

Children in Athletics

This article was written by Dennis Longdon, Coach, Elite Speed, IN.
Thanks to Dennis for allowing me to reproduce it.

The debate still rages, what is the best way to train young athletes. Every parent would love to see their child really excel in many things and many ways, education, music, art, science, sports, scouting and other activities. Through it all we hope to teach them to be good people, develop drive and initiative and give them confidence. Along the way it is good to learn patience and good sportsmanship.

Our children learn early that it is no fun doing things you are not good at, and it is a lot of fun doing things you are very good at. There are some endeavors that you have to work at being good at, they don't come easy. It doesn't mean they are not worth it, it just takes time. Sometimes instant success is bad, it teaches children they don't have to work to be good at something, then when they need to work hard they don't know how to.

Speed skating is a lot like learning a musical instrument. It takes a lot of time and a lot of practice to get good at it. It requires a series of teachers, and it requires dedication. The best musicians learn the art, theory and science of music. Then after years of education and practice you have an expert musician.

Speed skating is an infinitely variable physics problem, where mass, speed, angle, ice conditions, equipment, physical conditioning, fatigue, mental state, rest, opponents, strategy and efficiency all meet at a point of intersection. You need to learn to skate, learn to train, learn to race, learn to eat, and how to rest and recover. You have to learn to skate a 15 second lap before you can learn to skate a 14.9, then 14.8, 14.7 etc. etc. You can't cheat it, you can't study it, it is muscle memory, and you have to experience it. If you try to skate way faster than you ever have you usually fall.

The key to rapid improvement is being exposed to a vast variety of situations on the ice and time. It normally takes about 2-3 years from someone to master all the skills of speed skating. Using camps, different types of practices and different teachers are keys to rapid improvement. Rapid improvement is essential to keeping the athlete motivated, working hard and having fun.

When it comes right down to it, it is the journey that teaches children what we want them to learn, not the destination. You make friends at summer camps, you make friends in school, you make friends at practice, and you make friends that you will be friends with for life in some cases. You eventually decide what you like and don't like and somewhere along the way you decide what you want to do for a career when it is time to pursue it.

I have said for years in speed skating that if you are not enjoying the journey, then you are not doing it right. If you enjoy the friendship, camaraderie, working out, improving yourself and love the skating you will go far in this sport. You cannot judge yourself on a

single competition, different kids mature at different rates, there is such a thing as a late bloomer, but if you give up you will never know how good you could have been.

We hear about the home schooled child who has gymnastics practice every day and their parents build them a small gym in the garage and they work at it every day. If this always worked, everyone would be doing it. Another child attends public school every day and attends practice 3 times a week. They stay in the top 10 of their sport but never win the big one. Then when the time comes they crank up the training and make the Olympics, not the kid who gave up their childhood and burned out by age 15.

That kid who made it also had a plan, they worked out 4 times a week, they went to competitions, and they were constantly improving seeing the fruits of their labor. They sacrificed trips to the mall, they skipped some sleep overs. Most importantly they had an enabler, someone who helped them make it to practice, someone who helped them through the tough times, and someone who encouraged them and made them keep going when they didn't think they could.

One of my strategies is to ask my skaters to commit to one year at a time; it is easy to give up after a bad meet or a bad practice. You can quit any time you want to, after the end of the season. But if you stick out the season you will normally see the improvement and feel successful.

For children the most important person in their success is their parents, not the coach, teacher or mentor. Parents know their children better than anyone, they know when they are fatigued and need to rest, when they are discouraged and need encouragement. Parents need to manage their child's athletic training, use the coaches that best suit their children and do what is best for their child. Most of the time if you have a good coach it means letting the coach do the coaching.

With that said, being good at anything requires a lot of work. That kid who is a natural, is not usually a natural. They have worked very hard to get where they are at, you might say "but they are 6 and good at something, they didn't have to work at it". Oh yes they did, they ran harder, jumped more, climbed more, took more interest in it, paid better attention at etc. etc. They have been working at it, they just thought they were playing.

Lastly, you don't have to give up a normal life to get good at something. That also means you take time off from the sport, recover, do other things, other activities, and other sports.