Striving for success: personality development and high achievement in athletics

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1. Introduction

The sport scientist Weinberg has defined sporting activity as "an athlete's purposeful, conscious and volitional goal-oriented contest with the environment. It is determined socially, and the contest with the environment takes place in collectively and individually determined forms of learning. The sporting activity exists in the form of ideal and non-material results as well as in the formation and development of the subject (i.e. personality development)."

If one agrees with this definition, one can see competitive sporting activity as a linked sequence of actions that makes possible and necessary the realisation of two goals that determine each other:

1) The development of high athletic achievement, i.e. the level of aspects concerning motor sport activities.
2) The development of aspects concerning cognitive emotion-motivational actions, i.e. the personality itself.

Only the combination and influence of achievement and personality on each other make the development of athletic mastery possible through an extended process of instruction and education in competitive sport activities. I shall now consider each of these briefly.

2. Achievement

At international congresses and seminars, when the development of forms and methods of training and competition are discussed, questions and discussion concerning new insights into training methodology dominate. In other words there is a concentration on the realm of physical development, i.e. athletic

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performance. This is to be expected since the production of top level performances is the declared aim of competitive sport activities.

A high level of performance is what we need and want to develop in training so that it can be counted on at just the right time and place, i.e. during competition, in order to achieve victory. Hardly any result of cultural activity depends more on the immediate acknowledgement and resonance of the consumer than athletic performance, due to its relatively ephemeral character. It lacks the tangibility of a material or mental product like a work of art or a book. Its resonance therefore depends primarily on the level of achievement, in victory or defeat, in competition. My own past victories would hardly be noticed nowadays; every achievement has its historical framework and focus.

At present, we athletes can be proud of the fact that records, in our kind of sport, be they achieved by men or women, receive great international acclaim and positive valuation by the producing athletes and above all by the consuming public. With the membership of the IAAF now at 185 countries, and the enormous media coverage given to the World Championships in Athletics and the Olympic Games, it is clear that top level performances in our sport can have a strong effect on the spectators of many countries and nations.

Athletes are idols in many places: they are above all examples for the young generation. Even if athletic achievement is the main criterion it is also evident that the total view of personality, i.e. the manner and behaviour of the athlete during competition and surrounding it, become part of an evaluation process. They all contribute to the overall effect and importance of the achievement.

The fact that the record achieved is tied directly to the achiever means that the person of the athlete gains in importance. The achievement exists, after all, only through him/her, and the immediacy of the connection with the person creates a cultural factor. The effect of athletic achievement on the public depends more and more on how much the athlete represents the ethical-moral ideals and values of sport in general - and those of the organisations running it, in our case those of the IAAF.

3. Personality

Apart from the right to personal presentation and that of subjective striving for athletic fame, it has, in my opinion, become necessary to pay more attention to personality development in coaching for competitive sports. The level of achievement and behaviour of the athlete not only influences the extent to which the consumer of sport, the spectator, values, perceives and enjoys what the athlete is doing, but the spectators themselves, be it in the stadium or via television, radio, or newspaper confront the natural and social qualities of sport achievements according to their own pre-existing orientation and interests.

By the nature of their achievements and their overall behaviour, i.e. sticking to the rules of fair play during competition, respect and acceptance of the other competitors, or being able to win or lose with dignity, the athletes essentially determine the identification-process of the public both with them as individuals and in the particular sport in which they are performing. The athlete also determines the degree of valuation, recognition and acclaim of her national association as well as the reputation of the international federation. Resulting from this there is, in my opinion, a social responsibility that, if properly recognised and experienced by the athlete, can become a stimulus for achievement and motivation.

4. Team Work

The induction of ethical-moral values into the education process for competitive sports has also allowed an achievement-motivation to grow in our national team-collectives that we call identification with
society and social responsibility.

In a number of surveys I conducted in connection with my doctoral thesis on "Problems and motivation development in sports activity", around 80 of our top track and field athletes during the 1980's expressed the view that membership of the national team and the method of training and competition accepted by the team had a positive influence on their collective and individual degree of achievement. They also realised the extent to which their individual athletic achievement and success was partly the product of team-work.

5. The Coach

Apart from the experience of team support, the person of the coach as leader of the educational and training process has a dominant position in motivating athletes at all levels of the long-term building process of achievement and stress endurance. He/she is, according to my research, of unparalleled importance for the realisation of a successful career in competitive sports. The dominance of the coach is undoubtedly due to the fact that he/she is not only the active organiser of the educational process in competitive sports, but also that he/she as a person, through his/her actions, leadership qualities and social connections with the athlete, becomes a determining factor for the motivational development of the latter.

This becomes all the more significant as the coach through his/her dominating position can become a creator of many other motivating factors. The direction and strength of the coach's motivating influence are determined by the subjective recognition given to it by the athlete and the position the athlete develops in regard to it. Important in this identification process, concerning the coach's worth and role for the athlete's personal development in competitive sport, is the fact that both are united by a common goal, and in attaining it feel the need to depend on each other.

Today's high level of athletic achievement gives rise to the theses (for which there are, of course, always exceptions) that the talented athlete will never attain his/her highest level of performance unless he/she has a coach who is prepared and capable of leading him/her to top achievements. On the other hand, practice proves that the best coach can lead only those athletes to world records who are prepared to put the coach's ideas into practice.

Of particular importance, therefore, are the coach's style of leadership, depth of knowledge and level of pedagogical abilities coupled with their psychological empathy with their athletes.

Experience shows that athlete-coach relationships which are conflict free, productive and mutually stimulating, in other words real partnerships, are a determining factor in successfully shaping and developing athletic mastery. Such partnerships on the basis of mutual respect and acknowledgement as well as absolute mutual trust, depend also on long-term development. They need the athlete's acknowledgement of the coach's leading role concerning education and training during its formation.

The mention of the athlete-coach relationship is really already part of my explanation of the second reason why more significance ought to be attributed to personality development in its complex effect on sport achievement.

From his/her start in competitive sports through the long-term build-up of his/her achievement, the athlete is confronted with ever new and higher challenges. This perpetually recurring discrepancy between the actual level of achievement and stress endurance on the one hand and the prognostic aims of his/her development on the other also demand an increasingly higher level of personality development. This process, however, is not linear, since it is determined by factors like age, development and training. There is evidence, particularly in young athletes, that personality development takes place intermittently with achievement development. Over-estimation of personal
abilities, unwillingness to train and lack of stress endurance as well as lack of discipline, is often the result. The opponent is often underestimated. Successes diminish while failures increase and the lack of strong personality qualities often sees a promising athletic career discontinued.

Consciously working through experiences of success, and even more, failure, and above all in a way that fosters achievement, is one of the dominant pedagogical tasks of the coach. It should be he/she who consciously points out to the athlete the individual discrepancies between his/her achievement and personality development.

Athletic achievement is developed as a result of the training process and becomes evident in competition. These two principal aspect of competitive sport activity have goals that need to be regarded separately.

In training, stress endurance is the chief objective and training achievements are provisional goals to attain the achievement structure. In competition, however, the attainment of high athletic achievement and success are the goals of action. At the beginning of my arguments I mentioned that the level of sport achievement depends on the strength and efficiency of both physical and psychological capacity. The closer the physical level of achievement of the athletic competitors the more the degree to which the level of psychological achievement components has been developed becomes the decisive factor for winning. The cognitive-emotional-motivational activity aspects that are necessary for high athletic achievement become continuously available with great certainty if they are stable and firmly established psychological personality traits.

They have to be present in talented young athletes as psychological prerequisites, but they can be strengthened and developed through competitive sport activity. It is
therefore true that trainers forgo important possibilities to develop athletic top-achievement for themselves and their proteges, if they do not pay sufficient attention to the enhancement and formation of their athlete's personality - in its totality and complexity.

This might occur if through a failure of pedagogical guidance they:
- do not use the potential to exhaust all internal and external possibilities to develop the individuality of the competitive athlete.
- fail to allow the individual subjectivity and self-reliance of the athlete to become active in a relatively self-contained way.
- do not demand discipline, readiness to endure stress, consciousness, consequence and will-power from these athletes.
- put little importance on the potential of athletes to put knowledge and experience to use and take up and use information of all kinds, and do not bother about the development of the overall educational level.
- leave the education development of any progress towards self motivation entirely up to the athlete.

In relation to my subject, the striving for success can thus be learned and trained, i.e. influenced pedagogically!

6. Conclusion

An athlete who has the best and most able partner in this learning process, i.e. their coach, will find that the risks and imponderables of optimal achievement development diminish. At the same time he/she will be put in a position to develop personality traits that are of high significance for the coping with and mastering of so-called everyday problems during and, above all, after his/her career in competitive sport.

I believe and I wish that all of us sport officials, coaches and athletes should consider this possibility for personality development, despite the justifiable and necessary striving for even higher achievement.

Apart from the striving for victory and success - without which competitive sport cannot exist - this competitive sport activity offers, above all to young people, the chance to open up an important social realm of life, where in unity with others, they can attain self-development.

REFERENCE