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CANADIAN SPORT FOR LIFE

Training to Win

The athletes featured in this edition of Prospect Magazine are representing Canada at the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games. They are at the pinnacle of sport competition, or the Training to Win stage of the seven-stage Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) model.

These athletes have moved through the stages from developing physical literacy, to learning the basic skills of their sport, to learning to train and compete. All of the athlete's physical, technical, tactical and mental capacities are fully established and the focus of training has shifted to the maximization of performance.

Dr. Joe Baker from York University recently presented research on elite athlete development and identified what is well understood and what remains to be clarified. He observed that the best athletes have trained more during their development and experienced 'higher quality' training than those not so successful. Optimal development of these athletes occurred when training was matched to developmental status during the various training stages.

Despite the theory that the development of expertise requires approximately ten years or 10,000 hours of practice, Dr. Baker suggested that effort alone does not guarantee success at the elite level. No research to date has suggested that there is no such thing as 'talent'.

A simplified model of elite athlete 'development' proposes three phases of sport involvement. The Sampling Years are characterized by participation in many sports with emphasis on fun and gross motor skill development. The Specializing Years feature more specialized and intense training split between fun and more structured practice.

The Investment Years have highly structured and intense training with emphasis on deliberate, sport-specific practice.

Once an athlete reaches the elite level, they are probably approaching the limits of their genetic potential in terms of physical ability and technical skills. At this stage, ancillary capacities become critical to further improvements in performance.

Appropriate warm up and cool down, nutrition and hydration, recovery strategies, mental training, tapering and peaking, and general lifestyle ('professional' athlete) all impact the final performance.

Own the Podium has made possible athlete Integrated Support Teams. These teams of experts address the ancillary capacities in providing medical, physiological, nutritional and lifestyle support to national team athletes. This assists the coaching staff who can then focus their attention on the performance aspects of the competition.

The 'Top Secret' program advanced sport research into the technological areas that support performance. This included equipment improvements (suits, blades, skis, waxes, etc), and performance factors (aerodynamics, video and GPS tracking). As the 2010 Games approach, expect further revelations of the impact this program is having on athlete performance.

Our athletes' performances in 2010 will be the result of years of individual commitment and investment on the part of athletes, coaches and many others. We encourage you to support the efforts of all athletes through all seven CS4L stages.

The content of this article is taken from the Canadian Sport for Life resources which can be found at www.canadiansportforlife.ca