

Training Young Athletes

Tips from the best coaches on Athletic Development



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Introduction

Earlier in 2012 I was lucky enough to have some guest coaches and authors write some blogs on Training Young Athletes.

Expert coaches from Track and Field, Athletic Development, Rugby Union and Strength and Conditioning have kindly donated some ideas.

With all the hoo ha about the top end, it is important to remember how to get there.



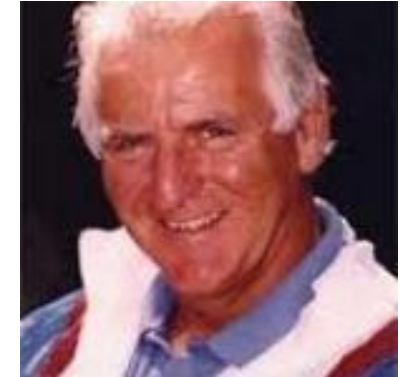
Every young person should have the opportunity to experience great coaching. Our young people deserve more than adult routines imposed upon them in a desperate hurry to "Win on Wednesday".

Training young athletes: Part 1 Frank Dick

Frank Dick has coached many of Britain's best athletes, written several great books and is well sought after public speaker. If you get a chance to hear him speak, or meet him, take it up.

"Back in the 80's I designed a simple set of steps for development. It started with "Train to train" and subsequently Istvan Balyi used it as his LTAD basis.

My reason for that starting point was that before you get into teaching young people techniques they must have the physical competencies to do so without building in compensatory movements. Otherwise you are building thereafter on a compromised foundation.



The steps now I see as:

- 1.Excite to practice**
- 2.Practice to prepare**
- 3.Prepare to participate**
- 4.Participate to perform**
- 5.Perform to compete**
- 6.Compete to learn**
- 7.Learn to win**

Mostly people leave out step 6. This represents the years of learning how to get the final 1% needed to deliver personal excellence under pressure and on the day

When deciding what to do and how to do it re a coaching issue, always go back at least one stage and make sure that is as it should be. The original thing you are looking at is a consequence of what has gone before.

When coaching technique always look at the athlete's performance from a distance first. This will give a clear picture of rhythm, flow etc and where this is fractured. Then coach from the ground or attachment to fixed equipment up or out

Finally, when teaching or coaching young and early developing athletes fit the discipline/equipment to athlete then fit athlete gradually to the formal discipline/equipment etc"

Frank Dick



Part 2: Vern Gambetta and Roy Headey

In order to become a successful athlete, each individual needs to take responsibility for their own actions, whilst gaining the support of coaches, team mates, teachers and parents. This week we are looking at advice for young athletes looking to get better.

Today **Vern Gambetta** and **Roy Headey** offer some insights into what a young athlete needs to do to prepare.

Vern Gambetta is an Athletic Development coach based in the USA, his book "[Athletic Development](#)" is a must read for aspiring coaches in this field. He also runs the [GAIN](#) programme for coach development.

- "Be consistent.
- Have a routine.
- Know your body so that you can test your limits.
- Work smart.
- Be great for 24 hours, not just the two hours you train because great people make great great athletes."

Vern Gambetta

Roy Headey is the head of Sports Science for the England Rugby Football Union

"Elite athletes are different - everyone knows that, but it's difficult to define why and in what way. One difference though, has been proven; during their teens, developing elite athletes consistently get more out of their training than their less successful counterparts. They prepare for training, mentally and physically; they set demanding goals for themselves and work on their weaknesses, however painful or frustrating; they demand accurate, honest feedback from their coaches then reflect and learn from it.

So my tip is this: make your coach work hard for you, by setting demanding goals for yourself and turning up to train with an intensity that means your coach has no choice but to be at the top of his or her game"

Roy Headey



Part 3: Paul Gamble and Simon Worsnop



Simon Worsnop is the national fitness adviser for the England Rugby Football Union and author of [Rugby Games and Drills](#)

"Train to be an all-round athlete. Unless you are in an early specialisation sport this means participating in a number of activities.

Strength: this can be achieved through various forms of appropriate age specific resistance training, but other modalities such as gymnastics, wrestling, judo and climbing are all very useful.

If you want to build stamina via running or biking, then do them outside then you will also be working on balance and core stability.

If you are a team games player DO NOT just play your own sport; instead play a variety of racquet and invasion games.

If you are talented, dedicated and lucky and do become a performance/professional player this will be when you at least 16; so until then try lots of activities, it will give you better life balance, potential interests for later in life AND you might discover you are better at or enjoy one of these more than your original preferred sport!!"



Simon Worsnop



Dr Paul Gamble is the author of ["Strength and conditioning for team sports"](#) and is currently based in New Zealand.

'Be mindful when you train. Training is preparation for competition, and this includes attention and concentration aspects: if you are sloppy and unfocussed when you train you will be prone to the same lapses when you compete.'

Paul Gamble

Part 4: Gil Stevenson and Denis Betts

There are many different ways to develop young athletes; all require some direction, support and encouragement. I am not sure what is the best way, but I am pretty sure there are less than ideal ways.



First up is Denis Betts, Head Coach of Widnes RFL. I worked with Denis on a Great Britain Under -18s Rugby League camp, and was very impressed with his coaching style, organisation and rapport with the kids.

"With regards to coaching kids I would stress the importance of the simple things. The **fundamentals** are the keys to any players success. Get a good catch and pass, work on small sided games to grow the understanding of space and **awareness** of his/her surroundings. Get them to have **fun** with a rugby ball in their hands, if you can do that you are going to keep them interested."

Denis Betts

Gilmour Stevenson is one of the founders of the UKSCA and is currently a Director.

"Here are a couple to add.

The better you are at your sport, the more important it becomes to work even harder. As you progress eventually you will come across competitors who are as good or better than you. That is when the hard work will count.

'All other things being equal strongest always wins' Prof. Mike Stone.

Developing your strength should be your first priority.

Work hard at becoming strong.

Fastest always wins the race.

To get faster you need to get stronger.

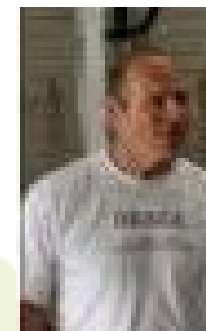
Work hard at becoming fast.

Once techniques and skills are acquired practice them quickly. Put them under the pressure of speed.

Keep it fun

Have fun working hard!"

Gil Stevenson



Part 5: Kelvin Giles

Strength and conditioning for children appears to be a popular topic. Unfortunately, short cuts are often desired (4 hour International Athlete anyone?). One of the common, if unpopular, themes from the guest Coaches this week has been fundamentals, process and detail. Today's author is a great exponent of that.



Kelvin Giles has a vast experience working with International athletes. His "This isn't a text book" is on my recommended reading list.

These are probably best for coaches:

- 'Give them the physical competence to do the technical stuff and the technical competence to do the tactical stuff - in that order.'
- 'In the early stages let them solve movement puzzles in their own way. Don't over-coach - let them work things out.'
- 'Progress exercises in a variety of ways - Static to Dynamic; Slow to Fast; Simple to Complex; Unloaded to Loaded.'

For the Athletes:

'This is a test of your patience - you might not get it right to start with.'

- 'Have you had your water bottle with you all day?'
- 'The best way to recover is to get a good night's sleep.'
- 'It's not whether you try hard today but whether you try hard all the time - tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, next decade.'
- 'Don't worry about what the person next to you is doing - focus on what you have to do.'
- 'Be smart in training and more importantly be smart outside training. You are an athlete all the time.'



Kelvin Giles

Part 6: Tom Kurz

For many of our athletes Hindu press ups and Hindu squats are a regular feature of our training. I got these from today's guest author Tom Kurz. He is an example of a Coach practitioner who sets a great example to others. His book "**Science of sports training**" is an excellent and very readable resource.



"I will begin with tips not for the the young athletes themselves but for those who train them. I begin by commenting on a concept from the post by Frank Dick, "**before you get into teaching young people techniques they must have the physical competencies to do so without building in compensatory movements.**"

I don't distinguish very much between teaching general exercises and sport-specific exercises (techniques of the sport). In both cases one has to observe athletes to see whether they are ready for the exercises, if needed correct their defects, and then, with the defects seemingly corrected, still correct those defects or others as the exercises reveal them.

To do so effectively one has to pay attention to the athletes and know how to dose the exercises, their form and internal load. (**External load** = External resistance, number of reps, distance, etc. **Internal load** =

Physiologic effect of the external load.)

Now I will end the fuzzy generalities and give examples.

A **gymnast** learns vaults. Soon after the warm-up he does well, but as the workout progresses his form gets worse. Eventually he misses jumps, more and more, and yet the coach encourages him to keep trying as if trying harder could help when inhibitions have set in. The coach is not paying attention to a technical flaw in the landing on arms, that in turn has its source in a posture defect. Every landing is causing a discomfort and raising an alarm in the athlete's motor centers, "This hurts, this damages, stop this."

A young **female gymnast** lags behind the group in hip flexibility. She is skinny but much taller than the rest of the group. Her Russian coach, a former gymnast, makes her do the same flexibility exercises as the rest of the group, even though they evidently don't work for her. The coach has no clue that there are other flexibility exercises than those that work only with little children built for gymnastics. The coach has no understanding of anatomy that would give him a way of adjusting her position in stretches so to make them effective for her.

A high school **track-and-field sprinter** has a pronounced upper and lower cross posture, which forces his legs and arms to move in inefficient patterns. His coach, a high school p. e. teacher, has never given him corrective exercises. The athlete was allowed to sprint prior to undergoing a corrective exercise program.

A **judo wrestler** ends a practice bout, and walks off the mat with a slight limp, which he had not prior to this bout. Time for another bout, so he steps on the mat again, with a limp. His instructor acts like all is well. I stop the wrestler and order him to have his knee examined. The exam revealed a severely sprained ACL, that took several months of rehab to get back to normal.

Now tips for the young athletes themselves.

A good technique feels comfortable. If it does not, then you are taught wrong. It does not matter whether you were not prepared well for learning that technique, or you were taught a wrong technique, or you have misunderstood the instruction--you were taught wrong. It is a responsibility of the instructor to instruct according to the athletes' capabilities.

The **most effective training loads** (resistance, number of reps, distance, etc.) are such that do not distort good form. If your form in exercises or techniques deteriorates, you are doing too much. You are erasing good technical habits and ingraining bad ones.

A good coach is the one who looks at the athletes when they exercise and not into notes on a **clipboard or in a laptop, notepad,** or whatever. If your coach or instructor doesn't catch your errors on the first or second repetition, you need to go elsewhere for instruction."

[Tom Kurz](#)

Part 7: Marco Cardinale



I started my career coaching young athletes. I was in fact a **Handball** coach, interested in developing young handball players. Our programmes started with kids in primary schools all the way to the senior national teams.

Working with young athletes has always been rewarding as you see them growing and improving and very quickly you can see the ones having the right attitude about **hard work** and **commitment** which will lead them to sporting greatness. Rewards don't come only from the one winning medals, they come from seeing everyone reaching their potential and maximising learning to become better.

So, here are few hints and tips.

- 1) Each training session counts, but only if the athletes are connected and willing to engage
- 2) Each training session has to have a purpose; athletes need to know why they are doing it
- 3) Learning happens with deep practice, so make sure the athletes are immersed in what they do
- 4) Use random practice to create challenging environment, however keep in mind progression needs to be appropriate to the skills of the athletes you are coaching
- 5) Make sure athletes write things down and are actively engaging in learning what they are doing
- 6) Give 'process orientated praise'. For example, praise the athlete's effort and strategy. E.g: 'You really tried hard'; 'That was a good way to do it'
- 7) Emphasize hard work and learning, you can get better if you learn more than your opposition
- 8) Use interactive technology, the young generation likes interactions, persuasive technologies can be very effective

Coaching Generation Y

The way we coach/teach athletes now needs changing as new generations cannot be coached in the same way as the old one. Some fundamentals are still valid. Hard work and learning are the fundamental aspects for a young athlete, **deep practice**, **passion** for the sport and **knowledge** are the building blocks of elite performers.

Young athletes willing to excel in sport should look at **young musicians** or **artists**. You can only excel if you study your sport, if you develop a deep inquisitive knowledge of all the aspects relevant to your sport (equipment, nutrition, tactics).

So, look at the best in the World, learn what they do, write notes, take pictures, save videos, analyse their performances, admire the skills and think about how you can develop new ones.

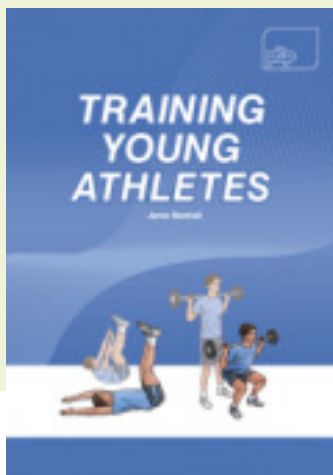
The young athletes of today will be tomorrow's champions only if they will play a different game than today's champions.
Marco Cardinale

SUMMARY

The overall view when it comes to training young athletes is to really work on the fundamentals. Allow children to learn the basic skills in fun environments, and give them the chance to learn and explore for themselves.

Giving them this opportunity will help them in the long run, no matter what sport they choose to do later on in their lives. Coaches are trying to specialise children so young that they end up unbalanced and disliking the sport!

To read more on training young athletes, take a look at the blogs and resources available for **FREE** on www.excelsiorgroup.co.uk.



My book Training Young Athletes Book expands on these ideas in more detail.

[James Marshall](#)