Developing young distance runners
by Gerry Swan

The author discusses the criteria for the development of young athletes in middle-and long-distance events according to the coaching philosophy of the Abbotsford Royals Track Club. He presents detailed training programmes for both the young and the more experienced athletes, with helpful explanatory notes. He concludes by laying down broad but in his view essential considerations for planning psychologically and physiologically sound programmes for young distance runners.

1 Introduction

The recruitment, development and retention in the club and the sport of talented young middle-distance runners has been one of the Abbotsford Royals' major goals. It has been accomplished by following the procedure outlined below:

- Assessment and recruitment
- Establishment of a vision for both the athlete and his/her parents
- Development of a varied and interesting programme for training and competitions
- Integration of the aspiring athlete into an elite and motivating group environment

In the following article I will examine closely each of these items. I will present examples of training programmes with the aid of detailed tables and explanatory notes and conclude by laying down what I believe to be the essential considerations in the initiation and development of young distance runners.

2 Assessment and recruitment

Most of our elite runners are recruited between the ages of 12 and 15 years. Although this may seem young, in this age of sport specialization it is not unusual for individual and team sports, such as basketball, volleyball, soccer and hockey, to have year-round programmes for very young athletes. If we are unable to commit an athlete to a running programme at a very young age, we are likely to lose that youngster to another sport.

We employ most of the usual recruiting
Table 1: Example sessions in the first training group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early season</th>
<th>Mid-season</th>
<th>Late season</th>
<th>Cross-country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Warm-up &amp; stretch</td>
<td>Runs varying from 15&quot; to 5'</td>
<td>Only time when athletes are required to run on the track – above 300m can be done by time in an off-track environment</td>
<td>Note: Training is similar to track except runs are longer in duration. Again, training times are not kept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40° constant movement with 20-40° faster pace</td>
<td>Ladders: 2' fast – 90° easy, 1' fast – 1' easy, 30° fast – 3' easy jog and repeat until 30-40° training has been completed</td>
<td>300m fast – 200m jog, 200m fast – 100m jog, 100m fast (1-1½ lap jog) 4 – 6 sets</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sprint drills</td>
<td>4' 15° variation run: 40° constant – 20° easy, 30° constant – 20° easy, 15° constant – 20° easy, 40° constant – 20° easy, 30° constant – 20° easy, 30° constant – 20° easy, 30° constant – 20° easy, 15° constant. Take a set break of 3' and do 4 – 6 sets. Divide sets into half and speed up runs as season develops</td>
<td>Note: Training times are not recorded except during late season and not revealed to athlete except to say 'fine', 'fast' or 'slow'. From this type of training, many female youngsters break 5' for 1500m and male runners 4'30&quot; for 1500m.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-the-leader runs – weaker runner starts first followed by stronger runners</td>
<td>10 × 1' fast with 2' jog</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delay-type training to keep everyone moving</td>
<td>Note: Runs of more constant time elements are introduced.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Coach’s job is to monitor, motivate, correct & criticize and to keep a constant movement going that will develop aerobic background in a fun and not too painful manner.

Methods: selection from school cross-country or track meets (often from events sponsored by the Royals); recommendations from school coaches; announcements in newspapers and on radio; and maintenance of the high profile of the club by publicizing its accomplishments.

Assessment centres on several factors: aerobic capacity (can the athlete cover a distance of 1500-3000m without great suffering); speed (the ability to run the 200 metres in a time of approximately 30 sec.); body type; natural strength; ease of movement; and attitude (including enthusiasm, competitive spirit and parental support/influence).

3 Vision

To recruit a young athlete is one thing; to be able to keep that athlete involved in the sport throughout his or her developmental years is quite another. To do this we paint a ‘vision’ that can be understood by both the athlete and the parents. This consists of a number of elements. For the athlete, it includes recognition, companionship, travel, success, and possible financial rewards in the form of post-secondary-school scholarship opportunities.

Parental support, which is very important, is gained in the following ways: by informing the parent(s) that a national coach believes their child to have talent; by encouraging them to realize that their offspring is engaging in an activity which is basically healthy, both physically and mentally; by impressing upon them that the resultant involvement, commitment and dedication from striving to achieve athletic goals will have positive ‘spill-over’ effects on other aspects of the youngster’s life; by letting them know that the athlete’s running will be carried out in a positive and motivating social environment; and by sug-
gesting that there is an excellent chance that running could help ease the financial burden of post-secondary-school education.

4 Developing a varied and interesting programme for training and competitions

The Royals have two basic training groups for middle-distance runners. The first group is comprised mainly of younger athletes – those of 15 years or younger. Regardless of their talent, all athletes of 13 years or younger must be members of this group.

Training sessions for the first group take place from March to July for track races, and from September for cross-country running.

During both track and cross-country seasons, formal work-outs for this group take place on Monday and Wednesday, and athletes are expected to do easy runs that vary between 20 min. and 40 min. on Tuesday and Thursday. Saturdays and some Sundays are competition days.

4.1 First training group

For examples of work-outs for the first training group, see Table 1 (page 44).

4.2 The middle-distance unit

The second training group constitutes the Simon Fraser University Middle-Distance Unit, comprising athletes ranging from 15 to 36 years. Presently, 12 of the 40 members are under 19.

This group trains formally 3 times each week, with recovery runs on 3 other days, providing there are no competitions. Training sessions are carried out over a period of 11 months.

Training for the younger athletes concentrates on all areas of fitness: aerobic, anaerobic and speed energy systems, flexibility and strength. In particular, we are concerned with improving the strength ratio of our young female athletes.

Space does not permit detailed, season-by-season work-outs, but tables 2-4 on pages 46 and 47 convey a general impression.

5 Example of possible ‘tapering’ sessions: 2 weeks during summer

(See Table 5, page 48.)

6 Integration of aspiring athlete into a motivating group

The group atmosphere is a very important ingredient of training. With between 30 and 40 athletes attending most work-outs, training partners are easy to find. The middle-distance unit includes 5 internationals who offer considerable support and encouragement to the younger athletes, and whose intense work ethic is a positive example.

We also have 3-4 coaches present at every work-out who are able to give individual attention to the athletes under their charge on any particular day. The coaches take time to talk to each athlete during work-outs. Time is given to ascertain lifestyle habits, and particularly those of eating and sleeping. The younger athletes are eager to be at work-outs.

Competitions are arranged for most weeks during the year. Diversions from training are very important, and a trip to an indoor meet, a road race or some fun relays help to keep things interesting.

While there are dangers in beginning an intense programme for young athletes, with some thoughts and a good climate it is possible to start these youngsters early, work them hard and help them to become outstanding, mature athletes. We have the results to prove it.

7 Considerations in planning this programme

- The most natural type of middle-distance athlete has innate endurance combined with strength and a good deal of natural speed. The latter two qualities must not be neglected.
- Developing a young athlete is a long-term project. All those involved must be patient.
- The major components of middle-distance running – endurance, strength, 45
Table 2: Middle-distance unit – September to December

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
<th>Sunday</th>
<th>Monday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■ Warm-up run 4000m – stretch</td>
<td>■ Warm-up run of 3000m – stretch</td>
<td>■ Off-track ladder work-outs incorporating distances of 200m and 600m done over a time of 25-40' + Drills</td>
<td>■ Easy recovery runs of 30-50'</td>
<td>■ Rest</td>
<td>■ Warm-up run and stretch 20' building up to 30' of 'transition' drills. This is a circuit-type training which includes running, sprint drills, push ups, sit ups, stairs and hills – constant and quite intense</td>
<td>■ Recovery run of 30-50'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ 20' varied run consisting of 1200m steady – 600m easy – loop 600m fast – 600m easy and repeat until time is up. Add 5' each week to a maximum of 35'. Cut back late in season or before competition.</td>
<td>■ Recovery run of 30-50'</td>
<td>■ Use 2000m loop which includes 200m hill and do loops as follows: start at bottom of hill with 15' running drills + 10' easy run and rest of the hill hard + 45' easy + run hard all but last 150m of loop strongly + last 150m very easy. 20' rest and repeat. Start with 2 sets and every 2 weeks add 1 set to maximum of 5-6 sets</td>
<td>■ Rest</td>
<td>■ Warm-up run and stretch 20' building up to 30' of 'transition' drills. This is a circuit-type training which includes running, sprint drills, push ups, sit ups, stairs and hills – constant and quite intense</td>
<td>■ Recovery run of 30-50'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Sprint drills</td>
<td>■ Medicine ball routine</td>
<td>■ Hills: use a hill with medium grade approximately 200m in length. Run up hard and come down easy. Start with 15' and build up to 25' for women and 30' for men</td>
<td>■ 20' building up to 30' of 'transition' drills. This is a circuit-type training which includes running, sprint drills, push ups, sit ups, stairs and hills – constant and quite intense</td>
<td>■ 20' building up to 30' of 'transition' drills. This is a circuit-type training which includes running, sprint drills, push ups, sit ups, stairs and hills – constant and quite intense</td>
<td>■ Medicine ball routine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Middle-distance unit – January to March

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
<th>Sunday</th>
<th>Monday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■ Repetition runs between 400m and 1200m – done off the track or</td>
<td>■ Recovery run of 30-50'</td>
<td>■ Off-track ladder work-outs incorporating distances of 200m and 600m done over a time of 25-40' + Drills</td>
<td>■ Easy recovery runs of 30-50'</td>
<td>■ Rest</td>
<td>■ Warm-up run of 3000m, stretch 3 sets building up to 5 sets of (5 x 200m under 35' + 200m in 1')</td>
<td>■ Recovery run of 30-50'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Controlled fartlek such as 40&quot;, 30&quot;, 20&quot;</td>
<td>■ Medicine ball routine</td>
<td>■ Hills: use a hill with medium grade approximately 200m in length. Run up hard and come down easy. Start with 15' and build up to 25' for women and 30' for men</td>
<td>■ Rest</td>
<td>■ Warm-up run of 3000m, stretch 3 sets building up to 5 sets of (5 x 200m under 35' + 200m in 1')</td>
<td>■ 20' 'transition' routine as described in Table 2</td>
<td>■ Medicine ball routine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Middle-distance unit – April to June

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
<th>Sunday</th>
<th>Monday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Ladders as follows:  
  1 x 600m fast relaxed run with active easy for 3'  
  + 3 x 400m fast relaxed run with active easy for 2'  
  after each 400m and 3' active easy at competition + 4 x 300m fast relaxed run with 1' active easy between sets or  
  4 x 1000m at variable pace – first, third and fifth 200m run strongly, second, fourth 200m run slower; reverse procedure with each set  
  4 sets of (4000m fast + 100m easy + 200m fast) with active rest 2-3' | • 30-40' recovery run  
• Medicine ball routine | • 4-6 sets of  
300m, 200m, 100m run as follows: run 300m fast + 200m easy + 100m fast + 300m easy and rest for 30' and repeat. (In later season and before races, cut the number of sets down to 3 or 2 but do more intensely)  
• Variations of 200m, 300m or 400m, i.e. 4 x 3 x 300m and do the first set with 100m moderate, 2nd 100m hard and 3rd 100m moderate.  
Second set, do the first 150m moderate and 2nd 150m fast.  
This type of running is very hard if a finishing time is set. | • Rest | • Competition or  
• Longer run | • 15' warmup run + 15' transition routine and 20' warmdown run or  
• Whatever option the coach feels is necessary to work on | • 30-50' easy run |

Note: The above should be built up over the first 4-6 weeks.

The purpose of this period is to be specific, to put the finishing touches to anaerobic strength and to improve the ability to change pace.

flexibility and speed – should be worked at in all phases of the programme. Changes should be in degree of emphasis only.

- 3-4 training phases would seem reasonable. Within each phase some tapering for competition may be necessary. The phases should be linked by way of a gradual transition.

- The programme must provide psychological motivation and be physiologically sound. Balancing the programme is a major task. Variation is essential, in training sites (tracks, grass fields, trails, roads) and in sessions.

- Aerobic capacity is developed through running over an extended period of time. Initially this can be built up by alternate jogging, slow running, faster running and fast walking for a period of 20-30 min. Fartlek-type running is also very useful.

- Strength training is the focus of most of our directed sessions. It is accomplished through runs of between 1 and 10 min. Most runs, however, are between 2 and 5 min. Within each run there can be variation, as shown in the sample work-outs.
The number of repetitions is established by linking running time to some specific distance, for example 600m. How many repetitions of 600m would you do on the track for an athlete of a particular level of ability? An alternative method is the application of total running time. The intense part of the work-out is usually done in a phase of between 30 and 45 minutes. Actual running is supplemented by upper-body weights, drills (often combined with running), flexibility work, medicine ball routines and circuit training.

- Transition periods should attempt to blend one training phase with another. If the athlete is coming out of phase 2 – ‘middle type’ repetitions done off the track – into phase 3 – which includes 2 days of track training covering specific distances – it would be appropriate to
increase gradually the emphasis upon 4 x 5 x 30 sec. runs or 3 x 4 x 60 sec. runs.

- The last phase of training emphasizes speed and peaking. The quantity of repetitions are cut, but intensity and quality are increased.
- Most sessions are built around sets of repetitions. There are very short breaks between runs within a set, i.e. 15-90 sec., and much longer breaks between sets – up to 4 min.
- Psychological motivation must be built into everyday training and not left until the day of competition. Time must be taken to explain to the group what they are doing and why. The coach should try to say something personal and appropriate to each athlete on each day of training. Athletes that are well rested for important competitions and have been quietly made aware of their talents and abilities will probably fulfil their potential.