

Charting Progress in Athletes With Parents and Coaches

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This a workbook on athletes. The three charts describe some essential aspects of the phases every young athlete goes through on the way to his or her best performances. Since we would like to assume that those best performances are the greatest pleasure and sense of self-expression, we can best foster the growth necessary to achieve it by understanding how to enter the athlete's awareness and efforts. The following charts allow us to do that by providing hints or cues about what we can expect at various stages of the athlete's development. By knowing what to expect, we can most accurately gauge the most effective sorts of information and emotional supports along the way.

The three charts are: **Model of Athlete Development** (physiology), **Sources of Athlete Motivation** (emotional and psychosocial development) and **Phases of Learning Model**.

If there is anything central to the very nature of development, it is change, change understood as transformation. It is not only taking place in the athlete. It is taking place in parents and coaches at the same time. At each corner of this triangle good and generous human beings live in the midst of their own continuing growth along with the others, younger and older, who mutually inform and inspire them. Each of the corners of the triangle need to remain present in our considerations if we are to work optimally together in the interests of the young athlete.

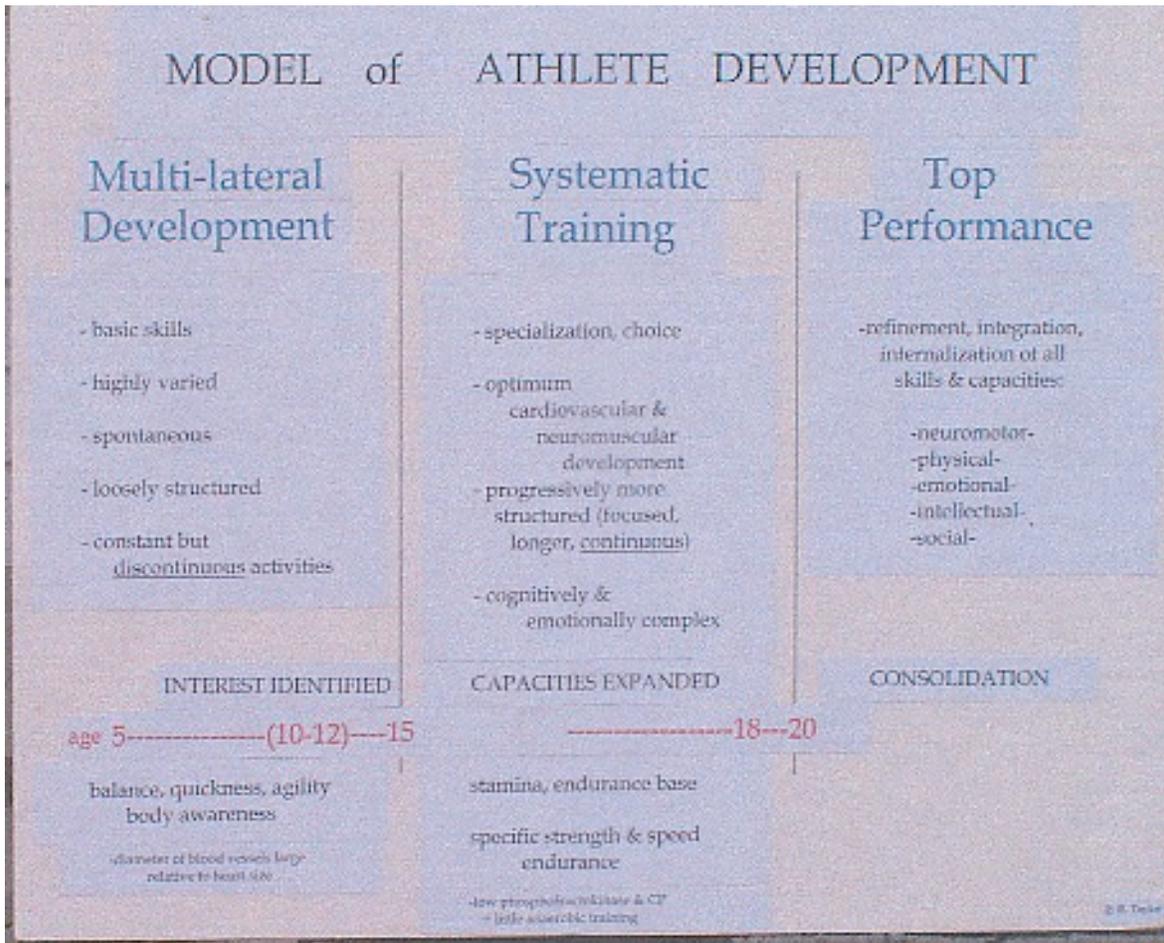
In particular that involves building a language inventory which is most appropriate at the various levels of the athlete's cognitive development. At the same time, athletes begin a particular sport at different times in their lives, and since the phases of learning (chart 3) are independent of the biological and emotional phases, there will be different sorts of communications with each group. The charts can be aligned vertically and then shifted left or right in order to reflect the situation of an individual athlete.

Two examples of how this works.

For a grade schooler effort is perceived as ability. "Good job" or "Good try!" from parents are all he needs by way of affirmation. He cares little about ranking and a lot about just doing the event with friends. By middle school he is more critically focused on peers. Rank suddenly matters a great deal more than simply "Good try." At the same time, both peer comparisons and cognitive development are beginning to make his self-appraisals more accurate, with the ironic, confusing, and even painful result that his self-esteem tends to go down for a period. To add to the confusion while he is suffering some, he also wants contingent feedback rather than just love and affection, which he may even pointedly reject. Now parents suffer, the more so because they are seldom expert enough to give that desired skill-specific advice. Enter the coach who needs to communicate with both parents and athlete. How to go from there makes a good workshop exercise.

A freshman or sophomore in high school is a good athlete and takes up a new sport. He is used to being a varsity player, and the events scheduled are appropriate for his age group. In endurance sport, however, both the race distances and race frequency are too great for the beginner. He needs a year or more to become fit and skilled, even as he wants to play a full role on his team, which needs his points for team scoring. He is used to success in another sport and in school and thus logically feels that if he works extra hard, he will be able to catch up. But a check of the athlete development chart reminds him, and all of us, that hard anaerobic training is not suitable for the teenage body, so his coach needs

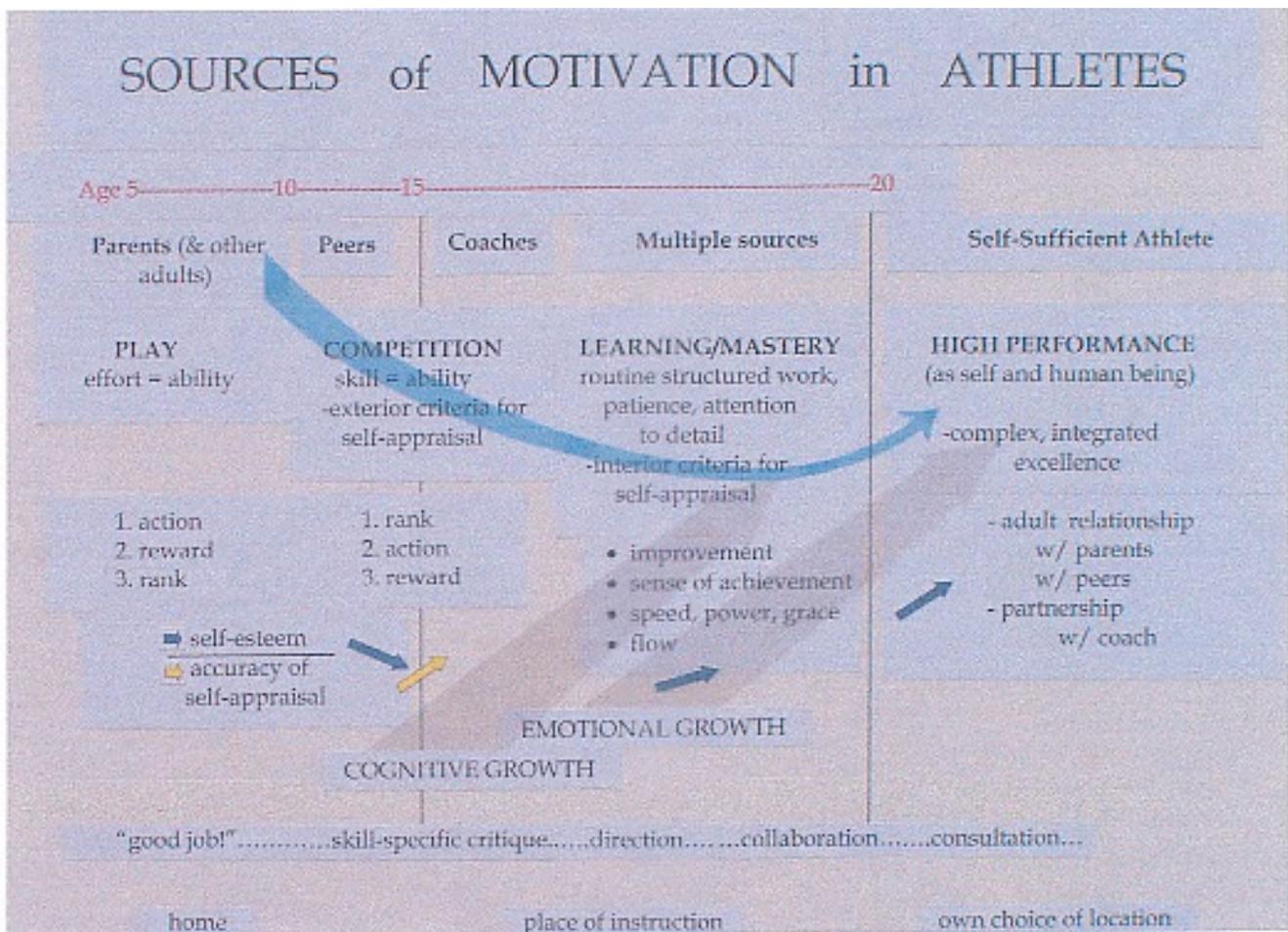
to understand the ingredients of endurance and speed training outside of the intense anaerobic element which must wait until the later teens. Intense work will get some quick, short-duration gains but sacrifices the athlete's long-term potential for significant improvement.



Adjusting the charts further to reflect his situation gives the cues to understanding him and the language with which to best communicate, both to him and his teammates. The **Phases of Learning Model** shows he first needs a period of apparently reckless “play” time, free of external pressures, before engaging in more serious structured training. The **Model of Athlete Development** supports that choice by suggesting a period of basic skill building which is long enough to embed optimal movement patterns before significant loading is added. Different language alone may provide that feeling of easy, inconsequential play for him. But, being older, he will know when what he does is not yet a “good job” and will want real skill-specific feedback, though not so much that the challenges appear too great. The **Sources of Motivation** chart can show how the coach will become the dominant adult. The parents (however painful and isolating it may seem) will need to adjust how closely or distantly they observe the process. Looking at the development charts, however, they can draw out helpful alternative approaches. They can tacitly compliment their child's cognitive level by simply asking how they can support best – present, absent, close in, where, far off. This affirms what is well-known by all parents, what Erik Erikson called the “mutual regulation” which accompanies the lives of all families and their children. They can also be very supportive by modeling persistence and excitement in an activity particularly dear to themselves, regardless of whether it is the same one in which their child is engaged in or something quite different. Letting kids visit the charts and think where they fit in them can also

reduce some stressful aspects of the process everyone is experiencing and add to the creative pleasures of being most intelligently present.

Moving to the parent and coach corners of the triangle, they can be critical content concerns which have to be recognized by everybody involved in athletic development. Good will, a generous spirit, and time to give, are unfortunately, not enough to create a responsible coach. As the saying goes for athletes, so it goes for parents and coaches: Desire is not substitute for preparation. Patience and detail are key concepts, as is the unavoidable fact that more than 90% of talented athletes only confirm that talent after 3-5 years of structured learning. Seeds grow down before up, and demands for early results will soon kill motivation at its roots. Fundamental knowledge is required if the young athlete is going to be fairly, and indeed morally, served. Basic knowledge levels determine which coach can be active with kids in training. That holds for beginning grade school youngsters as well. Otherwise, for example, a youngster who might already seem an accomplished runner or cross-country skier might seem ready for more structured continuous endurance sessions. The chart makes clear why thus should be avoided. The indispensable content areas are: developmental physiology, biomechanics, applied training science. Adults must study, collaborate, and study continually further, for young bodies are too precious to trivialize with haphazard coaching. Real insightful knowledge, on the other hand, is a joy both to acquire in itself and to see work positively on an athlete's progress.

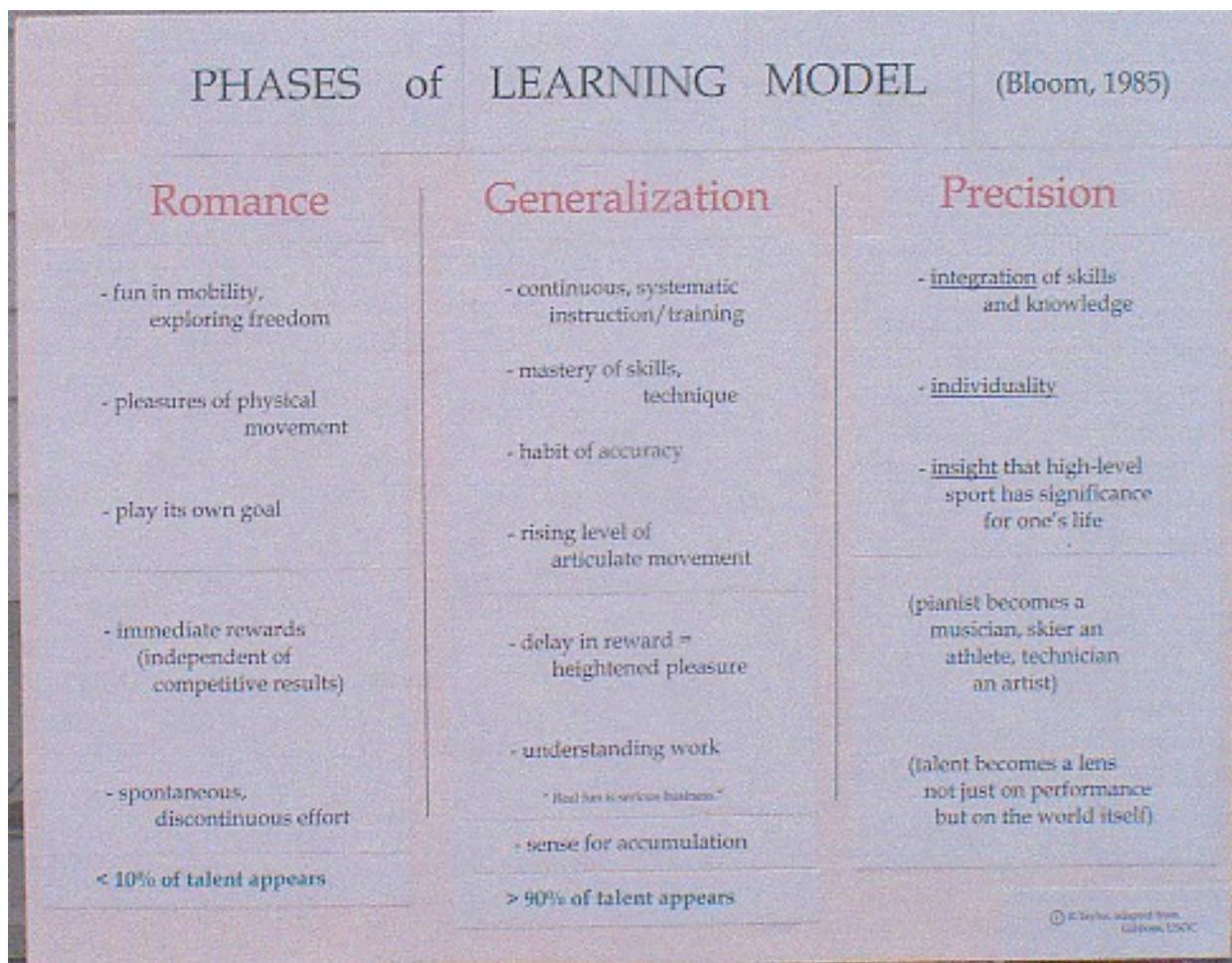


In the spirit of “mutual regulation,” it will always remain essential to the growing athlete's

success that the balance in **locations of control** be kept in mind. Locations of control define the dominant sources of information and motivation in the athlete's efforts to excel. While we generally are comfortable with adding our wisdom to the athlete's store, and he is glad to have it, there very soon comes a time, and we encourage it, when the athlete takes greater and greater control of his own destiny. That signals growth in every aspect of his life. What is much less comfortable (and seldom expected) is that while he gains control, and with it a wonderful sense of personal power, parents seem to lose and may come to feel painfully isolated. In the charts, however, they can redefine their roles more satisfactorily to themselves, just as the coach can follow the process of his changing roles as “his” athlete proceeds toward becoming the self-sufficient adult we have always wanted him to become. The coach's changing role from directive to consulting may leave him feeling pushed out, much as the parents did some years earlier. Understanding the subtlety as well as privileges of the new role can help sustain his sense of involvement and contribution. For an intelligent athlete deep knowledge and perspective will never become unimportant; these sources in a wide variety of people will simply gain access to him through different contexts and relationships.

For the athlete, recognition of the ways in which his life-long adult support systems may come to feel left behind and uncared for allows him to consider thoughtful ways of transforming or reconstructing these valued relationships, but now as a co-adult. That challenge is important as well, for a study of elite performers found they “do not credit their achievements to any single force. Instead, their reports reveal a combination of motives at work.” (Bloom, 506) Few athletes consider very much the full fruitful range of supports adults can provide, not the least because adults themselves tends to define their roles too narrowly and too simply.

This insight comes from Benjamin Bloom, whose monumental study, *Developing Talent in Young People* (Univ. of Chicago, 1985), is the basis for the third chart, the **Phases of Learning Model**. The chart began with Tim Gibbons when he worked with the USOC. He noted the similarities with athlete development. I have expanded and added some detail to Gibbons' version. Bloom and his colleagues studied 120 elite performers – athletes, musicians, mathematicians, sculptors, neurologists – the patterns of their learning within an environment of “instructional situation.” (Bloom, 425f.) That environment is profoundly human and decisively determined by the variety of adult supporters at the youngster's various stages of growing mastery.



The overlap with the physiological and psychological development charts is quite remarkable. One caution is necessary, a point Bloom makes emphatically: The phases of learning are “not innately determined, nor do they arise from the subject matter of lessons or the curricula for a course of study. They emerge from the interaction of the learner, the teacher, and some subject matter – in doing or the act of learning.” (Bloom, 434) Thus, for example, “the type and amount of previous experience a student has had with the subject matter may be at least as important a guide for instruction as the age and psychosocial status of the learner....[and] they hint that the sequences of the phases may be pedagogically important, although not psychologically or biologically determined.” (Bloom, 433) That is not to say biological and psychological factors are not among the prime influences, it rather emphasizes that the extent of the youngster's development remains more contingent upon his interaction with a specific environment and the presence of a sequence of specific adult teachers over an extent of time.

However, Bloom's study does confirm something we now know from the other charts: there are no phases of development which can be skipped. “That which can be gained from each phase seems to be a prerequisite for being able to make the most of the subsequent phases.”(Bloom, 433)

The Phases of Learning Model can provide the contexts and sequence of learning anything new which leads to mastery or even profession. Viewed as whole, it suggests foremost that nothing extraordinary is achieved quickly. It also suggests that people who may appear quite ordinary may well

achieve extraordinary performances if they find desire, patience and good teachers. Those teachers will impart the variety of wisdom required, no small part of which is that no athlete accomplishes extraordinary things with only part of himself, with only part of what it is to be human. If the athlete can know that, he may indeed find new ways to appreciate and foster the variety of sustaining strengths in some of those “lost” adult relationships, even though they no longer provide him sport-specific guidance.

That, after all, is also a critical part of the athlete's learning, just as “eventually, as the athletes master the separate parts of their sport, they have to learn to put them together in a whole that is different from the parts. And for all the dedication of their coaches and parents, eventually the athletes have to do this work by themselves and for themselves.” (Bloom, 436)

Parents and coaches, on the contrary, will find they cannot do their work by themselves, nor should they do this work by themselves. Working in groups with these charts can prove in a gentle way how distinctly collaborative knowledge is and how vigorous a system of insight and support may arise in the process. That is the community of spirit and creative intelligence which may well turn out to be a sport's most inclusive gift back to them.