Coaching Young Athletes

The Challenge

Parents and coaches need to understand how to train young athletes to develop their skills without unrealistic expectations that cause too much pressure to excel.

Beginning figure skating parents struggle with balancing financial constraints to help their child achieve their athletic potential, while providing for long range educational and career goals, facilitating social interaction, and maintaining a high level of mutual family support and sibling interactions.

The progress of developing young athletes usually starts in early childhood and continues throughout preteens, teens, and into becoming a young adult. Sometimes the process is rather ordinary, but often these years have various personality and behavior problems unrelated to participation in any sport.

Parents need to become aware that some forms of raining are right for young athletes and there are types of raining that should be avoid. Training methods are devised and delivered by adult. These efforts have been extensively studied as they apply to adults. This explains why the same training theories and coaching methods used for young athletes are based on the physiology of adults.

The majority of test and competitive figure skaters range from elementary through high school ages. The elite international skaters are usually in their late teens to mid twenty’s, occasionally a small number continue competing into their late twenty’s and early thirty’s.

The exercise physiology of children is very different from that of adults. Children should not be treated as if they are mini-adults. From early childhood to late adolescence they are physically, emotionally, intellectuality, and socially developing.

They have different capabilities for, and ability to benefit from exercise. For this reason, young athlete training programs should not be just scaled-down versions of adult training.

The failure to establish correct training patterns for young athletes needs to be viewed in an historical context.

Physical education classes in schools depend on teachers who have been trained to guide groups of children who are forced to take the classes through a range of sports. The instructors have not specialized in most of the activities they teach in PE classes. State Boards of Education have decided that each child must participate without any thought if each individual might have some ability and actually enjoy being a participant.

Actual experience tells us that this is rarely so. What happens is that children who have natural physical abilities dominate every activity, while those lack physical abilities experience failure. Achieving competence in any sport invariably takes time - time which is not normally available within the PE curriculum.

There is no chronological chart that relates technical skill development levels and performance expectations to the skater’s age or sex. Some authorities in figure skating observe that individuals of slight build are more likely to rotate faster and when combined with a fearless personality are more likely to attempt to learn multi-revolution jumps that may not necessarily be technically superior.
There is no doubt that the free skating skills needed to stand on the podium have increased considerably since the days of Sonja Henie’s axel jump.

Few high schools have an on site ice skating or curling rink in the USA. Any varsity ice skating sports program that exists generally includes a male hockey team. It would be extremely rare if it included a figure skating program for girls as part of a school’s sports curriculum.

Even with good coaching and optimum practice does not guarantee perfect results; however, it does make permanent any incorrect technique. Working on essential core technical skills requires a great deal of repetition, that if not carefully monitored allows poor technique to become embedded as a long-term memory skill set.

An accumulation of poor technical skills will gradually inhibit an athlete from achieving their full potential skill development. Measuring their goal of competence as determined by badges, testing, or competition - provides a positive reward for skaters to continue their participation.

Performance outcomes in many sports of school age athletes are not used to determine groups. Competitive levels are based on age and complicate divisions based on number of students per school.

There is a myth of inevitable annual technical progression that is based on the average size of male and female student provides a chart of the physical characteristics of average male and female students. The average height and weight provides little means of knowing what skill levels or sports technique of the child.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that skaters enrolled in learn to skate group classes acquire rudimentary skating skills whose technical skills range from poor to good. However, the scope of the skills taught in group classes is not maximized in most “Learn to Skate” programs.

The weekly hours available to offer group classes are limited due to competition from hockey interests and the revenue from public sessions. Achieving a minimum number of skaters to make it economically affordable to offer more advanced classes is often undercut by coaches encouraging talented skaters to take more expensive private lessons.

Often there are comments made to parents about reduced effectiveness of group classes compared to private instruction. This is despite the evidence of the success and cost effectiveness of group class coaching used in team and individual sports in high school and college sports.

There are oases in which rinks/clubs offer more advanced classes that provide a transition from the basic “Learn to Skate” group classes; however, this is not the norm. The USFS has developed a very detailed set of materials for its “Transition” program so it is not necessary to “Reinvent the Wheel” to sponsor a more advanced series of group classes covering synchronized team, artistic, Theater on Ice, dance, and free skating.

No child enjoys lack of competence and, without positive reinforcement, there is no prospect they will continue participating in sport after graduating from high school.

The foundations of a successful skating transition program from “Learn to Skate” to US Figure Skating tests and competitions includes:

Core Topics
- Developing core skills
- Boosting performance
- Designing a free skating program
- Understanding judging criteria
Overreaching vs overtraining
The Underperformance Syndrome’ (UPS)
Setting coaching priorities

Test and competitive topics
Proactive training for athletes
Improving performance safely
Avoiding repetitive strain injury
Strength training
Aerobic and anaerobic development
Aerobic training priorities
Avoiding burnout, staleness, and over-training syndrome
Effective endurance training
Resistance training
Relating training to ability
Boosting endurance capacity