



My athlete has turned into a baby Giraffe.....

The vast increase in young people wanting to take up running and the number of running clubs who are looking to embrace this growth and set up junior sections is of course potentially great for the future of the sport. However are the people who are looking after the development of these young runners well equipped enough to help them through one of the more difficult times in their life whilst keeping them healthy, injury free and motivated to remain in the sport?

Even those who have been coaching for many years struggle to help athletes come to terms with the changes in body shape and growth that occur in young people. For those who are experienced, and have been coaching runners and other young athletes for some time, it will be a familiar sight to witness young athletes who six months ago were heading the rankings and competing at the highest level now resembling baby giraffes on ice!

Form has disappeared, coordination has gone, and balance is proving difficult. In view of this I thought it would be useful to share some of my thoughts about how we, as coaches, can help get our young athletes through this very difficult stage without them becoming too despondent and, more importantly, without causing them injury or losing them to the sport altogether.

Coaches who have taken the Athletics Coach or Coach in Running Fitness qualifications in the past few years will have gone through a good deal of instruction but little, if any, of this touches upon how to specifically cope with these difficult times where growth patterns in young bodies affect almost everything that they do. In some defence of the National Governing Body (NGB), the Children's Coach Award does cover some areas but from anecdotal evidence doesn't give an awful lot of day-to-day practical advice or guidance (note at the time of writing no courses were available). There is some information through the You Coach website. However, this is often (as well as being sometimes very hard to find) clouded in technical jargon or very scientific. Although the charts and graphs that are published are useful in helping to understand when these peak growth spurts occur, and where and how they can cause the most disruption to training and competing, there is very little practical information about how to progress

through this difficult stage. As a coach who deals with a good many young athletes, many of whom are going through this phase, this is most frustrating as more information on guiding these young people might well help to curtail some of the drop-off rate at this age - as well as reducing the hair loss in us coaches!

Whilst trying to avoid jargon as much as possible this growth period is generally termed as “adolescent growth spurts” (AGS) and the peak growing period is termed as “peak height velocity” (PHV). I have attached one of the charts available from UK Athletics which highlights these particular periods and when they may occur.

Understanding that AGS, and both the athletic and general awkwardness that often accompanies these periods, is normal at this phase of puberty does not make it any easier for the young athletes themselves. This can often be compounded by parents who are worried that their young “star” has lost all of his/her ability (often pointing the finger at the coach).

AGS can affect our young athletes not only physically but also socially and psychologically as their bodies change. We may also start to see that it has a detrimental effect on the posture, core strength and performance of the young athlete, who may in turn begin to lose skills, speed, coordination and agility as their bodies grow and change rapidly.

From a psychological point of view, it is important to highlight to the young athletes, and also their parents, that they are not alone in experiencing difficulties in coordination and balance during and after an AGS. It is important to highlight, and have them understand, that boys can grow by up to 4 inches in a year and around half that figure for girls. Understanding this, it becomes obvious that as height quickly increases the centre of gravity changes. This happens in some cases so quickly that the brain does not get a chance to keep up with the new rules of balancing.

Obviously, all individuals are different, but on average the peak growing height for boys is between 14 and 15, and girls, who develop much sooner, grow more quickly between the ages of 12 and 13. In general, girls will finish growing at 18, whilst boys will continue to grow for another two years or so, reaching full maturation at around 20. It is important then from a coaching point of view that we understand that this is not just a short-term issue that needs addressing and that we should be looking out for signs of growth on a regular basis.

Measure up!

One of the easiest and most practical ways of keeping an eye on how your athletes are growing is to either keep a record of their height yourself by measuring them on a

regular basis or, probably more practically, by asking parents to do this for you. You will find it interesting to correlate lack of form and agility with these growth spurts. This will perhaps help you to understand why there has been a dramatic loss of form or lack of coordination when athletes are doing drills they have previously been able to execute impeccably.

So, we have our young athlete who is obviously beginning to suffer with lack of form and coordination and may well be becoming frustrated and not understand what's going on. What steps can we, as coaches, put into place to help retrain growing bodies and maintain their enjoyment of the sport whilst doing so?

We can breakdown the relevant modules into basic areas which will overlap and merge together as you progress with the athlete.

Confidence

In my experience probably the most important aspect of helping our young athletes through this difficult time is to maintain their confidence. The athlete should be reassured that even though their results and associated skills may have deteriorated they haven't become a bad athlete in the past few months. They need to understand that this is a natural process and that everyone goes through it at some stage.

It is very difficult for an athlete who has been performing at a high level to see their performances drop or stagnate whilst their competitors continue to move forward. Getting them to understand that at some stage everyone goes through this is the first stage in increasing their confidence. Once AGS and PHV have been identified it is important for the athlete's confidence to have a plan prepared so that, in the first instance, they will feel that they are able to do something about what is happening to them and have a degree of control over their future development. Secondly, it will help you as a coach to be able to plot development and progress during the coming months and years.

Your athletes will all manage things differently, both in terms of their physical growth and in their emotional reaction to what is happening to them. Some may just accept that it's happening and will gladly go about their business and continue to enjoy their training and competing, whilst others may find it difficult to toe the line in a race or competition as they may feel they are no longer able to perform at the level they expect. Managing these different reactions wisely is key.

Basic overall fitness

As discussed above, with AGS beginning at a young age and ending in adulthood we have to understand that both coaches and athletes are in for the "long haul" in terms of

training. It is then most important that general fitness is maintained throughout the whole period, whether our athlete is in between growth spurts or in the midst of them. Our young athletes may feel a degree of demotivation as the training regime may be becoming more difficult and unrewarding. It is at this stage – bearing in mind the way in which the two stages outlined above overlap – that, as coaches, we need to produce effective plans and underline the reasons why our athletes have come into the sport - which is, of course, the pure enjoyment of taking part. For example, for middle-distance runners who enjoy a long run at the weekend there is no reason why this shouldn't continue to take place. However, a different attitude should be instilled where times and distances covered become immaterial and the “joy of running” should be embraced and experienced. This way we are able to maintain a good level of fitness even though style and technique may have gone out of the window somewhat!

Re-learning the skills

The plan to bring our growing athletes back to form should also include re-learning the skills that have “vanished” (sometimes it seems almost overnight). Rather than concentrating immediately on, for example, sport-specific drills which were recently second nature, we should begin a programme of basic movement skill acquisition which can also be strength based. These sessions will employ the movements involved in the athlete's chosen sport. However, whichever discipline they favour, running with basic bodyweight exercises such as lunges and squats should be the beginning of the re-learning curve. Other sport-specific work can be introduced in tandem soon afterwards. Once the learning curve is on its way and the basic skills are beginning to be re-mastered, speed can be introduced, ensuring that any work is still being carried out correctly. As your athlete becomes stronger and more proficient confidence will begin to return.

Rediscovering lost movement patterns

Reviving lost skills that have been blurred at the edges by PHV/AGS can be a frustrating stage for the athlete. The following sections will help them to track their progress and identify the stage they feel they are at. This should be incorporated into an overall plan which utilises all the approaches outlined above, and helps psychologically as well as physically. The sections below are well-known phases of skill acquisition and development. However, it is useful to reiterate these important stages, which cross over to all skill acquisition plans.

Unconscious incompetence

The individual does not understand or know how to do something and does not necessarily recognise the deficit. They may deny the usefulness of the skill. The individual must recognise their own lack of knowledge, and the value of the new skill, before

moving on to the next stage. The length of time an individual spends in this stage depends on the strength of the stimulus to learn.

Conscious incompetence

Though the individual does not understand or know how to do something, he or she does recognise the deficit, as well as the value of a new skill in addressing the deficit. The making of mistakes can be integral to the learning process at this stage.

Conscious competence

The individual understands or knows how to do something. However, demonstrating the skill or knowledge requires concentration. It may be broken down into steps, and there is heavy conscious involvement in executing the new skill.

Unconscious competence

The individual has had so much practice with a skill that it has become "second nature" and can be performed easily. As a result, the skill can be performed while executing another task. The individual may be able to teach it to others, depending upon how and when it was learned.

Keep ahead of the plan

The final phase is where we should, of course, be aiming, but bear in mind that if the athlete is still of the age where further AGS occurs it may mean going backwards before going forward again. It is essential, therefore, to keep monitoring height and growth so that action plans can be revised.

So, by designing a training programme that takes account of AGS, coaches can help young athletes to readjust, both physically and psychologically, minimising awkwardness and injuries caused by a loss of coordination and balance, helping them through a difficult time in their lives, and aiding their progress into adulthood.

JOHN SKEVINGTON

UKA Level 3 Performance Coach.

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