


Athlete Development - Reflections on the Pathway from Potential to Performance

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by Frank Dick

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to add perspective to the strategic planning process at the start of a new Olympic cycle with a focus on athletes and elite athlete development. After referring to a seven-stage athlete development pathway, the author, an experienced former head coach, outlines strategic and delivery tasks for an effective system. These include a coach development programme based on specialisation for working with athletes as "beginners", "developers" or "high performers" rather than progressing in parallel with the athlete on his/her development pathway. The focus is then turned to the period between junior (U20) competition and the age range for peak performance - 23 to 30 years (men); 24 to 31 (women). A statistical study suggests that the sport as a whole may not be effective in retaining and supporting talented athletes along the pathway to very top-level success: on average, less than 10% of the medallists at any of the six IAAF World Junior Championships in the years 2000 to 2010 were able to make the finals at the London 2012 Olympic Games. After discussing the study results, the author makes 11 recommendations for national federation and IAAF leaders.

AUTHOR

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Introduction

Systematic and positive development calls for a clear, well thought out strategy. Without strategy, success will be unpredictable, unsustainable and maybe unnoticed – that is, if it appears at all. This point applies to athletics, and it is the national athletics federation that is primarily responsible for elaborating and then delivering strategies to develop the sport in its country with the aim of success.

In designing a strategy for any aspect of athletics, a federation has three key objectives:

- increase participation,
- develop people,
- improve performance.

While these apply to all involved in athletics, the focus here is on athletes and athlete development. The aim of this paper is to add perspective to the strategic review and planning process that many federations will be going through at the start of a new Olympic cycle.

Development Pathways

The pathway of an athlete's development has been variously described. Figure 1 covers the journey well over seven stages. For some, the pathway will lead to high-performance arenas during the age range for peak performances – 23 to 30 years (men); 24 to 31 (women). For others, the common initial three stages are preparation for a lifetime of activity for recreation and/or well-being objectives.

It may be worth noting that the idea of exciting or motivating someone to participate is not a one-off exercise as part of the recruitment programme, but is a continuing exercise in the retention programme. This is important, because electing to commence the pathway is of little value unless the athlete commits to going the distance by deciding to do so. There are a number of influencers when it comes to this decision, according to age and culture. Whether they are parents, peers, social media or whatever, it is critical that they are identified so that we can "influence the influencers". This applies equally to those athletes who may have the talent to deliver high performance or simply the wisdom to have an active and healthy lifestyle.

To narrow the focus of this paper further, it is the pathway to high performance that is considered here.

While the various stages of the Athlete Development Pathway suggest a simple sequential build, it would be naïve to assume that it will develop its own momentum. It is sensible, then, to:

- design and deliver a talent action plan,
- ensure effective leadership of the process by a coach or coaches competent to do so,
- create a supportive environment that re-

flects understanding of the athlete's changing needs in a rapidly changing world.

Talent action plan

A talent action plan might be built on a simple framework:

- Identify (talent spotting on basis of performance potential),
- Recruit (attract talented athletes to travel the pathway),
- Coach (lead the process and those who have input to it),
- Conduct (create the motivational climate to retain a flow of talented athletes),
- Involve (prepare athletes to take ownership of his/her development and performance pathway).

Coaching competence

The key, on-the-ground facilitator of the process is the coach. The scope and quality of the coach's knowledge and competencies, and the effectiveness of the coach's work is the outcome of his/her coach development pathway. To understand how coach development relates to athlete development, the following points must first be understood:

1. Different skills and areas of competence are required according to the athlete's age, development stage etc. (A similar situation occurs in education when we consider, for example, the specifics of experience and expertise required in teaching infants as opposed to teaching teenagers in high school.)
2. Beginner athletes should not be exposed to beginner coaches.
3. The science of coaching may be taught; the art can only be learned. (This means

Excite to Participate	Participate to Practice	Practise to Prepare	Prepare to Perform	Perform to Compete	Compete to Learn	Learn to Win
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Figure 1: The Athlete Development Pathway

that coach development involves both curricular education and experiential growth).

4. Early in the coach development pathway there is greater priority on the science and reliance on previous practice, later the priority is on the art and judgement calls. Throughout the pathway there must be a consistency in living core values and the coach's code of ethics.

In this context it is clear that there is error in considering the coach development pathway as progressing in parallel with the athlete development pathway. Consequently it may be appropriate to pursue a different paradigm, where coach development appropriate to the picture of athletes as “beginners”, “developers” or “high performers”, for example, is pursued.

This might be illustrated as in Figure 2, where the athlete development pathway progresses horizontally, and the coach development pathway vertically in a framework defined by the IAAF's five-level Coach Education and Certification System for reference.

Supportive environment

For the most part, federations assume that the sport's culture affords an adequately supportive environment for the athlete. The annual cycle of training for, and participation in, competition in this context becomes the cultural framework into which the athlete fits.

There are particular concepts of competition that have been designed to enrich the culture and facilitate the athlete development pathway as a process. The IAAF Kids' Athletics programme (for ages 6-8; 8-10; 10-12) and the IAAF Team Athletics Championships (13-15) are excellent approaches, which both in principle and in practice reflect the seven critical factors that deliver a valuable and valued experience for these athletes:

1. Universal access
2. Age appropriate
3. Dosage and duration
4. Fun
5. Incentives and motivation
6. Feedback to athletes
7. Teaching/coaching/mentoring

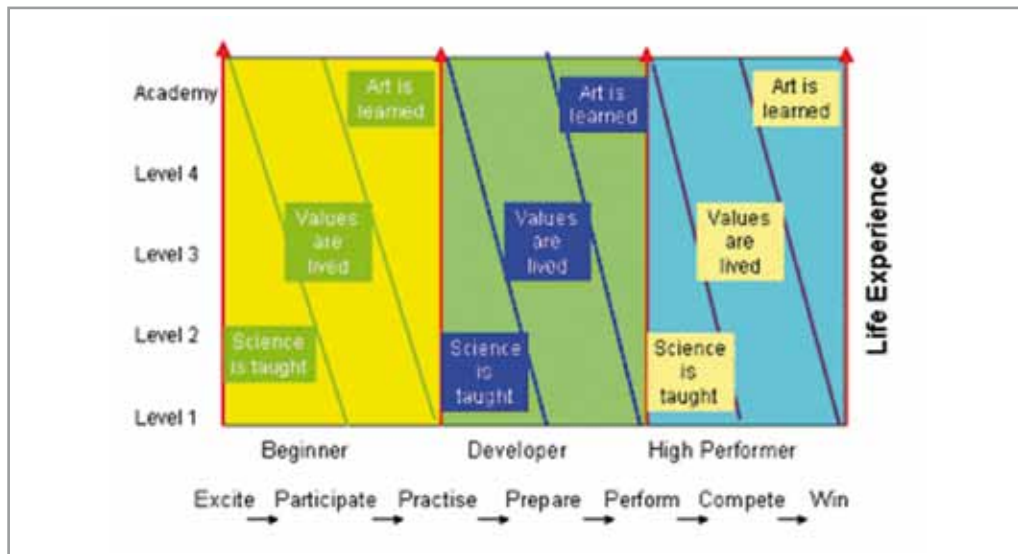


Figure 2: The athlete development pathway (horizontal axis) and performance level-appropriate coach development pathways (vertical axis)

These naturally lead into the notion of age group championships first at national then at Area and IAAF level. The most significant are at U18, U20 and now U23 (e.g. European Athletics). U16 also features in many national federation and school programmes and in a few instances we even see U14 championships.

It is less important whether or not such exist than it is to consider them not as ends in themselves, but as monitoring or control points in a development process preparing athletes for senior competition in the peak performance age range. So they are to be seen by the athlete as “where am I now in the context of where I am aiming to be”. The coach must not only see things in that light, but address preparation and motivation accordingly. This situation would reflect that we are effectively addressing our three primary strategy objectives.

Once an athlete enters the stages in the development pathway that feature championships, it is relatively easy to track those athletes who show achievement or talent as medallists as they progress. The overall numbers of athletes participating can also be determined.

Unfortunately we have come to see reducing numbers from early to later age group championships almost as a fact of life. So for many federations, it is considered normal for participating numbers of athletes to drop by around 30% (U16 to U18) and 35% (U18 to U20) – males and females combined. Some of these athletes will be the more talented.

But why should we accept this situation as normal? Increased participation is one of our primary objectives, so surely this must be addressed. And what can be more distressing than unfulfilled potential of our talented young people? When this happens we are failing to deliver on the other two primary objectives.

A Reality Check

Some might say that these issues only affect the years leading through to the junior age group (U20). Unfortunately a study following the London Olympic Games appears to indicate otherwise in the apparent failure of talented high-achievers who medalled at IAAF World Junior Championships (WJC) to demonstrate similar levels of achievement at the Olympic level in subsequent years.

We chose a 12-year timescale leading up to London 2012 because it is understood that when an athlete competes in the WJC he/she will be coming into his/her peak performance years in such a period (we have allowed extra time at both ends of the roughly eight-year age range to accommodate exceptional early and late-bloomers).

From 2000 to 2010, there were six editions of the WJC, from which emerged 360 male and 354 female medallists (excluding relays). Clearly some athletes covered by this analysis from all parts of the world will have enjoyed successes at the 2004 and 2008 Olympic Games and the IAAF World Championships in Athletics during this period or will be successful at future major events. However, the focus here is on London 2012 and secondarily on European athletes.

We have calculated on the basis of 176 finals positions (top 8) and 68 medals for men¹ (there were three bronze medals in the high jump) and 168 finals positions and 63 medals for women in all the events in London (again, relays were excluded).

Men's results

In the case of the men, the 360 WJC medallists in the 10-year period translated into 33 finalists in London (Figure 3) who took 18.7% of the Olympic final positions available. Average that out over the six editions of WJC in question and it comes to about 9% of the male medallists from the WJC in any year going on to earn an Olympic finals place London.

The 360 male WJC medallists also took 14 Olympic medals in London (20.6% of those available). Averaged over the six editions of the WJC, it comes to about 3.8% of the male medallists at the WJC in any year going on to take an Olympic medal.

For European men, the 127 WJC medallists translated into nine finalists in London who took 5% of the Olympic final positions available (Figure 4). Over the six editions of the WJC it comes to an average of 4.7% of male European WJC medallists in any year going on to earn an Olympic finals place in London (for this calculation, I assumed that the WJC medals won by Europe's men were spread evenly over the six editions).

The 127 European male WJC medallists took one Olympic medal in London (1.5% of those available). Averaged over the six editions of the WJC, it comes to about 0.8% of the male European medallists at the WJC in any year going on to take an Olympic medal.

Women's results

In the case of the women, the 354 WJC medallists in the 10-year period translated into 30 finalists in London (Figure 4) who took 17.8% of the Olympic final positions available. Average that out over the six editions of WJC in question and it comes to about 8.5% of the female medallists from the WJC in any year going on to earn an Olympic finals place London.

The 354 female WJC medallists also took 18 Olympic medals in London (28.6% of those available). Averaged over the six editions of the WJC, it comes to about 5% of the female medallists at the WJC in any year going on to take an Olympic medal.

For European women, the 169 WJC medallists translated into 11 finalists in London who took 6.5% of the Olympic final positions available. Over the six editions of the WJC it comes to an average of 6.4% of female European WJC medallists in any year going on to earn an Olymp-

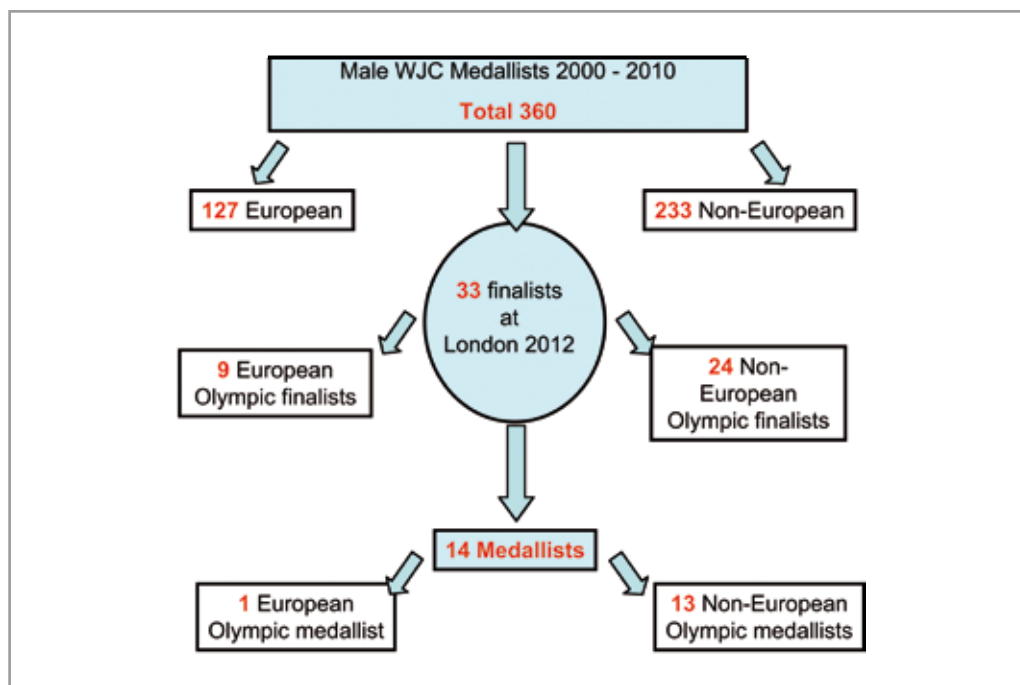


Figure 3: Male medallists at the IAAF World Junior Championships 2000 - 2010 and their success at the London 2012 Olympic Games

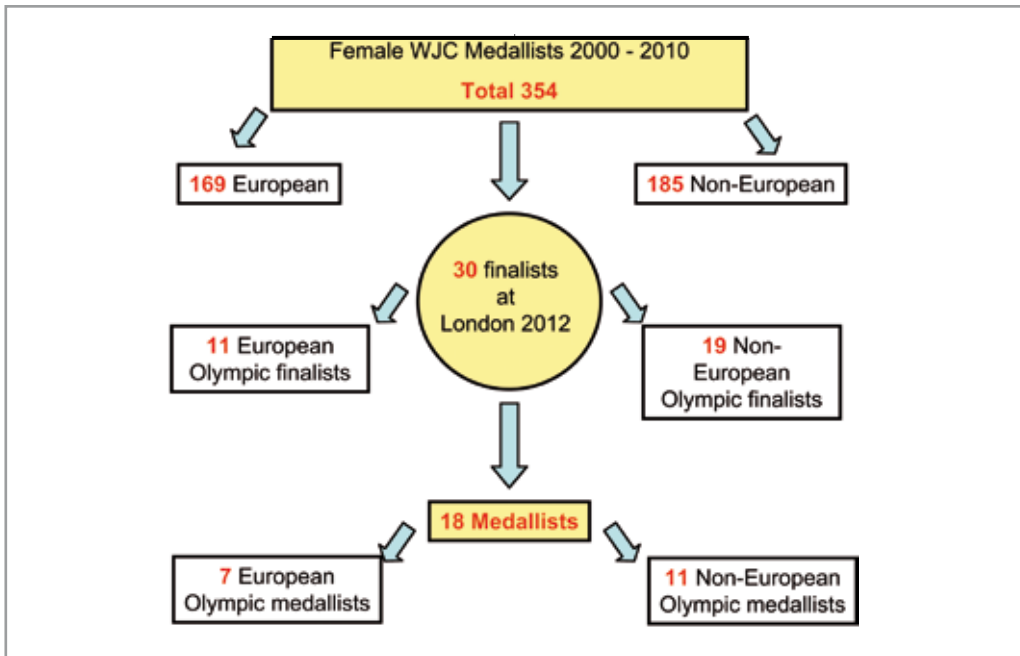


Figure 4: Female medallists at the IAAF World Junior Championships 2000 - 2010 and their success at the London 2012 Olympic Games

pic finals place in London (for this calculation, I assumed that the WJC medals won by Europe's women were spread evenly over the six editions).

The 169 European female WJC medallists took seven Olympic medals in London (11.1% of those available). Averaged over the six editions of the WJC, it comes to about 3.9% of the female European medallists at the WJC in any year going on to take an Olympic medal.

Discussion

The questions athletics leaders at the national and international level need to ask are:

- Are the environment and services provided making it possible for an acceptable number of our very best juniors to progress through the final stages of the athlete development pathway and excel at the very top level?
- If not, what could be done better?

In my view, the attrition rate we see from these figures is significant and substantial. Of course, not every medallist in six editions of the WJC can expect to earn one of the limited finals places at one edition of the Olympic Games. But the athletes considered here presumably represent the best of their generation and presumably they benefitted from large investments of attention, time, effort and money. Given this, is a top figure of 9% making an Olympic final an acceptable return?

And focusing on Europe, will governments and sponsors continue to support high-performance programmes and accept the odds for success when we say that, for all the European males, from the whole continent, sent to the WJC and coming back with WJC medals over an entire decade, the net result was that we were able to help one, just one, go on and win an Olympic medal?

What prevented so many the top juniors in this period from fulfilling their potential or, worse, persuaded them to drop out of the sport? What was missing from their further preparation and environment to compromise their progress?

And for those athletes who continued to progress or emerged – what kept them going? What factors in their training raised their game?

The type of statistical data presented here cannot give us causes and there will always be a number of contributing factors impacting these years in an athlete's life. But whatever they may be, would it not be prudent to consider a national, Area and global strategy to at least reduce the attrition?

Recommendations

Once the dust has settled from an Olympic Games, many federations, having reviewed the past few years, look to make changes. These range from personnel to policy. Given the issues raised here, it may also be appropriate to review and revise strategy in affording athletes their athlete development pathway experience. As a guide in this, the following points are offered.

For national federations:

1. Clarify the relationship between the three primary objectives and the athlete development pathway.
2. Ensure that high performance and active lifetime choices are both catered for.
3. Create athlete retention/motivational climate support environment programmes specific to age groups and developmental levels. One size does not fit all.
4. Design and deliver a talent action plan that takes athletes through to fulfilling performance potential in the peak performance age range.

5. Review coach education and development programmes to prepare coaches to be more effective in meeting the needs of athletes at specific stages of development.
6. Monitor coach development through a dedicated tracking programme to be more responsive to addressing individual coach development needs.
7. Establish clear understanding in all involved, that age group championships are not ends in themselves but milestones in the process of athlete development.
8. Prepare an online national athlete tracking system to ensure appropriate guidance and support is available for athletes and their coaches once the athlete is identified as having talent for high performance.
9. Remain constantly in touch with development in performance science and medicine, realigning athlete development pathway programmes and coach education content accordingly.

For the IAAF and Area associations:

1. Prepare an online Area athlete tracking system to do so for athletes who are medalists/finalists in Area age group championships.
2. Prepare an online IAAF athlete tracking system to do so for athletes who are medalists/finalists in IAAF age group championships.
3. In each case, establish an online interactive information and support service for these athletes and their coaches.

On a slightly bigger scale of action, it is worth considering if the situation could be improved by a change to the competition structure? In Europe, we have the European Ath-

letics U23 Championships and these certainly seem to have the potential to maintain motivation in the gap between junior competition and the peak performance age range. Might this approach help do so at a global level, if IAAF held this type of competition?

A Final Thought

It is our highest priority to prepare our athletes for sport and through it, for a better life. The world in which we live is changing faster and faster. We cannot assume that what worked for our generations will work for them. So we must become more agile in being adaptable and creative if we are to be effective in guiding them to being all that they can become. Like every relationship in life, ours with the athletes must be worked at persistently. The athletes have choices of course. For the

relationship to be strong we must focus more carefully on making athletics their choice and provide that sense of partnership that lets them take ownership of the future.

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FOOTNOTES

Page 50: There were three bronze medals in the men's high jump