

Teen athletes need diverse experience

Chris Zdeb

The Edmonton Journal

Monday, July 02, 2007

EDMONTON -- Canadian sport has been all about winning and losing which is why, sports experts say, so few of our elite athletes make it to the Olympic podium.

The key to bringing home more medals is building a better overall athlete and starting when they're young, says Vicki Harber, a University of Alberta physical education professor and former Olympic rower.

She's not the first to say it. There's all kinds of scientific research to back it up.

But Harber is excited that Canadian sport finally appears to have a road map to get where it has to go and she's currently following it with an elite team of 12 and 13-year-old soccer-playing girls.

For the last two years the academic has been implementing aspects of her own research into long term athletic development in the training of the Southwest United U14 girls team, which includes her daughter, Emily Stenerson.

"It's a chance of merging exercise science into application, to see how it works when you put it into the real world," Harber explains.

Among the things the team is doing differently is making the outdoor season their priority, instead of splitting their focus between outdoor and indoor soccer.

"We still play soccer but in the non-outdoor season we give these girls a lot more latitude and freedom to participate in other sports and athletic activities," says Harber, who is assistant coach.

So team members have spent time at a gymnastics club working on co-ordination, balance and flexibility. They have also taken part in a U of A program that focuses on speed, agility and quickness, never having a soccer ball at their feet, Harber says.

The cross-training is making them better overall athletes, which makes them better soccer players, she says.

The strategy, which follows the national Long Term Athletic Development (LTAD) plan outlined on the website www.ltad.ca in combination with Harber's own research, and her experience as an Olympic athlete, appears to be working. Eight of the 18 team members are playing on provincial select soccer squads, and they're eyeing a run at the nationals next year. The team is also playing up a tier for the players' age level and currently sits in third place out of nine teams.

This might not impress some people because the team isn't sitting at the top of the standings, but the team is eschewing wins and losses.



CREDIT: Shaughn Butts, The Journal

U of A professor Vicki Harber puts research into creating well-rounded athletes into practice with an under 14 girls' soccer team.

"We believe longterm development is a much more important overall goal," Harber says. "There's lot of literature to show that a lot of young North American athletes overtrain and undercompete. The ratio of practices to competitions is not where it should be -- too few practices and too many games -- and as a result these kids end up thinking that winning is everything. This comes at the expense of training them properly," Harber says.

Training should be age appropriate, but historically kids have been trained as little adults, not taking into account their bodies are still growing and developing.

Instead of one practice and two games a week, which is how the soccer season is currently set up to take advantage of the two months May and June that most Alberta kids play soccer, it should be the other way around, the sports researcher says.

Yeah, but most kids hate going to practice, you say. Make practice fun and they will come, Harber says. Playing tag or a game of keep-away as part of soccer practice keeps things interesting as well as building the key elements of run, jump, throw, agility, balance, coordination, catch, kick and strike.

"The research tells us that children who are exposed to a wide range of motor skills become much better athletes and much better peak performers in their specialized sport in the later years," Harber explains.

Scientific research also concludes that it takes a minimum of 10 years and 10,000 hours of training for a talented athlete to reach elite levels. That translates into an athlete and coach spending more than three hours of training or competition daily for 10 years, Harber says.

What can you do as a parent?

Instead of plunking kids into one sport at the age of three or four and then keeping them in that one sport, parents should encourage their children to try as many different sports and activities as they can before the age of six.

The diversity will not only keep up their interest, says Harber, it may make them less likely to drop out of sports around the watershed ages of 12, 13 and 14. And it will give them a well rounded physicality. Kids who play only soccer, for example, have very strong leg muscles and are good at kicking and running, but most can't throw a baseball very well because the muscles of the upper body have been ignored, Harber says.

Athletes are more likely to be exposed to long term athletic development by coaches and instructors that are supportive and encouraging and allow for all different kinds of bodies and shapes and sizes and that are inclusive, Harber says. So look for them when scouting out teams.

As for children who exhibit Wayne-Gretzky-like skill in a certain sport at the tender age of seven or eight?

Parents are sometimes fooled into thinking their child is gong to be the next great whatever and go along with coaches who may have them practicing or playing six to seven days a week, Harber says.

They justify their support of such a schedule by saying their child loves the sport.

"Then I say, your child might like candy as well, but would you allow your child to have candy six or seven times a week or would you rather they have a balanced diet. It's allowed some parents to look at sport a little differently," Harber says.

czdeb@thejournal.canwest.com

EXPERT COACHING

To watch University of Alberta professor Vicki Harber, who is also assistant coach of the Southwest United U14 Tier 1 girls team, help supervise the players' warm up before a recent

game, go to www.edmontonjournal.com and click on Journal videos.

© The Edmonton Journal 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.