

Development of the Elite Athlete

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When one starts to discuss a topic such as the “Development of the Elite Athlete” it is important to keep in mind the fact that in a room full of coaches who have spent their career working with Elite Athletes, a simple singular uniform approach would be very difficult to settle upon. This is due in part to the fact that the path to success has not been the same for all and that there are many cultural differences that come into play. There is a strong tendency of coaches to follow in the footsteps of their own personal coach or coaches and draw heavily upon their own experience as a athlete. A philosophy of “this is the way I was taught, this is the way I did it, and it worked for me.” This is human nature and certainly has some merit if in fact, there is a history of proven success behind it. So while not in all areas, at least in some, I think it is safe to say that we can agree that coaches will disagree on means and methods of the development of young athletes. I personally believe this is a good thing and that healthy discussion with an open mind on topics such as this results in building a better foundation for working with talented young athletes. Remember the mind is like a parachute, it doesn't do you any good if it doesn't open.

Athlete development from beginner to senior level is a long-term process with a different path in a country such as Russia compared to the USA. In my opinion, one cannot argue that one system is better than the other in that it would not be possible to employ the American System in Russia or vice-versa. The Russian System is based upon club development with a primary singular coach involved in the young athletes development, focusing on the international styles of Freestyle and Greco-Roman Wrestling. Whereas, in the USA it is based upon folkstyle wrestling within the school system, from middle school to the university level with a multitude of coaches involved. In both instances it is a lengthy process usually taking from 6 to 12 years to progress to the senior levels of competition. There is a definite thought among these coaches that beginning to train at an early age increases chances of success later in the world arena. While there is certainly validity in identifying talent at an early age we need to recognize the fact that there are physiological and psychological changes that occur as the young athlete matures that need to be considered in planning their training regiment. Boys from age 8 to 10 or 11 years of age will respond quickly to aerobic activities and training but it is at puberty that they begin to show real response to anaerobic-glycolytic training methods. I don't mean to imply that they will not respond to a certain amount and right type of strength training. The better you know your athlete the better you will be able to guide and train him. A coach has to have the ability to read his athlete and know when to push and when to reign it in. This is especially true in the formative years as all too often we see burn out occur in a promising athlete before he reaches his potential.

There are fundamental constants in developing a young athlete to the elite level but first let's take a look at some of the differences in the systems.

Developmental System Differences	
Russia	USA
Average starting age 9-10 years.	Start as early as 5-6 yrs. of age.
Start with GR and/or FS	Start with Folkstyle
International Style throughout career (Senior level at 20 years of age).	May get introduction to GR & FS but emphasis on folkstyle throughout school years. Full time international style after college. (22-23 years of age)
Spends 4-5 years learning Basic Skills and cross training before real competition.	Most involved in competition within weeks of first introduction to sport.
Must master the basic skills involved in a technique he is learning as well as how to include it in the wrestling process.	Often taught techniques in random fashion without thought to fundamental skills involved.
Tactical preparation in training to learn how to properly apply attacking techniques in a bout. A chess game approach.	Techniques more often taught based on successful or unsuccessful application in competition.
Psychological stability stressed and enhanced.	Sports Psychology not readily available to most and seldom used in youth programs.
Experienced, dedicated, qualified coach that stays with him throughout his career.	Multitude of coaches throughout his career. (Most with little advanced experience in his early years)
International experience from start of their Cadet age. (Jr. World Team has an average of 4-5 major competition before the Jr. Worlds)	Most USA Athletes never get any experience outside of the USA. Only a select few. (Jr. World Team usually has zero competition as a team before the Jr. worlds - some may have been on a Cadet Team.)
Once a Senior Level Athlete time is spent honing the individual skills he has that are unique to him. Fundamentals are ingrained.	At senior Level most have just finished college and spend 2-3 years developing their FS skills.

Even though there are some significant differences in the systems, the goals of both are the same, to establish a methodical means for developing today's youth into tomorrow's World and Olympic Champions. To accomplish this I believe the following as essential.

- 1) Established **program objectives with a strict continuity of tasks and method of training**. Building a solid foundation of essential fundamental skills is part and parcel to this task. We have all talked about and taught the 7 Basic Skills - Stance, Motion, Changing Levels, Penetration, Lifting, Back Step and Back Arch. But I think most of us feel there are many other skills that should be considered as Basic or Fundamental. Skills like Grips, Downblocks, Sprawl, Pushing, Pulling and Hip Heist to name a few more. A uniform method of teaching, drilling and re-enforcing these needs to be introduced and re-visited throughout their development.
- 2) There should be a **steady and continuous growth in the volume and methods of physical training and conditioning**. Development of Explosive Strength, Stamina and Flexibility all contribute to future success in competition. A continual improvement in the athlete's physical qualities should be seen as he progresses through the years.
- 3) Athletes need to be **taught fundamental techniques or basic actions** that will come into play in competition. There could be a long and lengthy discussion between coaches on which techniques should be considered basic so what I am going to present here are some of the ones that according to the great Russian Coach Yuri Shakhmuradov are taught to their youth in the formative years.

1st year (Ages 10-11)

From Feet

The Arm Drag
Duck Under
Double Leg Tackle

From Mat

Near Leg Far Arm Tilt
The Arm Bar
The Basic Gut Wrench

2nd Year (Ages 11-12)

From Feet

High Crotch Leg Attack to a Lift
The Fireman's Carry
Head and Arm Throw

From Mat

The Ankle Lace
The Leg Turk
The Cradle

3rd Year (Ages 12-13)

From Feet

The Arm Spin
The Double Overhook Throw
The Hip Toss

From Mat

The Crotch Lift
Lift to a Turk
The Switch

Shakmuradov feels it is important to note that the effectiveness and reliability in implementing these holds is directly dependent on the wrestler's tactical skills and know how. An attack cannot be used successfully against an experienced opponent if it is not accompanied by tactical preparation. For example Wrestler A does X, causing Wrestler B to do Y, resulting in A being able to score with Z. Athletes are taught to create a predictable action on an opponents part through their own actions. An athletes favorite attacks and actions form the basis of his future success or failure. Each individual has his own potential so even though there must be an overall plan and training for all the athletes, as talent emerges individualization is also essential. Great wrestlers develop 2-3 holds that they can bring into play on their opponent at anytime. They wrestle their match, not their opponents. I put it this way "A Champion has the ability to impose his will on his opponent at his discretion."

- 4) There needs to be **proper sequencing** in the instruction of young athletes. A **step by step approach** to the development of their technical and tactical skills. The organization and sequencing of the technique being taught is an issue we all must deal with within our programs. Using a systematic approach, not one that is arbitrary. Learning from simple to complex, Holds, then counter holds, etc. Understanding that complicated holds may need to be broken down into separate elements. One approach is to teach them a hold as a whole and then correct the parts where needed. A complete sequence would be when they have learned a hold complete with set-up and finish. Each year we must increase their technical and tactical skills. Learning the elements of wrestling is an area that not enough attention is given to. Where the system often breaks down is that most coaches teach on the basis of their own personal experience in the sport and as a result techniques are introduced at random with no thought to order or sequence. There needs to be a systematic approach within any program, it can't be arbitrary. That is not to say that all need to be clones, one exactly like the other. I have had the good fortune of having been able to work with a lot of different coaches over the years, most of which were very successful with their programs. The common ground was that they all had a system that they believed in and adhered to in coaching their athletes. All believed in

essential skills, fundamental techniques (though they may be different) and the importance of mental toughness. The single biggest benefit I derived from the exposure I had to other coaching philosophies and methods was personal growth in my own ability as a coach and mentor to young athletes. Throughout my career I have never stopped learning, I have always kept myself open to what others have to offer. I treat it much like going to the grocery store. I don't go in, grab a cart and start filling it with one of everything. I take the things I need and leave the rest on the shelf, knowing I can come back for more when I am ready for it. If you can walk away from a conference or clinic with one or two things that will help you in your coaching philosophy, tactics or technique it has been well worth the time and expense. This leads to my next essential.

5) **Coaches Education:** FILA throughout the year offers opportunities for Coaches, Athletes and Officials to interact and learn. This Clinic is a good example of this. Most countries have within their National Governing Bodies a form of Coaches Education and provide an opportunity for Coaches to compare notes and learn from one another as well as from those coaches that are leading their respective National Teams. In the USA ,USAW offers NCEP (National Coaches Education Program) with four primary levels of accomplishment, Copper, Bronze, Silver and Gold certification. One must be at least Bronze Certified to be credentialed to coach at USAW events but I think the important thing here is that by going thru the process of achieving each level of certification, coaches are given the opportunity learn from coaches who have been successful in working with elite athletes at the highest levels of competition and to be exposed to proven training methods, techniques and tactics. To hear what areas of concentration are considered essential and how to properly sequence and teach those skills. To learn what characteristics, traits and work ethics champions have so that they can begin to recognize those same qualities in the young athletes they encounter in their programs and have a better understanding of how to get them to the next level. As coaches we should be constantly looking for new tactics and techniques

6) A **plan of action** that balances competition with learning skills and repetition. Competition is where the athlete learns to apply the techniques and tactics he is learning. There must be both time to compete and a time to learn and athletes need a period of rest, even young ones. It is important to remember that when working with a young athlete to not focus on a loss , but rather to evaluate his techniques and tactics in the bout, enabling you to correct his problem areas. This is accomplished in the practice room after competition. When we model situations that often occur in a bout in the practice room we are able to observe a wrestler and discover strengths and weaknesses exhibited that enable us to train him better for the next competition where similar situations are likely to occur. It also helps the athlete master techniques appropriate to the situation and increase his confidence exponentially. I think of it as

a continuous process of experience, evaluation and re-education. It should be noted that to establish a training plan that is designed to enhance an athletes skills we must know the athlete, i.e.

Know something of his character and behavioral traits.

Know how disciplined he is, his dedication and determination.

Know his current level and potential capabilities.

Know what knowledge he has of technique and tactics.

Know his faults, strength and weakness, in performance and mental preparation.

Above all else you must have a plan that maintains the athletes interest as they develop.

7) We must be able to **identify talent**. Only a very small percentage of those athletes that start into the sport of wrestling will ever reach the level of National Team. This fact makes it important for us to be able to identify those individuals with that type of potential as early as possible, so that they can be nurtured and encouraged in their development. It is also essential that as their talent points to them, that they are singled out for more individualized training. Each individual has his own potential, it is our job as coaches, to do all within our power to help them reach that potential.

So how do we identify them?

They will have characteristics that make them stand out over others.

Their Athleticism.

They're Self Driven - Continually asking to learn and be challenged.

Their Dedication and Determination.

Their Commitment and Accountability

Their Motivation and Goals

Their Ability to Master Technique and Tactics.

Their Success in Competitions

If you look the developmental years of the great wrestlers of the past 25 years in Russian history, like Belaglazov, Fadzaev, Khadartsev, Satiev, etc. you will see they were all successful at the Junior and Cadet age levels.

The same is true in the USA, age level success leads to world success.

Let's take a look at USA's Olympic Medalists in Freestyle Wrestling over the past years.

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OLYMPIC GAMES FS - Past 25 YearsYear				
Year (#Wts)	Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1988 (10)	2	1	2	5
1992 (10)	3	2	1	6
1996 (10)	3	1	1	5
2000 (8)	1	1	2	4
2004 (7)	1	2	0	3
2008 (7)	1	0	0	1
2012 (7)	2	0	1	3
Total	13	7	7	27

A total of 27 medals were won by 23 athletes.

John Smith won 2 Gold

Kenny Monday 1 Gold, 1 Silver

Bruce Baumgartner 1 Gold, 1 Silver, 1 Bronze

Percentage of Success			
Olympics Medals	International Dev. Age	USA Cadet/ Junior Age	NCAA Finalist
Gold	75	100	92
Silver	57	86	71
Bronze	43	100	100
Total Medalists	57	100	87

Total of 27 Medals won by 23 Athletes

1 - Henry Cejudo never competed in NCAA's

It is obvious from this data that success breeds success.

It is interesting to note that if you remove Henry Cejudo from the group, as he did not attend college and compete in the NCAA competitions, 91% of our Olympic Medalist over the last 25 years were finalist in the NCAA DI Championships. 65% of the athletes competed at the International Age Group level with success and a 96% were successful at the Cadet and Junior National level.

In conclusion I feel that an athlete has the best opportunity of reaching the elite level when he has been in a structured program that balances his natural ability and skills with essential techniques and tactics. An environment where he is able to develop both mentally and physically. This means that he has had coaches that understand how to control the pace and pattern of his learning, giving him the right amount of competitive experience at the right levels and times to build his confidence and mental toughness.

As coaches we need to test our selves, sometimes ting outside of the box. Be creative with training methods and innovative with the teaching of technique and tactics. Wrestling is a sport that is dynamic and changing. I don't believe there is anyone system or method of coaching for all. As we say in America "There is more than one way to skin a cat." But we do need to learn from one another and to take advantage of the wisdom of those who have proceeded us. Who better to impart the knowledge of how to become a champion that those that have done it themselves or those that have trained athletes to that pinnacle of success.