

A kick start for rugby's future

Rugby union has never had it so good. The World Cup win has boosted its popularity to an all-time high, but the challenge is to sustain this interest and develop greater participation. To tackle this, the sport has its own Long Term Athlete Development plan

BY DAN BROWN

The Rugby Football Union (RFU) published its first strategic plan in 2001, which looked at its responsibilities in the three distinct areas of elite rugby, community rugby and business activities. The elite end of the game is, of necessity, focused on achieving excellence and success at the highest levels, while within the community area the main aim had to be one of encouraging participation and retention. To enable these two

sectors to attain their individual goals, it is essential for the RFU to achieve a thriving business capacity in order to finance and resource the development programmes and action plans.

For the game to progress at both of these levels we need many more and better players. Current approaches to player recruitment and retention, player identification and development is reviewed within such documents as *Blackman Actions*, *Rugby – Making an Impact*, England Rugby Academy's *Briefing Paper* and the *Schools, Students and Youth Review*.

The key recommendation in all of these documents is to consolidate existing structures into a single, integrated development pathway, underpinned by one continuous curriculum of rugby that provides for the needs of all involved within the game. This is why the RFU has adopted the Long Term Athlete Development model (LTAD).

To meet the technical demands of the modern game this curriculum model will constantly evolve. This evolution must be based upon lessons learnt through implementation, and reflect both current best practice and future research. As such, the model is very much about the next generation and it is important to accept a culture of constant change and modernisation. The implementation needs to be flexible, with an annual review to measure impact and clarify the objectives, both at national and local level.

The LTAD model aims to communicate to the game a clear, agreed vision and strategy for the technical development of rugby union. It aims to raise awareness of what is required, to ensure continued development, by providing a syllabus that outlines not only what needs to be addressed, but when it should be introduced. It is not intended to be a complete reference document, and as such will provide signposting to other resources/ agencies where appropriate.

The model attempts to align all existing programmes to create a seamless development pathway, which identifies programme content and provides a framework within which each skill and ability level, from playground to world class



performance, can be extended. The model is designed to achieve a fully co-ordinated pathway for development and excellence within rugby union by: providing a national framework and clear objectives; setting targets based on the resources available; and allowing specific priorities to be targeted locally, according to need.

Scientific research now concludes that it takes eight to 12 years of training for a talented athlete to reach elite levels (Bloom, 1985; Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson and Charness, 1994). This is called the 10-year or 10,000 hour rule. For players, coaches and parents this translates as slightly more than three hours of practice daily for 10 years (Salmela, 1998).

The competition programme followed by the majority of schools and clubs reflects historical traditions rather than athlete development needs. Within these competitions we are also aware of a lack of good quality coaches who are able to deal with the development of younger players.

Many approach training with a view to winning the next game. As a result, most young rugby players suffer from under-training and over-competition, especially in the younger age groups.

This is compounded by the presumption that, if players do not play competitive games, they lose interest and stop playing. These attitudes are reflected in the use of scaled-down adult

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competition and training programmes for younger age groups, which have little focus on development. Results are seen as the only performance indicator in assessing how good players are, rather than the achievement of the necessary athletic skills to realise optimum development for long term success and involvement.

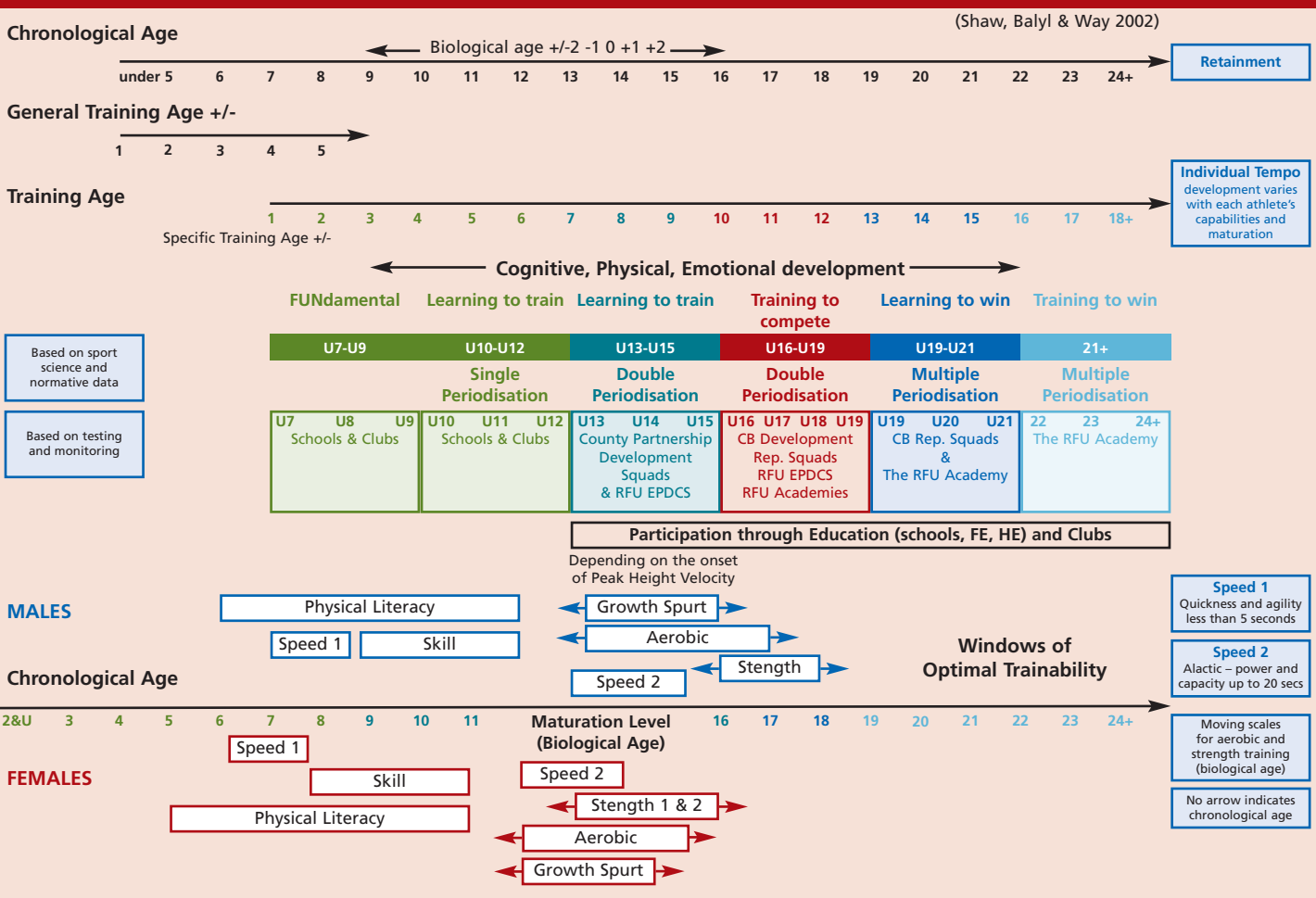
Rarely are the necessary physical, technical, tactical and mental skills introduced in a systematic and timely way to meet player's development. Yet ultimate success comes from



training and performing well over the long term rather than winning in the short term. There is no short cut to success in athletic preparation.

A long-term commitment to training is required, not only to produce elite athletes but to ensure their lifelong enjoyment and participation. A specific and well-planned training, competition and recovery regime will ensure optimum development throughout a rugby player's career. Rushing players into competition will always result in shortcomings in physical, technical, tactical and mental abilities. The number of

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games played has an effect on the overall development of the rugby player.

That there is a need for change is clearly apparent in how the game is introduced, coached and played. The RFU LTAD model seeks to provide a rational justification for this change, and helps provide some of the solutions on the way forward.

Dr. Istvan Balyi, a leading expert on long-term training and performance programming, is currently working with a number of sports governing bodies to place LTAD modelling at the heart of any future development for any sport. The RFU is using this model in order to underpin the technical development of the game, as well as to identify the pathway for elite players.

The outcome is to align all existing development programmes into a consistent, integrated development pathway that will provide participants with the skills and abilities to help them reach their own level of excellence in rugby.

The model is intended for use by professionals, administrators, coaches, referees, parents/guardians, teachers, volunteers, clubs and educational establishments from the earliest introductory to the highest performance levels. The RFU and RFUW hope it will provide a guide to finding answers to the majority of questions asked about what is being delivered for the development of the game. It aims to define the core syllabus that will provide for the total needs of all players.

The document provides an overview of the rugby journey through six stages of development and illustrates those responsible for implementing and resourcing each stage of the journey.

The programme

The LTAD programme incorporates all facets of the game. It is important that a long-term commitment to training, development and playing should be incorporated into planning strategies. Balyi's work with the RFU is to establish the required strategies for developing young players using the six stages as illustrated (Fig 1).

Rugby is a late specialisation sport, which requires a generalised approach to early training. The emphasis of training should be on the development of general, fundamental motor and technical-tactical skills. For late specialisation sports, specialisation prior to age 10 is not recommended since it contributes to early burn-out, drop-out and retirement from training and competition (Harsanyi, 1985).

One of the most important periods of motor development for children is between the ages of nine to 12 (Balyi and Hamilton, 1995; Rushall, 1998; Viru et al., 1998). During this time children are developmentally ready to acquire the fundamental movement skills that are the cornerstones of all athletic development.

Coaching

The ABC of rugby skills should be used, in conjunction with the RFU continuum and existing coaching manuals, in order to introduce young players to the game and broaden their understanding of specific positional skills.

In preparing your weekly/monthly/yearly coaching programme, it is important to use the LTAD table in order to ensure the appropriate time is spent emphasising that the importance of core skill development.

Coaches should not be put off in the early stages of a player's development, from applying a repetitious approach to improving these core skills, though, should endeavour to vary their approach. Every player should be made aware of the importance of these skills, and constant reinforcement regarding the execution of precision at every session should be encouraged. For players to participate and have a greater influence in the game it is vital every player must

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have the ability to execute these skills to a high level.

LTAD advocates the use of multi-lateral development programmes early, for late specialisation sports. Activities should include all forms of running, jumping, hitting, throwing etc through a range of different games and sports, rather than working in just one sport.



STAGE 1: FUNdamentals and learning to train

The FUNdamental stage is well-structured and fun! The emphasis is on the overall development of the athlete's physical capacities, and fundamental movement skills, and the ABCS of athleticism (agility, balance, co-ordination, speed), the basics of athletics (running, throwing and



jumping) and the KGBS of movement (kinaesthesia, gliding, buoyancy, striking).

Participation in as many sports as possible is encouraged. Speed, power and endurance are developed using fun games. Correct running, jumping and throwing techniques are taught, using the ABCS of athletics.

Strength training during this stage should include exercises using the athlete's own body weight, medicine ball and Swiss ball exercises. Athletes should be introduced to the simple rules and ethics of sports. Activities revolve around the school year, and during summer and winter holidays multi-sport camps are recommended.

If athletes and parents have a preferred sport, participation once or twice per week is recommended, but participation in other sports three or four times per week is essential for future excellence.

Fundamental movement skills should be practised and mastered before rugby-specific skills are introduced. This emphasis on motor development will produce athletes who have a better trainability for long-term sport specific development. If the fundamental motor skill training is not developed between the ages of nine and 12, skills cannot be recaptured at a later time (although carefully planned and implemented remedial programs can contribute to limited success).

If the athletes later decide to leave the competitive stream, the skills they have acquired during the FUNdamental stage will still benefit them when they engage in recreational activities, which will enhance their quality of life and health.

Fundamental movement skills should be practised and mastered before rugby specific skills are introduced. The development of these skills, using a positive and fun approach, will contribute significantly to future athletic achievements. Participation in a wide range of sports is also encouraged.

The FUNdamental part of the programme underpins the long-term development of any player. It is therefore important that every player is exposed to continuous sessions that place an emphasis on the core skills, irrespective of age or ability.

STAGE 2: Training to train

During this stage, young athletes learn how to train and they also learn the basic skills of a specific sport. They are introduced to the basic technical/tactical skills and ancillary capacities including: warm up and cool down, stretching, hydration and nutrition, recovery and regeneration, mental preparation, taper and peak, integrated pre-competition routines and post-competition recovery.

During competitions athletes play to win and to do their best, but the major focus of training is on learning the basics as opposed to competing. Training and competition ratios are optimised because too many competitions waste valuable training time and, conversely, not enough

competition inhibits the practice of technical skills and learning how to cope with the physical and mental challenges presented during competition.

A ratio of 75 per cent training to 25 per cent competition is recommended by experts. During the Training to Train stage, however, these percentages vary according to sport and individual specific needs.

The Training to Train stage addresses the critical or sensitive periods of physical and skill development. Athletes who miss this stage of training will never reach their full potential, regardless of any remedial programme they may participate in.

Many athletes plateau during the later stage of their careers primarily because of an over-emphasis on competition rather than training during this important period in their athletic development.

STAGE 3: Training to compete

This phase of development is introduced after the goals and objectives of the Training to Train stage have been achieved. The training to competition ratio now changes to 50:50. Fifty per cent of training is devoted to the development of technical and tactical skills, and fitness improvements, and 50 per cent is devoted to competition-specific training.

During the Training to Compete stage, high intensity individual and sport-specific training is provided to athletes year round. Athletes, who are now proficient at performing both basic and sport-specific skills, learn to perform these skills under a variety of competitive conditions during training.

Special emphasis is placed on optimum preparation by modelling training and competition. Fitness programs, recovery programs, psychological preparation and technical development are now individually tailored to a greater degree. This emphasis on individual preparation addresses each athlete's individual strengths and weaknesses.

STAGE 4: Competing to win

This is the final stage of athletic preparation. All of the athlete's physical, technical, tactical, mental, and ancillary capacities are now fully established and the focus of training has shifted to the optimisation of performance.

Athletes are trained to peak for major competitions. Training is characterised by high intensity and relatively high volume. Frequent 'prophylactic' breaks help to prevent physical and mental burnouts. Training to competition ratio in this stage is 25:75, with the per cent competition ratio including competition specific training activities. ●

Biography
Dan Brown is RFU development officer