

Athlete as Student: *The Irish Experience*

Drew Harrison

The University of Limerick



Intentions of this presentation

- Share some of my experiences of working with high performance athletes in University of Limerick
- Long term athlete development and the role of 3rd Level Education in Ireland
- Importance of Total Training Environment
- Preliminary findings of the recent study on Athlete Environment commissioned by Irish Institute of Sport
- A Coach's view of factors influencing performance for athletes in Education in Ireland

1995- 1998

- No athletes, No system in place
- Established a programme of training and an ethos of achievement through hard work
- 1996 squad forms – one qualifies for Olympics
- 1996-1998 squad established around sprints, jumps, hurdles; 5 athletes at European Indoors
- 30-40 athletes – large range of abilities and events



1999-2005

- Consolidated squad; numbers still high. >30
- 3 athletes compete in Sydney Olympics
- Re-focus squad with emphasis on high performance – reduce numbers, $\cong 15$
- More direct contact with athletes on technique and monitoring of training
- 1 athlete reaches Final of World Indoors 2003; 2 athletes get Relay Bronze in World Indoors 2004



2005-2008

- Some athletes reach retirement
- Squad starts rebuilding
- Experienced and retired athletes contribute in a mentoring capacity
- Not all athletes ready to buy into high performance focus on entry to 3rd Level Education

Role of Education in athlete development

- In 1999, approximately 80% - 90% of athletes on the European Cup track and field team were either in 3rd Level Education or had completed a 3rd Level course.
- This information provides the basis for targeting resources- resources should follow athletes.
- Natural break -athletes move to new training environment
- Stresses the importance of 3rd Level sector for athletes



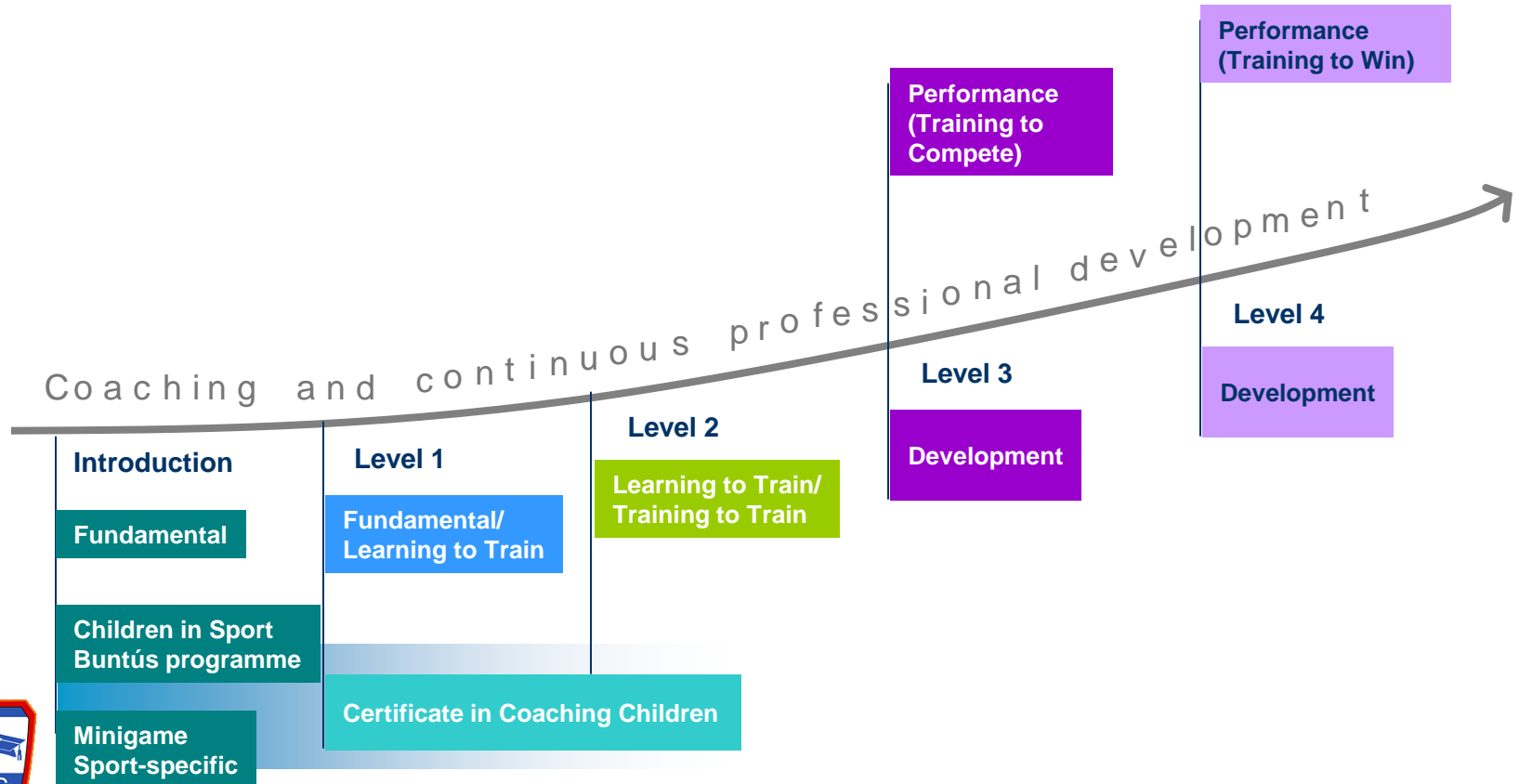
Athlete Development in progressive phases

- Balyi introduced the notion that athlete development follows a pathway with identifiable Phases:
 - FUNdamental Phase
 - Learning to Train Phase (Learning to play & Practise)
 - Training to Train Phase
 - Training to Compete Stage
 - Training to Win

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Long-Term Athlete Development



Importance of the 3rd Level Sector

- Athletes enter 3rd level at U20 progress through U23 and exit at Senior Level
- This is when many athletes drop out of sport or transfer to other sports
- Investment in developing potential in this sector is obvious
- Success in sport depends on the quality of the training experience



Importance of the 3rd Level Sector

- The Quality of the Training experience is determined by the **Total Training Environment**
- Analysis of athletes in Ireland shows very few truly world class athletes, a few show some evidence of world class performance and several have potential
- The priority should be on developing the potential in the U20-U23 group and facilitate transition to senior international level



Athlete Carding Scheme

- At Senior level, carded athletes would be expected to attain an ‘A standard’ performance or equivalent for entry onto the scheme.
- Levels of support increase with respect to performance level.
- At the very highest levels athletes earn very high incomes that allow them to be entirely self-sufficient and direct significant amounts of their own earnings into their training, competition and medical support.



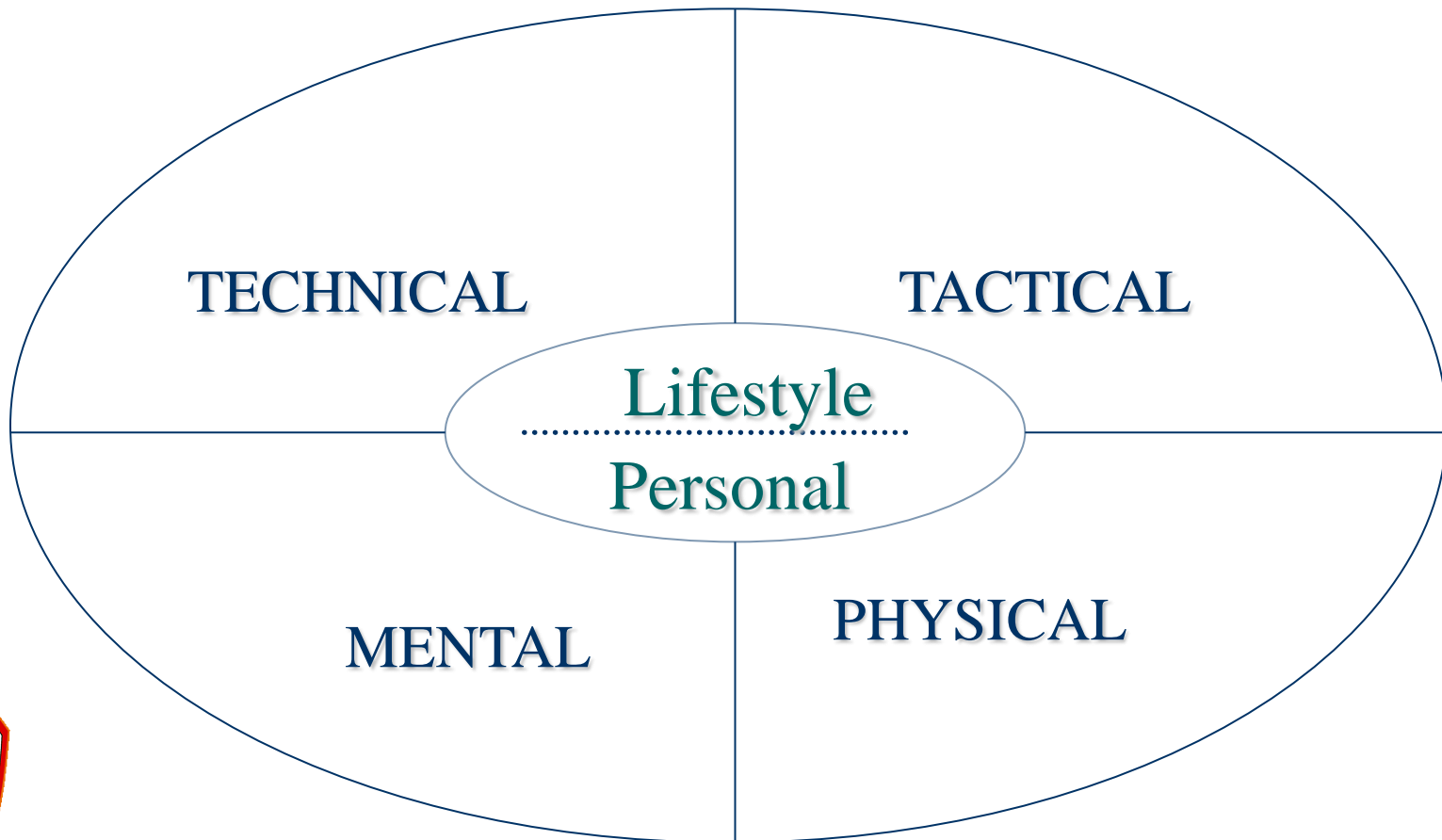
Developing the Total Training Environment

- The importance of training should never be underestimated
- The role of the coach in setting the total training environment is often under-estimated and under-valued
- Often athletes (and coaches) look for the missing element and forget the big picture

What is in the Total Training Environment?



The Athlete is central



What is in the Total Training Environment?

- The coach is essential:
 - Guides decision making
 - Guides the training and competition programme
 - Establishes ethical framework
 - Helps in prioritising training, work/education, family/social pressures, NGB / Sponsor responsibilities

Training Facilities

- Quality of facilities
- Availability at key times
- Range of facilities (specialized)

Other aspects

- Accommodation
 - Quality of provision, location, travel
 - Complementary Peer grouping
- Medical Support
 - Physio, Massage, Access to specialists
- Sport Science Support
- Financial support



Irish Institute of Sport Study on Athlete Environment- Report

- **Authors:**

- *Suzanne Guerin, Aidan Moran, Edel Langan, University College Dublin*
- *Deirdre Lyons – NCTC, University of Limerick*
- *Alan Ringland –, Institute of Technology, Tralee*
- *Tadgh McIntyre –University of Ulster*

- **Aim:** To investigate the athletic experience of elite Irish sports performers, from both a sporting and lifestyle perspective, across a broad range of levels

Reported Findings – Factor influencing performance

- Individual qualities (determination, enjoyment, natural ability)
- Technical resources and facilities (access to high-level competition)
- Support from coaches, (structured training programmes)
- Social support factors (relationships with family, support from friends).

Reported Findings – continued...

- Training seen **as the most influential aspect** of an athlete's life.
- In many situations the same influencing factors were described as positive influences by some athletes and negative others.
- There was evidence that participation in sport had had negative implications for their work or educational experiences

Reported Findings – continued...

- Work and educational demands seen as having a negative influence on athletes' experiences: tiredness, fatigue from having to juggle work or study with training
- Some athletes described positive outcomes of work and educational: having something else outside of sport provide a distraction to the demands of training and competition.
- These athletes had more flexible work/ educational arrangements in place.

Key Recommendations

- **Provide access to technical resources and facilities, and support personal development through flexible education and employment programmes.**
- **Top athletes approaching retirement age to serve as lifestyle mentors for younger sports performers.**
- **Development of a flexible support system for young athletes at crucial stages of their educational experience**

Key Recommendations

- **Develop Coaching and Coach Education at the high levels**
- **Specialist support for developmental level**
- **Help athletes to deal with set-backs**
- **Warm-weather training camps**
- **Help athletes in balancing complex demands on them**

Factors influencing performance- a Coach's view

- More sessions with coach supervision
- Full-time athletes need education or some other part in their lives
- Positive and negative role of scholarship programmes
- Facilities needed when athletes can train and coach is available
- Facilities for specialised technical events- Indoor facility provision for athletes in education is poor in Ireland (UL is an Exception)

Factors influencing performance- a Coach's view continued....

- Training camps abroad aren't always the ideal solution (without personal coach)
- Athletes aren't always the best judges of what they need most
- Athletes need to commit to training environment throughout the year including weekends and competition periods (out of semester time)
- Training group/squad influence is critical for individual sports (most athletes train better in a group)

Factors influencing performance- a Coach's view continued....

- Athletes need to optimise their living environment, travelling, eating, drinking socialising etc
- Are freshers (athletes) always ready to make this commitment on entry to 3rd Level Education- sometime the coach must wait..
- The coach is a key player in making “athlete as student” concept a success.

Factors influencing performance- a Coach's view continued....

- What do we (NGB's & Universities) invest in coaching in 3rd Level
- NGB's, ISC and IIS need to invest in University facilities (pay for and book training time)
- Universities cannot carry the sole burden for Athlete as student

Summary

- 3rd Level is a key stage in athlete development
- Requires partnerships with Univ, NGB, IIS, ISC coaches and athletes
- The ***total training environment*** is the key to success especially in Ireland