

Long Term Athlete Development: Promoting Physical Activity for Life

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Introduction

In today's society, physical educators and coaches are striving more than ever to promote the importance of being physically active for life. Staying fit through sport and exercise is not only rewarding physically (by staying healthy), but it can also be fun. However, obesity records in Canada are at an all time high (1 in 4 adult Canadians) (Lau et al., 2007). Thus, there needs to be a drastic change in how we go about teaching and implementing physical education programs in Canada; and this starts at the youth level. The implementation of an effective athlete development model would make it possible to not only reduce the number of obese people in Canada, but also train and develop athletes from the grass-roots level into potential Olympic competitors.

LTAD

The Long Term Athletic Development (LTAD) is a developmental pathway, created by Sport Canada, where athletes follow training regimes from childhood through all stages of adulthood (Canadian Sport For Life [CS4L], 2011). Throughout the physical maturation process, children and adults need to do the right things at the right time to grow as athletes. The idea is to develop athletic potential alongside biological growth. With this constant involvement in physical activity, children and adults will be more likely to get active, stay active, and reach their highest potential in sport achievement.

Purpose of an LTAD Model

Coaches and physical educators have a responsibility to help athletes reach their own levels of personal excellence. However, they need a systematic approach and structure to be able to do so effectively. The LTAD Model is a pathway that teachers and their athletes can follow to develop as physically active human beings. Not only is the LTAD Model purposeful in motivating an athlete to reach their full potential, but also in enhancing participation levels in sport across Canada. These high participation levels in sport and physical activity will hopefully permeate through society and create an interactive environment, where everybody is involved in staying fit and physically active.

Framework

Organization in the implementation of LTAD is paramount in the successfulness of the model. Thus, every national sport organization in Canada has developed LTAD guidelines specific to their sport (Skate Canada, 2010). With the support of various governmental agencies and provincial organizations, LTAD has been promoted in almost every region of Canada. This national, organized framework inspires many people to get involved and contribute to the growth of young athletes. These people all have a unique part to play in the development of participants of the LTAD program. For example, coaches are integral in the LTAD model. They design and implement athlete training programs that fall under the umbrella of the LTAD principles (in order to ensure effective coaching, they are trained and evaluated on a constant basis through the National Coaching Certification Programs). Parents, as role models for their kids, also provide a pivotal role to athlete development. The goal here is for parents to form a partnership with

the LTAD program and stress the importance of their child's growth both during training and at home (without pushing their child too far -- it is about finding balance). Provincial Associations play their part in long-term athlete development by providing resources and materials for community associations to use in the creation of their LTAD program. Finally, the LTAD program in Canada would not be possible without financial assistance from major sponsors whose beliefs coincide with those of Canadian Sport For Life. With an effective framework in place, participants (at all stages of development) will undoubtedly benefit from excellence in programming and coaching, and truly grow as athletes.

7 Stages of LTAD

The LTAD Model is comprised of 7 Key Stages. Focal points in physical activity are highlighted along with a suggested age category for "training". The 7 Stages are:

Stage 1 – Active Start (0-6 Years of Age)

At this stage, introducing children to a variety of body movements is fundamental in establishing a foundation for life-long physical activity. Developing the ABC's of movement (Agility, Balance, Coordination, and Speed) is also important as it prepares children for learning sports skills in subsequent stages (i.e., the rest of their life). In Stage 1, it is not necessary to schedule and structure exercise, but rather give the children an opportunity to engage in play and movement games. As a result, they will hopefully start to see physical activity as a fun part of their everyday life.

Stage 2 – FUNdamentals (6-8 Years of Age → Female; 6-9 Years of Age → Male)

During this stage, the fundamental skills learned in Stage 1 should be practiced and elaborated on. Children at this stage will continue to work on their ABC's of movement while engaging in many different sport contexts. This introduction to sport is crucial in lifelong athletic development. A wide variety of activities may spark their interest in a certain sport and give them motivation to be physically active, while avoiding “premature specialization” (Ford et al., 2011). However, it is important that these games and sports focus on fun and enjoyment; formal competition should only be minimally introduced.

Stage 3 – Learn to Train (8-11 Years of Age → Female; 9-12 Years of Age → Male)

At this stage, the fundamental movement skills that we have learned in Stages 1 and 2 are now being converted into basic sports skills (using structured formalized methods). The focus here is on training and practice, as opposed to competition. Instead of competing at this level, participation in a wide variety of sports is recommended. This will allow for the athlete to develop correctly, and be able to perform a wide range of skills in the future. Although single-sport involvement is often detrimental, some sports (eg., gymnastics) require heavy participation at a young age. Due to the critical instance of this phase, Canadian Sport For Life calls this stage, “The Golden Age of Learning” (CS4L, 2011).

Stage 4 – Train to Train (11-15 Years of Age → Female; 12-16 Years of Age → Male)

During this stage, we are beginning to develop the athlete's long-term potential. This is the most critical stage in the athlete's develop; according to Canadian Sport For Life, it is the “make it or break it” stage (CS4L, 2011). For long-

term development at this stage, winning is still a secondary goal. Here, it is necessary to allocate more time training and improving physical abilities in order to perform effectively in various sport's situations. Attaining a good fitness at this stage is most important to ensure that athletes are getting the most out of training; it is necessary to build an aerobic base during the onset of adolescent growth (approximately the ages listed above).

Stage 5 – Train to Compete (15-21 Years of Age → Female; 16-23 Years of Age → Male)

At this stage, there is a drastic shift from learning the fundamental skills to focusing on becoming the best athlete you can be and training to compete at National/International events. To reach the highest level possible, athletes must choose one sport in which they want to excel, and focus their efforts into reaching the highest level possible within that sport (achieved through high-intensity training all year round). Understanding the basis of their sport is their key to success, as well as performance factors such as nutrition and psychology. At this stage, athletes are elite and have been recognized for their potential talent.

Stage 6 – Train to Win (18+ Years of Age → Females; 19+ Years of Age → Males)

Stage 6 is the last stage of intense training of the LTAD model. Athletes at this stage are full-time and/or professionals in their sport. Here, we are structuring training to win international events. Coming in 1st place and receiving medals is the primary focus. The previous stages have prepared the athlete for this important stage. During this stage, the athlete needs to maintain their physical ability levels and be motivated to reach the top of their sport. Professional and experienced

coaches will help facilitate their growth as an athlete at this stage, keep them motivated to win, and structure training to optimize performance.

Stage 7 – Active for Life (Any Age)

Being active for life is a key outcome of the LTAD model. The goal here is for every Canadian to participate in some form of physical activity for the duration of their life. It is important to note that you don't have to go through the other stages (and become a professional athlete) to be active for life. Remaining fit through all phases of adulthood is emphasized and hopefully encouraged through involvement in physical activity.

Conclusion

Presently, in Canada, most citizens are not “physically literate” (CS4L, 2011). This is because there did not previously exist a sport's structure in our country. Hopefully, with Sport Canada's implementation of their Long Term Athlete

Development Program, we can strive for a

future where we are not only consistently producing quality athletes to represent our country internationally, but also create a society where health issues are minimized by motivating everyone to become physically active, and ultimately, physically active for life.

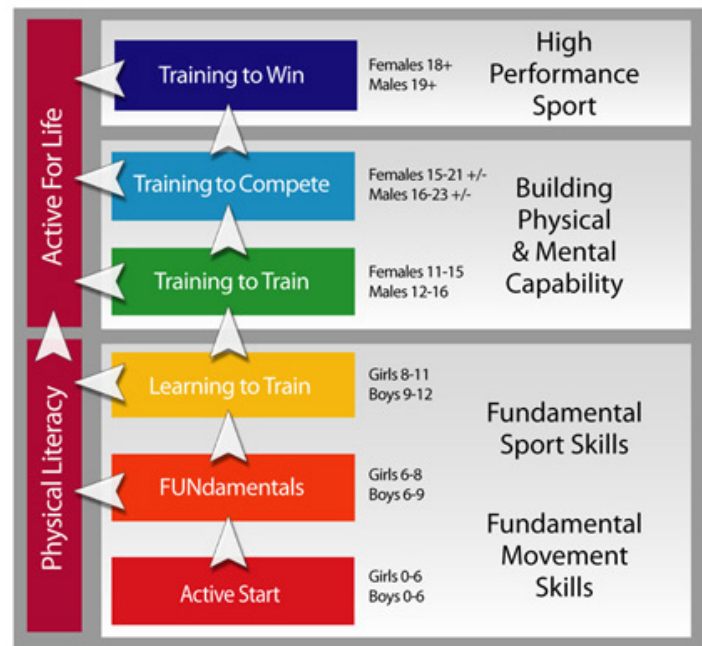


Figure 1 - LTAD Stages and Pathway

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