


Athletics 365: Building the Foundations for the Next Generation of Athletics Champions

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by **Scott Grace**

ABSTRACT

Athletics 365 is a teaching and coaching programme created in the United Kingdom by England Athletics as a part of a wider effort to improve how the sport at the grassroots level retains and develops young athletes. The philosophy of the programme emphasises a multi-event approach and the process of acquiring skills ('how' to run, jump or throw) rather than the outcome (time or distance achieved). After a successful 2009 pilot project, the Athletics 365 Curriculum has been rolled out across the country and integrated in the British Athletics Coach Education System. It has already made significant impacts on the operation of athletics clubs, the retention of young athletes and the profile of coaches in the UK and the support materials (coaching cards, videos, athlete handbooks, etc.) have attracted interest from coaches and teachers in a number of other countries. The project was named the Overall Winner for 2014 in the prestigious European Athletics Innovation Awards. In this report, the background, development process and roll-out of the programme are described and five recommendations for the future are given.

AUTHOR

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Introduction

Athletics 365 is a teaching and coaching programme created in the United Kingdom by England Athletics as a part of a wider effort to improve how the sport at the grassroots level retains and develops young athletes. Fully endorsed by the national athletics federation British Athletics (previously called UK Athletics), the programme, which was designed mainly for 8 to 15 year olds but is adaptable for older and younger age groups, focuses on the technical skills ('how' to run, jump and throw) required to move like a champion and perform at full potential. In addition, it addresses the young athlete's mental and emotional development, including lifestyle and social aspects.

Since its launch in September 2010, Athletics 365 has had a significant and positive impact on youth athletics in the UK, starting a revolution in frontline youth coaching. Publicity about the programme and its resources, including coach packs, on-line videos and training events, has gripped clubs across the country and over 6,000 coaches have been exposed to the programme through coach education. Importantly, the sport has been challenged to deliver youth coaching at a time and in a way that suits children and young people. As a result, clubs are now supporting and deploying dedicated youth coaches and have revised their athlete pathways and coaching structures to adopt Athletics 365 as best practice. Moreover, the profile of coaches, and coaching, has been raised throughout athletics.

In this report the background, development process and roll-out of the programme are described. It is hoped that the experiences will be helpful for athletics federations, clubs and other organisations in the sport that are interested in improving how they engage young people.

Background

The Athletics 365 programme and its associated resources are underpinned by information and conclusions gained from the study of both existing and commissioned research in this field. Among the relevant findings from

the existing research are the reasons given by young people for participating in or dropping out of sport, most of which will be familiar to those with experience in this field (Table 1).

A main area of concern of athletics in the UK is how well the sport's approximately 1,700 clubs understand the expectations and needs of young athletes and the quality of service they provide. In 2009, a general audit was made of the youth development sections of athletics clubs in England, the largest of the four countries that make up the UK. Many great examples of effective coaching and youth development programmes were found among the clubs, but a host of challenges faced at the grassroots of the sport were also identified, including:

- Inconsistent delivery of child development activities across the UK;
- Coaches with minimal experience working with children;
- Athletes specialising too early;
- Too much focus on the *outcome* (i.e. time run, distance jumped or thrown) rather than on *process* (i.e. technique when running, jumping or throwing);
- Low ratios of coaches to athletes;
- Lack of volunteers to support coaching and competition;
- Limited access to training areas for junior sections, being reserved for senior groups;
- Lack of structure and excitement within youth sessions;

Table 1: Reasons given by children for participating in and dropping out of sport

Reasons for <i>participating</i>	Reasons for <i>dropping out</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fun and enjoyment (excitement) • mastering a skill (perceived competence) • parents/teachers • learning new skills • friends/peers (belonging to a group) • being successful • gaining recognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • boredom • lack of success • too much pressure (from parents, coaches, peers) • loss of interest • friends leaving

- Losing out to other sports (due to the above issues);
- Previously provided support resources for youth development coaches were too numerous and too confusing.

A second area of concern is the dropout rate of young talents prior to them reaching the senior level. In 2011, England Athletics conducted an extensive survey of athletes (including elite performers) and coaches, called *Bridging the Gap*, to look at progression trends for young athletes in England. The findings complemented the existing research but also gave unique insights. Among these were that individuals who were highly ranked in more than one event as young athletes (i.e. following a multi-event approach to development) are more likely to still be involved in the sport as U20 athletes than those who specialised at a young age (Additional findings from this research can be seen in the box on page 91).

Vision and Objectives

The philosophy for serving and developing young athletes in the UK that has emerged in recent years can be summarised in the following vision:

- Every child in every athletics club to have access to a broad range of athletics activities, promoting the development of all-round athleticism and building the foundation for future development and success;
- A consistent approach to young athlete development throughout the UK ('like for like' activities in every club);
- A clearly defined young athlete progression pathway (From Playground – Podium), showing athletes what is needed for them to fulfil their potential;
- A delivery system for every athletics event providing step by step progressions from novice to skilled performer;
- A recognition and reward scheme focused on physical, technical, mental and emotional competence (the process / 'how to' skills).

England Athletics set out to realise this vision by meeting the following objectives:

- To provide a clearly structured Athlete Development Pathway for the UK (the British Athletics Athlete Development Model);
- To provide coaches with a sequential curriculum for teaching and developing the fundamental skills of athletics (Athletics 365);
- To provide appropriate and high quality resources to support the pathway and curriculum delivery;
- To fully integrate the curriculum into the British Athletics Coach Education System and Competition Programme;
- To raise the awareness of coaches, athletes and parents of the importance of a multi-skills / multi-events approach to youth athletics.

Concept Development

The Curriculum

In developing the Athletics 365 Curriculum emphasis was placed on the process and the acquisition of skills rather than on the result achieved. The Bridging the Gap research showed that this approach develops an athlete's *intrinsic motivation* and therefore helps to promote retention in the sport. Recognising and rewarding technical competence is also used by other sports with successful youth programmes such as martial arts (belt systems), swimming or gymnastics (badge systems).

The curriculum focuses on the following key areas of athlete development:

Physical conditioning: Including agility, balance, coordination, posture, etc.

Technical and tactical: (Athletics events):
Events specific skill and technique development.

Lifestyle and psycho-behavioural support:
How the athlete thinks and behaves and how he/she approaches the sport of athletics.

A very important aspect of the curriculum is the emphasis on developing multiple skills through a multi-event approach as opposed to specialisation, even if the athlete shows an early aptitude for a particular event or event group.

Both the curriculum and the resources to support it draw on resources from outside the sport of athletics.

Once produced, the curriculum was reviewed by some of the leading coaching experts in the UK including coaches of some of the country's top athletes: Peter Stanley (coach to triple jump world record holder Jonathan Edwards), Fuzz Ahmed (coach to European champion and Olympic medallist high jumper Robbie Grabbaz) and Bud Baldaro (coach to world championship 1500m silver medallist Hannah England).

The Pilot

In 2009, a selected group of 10 athletics clubs were invited by England Athletics to implement the curriculum and then provide feedback. This pilot group included both well-established clubs and others still in their infancy (less than 5 years since being established) and had a mixture of small (20-40 children) and large (100+ children) youth sections.

The aims of the pilot project was to establish the effectiveness of the curriculum and

clubs might need for the proper delivery of the programme and supporting young athletes.

The feedback from the project was extremely positive. The participating clubs all stated that the structure and sequential progression offered by the Athletics 365 Curriculum was very helpful and provided what many coaches needed, especially those new to the sport of athletics. Most of the clubs requested more coaching information and visual images to support the delivery.

Resources

The suite of resources has been created to support the delivery of the Athletics 365 Curriculum includes the following:

The Coach's Pack / Book

This pack provides technical coaching task cards and example game cards to help coaches and teachers deliver Athletics 365. Each technical coaching task card highlights the key coaching points to ensure that every athlete is able to develop their full potential.



Figure 1: Technical coaching task cards and example game cards

The Coach DVD Pack and Online Footage

A series of Athletics 365 video clips have been developed providing visual footage and coaching tips to both coaches and athletes. These clips can be viewed either online or on DVD. They serve as a good demonstration and education resource for coaching young and or developing athletes. There are over seven hours of footage covering the progressions for running, jumping and throwing.

Youth Development Training Programmes

In the initial introduction of the Athletics 365 Curriculum and support resources, several clubs expressed the need for guidance on how to plan an effective youth development coaching programme. This prompted the creation of Youth Development Training Programmes, which are available for free download within the UK. These programmes provide coaches with an example on how to develop their own specific training programmes.

Athlete Materials

Along with the coaching support resources, resources were developed for children to practice their athletics skills away from the club environment and to record their progression. A handbook was created to help athletes keep a record of all the activities they have successfully completed and chart their improvement. It provides them with specific challenges that they need to meet for every area of Athletics 365, as well as coaching points to help them achieve these. Linked to this, Athletics 365 provides a series of certificates and wristbands for clubs and coaches wishing to recognise and reward the progress of athletes participating in Athletics 365.

Further Development

Based on the needs of the coaches, clubs and young athletes the Athletics 365 support resources will be developed further in the future. Current plans include the creation of an Athletics 365 smart phone application.



Figure 2: Athletics 365 certificates and wristband rewards

Roll-Out of the Programme

In order to maximise impact across the UK, England Athletics has worked with British Athletics to make Athletics 365 an integral part of the British Athletics Coach Education system. Coaches undertaking the first two tiers of training in the system will be introduced to the Athletics 365 Curriculum and the supporting resources and then encouraged to use these to develop their coaching skills. It is hoped that by exposing all new coaches to this philosophy and approach of the curriculum, they will be in a better position to provide better all-round support to their young athletes.

Experienced coaches or other club personnel already working with young athletes who wish to expand their knowledge and understanding of Athletics 365 can attend one or more of three workshops offered. These cover the concept of Athletics 365, the delivery of the Athletics 365 Curriculum and how to develop a Youth Development Training Programme. In March 2012, 18 months after the launch of the programme, over 110 Athletics 365 workshops had been delivered in England alone and approximately 1,400 coaches had attended these workshops.

At that time, England Athletics conducted an audit of clubs to measure the initial impact of the programme. When Athletics 365 was initially proposed, many experts in the sport agreed that it would take up to 10 years before the true effects of the programme were noticed. However, the audit report clearly showed an immediate effect on clubs, coaches and athletes, with many success stories reported. The findings included:

- Nearly 7,000 children from 135 clubs had taken part in activities linked to the Athletics 365 programme.
- Over 400 clubs in England were using Athletics 365 in some form or another, with this number rapidly expanding.
- Nearly 4,000 Coach Packs and Books had been sold.
- The Athletics 365 Curriculum had been integrated throughout the British Athletics Coach Education System – Coaching Assistant, Athletics Coach and Children's Coach Coaching Awards.

As would be expected, in the first 18 months of implementation there were several challenges to be addressed (e.g. up-skilling/educating coaches, clubs, athletes and parents). Many

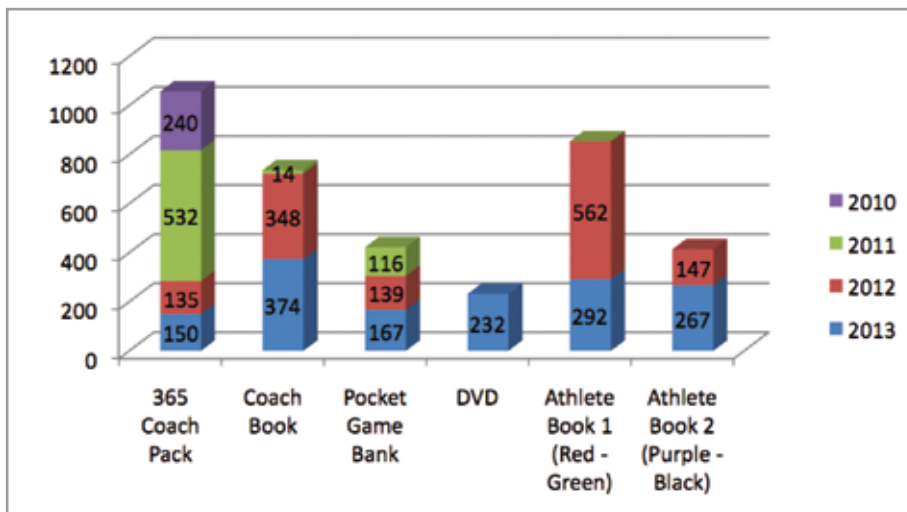


Figure 3: Online sales of Athletics 365 resources 2010-2013

Box 1

Overview of *Bridging the Gap* Findings

The *Bridging the Gap* research project took place in 2011. It tracked the progression of 660 young athletes in the UK between 2006 and 2011. The sample was a 50 / 50 split of male and female athletes from across 15 events. The athletes studied were all ranked in the UK top 20 for the U15 age group in 2006.

The following observations were made:

- 49% where still active in the sport (after 6 years)
- 37% where still active in their original event
- 12% where still in the UK top 20 rankings for U20

The research explored the main reasons given as Critical Success Factors by athletes (including elite) and coaches and are listed below in order of importance:

- intrinsic motivation
- coaching
- friends/family
- enjoyment

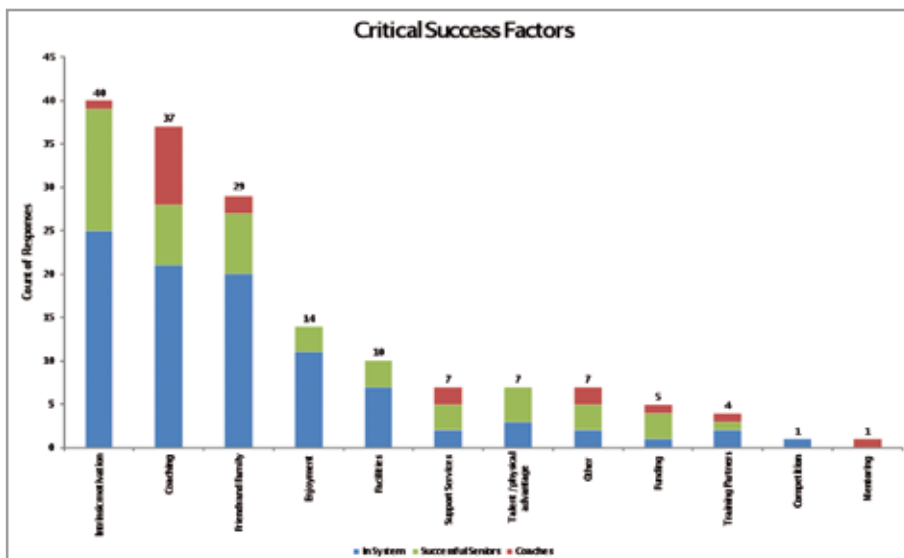


Figure 4: Critical Success Factors for young athletes

clubs found that introducing Athletics 365 to existing members was difficult and several clubs opted to introduce the programme only to new members. This was a very sensible approach as it avoided large disruptions to the existing club format and activities. Unfortunately, this meant some young athletes missed out on the benefits of the programme.

This approach, combined with the initial 'feeling out/familiarisation process, did however provide a useful insight into the impact of Athletics 365 on participation and membership. The figures given by the 135 clubs were in many cases a measurement of how many new athletes came into the sport over the first 12 to 18 months of Athletics 365 and are not indicative of the number of young athletes within clubs.

In the two and a half years since the audit was completed, the numbers engaging with Athletics 365 have grown significantly. The programme and resources have been sold to coaches and teachers in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA, South America, Africa and several countries within Europe. Within the UK, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have now adopted and implemented the programme into their youth development strategies. Figure 3 shows the online sales of Athletics 365 materials in the first four years.

In late 2014 England Athletics will undertake another audit to measure the progress in detail since March 2012.

Additional Feedback

In addition to the 2012 audit, other anecdotal information about the impact of Athletics 365 has been collected from various sources. Selected quotes received from club leaders can be seen in the box on page 93.

Many new coaches have stated how useful the programme and resources have been in learning the athletics events while providing a fun exciting coaching experience for young people in athletics clubs.

A number of clubs using Athletics 365 have noticed an improvement in retention rates, with some clubs quoting above 90% for the past couple of years. This coupled with a steady flow of children into athletics in the UK means these clubs are growing their membership and has prompted many to increase the number of sessions per week offered or the number coaches supporting young athletes.

Moreover, since the introduction of Athletics 365 we have seen several new clubs created. Some of these have introduced a more business-like approach in the delivery of athletics. Coaches and volunteer helpers are now being paid for their time and expertise. Young athletes are being charged at a rate more in line with other sports around the UK. This has led to increased employment of coaches and has created greater levels of commitment and accountability. This format at club level is quite new in the UK but has generated a reasonable level of interest from the more traditional volunteer-based clubs. Several business models have been developed and we believe we will see an increase in this type of approach. This may help with the sustainability and long-term growth of the clubs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Athletics 365 programme has been developed over the last four years and is now recognised by British Athletics and all the UK Home Countries athletics governing bodies as the recommended delivery model for teaching/coaching young athletes. It has already had a significant impact on youth development in the sport and the numbers participating athletes, coaches and clubs continue to grow. The keys to the programme's success include extensive research, a clear philosophy and excellent support resources.

The true measure of the success of the programme will be how many young athletes continue in the sport in (retention) and how many of them progress to higher levels of competition (i.e., international, elite level) in the long term.

Box 2**Quotes from clubs and networks using Athletics 365**

“Athletics 365 has had perhaps the most significant impact of any new initiative launched within our sport over the last 15 years at all levels” – *Club leader from two-time winner of the UK Athletics Junior Club of the Year award*

“...The structure of the Athletics 365, with outstanding, readily accessible resources and support services, has allowed new coaches to enter track and field less intimidated by the perceived requirement for high levels of technical knowledge and understanding. This has allowed us to significantly increase our entry level coach numbers and allow others, who want to coach at a higher level, more time and opportunity to develop their coaching pathways.” - *Chairman and Head of Youth Development at a junior club*

“...All the young athletes engage very quickly and enthusiastically to the structure of 365 and its progression through the levels. The philosophy and structure in many ways is very similar to what is already being delivered within existing groups. It however is slightly broader, more formal in its coverage, and has included several other areas like core strength, lifestyle and behaviour that were not previously fully covered.” - *Bedford and County Athletics Club*

“...The club is very pleased with the Athletics 365 model and the way the pilot has worked out with the Academy becoming a long-term part of the club. We are sure that we have provided a long term sustainable model to progress our young athletes and are also sure that the club itself will benefit long term by producing more competent athletes.” - *Wreake Academy*

“...The children have enjoyed the various tasks through Athletics 365, are keen to keep having a go to improve, and get up to the next level which is great, as it is getting them enthusiastic about the sport. The best part about it is the increases in skills, which may not have been properly taught, which can help them with any sport they may wish to do.” - *North of Tyne Athletics Network*

“...Following the Athletics 365 programme our athletes are significantly more capable across a broader range of athletic skills. The programme allows the athletes to better understand the need for an all-round development pathway prior to specialisation. We have athletes who have “discovered” new talents, learnt new skills and become significantly more committed to track and field as a consequence. Others have become fitter, more agile, more aware of their own potential. Many more younger athletes are now looking at multi-eventing rather than focussing on a single event realising that developing all round skills allows them to enjoy a greater number of event options as they mature. It also engages them more in athletics.” - *Slough Junior Athletics Club*

There are several challenges still to be addressed if Athletics 365 is to have the maximum impact for athletics. These include:

- Developing a greater awareness of the programme within UK schools and the athletics clubs system.
- Developing a greater awareness of the programme among parents. This would help them to understand what their children need to do in order to have the most enjoyable experience, while developing the skills required to fulfil their potential and lifelong involvement in sport.
- Providing further education opportunities for coaches (both new and existing coaches) and clubs on how to implement Athletics 365 in their own environment.

To help achieve these aims we make the following five recommendations:

- 1. Implement parent education:** Parents are key to ensuring that correct coaching and training is offered to young people. If parents pressure their children to succeed or accept poor coaching practices, even the most effective programmes and resources will fail. Through the development and implementation of a new parent education workshop parents will be better educated to help their children enjoy the sport and in turn understand the importance of focusing on long term development rather than immediate success. This philosophy and approach is supported and promoted through the Athletics 365 programme.
- 2. Support resources aligned to the coach education pathway:** Although the Athletics 365 curriculum is an integral part of the British Athletics Coach Educa-

tion System, the supporting resources are still not mandatory within these courses. Moving forward, coaches new to athletics will be entitled to the Athletics 365 Coach Book fostering their development and understanding of how to coach progressive all-round athletics.

- 3. Develop an Athletics 365 smart phone application:** The next natural progression for the Athletics 365 resource suite is the introduction of the Athletics 365 App. Planned for launch later in 2014, the app will provide coaches with training programmes, games cards and coaching teaching progressions all at the touch of the button.
- 4. Promote global distribution:** Already we have had many coaches and athletics professionals from overseas requesting the Athletics 365 resources. The major challenge has always been the cost of packaging and shipping internationally. The development of the Athletics 365 App will help in this area.
- 5. Conduct further research:** Longitudinal research into the progression and retention of young talented athletes has been planned for within the next two years. The findings from this research will reinforce the Athletics 365 approach and help to shape future resources and changes to the programme.

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