

DEVELOPING TALENT IN YOUNG PEOPLE REVISITED

by Mark Lonsdale

Many sports benefit from modern developments in sports science, but high-performance judo is one sport that benefits more from hard work and well-structured training than from science or computer modeling. But one area where research and study has been of value is in gaining a better appreciation for long-term athlete development (LTAD) and the interrelated training requirements. Understanding how athletes develop at various ages helps us to develop coaching methods and training programs which are **athlete-centered** rather than sports-centered.

Dr. Benjamin Bloom's research and book, *Developing Talent in Young People* (1985), has been a valuable resource on this topic. It is also a book that can be found in the libraries of many coaches and is used by the US Olympic Committee. So for the club-level judo instructor or coach who may not be familiar with this work, it is worth revisiting a few of the relevant findings.

Bloom's work was based on interviews with 120 highly accomplished young people, including musicians, Olympic swimmers and world-class tennis players. Interviews were also conducted with their parents and teachers so as to gain a better understanding of their influences.

Of the individuals interviewed, the ones who "made it" were not necessarily the most talented, or possessed natural ability, but were those that demonstrated *persistence, competitiveness, eagerness, and a love of the sport (or activity)*. The study group also stated that they benefited from **dedicated teachers**, for whom they felt *love, admiration and respect*.

One of the notable findings was that the majority had become involved in the particular activity before the age of 12 years, and that they had been encouraged by one or both parents. Many had also received one-on-one individualized instruction or training.

From this, Bloom noted a number of deficiencies in group instruction as it relates to a structured school setting. When at school, the students' lives are governed by a timetable and "assembly line" form of education and learning that does not allow the individual time to delve deeply into any one subject or activity.

Bloom also identified three development phases: early years, middle years, late years – all of which reinforces the argument in performance sports for coaching to be individualized, age-appropriate, and athlete-driven. Prior to Bloom, another educational researcher, Alfred North Whitehead (1929), described three similar phases of developmental that were also influenced by age. These were:

1. Romance
2. Precision
3. Integration

The **Romance** phase is where the child is drawn into an activity or sport and is able to play, explore, and **have fun**. It is in these early formative years that the child will develop a **love of the sport** that may carry him or her through their entire lives.

The **Precision** phase is the systematic learning, coaching, and mastering of technical skills. It is in this phase that young athletes move from "playing" a sport to being serious "players" and competitors.



Sterling helps two new students at Stallion Springs PAL Judo

The **Integration** phase is the continued study with a master or coach, and long hours of daily practice and training. The athlete learns to translate training and technical skills into improved personal performance.

This discussion leads us back to the term “age-appropriate,” which is often used when discussing modern judo training. Some believe that this simply means more fun and games for very young judoka; and they are partly correct. There is no argument that if a judo instructor can help develop a *love of the sport* with juniors at the club level, they may stay with judo, or continue returning to it throughout their lives. While all too many students seem to drop out in their teens and college years, many also return to the dojo as adults. However, it is the dedicated systematic training (precision phase) throughout the mid- and late-teen years that is a critical phase in the development of national and world class athletes.

Expanding on this as it relates to judo, we may discover talent in a 13 or 14 year old, but it is from 16 to 19 years that we are developing and building the future national champions. There is a level of strength and toughness required for judo that only comes with maturity, but for the instructor or coach, the challenge is maintaining an interest in the sport through these difficult teenage years.

So to be effective, even at the grassroots level, coaching should be **athlete-centered** rather than sport-centered. This necessitates that the development of coaches should be linked directly to the athlete’s age, maturity & abilities. Taking this into consideration, it would be logical that the training and certification of coaches should be both age-based and performance-based. A coach should be educated in the training requirements specific to children (5 to 12 years); teens and young adults (13 to 19 years); seniors and Masters, both male and female. Similarly, he or she should be trained and certified to coach at various levels of sports performance from novice and recreational through high performance and elite athlete development. The coach is then able to deliver an appropriate level of



training in an individualized, age-appropriate manner.

Based on personal experience, a dedicated young judoka who is enjoying judo and winning at the local level by age 13 could be winning at the junior nationals by 15 or 16. With the right coaching and the support of his or her family, that same judoka should be gaining international experience by 18 and a serious senior competitor by their early twenties. But unlike other activities that require only fitness or skill, judo also requires a level of mental and physical toughness that only comes with age and experience.

One of the traits that separate dedicated judoka from other athletes is the ability to take a pounding on the mat one day and still turn up for training the next. Anyone who has trained with the Japanese or French national teams will appreciate what it takes to turn up day after day knowing that the training will be brutal, and the only science that will help is a bottle of Advil and several rolls of tape.

CONCLUSION

1. Coaches should be able to identify the transition point where a young judoka is ready to move from “playing judo” to becoming a serious “judo player,” – keeping in mind that not all judoka aspire to be serious competitors. At the club level the instructor will find that the majority of members (~85-90%) will be recreational judoka who are perfectly happy playing judo well into their retirement years.
2. If we expect children and teens to maintain an interest in judo, they must develop a **love of the sport** at an early age. Moving too quickly into rigorous training for competition (*shiai*) before they have matured, may turn them off judo for life. This maturation occurs at about 13 to 17 years of age, depending on the individual. In the early teens, young people begin making their own decisions as to what they want to do, and not just what their parents or teachers are pushing them to do.
3. As young athletes “graduate” from the *romance phase*, they will need continued encouragement, coaching and support to get them through the more demanding *systematic phase* of performance development training. They will also need financial support from their parents for travel to training camps and competitions.
4. As athletes age, their love of the sport should be demonstrated by an equal love of teaching juniors and helping to develop the next generation of players and champions. Former champions should feel both an obligation and a passion for passing on their hard-earned

* From Amazon: B.S. Bloom's *Developing Talent in Young People* (1985) is a great book and suitable for anyone working with children. Similar in nature, but preceding Stephen Covey's work in *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, this book looks at common traits among talented young people across a multitude of disciplines. The USOC uses this work as a core fundamental in how coaches should work with kids.

Mark Lonsdale is an active judo instructor, USJA & USJF certified coach, a former international judo competitor, and has trained extensively with the renowned Racing Club de France. Mark can be contacted at Judo93561@aol.com.

