

Coaching

<http://www.usfigureskating.org/content/office-training.pdf>

As a given sport evolves and the participants within that sport begin to break records and perform what was once considered impossible, you can be sure that advancements in training and conditioning regimes have occurred within that sport.

Very few athletes ever become great sport technicians without the inclusion of a comprehensive athletic development and conditioning program as part of their training package.

Over the past decade, the type of training and conditioning performed by young, developing and elite athletes has gone from basic fitness to more functionally-based and developmental activities. Figure skating and all of the disciplines under that umbrella are such examples.

For example, many training coaches prescribe that their skaters practice landing jumps and performing balance based skills (such as spirals) off the ice.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are the 'athletic developers' who tend not to concern themselves with producing specified strength gains but instead work more directly at improving the complete athletic profile of the skater.

The general conception among these professionals is that the greater degree of athleticism the skater has, the more likely he or she will be able to carry out athletic skills.

While traditionalists often incorporate basic and conventional exercises into their training programs, the athletic developers come from a more movement based perspective.

This style of conditioning is often referred to as 'functional' training, which is in fact a misnomer. Let's examine that.

'Functional training' right now is a concept without a real definition; Many people believe that if an exercise is being performed on a Swiss Ball, Wobble Board or some other unstabling device then that constitutes it as functional.

I believe more in the true dictionary definition of the word and how that applies to training and conditioning. Functional is defined as 'used to contribute to development'. In keeping with that definition, virtually any style of training can be considered functional if it has application to a particular task.

For instance, I would strongly agree with a bodybuilder performing bench press in order to produce a hypertrophic response in his/her upper body (which is the desired result of bodybuilding training), but I would not advocate that a figure skater perform bench press as a training activity because it serves no functional purpose to figure skating.

In its simplest terms, the word functional can be defined as practical, purposeful and efficient. PRACTICAL movement. PURPOSEFUL movement. EFFICIENT movement.

Equally important as 'how' to train figure skaters is 'how not' to train them. There is a strong side of the youth sport training world (I call them traditionalists) that encourages the use of fitness based machines and free weight lifting equipment.

In fact it has been concluded without doubt that young athletes can and should in fact engage in resistance styles of conditioning.

'Contrary to the traditional belief that strength training is dangerous for children or that it could lead to bone plate disturbances, the American College of Sports Medicine contends that strength training can be a safe and effective for this age group provided that the program is properly designed and competently supervised.'

This is a statement made by Avery Faigenbaum, Ed. D, in a paper he co-authored for the American College of Sports Medicine on Youth Strength Training in March of 1998. To most of us in the sport training community, this is a no-brain issue.

Of course children can perform resistance training; kids run, jump, wrestle, go on hikes, play hop-scotch - all of these activities have strength components to them and one would never restrict a child from performing them.

Where the issue becomes convoluted and contentious however, is when one promotes stabilized machines as a means of conditioning for young athletes.

While I agree wholeheartedly with Mr. Faigenbaum and all of the research proven data which illustrates that children CAN safely perform strength training in conventional settings (i.e. lifting weights) what I contend is WHY they need to. This is a paramount concern in-so-far as figure skaters.

The following are some guidelines for training and developing figure skaters from an athletic and functional perspective:

Promote concepts of multilateral development. This is a hard pill to swallow within the world of figure skating due to

the fact that many coaches, parents and trainers are interested in pushing the limits with young kids in the hopes of national and international success.

Your job as a parent or coach with young skaters is to introduce them to as much athletic stimulus as possible. The nervous system of a young athlete is malleable and requires input to develop optimally.

If you are prescribing little more than basic fitness and on-ice type movements, you are robbing the child of potential athletic growth and limiting his or her prospective success.

Look at Kurt Browning and Elvis Stojko respectively - one played hockey the other took martial arts. Diversity contributes to athletic success not hinders it.

Don't engage kids in exercises that promote external stability or useless force production. The key to working with young athletes in any sport is to promote mobility, stability and balance in conjunction with force.

Especially with the demands of figure skating, young athletes need to have a virtual warehouse of athletic based skills in order to reach optimal levels.

This is achieved by moving and stabilizing the body through various planes and producing force through various vectors.

Alwyn Cosgrove, a conditioning expert who is recognized as a Master of Sport Science with sport organizations throughout the world, is the off-ice coach to Beebe Lang, who just recently finished sixth at this past Junior World Championships.

He defines the sequence as such: flexibility before stability - stability before strength - strength before power.

Potential exercises to use with figure skaters of all levels:

Single Leg Squats

On-ice force production occurs unilaterally and functional training should reflect this. Single leg squats should be performed with the 'free' leg in varied positions (which reflects sagittal, frontal and even transverse strength/stability).

Jump rope with movement (locomotion)

Develops a great deal of leg strength and coordination. Locomotion should be multidirectional and jumps should be on one, two and alternating feet.

Somersault to Jump

This exercise promotes leg power in conjunction with spatial awareness.

Single Leg Balance Touch

Tremendous unilateral strength exercise as well as high inputs of balance and stability. Involve transverse stability as well by touching points on the ground that are to the side and behind the skater.

Brian Grasso, known as 'America's Youth Fitness Coach', spends all his time training young athletes, children with disabilities and those encumbered with body weight concerns.

He has authored two books on the subject and was recently featured in Newsweek magazine for his work in youth fitness and sports training. He has also been named as one of the 'Top 100 Trainers in America' by Men's Health magazine.

Brian is the Founder and CEO of the International Youth Conditioning Association and can be contacted through his website -
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