win today at the expense of tomorrow? Obviously, one can be a successful youth athlete and a successful master athlete — the optimal situation. The greatest dangers to long-term development are premature specialization, high-intensity training or too many competitions. Lack of foundational athletic skills or training at too high an intensity can stunt the development of a young athlete as well.

### **6. Safety and Productivity**

A safe atmosphere is a prerequisite for learning, success and fun — and indeed, everyone says they make safety a priority in their youth programs. While acknowledging that accidents can happen even when risk management is properly handled, planning and running well structured and instructed programs is what secures a program's physical safety.

Beyond that, mental and social safety are just as important to a program's success. Mental safety thrives in an atmosphere where there is freedom within boundaries and discipline through caring. A productive mental atmosphere is created by clear rules and instructions, and a "lead by example" attitude. Children need to know and understand the rules, and see that instructors take the rules seriously, too. If a coach tells players to respect their teammates and then proceeds to mock a particular player, the concepts of mutual respect and adherence to rules disappear. More than any other group, young people require that their coaches exhibit a great deal of character and maturity.

The coach is also responsible for the social safety of the group, and each child needs opportunities to express him or herself without negative peer pressure. Bullying cannot be part of a successful children's program or team. Little "tough guys" on the team cannot be allowed to step up and take charge. The coach has to make the rules clear and follow them, too.

## 7. Do What You Can Do

How do you teach a new skill? Are you able to demonstrate an exercise or drill with the attitude and technique that you demand from your athletes? The rule of thumb with children is: Only teach what you can do and show yourself. You can explain the drill in great detail, but the demonstration will decide how the drill will be executed. It's a physically demanding task, but coaches should always prepare to demonstrate the exercise as well as they possibly can.

Work on one area of emphasis at a time and give specific cues such as "lift knees higher" or "hold it for the count of three." Always initiate the corrective feedback with a positive comment and search for strengths in the performance to accelerate the development in those areas: "Alex, excellent footwork on the shuffle — show me if you can keep the toes pointing forward on the next round."

The attention span in new learning is short. In teaching, you can move past this potential stumbling block by giving the same exercise repeatedly while modifying it a bit each time. For example, a single leg balance can be practiced as a timed balance test, a passing drill on one leg and a tag game on one leg. After the basic movement skill is taught, it is time to practice it in the more randomized setting of a game. The game will show you whether the skill was really learned, and whether you can expect it to be transferred to the sport situation.

## 8. Keep It Simple

Rarely does a practice session allow enough time to accomplish everything from athletic development to sport-specific skills. If practice takes place one to three times per week, it is a good idea to give simple tasks as homework. The short bursts of independent exercise will accumulate little by little and show results over the long term. The homework also teaches accountability and the importance of daily physical activity.

It is a great idea to always start the training the same way and create an opening and warm-up protocol so that children can eventually do it without instruction. A combination of exercises done in a logical order will not only prepare the body for the practice, but also switch on the mind so that it is ready to respond and absorb. If you decide to give homework, leave time at practice to observe the learning results, and encourage the most active home students.

Non-programmed recreational play is the most important time to develop motor skills and to help ensure an athletic and healthy future. Youth sports coaches need to accept that playtime with friends might be more beneficial for children than any organized activity offered, including the sport practice that they coach. The culture of free play is vanishing, and youth sports enthusiasts should be in the trenches fighting to preserve it. It is the most important of nature's athletic reserves, and the best homework coaches can give.

### Operational Tips for Youth Sports Training Programs

- *Create solid core values for the program.* A successful children's program needs to have a solid foundation of values and guidelines. Everyone affiliated with the program must be able to communicate its core values and objectives. A set of values or a mission statement is the foundation on which all the program variables are based. The ethical foundation gives validity to the program and will enhance its longevity.

- *Educate parents and the public.* Another role of a successful youth program is to educate the people involved. Every youth sports program looks the same on the advertisement poster or flyer, but the contents vary dramatically. How can parents make educated decisions for their kids if they rely on marketing materials? Administrators and coaches need to arrange situations to meet with the parents to share important knowledge that can benefit their children.

Demos and workshops for teachers and other coaches are also an effective way of sharing information. Practical, hands-on situations will make a lasting impression and transfer learning into teaching.

- *Choose great role models as instructors.* Why do we think that basically anyone without a criminal record can teach children? Does that reflect how we value the future of our children, or just our ignorance? Coaching and teaching children is a far more influential responsibility than instructing adults, and should be taken very seriously.

Coaching children does not require a Ph.D., but rather a genuine caring for children and a desire to learn more about coaching, teaching and instructing youths. Who does not remember the elementary school physical education teacher or the coach whose influence still carries over in our lives? Every youth coach is a role model, and hopefully is aware of it.

- *Envision the purpose beyond the score.* We need to acknowledge that we are in the business of improving children's quality of life and creating a lifetime interest in health and fitness. We have a crucial role in helping children obtain the physical, mental and social tools and abilities that will help them be successful in the future. Children learn most effectively by doing and moving instead of just sitting and thinking, and the sports field is the classroom where they learn about life. Emotions such as satisfaction and joy, as well as disappointment and frustration, are all part of sports. Youth coaches are in the optimal position to mentor young people with their words of encouragement and correction and, even more so, through their example.

Every child benefits from physical activity, athletic or not, and our job is to help them stick to it over time. For some, it means the Olympics. For others, it means simply staying happy and healthy.