



LONG TERM PLANNING - A PERMANENT NEED IN THE PREPARATION OF YOUNG ATHLETES

*The one who doesn't know what he seeks doesn't understand what he finds (Anonymous)
There are no favourable winds for those who don't have a port of destination (Socrates)*

INTRODUCTION

21st Century sport has increased its social impact and also its relevant reflexes in world and national economy.

These impacts motivate a constant search for new shows, new events, new competitions in which the youth handball championships have been held with more frequency focusing more and more on younger ages.

The preparation of the youth in handball apprenticeships has been developed, in a more or less an agreeable way alongside the stages of education in connection with the fundamental need of the entire process being subjected to a long term plan.

The observation of these procedures often raise pertinent doubts regarding the future of these athletes; when sports data shows precocious young athletes quitting, some of them already classified as great talents.

More than ever it is important to reflect on the programme and focus on the discussion surrounding long term planning as a fundamental element for the success in the education of young sportsmen.

1. THE EDUCATION OF ATHLETES IS UNDER PERMANENT DOUBT

The training of young athletes must habitually consider the educational stages.

The idea presented in stages is a theoretical model of progression in the sporting career of a young athlete with the aim of transforming him into a top level athlete.

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However, we are confronted with the reality that very few are able to reach the high level and unfortunately; to the contrary, a great number of athletes quit “the system”, in spite of all expectations.

The concept observed through educational stages has natural challenges aggravated by initial competitions and the difficulty in fitting the competitive evaluation in the educational process.

The actual sportive and social involvement will force the coach to demonstrate and explain immediate results against the principles of long-term preparation, which is supposed to be an axiom of the youth training.



The environment within youth competitions, either at national or international level, increases the challenges to which those persons responsible for education cannot remain insensitive to.

2. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF YOUTH TRAINING

The aim of the youth training must be the integration in sporting activity where it is hoped that a liking for the sport will be developed in such a way that the young athlete increases the personal motivation to continue sports training and increases also the capacity to actively participate in the determined sport activity whether on a leisure or a competitive basis.

The education of young sportsmen is undoubtedly a **long-term process**, continuous and not linear, and therefore cannot be conceived as a pre-determined sequence of events.

The major physical, psychological and social changes occur at younger ages, followed by ulterior growth and maturation changes at a more steadied rhythm.

A long-term process means accepting many uncertainties and doubts as the development of an individual is always an irregular process, changing constantly on physical, emotional and social levels.

Immediately, the structures involved in the youth training must have highly demanding characteristics encompassing continuity and tolerance, but with enough stability to maintain a long-term concept.

This means that education needs to be continuous; in order to contribute to increasing motivation and satisfaction levels of the young athletes, evaluation also needs to be constant in regards to successive results.

But if the results of the respective competitions are the only procedure for evaluation, all the process will have is the tendency to relate to short term, this should lead to positive behaviour and to avoid unrealistic illusions for the natural maturation of the youngsters.

These procedures play a significant role in talent selection, however they can be misleading in regards to the future success of an individual who maybe has no real capabilities and does not take into account the diminution of talent in youngsters as they mature.

The subjection to the immediate status of competitive evaluations does not allow for a response that is corresponding to a long-term process, motivating behaviours of immediate benefit, with the inherent procedures of careful talent selection.

The preparation (and training) in all sportive processes, aims to improve the advantage in the competition, however we cannot forget that we are part of a



process of educating athletes whose objectives and most important goals will reflect, permanently over a long-term period. That said, regarding future competitions, the well-being of the young athlete is put first.

3. WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE YOUTH COACHES

For a great number of coaches the education of the athletes is a very attractive activity and most of the time it becomes a passion without rationalisation, thus said certain procedures contradict this philosophy.

Modern training methods often emphasize long-term planning. The actual situation with the media, having many competitions with a heavy schedule putting pressure on the athletes is not something new in sport. However, it makes us wonder if it is efficient or even possible to apply a concept of long-term planning.

Theory has always indicated that an increase in sporting efficiency in future competitions was guaranteed by long-term planning, based on the fact that by using sensible training methods allowed for the progressive evaluation of an athlete.

Naturally, success depends on talent possessed by the individual athlete; as we are aware that systematic training guarantees the progression of all athletes. The level of excellence is measured by talent. There is no benefit in long-term planning if there is no core talent. Results of this can be seen in a variable period between 8 to 16 years of regular training.

For example in Handball (as in all collective sports) the period of systematic evidence bounces between 22 - 25 years until over 33 with a continuous and the unquestionable period of excellence around 27 - 30 years, which means preparation of 10 years minimum for a youngster who starts at 10 - 12 years.

The evolution of a young athlete has “elliptic repetition” characteristics (in ascending spiral), i.e., the evidence is processed by periods of greater impact, in which we think we have an athlete with confirmed value, and then suddenly he looks like a “rookie” with no perspectives.

At times it happens that a young athlete will show the same behaviour exhibiting higher levels of execution involving new elements, being able to select other options with the possibility of benefiting from his own capabilities.

The known variations between the chronological differences, which are the natural basis for defining the age ranges, distinguish themselves from the biological age (from 1 – 3 years according to the majority of authors) which shows the true maturity of each young athlete.

In this sense we must try to avoid some of the shortcomings where this kind of procedure could influence the behaviour of the coach:



1. Using the age scale as the only reference element to the individual plan, without taking into account individual evaluation processes and the evidence of different levels of maturation.
2. Not showing consideration for the various age groups thus subjecting the athletes to a general programme with the same group.
3. To view the programme contents as if they were “pieces” and to divide them using the age scales and by each year, hoping that, in the end, a satisfactory sum can be obtained.
4. To use the age scales as an indicator, without equating the number of years and the knowledge regarding the previous preparation. The promotion of plans that are not adjusted to the activity itself that do not take into account the level of training routines and the capacity needed for the specific execution are ill advised.

4. AND THE COMPETITION?

Another element that decisively influences this procedure (subdivision according to age) is a competition process that often adopts forms which are contradictory to the education process based on materially justifiable reasons.

The competition form always instigates evaluation and the respective process allows for the removal of those things that are unnecessary, to what has been planned, that instead of contributing to the continuity of the programme introduce destabilising elements.

From this point on, only the behaviour of the coach and the structural preparation of the hosting team can subject the young athletes to significant alterations of the long-term training plan.

The prominence of the “team identity” as a collective benefit could be to the detriment of the individual who is part of that team (athlete under education). Here we refer only to the point that in collective sports, in which we play as a whole against another whole; within the team there is a facet that is individual preparation to which collective behaviours, either technical – tactical, or sportive solidarity, or ethical commitment, or even socialisation, are subjected to.

This thought of team primacy introduces procedures of talent specialisation, habituating the players to functions and tasks that do not correspond to their characteristics (sometimes they are still not even evident) leading to “educational disregard” this can be seen through the behaviour displayed during game actions.

At the senior men’s level there are only stable teams, because on all other levels changes in age impose changes in the teams and the evolution of players leads us to think about using the individual in more than one specific position, more than one single function thus increasing the possibility for a broader answer in respect of the future demands of the game.



Again, this means dedication to a long term plan that is individual, persistent, tolerant, demanding and that corresponds to the needs of the athlete e.g. if their abilities such as defence were lower, particular attention should have been given to this area of the game.

The team must contribute to the individual education by knowing how to apply the game procedures collectively and systematically, however this is not always to the benefit of the long term planning that is inherent to the education of the individual athlete.

5. MATCH TIME

Nevertheless, within the framework of competitions, the utilisation of athletes during moments of effective and formal game over the course of a season and several seasons must be noted.

This means that in a specific game(s) we can face a very uneven utilisation of the players, however at the end of the match; this must not be used as a value of extreme variation between the playing time given and the varying components of the age scale.

This is something that influences the long term plan as it increases the individual differences which negatively impact the ability within a training match (a very important factor in the learning process), affecting individual results due to the players not being subjected to the same educational stimulations. The individual training process means different interventions for each player but not substantive differences in the methodologies and educational opportunities.

This aspect of using athletes in the game is one of the most pertinent tasks of a the coach's work and in which one can observe the will and the capacity of the coach and the hosting structure (club, national team...etc) to submit themselves in a critical and conscientious way, to the principles planned, taking into account the evaluations, both individual and collective, that have been performed so far.

Difficult tasks should only be used to vary the stimulation time and not to produce constant and disjointed alterations to the objectives, or to promote endless repetitions of the same exercises, gests, behaviours, facilitating action fixations that produce immediate results but do not allow for the development of capabilities and behaviours.

Long term planning in youth training, in the relation to competitions, is different from the seniors. Also, taking competitions into consideration, we do not run out of options neither are they absolutely determined by this fact, on the contrary, the competitions must be framed within the formative process.

In the senior level teams, competitions play a key role in the planning, whatever the time period may be, as they represent an evaluated goal to be reached in a predefined moment(s).



This is for sure of one of the most difficult situations concerning long term planning for younger age groups.

Matches within this long term planning concept must be considered as a specific load, being useful to test partial aspects, making it possible to obtain information about the assimilation levels, which must be reflected upon and eventually may be used to reinforce and amplify the training methods used.

Simultaneously, these matches will always be a factor when looking at the improvement in the functional capacity of the players and is a way of them letting them verify and increase their efficacy and consequently to strengthen their personal growth (increase in the match capacities at present and in the future).

6. A LONG TERM PLAN ESTABLISHES OBJECTIVES AND TRAINING DIRECTIONS

A long term plan must establish the general and specific objectives, subordinating the training direction, always taking into consideration some conditional questions based on fundamental principals that work as guidelines to the process, particularly necessary during evaluations or during the interruptions that always tend to happen.

There are questions which are impossible to ignore, such as the player's age that connect several other aspects regarding his level of maturity, which in turn determine the adjustments within the process.

Therefore we must consider the metabolic changes that influence growth and consequently pay particular attention to the dynamics of the charges, of which some relevant aspects must be highlighted:

- The young athlete reaches good physical shape with smaller efforts (of less duration) that have less durability and therefore the results cannot be maintained for an extended length period. This means that progressive efforts will over time allow for a durable effect.
- On the other hand, the possibility of accommodating the higher levels of efforts depends on the body adapting to the processes inherent to the particular metabolism originated by the continuous training i.e. getting used to training!
- Until 16 – 17 years of age the human body is in permanent mutation, including the bone-muscle structures, the evolution of the nervous system has a bearing on their capacity to absorb stimuli on physical and technical abilities
- The tactical learning depends on the superior nervous activity that in the early age of sports practice is still clearly in the development phase.



In the meantime, in conjunction with age, we equate the critical development phases that the players along with their coach (within the training framework) will have to overcome in order to benefit in a positive manner.

To Martin (1985) there are three fundamental stages that lead to a high level:

- . Basis psychomotor formation (6-9 yrs)
- . Specific training of the sport (10-14 yrs)
- . Development of the specific training to reach the high level (15-18 yrs)

Tudor Bompa (1998) shares a similar thought:

- . Acquisition of the basic motor abilities (appropriation of the notion of own body around 6-9 yrs)
- . Acquisition of corporal abilities associated to the different sports techniques with greater cultural impact (10-12 yrs)
- . Specialisation in a sports field and a specific sport (from 13yrs onwards)

Vicente Año (1997) in his considerations over the difficulty in establishing ages for the initiation, even because of the cultural differences, remembers the following differences as the main characteristics:

. A 10 year old:

- very much dependent on his family
- less capacity of acquiring information
- less capacity of social integration

. A 17 year old:

- increase in the independence from the family
- greater psycho-physical development
- greater capacity of holding onto the systematic training

Through this analysis Año arrives at a series of education stages, similar to those of other authors:

- motor initiation stage (5-8 yrs) – basic tasks and abilities
- training initiation stage (9-12 yrs) – general sports familiarisation
- systematic training stage (12+) – specialisation

The characteristics of these stages are similar but the age variation is significant given that for the specialisation we detect a gap of 3 years (12-15 yrs of age).

In any case, the specialisation period is too long and today we know that this period includes one of the moments in which the greater percentage of sports abandonment occurs, which is between 17 and 20 years old when the youngsters stop submitting themselves to any process of sports training.



It is possible that it has not been taken into account that within this age range, the young athletes begins to have a more critical and consentaneous self-evaluation that contemplates its real value and success expectations as they now possess a higher autonomy and increased social freedom. Ultimately, these are the first steps in considering important life options, the true initiation to the “adult stage”.

At the same we must concern ourselves with the integration of the youth at the senior level, many of them are subject to intense preparations and success while at the junior level and when they are faced with the effort put by the current senior athletes they will find it difficult performing at the level they used to before.

This leads to the conclusion that we are facing a new age level in regards to the abandonment of sports practice (athletes who do not adapt in the necessary time period to make the required progress to meet the current demands at that level) and others that only reach their true potential much later (21-23 yrs); thus we find yet one more reason to persevere with the need for having sports planning addressed within the realm of athletes' education.

It is now necessary to look at the question of balance regarding the load processing. This does not mean an absence of training loads of this kind, however there needs to be a correct adaptation to the training loads, leading to a total comprehension of a process that shows that 10 years are needed (sometimes even more) for an individual to reach the highest level with optimum success possibilities.

In a nutshell we can say that long term planning for the youth age stages must be a priority of sportive education and technical education, associated with high level training. For that we must take into consideration the chronological and biological age, training time and the respective working capacity, also included are the previous sportive activity and the guaranteed working frame that is included the average preparation time of each sport.

Such aspects ease the specific and concrete assessment of the athlete, by supplying data regarding the fulfilment of the planning and of the objectives. This will not be possible if planning does not exist or if it is short termed, because the data comparison will be therefore highly affected.

7. PHASES OF THE PLAN CONSTRUCTION

We can now start thinking of constructing a long term plan that addresses the needs of the young athletes, taking into account the following factors, based on one hand on the previous considerations and on the other hand on the selected operative methodology, that needs to be adapted to the coach's reality – his players, his club and his team, his associative working frame, his specific sport.

It is possible that the education can be divided into two phases, the first part designated as **General**, in which all youngsters are included, independent of the merits and talents of each individual and contributing in a transversal way to the



different sports and the second division designated as **Special**, which we can subdivide into **Specialisation Training** and **High Profit Training**.

In this subdivision we will consider the stages of education as initiation (6-10yrs), sportive education (11-14yrs) which included in the first great general phase and **Specialised Training** (15-20yrs) plus **High Profit** (20yrs-U23) that is integrated in the **Special Phase**.

As a basic structure for the long term plan the **STAGE PLAN** is adopted (with duration from 6 months to 2 years) in which the macro objectives are always integrated. The preparation issues also need to be considered in this period as the possibility to reduce the duration of the plan construction process exists.

This means that the stages in the General Phase and the Education Phase, i.e. Initiation, will have a longer duration, whereas the stages in the sub High Level Phase will have a shorter duration because the capacity of comprehension and subjection to the training will be much more developed.

We will now consider Seasonal Planning, which in the younger age ranges have natural recesses – Christmas, Easter and summer – more pertinent in the General Phase than in the High Level Training Phase. In this phase these periods must be integrated in the preparation specific plan, without ignoring the particulars of the younger seniors' integration in the respective teams.

The sport season planning includes the Meso cycles, Micro cycles, Training Units, and they should last over 9 months in the initial phases, with an initial volume of 40 training sessions (more or less 2 per week / 1 hour duration) until 11 months are reached (incl. holidays) with a volume of 46 / 48 hours based on the experience of organisation and direction in the education of the young handball athletes.

Regarding the younger athletes, the Meso cycles may coincide with the school periods (more or less 2 or 3 months) whereas in the older ages the Meso cycles must be conditioned by the whole set of Micro cycles (blocks of training units that repeat and structure themselves according to the objectives) depending of the whole set of special competitions and preparations, such as the National Teams.

At this level, the greatest conditioning for the construction of Micro cycles is related to the sports calendar and by the sequence of competitions, which should have time space (or proper time conditions) regarding the first leg and subjected to the relative difficulties of the opponents (according to the expectations of theoretical difficulty). It is in this context that the individual objectives must still be adjusted in the preparation of the young athlete.

Whereas in the phase in which the education stages are predominant (sport initiation and orientation), the Meso cycles are conditioned by a number of learning goals and the Micro cycles are conditioned by the progress factors in the training capacities, the competitions are important elements in the preparation and evaluation of the learning objectives.



8. LONG TERM OPERATIONAL PLAN

The first task within the construction of a plan is to *ESTABLISH GOALS*, as a plan inevitably obliges us to know in which direction we are going. To define objectives one must always have a mix of long term and immediate goals that allow for the conception of development presuppositions that nevertheless will guarantee a certain nearness of evaluation regarding the results of each stage.

The idea that long term planning denies immediate objectives is one of the main factors for forsaking the process, as immediate evaluations that lead to information are not available.

Simultaneously it is fundamental to formulate the stages and *SHAPE THE EVALUATION*, in order to control the global process that increases the immediate effects that the competitions always show.

Therefore, it is necessary to elaborate the method and process on how to attain these objectives, where must we specify the *ACTIVITIES*, registering the main modules and main goals in each activity or in all. It is important to remember that the youngsters' life is more than just sport. It is essential not to create too many activities that do allow sufficient recovery time. Priorities must be established in order to allow for decisions in the stages, but without sacrificing objectives.

Finally, the right conditions are in place to create an activities and preparation calendar. Perhaps this is the right moment to demand a long term plan from the coaches involved in order to actively integrate the decisions of the official competitions schedule in which they will be involved.

This involvement will allow for the selection of the most adequate way of play based on time and age range; keeping the principle that with senior competitions (extended, accumulation of points) that implies strategy, creates conditions for planning based on competitive micro cycles that are not adapted for the younger ages.

The youngsters, through the experience of having specific sportive actions, or obligatory time out introductions, or even adequate ways of play in the preparation stage; find the ideal atmosphere to develop and learn.

The organisation of these internal events lets the younger players to experiment with other functions, and also integrates other members of the sporting community e.g. officials to parents.

The physical exercise level that constructs the training unit should be as much aimed at general as aimed at specific education and also tailored to the respective activity.



9. CONDITIONING ISSUES OF LONG TERM PLANNING AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The execution of long term planning demands the existence of certain elements that assist with the accomplishment of the objectives.

On the other hand, even if we cannot be indifferent to the sporting result, it should be looked upon in function of the goal set in the plan and also of the evaluation we intend to perform during each competition.

In competitions, the “doubts” that I as a coach have experienced such as how I have led a game (i.e. many spontaneous changes re: competition plan, improvisation, altered the actions of the team and players in a significant way), the way I have reacted to the different situations (questioned the referees and their actions too often, lost my temper with the players, shocking sentences playing in my head), are valuable indicators to my evaluation on the real progress (or not) of the sportive results that based on my training and preparation.

The way I prepare the selection of data on the assessment of the defined objectives whether technical, tactical or physical, are crucially determinant in order to approach the competition during the educational periods better.

The way I individually address the athletes progress – how they are reacting, how I verify their growth, how they show me how they have evolved in their perception of the game, the way they show the civic sportive education – will be crucial to understand the player within the team.

I, as coach, cannot and must not forget that the opportunities are given in order to allow a self-evaluation, to analyse and comment upon the individual and the group’s progress, in order to create a high level performer.

Essentially, there are a few permanent doubts and concerns, which elaboration and subsequent response will allow us to encompass an adequate framework to the plan and to the amendments that we will have to implement.

To plan means to pull together elements in respective areas in order to be able to reach the objectives that increase in difficulty as they reach the final stretch towards the required effects.

To talk about a plan where maximum efficiency is determined 8 to 10 years after the start and where there are several conditionals that are not easily controllable and individually very different means facing a new highly difficult task.

In order to achieve success in this younger age long term plan, coaches must be highly motivated. Long term planning demands adequate education and great patience. A deep belief in the credibility of this venture is also needed, showing behaviours to be respected by the youngsters, in all circumstances.



Respect for individuality and the competence to intervene in defence of the principles may prevent conflicts and calm situations.

We are not talking about an irreprehensible behaviour but elevating the competences of someone who is able to conceive, to apply, to protect and to evaluate a long term plan, in which some will have to overlooked, in which others will get wrapped in publicity and gravitate towards spotlight and while others will probably think they are underestimated.

On the whole this means that long term planning in youth ages is a human task and therefore needs high human involvement otherwise it will become just another role with no soul and no real existence.

Therefore, only those who do not try do not make mistakes, but those who make mistakes deserve respect for facing a predominant culture of high level effort at all costs.

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