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When I was asked to write an article on the business of sport, its impact on children and the importance of having it as part of school curricula, I immediately thought of one line – Not every child is born with a silver spoon. But having said that - as an exercise scientist and a perfectionist - I do subscribe wholeheartedly to the importance of practice and hard work above talent.

The last decade has witnessed the most exemplary transition in sport. From just a game for recreational purposes to a trillion-dollar industry, the sports industry has not only created job opportunities and careers, but has single handedly catapulted several individuals to overnight stardom. It is the fastest growing industry in the world and – questionably - one of the most economically rewarding, across a wide spectrum.

But the question that remains is whether this ‘dream come true’ is actually attainable by the masses or is just a figment of our imagination. And more importantly, what steps do we need to take to ensure that sport is in actual fact packaged with equal opportunity?

In 2007, I presented a paper on a model for “Long Term Athlete Development”, which addressed many key aspects of child development versus athletic skill



development. It questioned three fundamental areas that I believe are founding steps to any successful plan for athlete development.

Let’s start with these three simple questions:

- Are we interested in maximising one or two performances or encouraging a lifelong commitment to sport and exercise?
- Are we interested in enhancing training and recovery or normal biological development and maturation?
- Is the perfect athlete-centred development model recreational or competition-based?

It is important to remember that a well-planned and efficiently executed training regime will always ensure optimum development throughout an athlete’s career. Success is a process that results from a structured plan, designed to ensure long-term results and NOT short-term gratification.

Bottom line: There is no shortcut to success.

In Malcolm Gladwell’s book “Outliers”, he uses the 10,000-hour rule as a foreteller of excellence. He goes on to explain that world class performers strive for a target just out of their own reach, but with some vivid awareness and knowledge of how to bridge that gap. And, over time, through the process of constant repetition, this gap slowly disappears and new targets - sometimes beyond the comprehension of the normal individuals - are created.

The problem with Gladwell’s theory is that it doesn’t address the quality of practice, which in physiological terms is all-important to enhancement of performance. The truth is that champions have a specific purpose: progress. And they devote every second of every minute of every hour towards that single goal. The attainment of excellence is only achieved by pushing themselves beyond limits above their wildest comprehension; by challenging themselves to overcome adversities so grueling that they literally leave each training session a different, more evolved person.

So instead of Gladwell's 10,000 hours of practice, I hold that the attainment of excellence is in actual fact a by-product of 10,000 hours of purposeful practice. But like in most secret recipes, purposeful practice is only one ingredient. In order to truly achieve excellence, we need access to the right training system, which will provide the right conditions for optimum performance. And when the right conditions are in place, learning takes off, knowledge escalates and performance begins to soar.

With this in mind, we can address the most challenging of all questions: What is the perfect training system?

The Perfect Training System is a five-stage system that blends a child's mental capacity to learn and their motor skills development. Let's look at this model:

The three phases of growth and development are as follows:

- The Foundation Phases: Between 5 – 11 years
- The Preparatory Phase: Between 11 – 16 years
- The Performance Phase: 16+ years

These three phases can be broken up into five stages of learning:

- Stage 1: Fundamentals – 5 – 9 years

The emphasis in this stage is on the child's overall development, fundamental movement skills and the ABC's of athleticism (agility, balance, coordination and speed) all through games and drills.

- Stage 2: Learning to Train: 9 – 12 years

The emphasis in this stage is to create a fun environment that encourages experimentation and decision-making.

- Stage 3: Training to Train: 12 - 15 years

The emphasis in this stage is to expand the athlete's understanding of his/her sport and his/her technical proficiency. At this stage we start noticing distinct differences in the athlete's physical and mental make up. And we start to inculcate accountability for

decision-making.

- Stage 4: Training to Compete: 16 – 18 years

The emphasis in this stage is on technique and refining their skills. Stressing the importance of values like honesty, fair play, respect for rules, loyalty, and



sportsmanship are all important as well.

- Stage 5: Training to Win: 18+ years

The emphasis in this stage is on competition, preparation, and physical maintenance. Accountability and responsibility are equally important.

Now that we have covered the stages of learning, it is vitally important we delve into the components that make up the development of a complete professional sportsperson. Drawing out the prodigy from within the child requires a holistic approach towards the physical and mental development of the child. This approach is four-fold:

- Mental Strength
- Strategy and Awareness
- Technique and Physical Fitness
- Personal Growth

These are the four key fundamental pillars required to develop a complete professional sportsperson. These are the cornerstones of success but not the vital X Factor that will make the difference and mould a champion. That X Factor is something that's harder to nurture and even harder to quantify. It's HARD.



H.A.R.D is the glue that will forge together the pillars that will one day give birth to a champion. H.A.R.D is EVERYTHING.

H – Hunger
A – Attitude, Awareness & Accountability
R – Resilience
D – Discipline

“Everything you wish to achieve in life is just outside your comfort zone.”

HARD is my philosophy and the message I endeavour to impart to my players. It serves as a reminder that we are in control of our own destiny, and that our atti-

tude is everything. It is a message that re-iterates and reinforces a player’s willingness to want to overcome adversity. It tells us that the opportunities we so badly desire come disguised as hard work. It tells us that EVERYTHING you want, EVERYTHING you wish, and EVERYTHING you can achieve is JUST outside your comfort zone. It tells us to GO GET IT.

The Model for Developing a Complete Professional Sportsperson

There’s no greater force on earth than your own personal will. So if you want to do something, anything with all your will, find a way. If you don’t, you’ll find an excuse. - Pat Farmer

Sport has the power to unify a nation and alter its moral fibre. But above all, it has the power to motivate and inspire a nation to reach for a dream – a right that every individual possesses.

In my view, therefore, sport as a curriculum is a non-negotiable. It is a duty that every country owes to each of its children, because the power that it yields cannot be quantified in monetary terms.

Let’s give every child a sporting chance!

***Shayamal** is a sports scientist, entrepreneur and lecturer, having worked with some of the world’s best athletes. With over 10 years of experience in the industry, Shayamal has had the opportunity to work with the Davis Cup and Cricket Teams of India and South Africa. He currently works with a number of top players on the ATP Circuit. Shayamal is equipped with an amalgamation of knowledge and experience, including a degree in Sports Sciences, a postgraduate degree in Exercise Science and a diploma in Sports Management. He is director at Digi-Sports - an organisation geared towards the performance enhancement of athletes - and is an exercise consultant to the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls. Shayamal is also a self-published author having written two books on sports science and medicine in cricket. While not training elite athletes, Shayamal is an avid distance runner, having participated in nine marathons and winning a bronze medal at the Comrades Marathon in 2007.*

