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December 2019

VOLUME 30, ISSUE 3

## Good Athlete Project: Long Term Development of Body and Mind

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Coaches, we have some startling new: sports do not teach life lessons. It's true. Sports don't teach life lessons – thoughtful teachers and coaches *use sports* as a platform to teach life lessons, but it does not happen automatically.

To swim faster or throw farther, to run with greater speed and endurance... these are valuable results, but they are outcomes for athletes, not lessons for life.

Saying that sports teach life lessons takes too much ownership off of us, the coaches. Sports are merely a classroom. They offer a unique learning platform filled with novelty, goal-directed behavior, and compelling social dynamics, but *someone* needs to design the curriculum and build for specific outcomes.

We need to be sure the lessons learned in athletics transfer to life after sport. And we should act fast; the athletic experience is fleeting.

Olympians who compete into their late 30s and early 40s are heralded and, simply put, unlikely (Anthropometry of Olympic Athletes, 2016). Even in those cases, when their career is over, the athlete might have 50 or more years left to live. If we teach lessons which fade away after the final competition, then we have missed a tremendous opportunity.

At the Good Athlete Project, our mission is to support coaches in maximizing the potential of the athletic experience.

### Long Term Athlete Development

Although shooting a ball into a basket rarely changes lives, the sport of basketball has potential to do just that. The same is true for all sports. A community of young people, coming together under a shared motivation and the guidance of powerful mentorship, can learn resilience, self-management, and commitment to community, but only if the coach prioritizes these results. That would not happen if one were shooting baskets alone in the driveway.

And while performance outcomes will always matter, sports seem to be experiencing a refreshing reappraisal of priorities. Long Term Athlete Development, abbreviated as "LTAD" and brought back into public consciousness after a 2013 book by Istvan Balyi and colleagues, reminds coaches that *development* should supersede immediate results.

Health, enjoyment, and growth should be the primary aims of an athletic experience. Results are recognized as the byproduct of that development. They are products of a well-considered process.



An essential element of that process is keeping athletes safe. Tommy John surgery is the procedure used to repair a torn UCL (ulnar collateral ligament) in the throwing arm of baseball players. This sort of injury is most common among pitchers, and often attributed to overexertion at a young age. The frequency of this injury has been rising (White, 2018; Langager, 2015). From 1974-1994, there were 12 Tommy John surgeries performed in Major League Baseball. During a more recent twelve season span (2000-2011), there were 194 surgeries performed on MLB players, and another 275 surgeries on Minor League players. Researchers attribute the climb in injury rate to early specialization in youth sports.

The phenomenon of early specialization points to an unhealthy focus on immediate results in youth athletes. If, for the sake of a Little League baseball title, a young pitcher is overloaded in a game, during the season, or both, they will subject themselves to potential injury. Extra emphasis on travel and all-star leagues, extra time spent with pitching coaches, and the over-prioritization of youth championships are far too common. The stress of pitching is not the issue – the lack of rest between outings is likelier to blame.

Challenge is necessary – a body will adapt to meet the demands imposed on it – but only if there is sufficient time to rest. We should create systems and teach lessons that allow for balance. The good news is, if coaches are willing to be patient for the sake of an athlete's health, they will also see increased competitive benefit – a well-rested athlete is a faster, stronger, better one (Mah, et al, 2011; Thun, et al 2015).

The priority should be on health, with an understanding that performance will be enhanced or degraded by their ability to achieve this balance. If we do this well, we might set an athlete down the path to lifelong physical wellness.

These concepts also apply to an athlete's mind.

### **Long Term Psychological Development**

Psychological development within the athletics setting will last far longer than any physical performance outcome. When strength fades, resilience can take over. When speed begins to decline, conscientiousness can determine the way a former athlete goes about their life.

These important psychological qualities can be learned through athletics, but only if a coach identifies psychological enhancement as a primary outcome, and creates a culture to support it. One example of this would be the cultivation of Carol Dweck's famed *growth mindset*.

"In a growth mindset, people believe that their most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment," (Dweck, 2015).

To accomplish this, a coach must first identify growth mindset as a psychological capacity they would like to develop in their athletes. The decisions a coach makes should map on to that desire. Challenges and setbacks must be framed in a way that promotes these beliefs, and the coaching

staff must model a growth mindset themselves. Again, this is not an outcome learned from sports, but from thoughtful coaches using sports as a platform for education.

Assuming these lessons are happening as an automatic byproduct of sport is a mistake that manifests in a variety of ways. One phenomenon we have witnessed includes coaches creating cultures in the mold of their own athletic experiences, but with the intensity ramped up. *If some is good then more is better, right?* Unfortunately, that's not how it works.

"Burnout" was not an issue for young athletes at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These days, it's a problem. For perhaps the first time in history, participation in youth sports is declining (NFHSA, 2019).

Dr. Tony Moreno, professor at Eastern Michigan University, believes that the decline might be rooted in a basic psychological idea. "Pressuring kids to specialize in one sport is an adult-inspired model. The number one reason kids participate in sport is *fun*. Early over-emphasis takes that fun away and enters them into a cycle of redundant practices, drills, tournaments, travel, and structure..." he adds that the reason for declining participation is "not a secret," (personal contact, 2019). Attrition is almost always the product of negative sports experience.

Having fun does not occur in the absence of challenge. Athletes will grow with appropriate psychological challenge but, just like physical stress, it must be balanced by recovery. Consider the Tommy John concern applied to an athlete's mind – instead of a ligament in the elbow, the "snap" might appear in the areas of trust, motivation, or self-worth. Coaches should identify, with a context-by-context appraisal, where the balance between rest and stress might exist.

The goal, first and foremost, should be to provide the athletes with a safe and enjoyable experience. In doing so, coaches might not just be on the side of an ethical right, they might also be setting students up for success over the long haul.

A slow, deliberate, and wide-ranging approach to development benefits students in a variety of ways. David Epstein, in his book Range, acknowledges that the highest achievers actually devote "less time early on to deliberate practice in the activity in which they will eventually become experts... they gain a range of [proficiencies]... only later do they focus in and ramp up technical practice in one area," (Epstein, p. 7). Denying the impulse to specialize early and allowing kids to heal and have fun not only keeps an athlete safer, but might lead to greater performance outcomes over time.

Epstein's research dovetails with the research of Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Csikszentmihalyi's bestselling book, Flow, compiles decades of research in positive psychology to unlock a simple truth: success exists at the stable intersection of challenge and skill. He notes that the identification of such balance creates happier, more focused, more diligent workers. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Moneta & Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Embedding athletes in this sort of environment is good; teaching them to seek out and create that balance for themselves is even better.

Coaches must identify the psychological capacities they hope to build in their athletes. The nurtur-

ing of those capacities should include a *flow*-like balance of challenge and skill, a broad *range* of experiences to practice those capacities and, ideally, a focus on *growth* which includes resilience and a passion for learning.

When an athlete can no longer jump as high as they used to, these psychological abilities will keep them going.

### **Essential Developmental Stages**

When Erik Erikson published his *8 Stages of Psychosocial Development* in the early 1950s, he changed the way many understood development over the lifespan.

Two of Erikson's Stages define the bulk of a career for most athletes – from youth through high school participation. Stage 4, which he labeled *Industry vs Inferiority*, lasts from the ages of 5-12. During this time, a young person's primary influencers shift from those inside the home (parents, grandparents) to external sources like teachers and coaches. In Stage 4, positive reinforcement of an athlete's efforts will promote future industrious behavior, whereas an abundance of negative critique lowers initiative and limits future motivation (Erikson, 1950).

Stage 5, Identity vs Role Confusion, spans the ages 13-19. During Stage 5, a young person is increasingly influenced by peer groups while exploring different social roles, ultimately working through Erikson's famous term, the *identity crisis*. In Stage 5, as the intensity of athletic participation picks up, many dedicated athletes will find their identity through sport, making the coach – as mentor and designer of team culture – a key contributor to the development of those young people.

Erikson's stages align with Jean Piaget's developmental stage theory. In pre-adolescence and adolescence, young people are capable of hypothetical thinking and inferential reasoning – for the first time in their lives they can successfully imagine a future, and envision how their decisions and behaviors might impact that future. There is tremendous opportunity for the teaching of life-long lessons through this stage of development (Mitchell, et al, 2007).

Positive athletic experiences during these stages are why sports are often highly regarded in systems of education (Sport and Development, 2019). Young people find peer groups, motivation, healthy habits, work-ethic, resilience, and all of the good things we prize about participation in sport.

But the athletic experience is not always positive.

In some cases, hazing, villainizing kids from the neighboring town, win-at-all-costs mindsets, obsessive compulsions and sustained anxiety can negatively impact a young person's development (Fields, et al, 2010; O'Sullivan, 2015).

The longer a person is involved in athletics, the more these lessons – positive or negative – engrain themselves. The opportunity for coaches to be an influence here is massive.

Erikson's 6<sup>th</sup> Stage, Intimacy vs Isolation, lasts from ages 20-40. Here, a person works to understand who they are, selectively shedding prior experiences and developing new relationships that will influence the rest of their lives. The Olympic Coach will guide an athlete through parts of Stages 5 and 6 – these might be the most crucial in determining what sort of person that athlete will be for the rest of their life.

We recently met with an Olympian who was self-medicating his physical and psychological pain. He was well-known, celebrated in his sport, and found a lucrative job in finance immediately after his athletic career. By many objective accounts, he had it all. But he was unhappy. And he couldn't figure out why.

At the end of a long athletic career he was left with a shelf full of trophies, but lacked the capacity to manage his own life. He was admittedly lacking direction. Self-discipline was never a problem as an athlete, but self-management in professional and social settings had become a large concern. Without a coach, a timetable, an eating plan, a workout routine, and a sports psychologist in his ear, he wasn't sure where to turn.

Our initial consultation examined his experience in youth and adolescent training. As outlined in Erikson's Stages, this can shed important light on where and why things went wrong, as well as identify areas of missed opportunity. In this case, it was clear that a lifetime of athletic achievement entrained this person to seek outside validation in a very tangible way. The rules of prior athletic engagement were clear. So were the outcomes. Trophies and medals were the measure of success, and the real world wasn't handing out awards.

Through that understanding, we worked toward reframing unhealthy concepts and developing positive habits. We decided to be empowered by the accumulation of positive habits. Sleeping well was its own reward. Finding time for family and friends became a real-world trophy, and pursuing a purposeful profession became a benchmark of true success.

Think of this as a long-term *project*. It is slow and sometimes difficult work, just like coaching. But it's worth it.

### **Call to Action**

Olympic Coaches, you occupy a unique space in an athlete's life. You are mentors in one of the world's most powerful learning platforms, and during the most important stages of an athlete's psychosocial development.

You might also be their final hope.

Once an athlete's career is over, the identity crisis faced during adolescence will reappear. The initial answer to the identity question – *athlete* – is no longer viable. Many post-career athletes report entering a second adolescence once the bright lights are behind them. They are no longer heroes. They no longer have coaches and teams and clear goals to guide them.

The longer the athletic career lasts, the more difficult the transition will be.

The motivation of the regular, day-to-day world is absent of the poignant, goal-driven pursuits of an athletic career. Professional and Olympic athletes have one final learning opportunity where the motivation is high, the expectations are clear, and the mentors (you) are powerful. Coaches, we have to take this charge seriously.

Though it may sound strange, it is sometimes helpful to not refer to people as “athletes” at all, or only in certain circumstances. Refer to them instead *by name*, or in general as *people*. After all, “Rebecca” might be the coxswain of a crew, every bit as important as those around her, and together they are a team and in the moment they are rowers, but they are *people* who will hopefully live long lives once the boat has been pulled out of the water.

Can they be intensely focused and hyper-dedicated to their craft? Absolutely. That’s how the elite tend to operate. But remembering that athletics are something you participate in, not who you are, will allow that person to be their best over the long haul.

There is no direct prescription in this call to action – we have no judgement regarding principled processes and ethical outcomes, and there are no methods to ensure positive results – only the hope that a coach will reflect on two basic questions:

1. **What is your purpose?** Many people get into coaching for the love of the game. That is a fine starting point but insufficient as a professional purpose. What do you really want for those you work with? Name it. Be explicit. Be willing to adjust this purpose over time, but be sure to think about it. After deliberating, many coaches identify some version of fulfilling their potential that allows them to help others reach their potential as well – that’s always a good place to start.
2. **Does your behavior match your goal?** This is the cornerstone question of the Good Athlete Project. Confronting this question for sake of analysis and without judgement is the only way. If you want to be healthy but you eat Dorito’s with lunch every day, does your behavior match your goal? If you are a coach who hopes to teach life lessons but degrades athletes in front of their teammates, you’ll have to confront the same logic.

If your behaviors consistently match the goal of teaching life lessons, you will have accomplished something that is meaningful beyond measure. You will have inspired the ripple effect that happens when a good person inspires another good person to be good. That person will carry your work forward.

The long term development of high quality human beings might be the most satisfying pursuit one can imagine. The reward of that pursuit will last far beyond the podium.



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