

Skills and Drills
Off The Road Column
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How does one teach track and field? From the start I am not talking about a high school freshman who has played little league baseball or softball. I'm talking about the pure novice seven or eight year old who shows up to a Junior Olympic practice clueless. If you pause to think for a second, it's a good question.

The fact is one must start somewhere. The educational theorist EL Thorndike wrote that the key to all learning is relateable skills. But at the first practice the novice may have never thrown the shot, long jumped or competitively sprinted. But on the other hand they have, at one time or another, run, jumped or thrown. At its most basic level track and field prizes one's ability to run, jump and throw.

With that in mind we have a starting point to design a developmental track and field program that builds upon the already established fundamental playground skills of running, jumping and throwing. It becomes important that the youth coach and as it is possible the novice athlete, recognize the fact that this development is a process. It should be noted that this process involves multiple steps or benchmarks that can be charted out as would a multiple day vacation to Disney World.

In this process there are several areas that ideally should be addressed. The physical component becomes most obvious but equally and possibly more important are the concomitant life skills (teamwork, communication, personal discipline, sacrifice, etc.) that are applicable on and off the field and will play an important role later in an athlete's life.

While it may seem that the organization of a youth track and field program would be a simple project, it is not. For it to be done well and to be of greater effectiveness the more forethought and developmental planning there is the richer the immediate experience will be with the long term results more fruitful.

Starting in January 2009 the Niagara Association of USA Track and Field will initiate a Pre-Junior Olympic Program with the expressed intent to introduce the sport, at a fundamental level, to the young athletes of the association. We will be funding four satellite clubs or teams that will conduct a 6-week "Skills and Drills" program to prepare the novice athlete (in particular the entry level athletes) with the fundamental knowledge, skills and attitudes that will create a basic inventory of "relateable skills." It is hoped that with growth and maturity these fundamental skills will provide a solid foundation from which individual talents will blossom.

Grants for the six -week program will be given to organizations with the following stipulations: the coaching staff are current USATF members and conduct background screenings, the Pre-Meet is a sanctioned event, at least 10 events are conducted at the meet and they have at least 35 athletes participate. Athlete membership in USATF is

encouraged but not required. Participation in the Association Championship will require USATF membership.

Why a six-week program? In truth I first read about a six-week entry level program conducted by the noted children's author Rich Wallace. He designed a program that introduced the sport without making participation a "career decision." Most knowledgeable coaches would agree that an entry-level program should not be a career decision or lifetime commitment.

Late childhood (7-10 years old) should be a time of discovery. Ideally the athlete should be exposed to multiple athletic challenges to better develop their overall skills. The more varied the program creates an athletic inventory of physical skills, foster learning rules, tactics and strategies and will create a more well rounded the athlete. Most youth league programs run about six weeks. It neatly presents enough time to learn and digest new skills while at the same time blending in with other youth program offered throughout the year.

But the challenge still remains as to what should be taught, how it should be taught and when it should be taught. The thrust of the program will be in three areas:

1. the introduction of skills and drills related to running, jumping and throwing
2. the application of elementary training concepts
3. the introduction and application of life skills

Although simple and generic these three concepts should serve as the underpinning of the 6-week program and reinforced at each day's practice session. Once this model is accepted the next question that arises is that of implementation.

The Weekly Plan

It is recommended that the Skills and Drills Program be implemented over a six week period with a practice session held one time per week. While it could easily be argued that a twice or even three weekly practice sessions would be more effective more practice time will only complicate the daily training plans and escalate the time, effort and energy of the volunteer staff.

An equally important concern would be facility availability. This program can be designed that most if not all of the practice sessions can be held on a flat grass field. This may be an important consideration with the limited availability of a track and field facility, especially during the spring season.

A third point is to re-emphasize that one of the goals of the Skills and Drills Program is to introduce the sport to a child. Arduous and fatiguing training sessions are not the focus of this program. Rudimentary "homework assignments" can be given that will compliment the taught weekly skills. While actual practice sessions will give some direction towards track and field training off time can be used to supplement training providing a general level of fitness. Bike rides, ball sports and other childhood activities are to be encouraged to supplement the child's fitness levels.

The Daily Practice Plan

The Daily Practice Plan should be planned out in advance. Each DTP can be broken down into three recognizable parts – a warm-up, the development of the main theme or focus of the day’s practice session and a conclusion that includes some general conditioning exercises, a warm down and discussion of an athlete’s life skills. At the early ages practice sessions should last about an hour. It needs to be emphasized that children should not be trained as little adults. Children are not little adults.

A summary of the three practice components is as follows:

The Warm-up – 10-20 minutes of skills and drill work. The warm-up should be dynamic (meaning movement oriented) in nature and serve to re-enforce old skills previously learned or introduce new skills while the athlete is attentive and physically fresh. The coach’s ability to relate new challenges to old learning would be an example of the relatable skills and will pay dividends in the short and long term. Examples of actions would be: foot drills, skipping, hopping, light jogging, arm action drills, etc.

The Main Theme – 20-30 minutes of a more focused development of the day’s practice theme (see chart 1 below for a suggested thematic development of the Skills and Drills Program). Using themes over a six week period allows for focus for each day, the introduction of the sport in general to the novice and the identification or development of skills in a particular event group (sprints, jumps, throws).

The Warm down/Conditioning – 10-20 minutes – this allows for the development of general endurance qualities with simple circuit training type conditioning. Each day’s practice session can be ended with some flexibility work and a team discussion of a life skill and hopefully its application to what was done or learned in practice this day.

Daily Themes

The ultimate success of this program hinges on the introduction and successful implementation of the daily themes. If you would view Chart 1 for a moment note that the themes are presented in an order such that the next week’s skills are in some way similar (or relatable) to the skills previously learned. Thorndike’s “relatable skills” presented in a progressive manner.

A brief overview of the weeks:

Week 1 – Sprinting - baseline testing (30m sprint time, standing long jump, vertical jump), the cyclic action of sprinting, sprint mechanics, acceleration

Week 2 – The Long Jump – an acyclic action (sprint and jump), landing mechanics

Week 3 – Throwing – an acyclic action that coordinates a run with a throw (javelin, softball or Turbojav) versus the pushing action of the shot put.

Week 4 – Sprint, Jump and Throw Relays – combination skills, strategies, and teamwork

Week 5 – Endurance – the 400m run – a more moderated sprint action, short interval training, heart rate monitoring

Week 6 – Re-testing day or Pre-Meet preparation

The overall learning objectives for this Pre-Meet JO Program are:

1. to teach the sprint action via correct movement of the body's parts (arms, torso, hip, knee, ankles)
2. to teach jumping skills and landing skills
3. to teach throwing mechanics (push of the shot, elbow above the shoulder for the throw)
4. to teach teamwork with the relays of various kinds

A Note on Training

Just as there are fifth graders who can read on the 10th grade level there are fifth graders who have the physical maturity of 15 year-olds. The reverse is also true. This presents a real problem in the design of a workout for a novice athlete. All too often the well-meaning but ill-prepared coach trains their novice athlete as if they were a “little adult.” A child is not a little adult. This is why the whole concept of distance training, interval training, strength training when applied to children unfortunately ends with disastrous results. Children are not little adults.

The developing child is just that – developing. To introduce any form of sophisticated training, however well meant or physiologically sound *for an adult* shunts efforts and energies of the body from growth and development to early adaptation and survival. The future is spent on the present. With few, and I mean very few, exceptions the child superstars of yesterday are not the adult stars of today or tomorrow. Their moment of glory has come and gone, the direct result of training loads prescribed by a coach that was well meaning or misdirected or both.

Tudor Bompa, the great training theorist of the 80's and 90's, often stated that one of the goals of training children or physically immature young people should be to “not fatigue the system.” Tax it, challenge it, stress it lightly but then back off. One of the secrets of my high school coaching success with high school freshmen was how little I had them do. I strove to introduce training to them, created an inventory of skills and a history of successfully meeting new physical challenges and then backed off and let natural growth and maturity take over.

Conclusions

Abraham Maslow is credited with developing the learning strategy of “whole-phase-whole.” This is where a task or activity is performed, corrections are made and over the course of time the performance of the task is perfected.

The teaching of track and field using the Skills and Drills Program employs Maslow's whole-phase-whole method. What is created is a fundamental framework for the event disciplines within the sport. It also develops an inventory of skills and movement

strategies (running, jumping or throwing) that are transferable to other ball and team sports that at their essence prize one’s ability to run, jump or throw.

The “athletic life” of a human is a short one, usually less than 15 years. Because of this the managed use of time becomes a pre-eminent goal. It becomes doubly important that any and all skills learned on an entry level to the sport have a greater and broader application that allows for refinement and perfection with growth and maturity.

This Skills and Drills Program presented here offers an introduction to the sport, a means to identify and develop talent while at the same time providing fundamental movement patterns that are readily transferable. Additionally this program, applied sensibly, will also avoid any chance of early specialization that would stunt long-term growth and development. Good luck with the program. Should you have any questions or comments I welcome your input.

Chart 1

<u>Week</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Skills and Drills</u>	<u>Life Skills</u>
1	Sprints	skipping, high knees, acceleration, arm, leg, foot mechanics	time management, be on time
2	Long Jump	approach, step count, landing	goal setting, diet and nutrition
3	Throwing	step and throw, run, step and throw, putting	problem solving, decision making
4	Relays	zones, baton passing	teamwork, communication
5	Endurance	400m run, 2-3x200m interval training	thought management and attitude
6	“Pre” Meet	practice meet	

Final note – for coaches wishing a more structured learning it is recommended they consult the USATF national website for information and details on the Developmental Coach Program and the Level 1 Schools that are offered around the country.

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