

Children in Sport Part 1

Introduction

Though sport can be and is great for many children there has always been concern by some coaches and parents about the effects of competitive sport on growing children. For the many children who enjoy their involvement in competitive sport there are many who do not and indeed suffer while doing so. In a short series of six articles I want to consider the development of children in badminton in England though what I write could apply to many competitive sports in many countries. The first article follows below.

Article 1. So You Think Your Child is Going to be a Champion

On the crowded courts numerous children are engaged in the challenge of the contest, the fantasy of their own or their parents' aspirations and enjoying or suffering the experience of play before coming off court in joy or gloom.

At every possible viewpoint are perched Mums and Dads watching the outcome of every action of their children. Each win would compensate for all the sacrifices made on their behalf and the better the win the easier to justify the sacrifice.

"My daughter is going to play for England" reflects Mr and Mrs Smith proudly.

"My son is going to become a professional player; he is the best of the lot. I'm going to make him an All England singles champion." contemplates Mr Brown.

"I'm so confused," Mrs Green thinks, "are we doing the right thing? We have been spending so much time and money on her badminton; her coaching, going to practices, matches and tournaments costs us several thousand pounds each year. We don't drink or smoke, we cannot afford to go out much or on holidays anymore and she is still only 15 years old. Is it all worth it? Will she make it? Shouldn't she be concentrating on her school work, doing some other sport as well and enjoying her social life with her friends?"

There is no doubt that without the aspiration and the efforts of parents junior badminton would not thrive as it does today in England. The children could not travel around to play badminton to the extent that they do. Consequently it is quite easy to understand and appreciate the thoughts and feelings of those parents who do put so much time, money and effort into their childrens'badminton. Though I assume they all believe that they are doing so in their childrens'best interest many still expect some return for their labours. There are three main questions here for badminton parents. First, what sort of return do they expect? Second, are they likely to gain that sort of return? Third, what other returns might they get?

Expectations

The first question is a soul searching one. The Smiths and Mr Brown above believe that they know exactly why they are putting so much effort into their childrens'badminton and what sort of return they expect. At this point we don't know whether the children have the same ambitions and expectations as their parents. But it is a question that should be asked at some point, one perhaps their parents should be thinking about it. Mrs Green isn't at all clear why she sacrifices so much and what sort of return she expects. Perhaps her confusion is because she doesn't know fully what sorts of returns there are in badminton and whether they are as important as other things in her daughter's life.

The reason why I say that this question is a soul searching one is that the answer really lies in reply to a deeper question, WHY DO I WANT MY CHILD TO PLAY BADMINTON? And to answer that parents must give some thought to their own motives and ambitions for their children. And when they have done that it might be a good idea to find out if their children genuinely play for the same reasons and have the same ambitions. The second of the three questions is important because it is to do with the steps that are being taken to gain the return the parents want for their efforts. Are they going about trying to achieve their ambitions in the right way? Is it necessary to spend thousands of pounds on coaching, court hire, shuttles, tournament expenses, travel and hotel bills? Is the child receiving the right sort of coaching and advice? Is it necessary to enter so many tournaments, to be a member of every squad and to be coached by so many different coaches, e.g. private coach, squad coaches and team coaches? Is it necessary to do so much fitness training? Is it necessary to cut out other sports and concentrate solely on badminton? What are the best ways to prepare for future success?

In this area many parents are quite ignorant and depend very much for advice on other parents, officials and coaches. Unfortunately, because of the rapid growth of junior sport there is much general ignorance about children's development in sport and so even this advice is not always sensible and in the best interests of children. There is much information available about children's development in sport but too often it appears to be neglected or ignored in the demand for future champions and success.

This leads us to the third of the three questions. For if inappropriate advice is given and the wrong steps taken in trying to realise the parents'ambitions for their children then the parents might discover one day that they get returns they didn't consider and certainly would not want. It is the moment of truth for many parents whey they are confronted with their children suffering from serious injury through overuse of a part of the body in training or practice. When the child loses for no apparent reason on the court; appears not to try; makes simple and unnecessary errors. When the child feigns illness, makes excuses and is all if and buts; doesn't seem to show any improvement and doesn't practise regularly. When the child becomes sick before a match, comes off in tears, feels a failure and gets depressed. When the child expresses poor behaviour on the court, cheats and swears and is rude to others, never seems to smile or enjoy the contest anymore and prefers practice sessions to competition. When the child enters older age group tournaments not always for the experience but to avoid the risk of losing to a younger or lesser'player in their own age group. When the child is embarrassed or ashamed to speak to the parents. And when the child finally, drops out.

And what of the possible effect on some parents? How many parents become embarrassed at the

way their children behave on the court particularly when their child is losing? How many parents can cope with the defeat of their child particularly when expected to win? How many parents make excuses of the ifs'and buts'type? How many parents feel displeased with their children and sulk or take it out on their children when they lose? Far too many in my experience. One might well ask why this is so. Perhaps a possible answer may be found in the quotation from Rudyard Kipling's poem "IF" placed over the entrance to the centre court at Wimbledon. "If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same" . And therein lies the clue to the cause of most of the serious problems in children's sport. The mistaken belief that winning is the only thing that matters.

Players first, winners second

Let me say quite categorically that children's development as social persons and badminton players should come before the pursuit of winning. "Players first, winners second.". If winning is pursued as the first priority then such pursuit may cause children's development as persons and players to be retarded and create many of the outcomes listed above.

If your child has the talent, the desire and the will to become a champion you want to make sure that he/she does so whilst developing fully as a person at the same time. That means winning must be kept in perspective.

The future health and happiness of children is surely the main goal with badminton just one means that may help to achieve it. It is possible to pursue and achieve success in sport whilst still developing fully as a well-rounded, balanced person. The main task is to get the balance right between personal development and the pursuit of success as far as the growing child is concerned.

In the next article I will discuss how this might be achieved.

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Article 2. **Getting the Balance Right**

In the previous article I concluded that we must get the balance right between personal development and the pursuit of success as far as the growing child is concerned. First let me explain what I mean by personal development and the pursuit of success so that you understand just what I am trying to balance.

Personal development includes such areas as physical, mental, emotional and social development. We want to ensure that children are generally fit and healthy while they grow up. In this respect I think we might all agree that the right amount of exercise, diet and rest are important factors. Mentally they need to be learning about the world they live in and how to operate in it both through informal and formal education, and experience of daily life. During these years they are acquiring knowledge of the world, and beliefs and values about what is important in life. This is when they experience in the school of life that what they want often conflicts with what adults believe they ought to have. During this period emotions run strong particularly when, as often is the case with teenagers, they are trying to assert their viewpoints and make their own decisions. They want to be treated like adults while still learning to become adults. Freedom to express their views and to choose what they do and how they do it are important features in their lives.

All this takes place within the context of the various forms of social life. Social interaction in the teenage culture, the home, the school and the badminton scene all come under this umbrella. Imagine belonging to a number of different clubs, each one with different rules about what one ought to believe and value in life. And each one with different rules on how life ought to be lived. How does one decide?

It is a difficult period and for many young people one in which they just learn as they go along. What is important is that they should experience these different parts of life and are guided in forming rational beliefs and encouraged to pursue those interests they have chosen which we, as adults, believe will be of value to them.

Quality

If experiences in worthwhile activities are considered important, it is also desirable that the experiences should be quality ones. It is through participation in activities and interaction with other people that young people begin to form their self image. We would all agree that we want

young people to form a positive self image; one in which they have confidence in their ability to cope with the different situations they encounter whether it is in their studies, their social life or their sport. It is important that they grow up to believe in themselves, and to become secure and confident individuals. In this respect the successes they achieve in life play an important part. So let me now examine the pursuit of success and work out where that fits into the life of young people.

Being a somebody.

What is success? I suppose the simple answer is that if one tries for a goal and then achieves it, that counts as success. Why do we value success? One simple answer could be that we value achievers. They are somebodies. Somebodies have status.

There are numerous activities in life in which we can set goals and become achievers. Consider the number of goals there are. Write a list from your own experience. How many sheets of paper might you fill? How many times have you been an achiever in some task you set yourself and felt good at your own success. Imagine a life without such an experience. Frightening! Yet, unfortunately, there are many occasions for some people when they know they have been achievers and don't feel good. They even feel like failures.

How could this be? Quite easily if you think about it. We feel good if we know that others, particularly those people who matter to us and whom we respect, recognise or would have recognised and praised our small achievements, our minor successes. But more than that we feel good when those others recognise and are prepared to **praise our efforts** even when, sometimes, we may fail to succeed in our task. But, if our minor successes continually go unrecognised and unpraised we may even wonder why we should bother to attempt anything. And, Even worse, just imagine what it must be like not only to go unnoticed but for someone to criticise us for failing - for someone to imply that we are failures regardless of how hard we tried.

What a confidence-booster! I reckon that most of us will have met these ego destroyers at some time. How tough must the survivors be? Or how much self doubt or lack of self confidence must they have?

WHAT HAS ALL THIS GOT TO DO WITH YOUNG PLAYERS IN BADMINTON?

The connection is quite easy to see if you think of badminton being just like any other worthwhile activity. There are goals within badminton, tasks to be attempted and outcomes which can imply success or failure. There are personal performance goals which include: getting the strokes right, skilful footwork, intelligent tactics, trying hard throughout the

contest, being fair and sporting. Without these it would be impossible for any player to defeat others of comparable standard. That is why players must work on these aspects in practice and training in order to become competent and then highly skilled badminton players. They appear as tasks that the player should try to get right which is not always easy to do in a game. Getting personal performance goals right in competition is a big achievement, e.g. to change grip quickly from forehand to backhand as necessary, to hit a backhand clear to the rearcourt while under pressure from the opponent. These are personal successes which should give personal satisfaction regardless whether the player wins or loses the game. When players get something right they are entitled to have that personal success recognised and praised. Not only does that make them feel good, thereby strengthening their egos and helping to build self confidence and self esteem, but it also encourages them to keep up the work they must do if they are to become competent in their craft.

There are also competition goals. The outcome of skill and effort being victory or defeat in a contest. With victory usually comes the feeling of personal success; with defeat can come the feeling of personal disappointment. However it should be recognised that TO BE DEFEATED IN A CONTEST IS NOT TO FAIL AS A PERSON!

In badminton there are these three goals. There are many different **performance** goals which young players can try to achieve, all of which contribute towards realising the **competition** goal of winning. And there is the **effort** goal, to try ones best. There are therefore many aspects of a young player's game which can and should be recognised and praised. ALL YOUNG PLAYERS CAN BE ACHIEVERS!

The 'failure' approach

It would be quite easy to ensure that all young players were achievers by recognising the distinction between 'effort' (trying one's best), performance goals and competition goals. Unfortunately too many adults only consider the competition goals; too frequently they are only concerned with winning. For such parents any sort of failure is disapproved of. Even making mistakes is seen as a failure to get things right, and disapproved of because it may cause defeat, the greatest failure. From this viewpoint little account, if any, is taken of the amount of effort or the good aspects of performance that might have gone into trying to win.

Parents and coaches who take this approach 'fail' to get the balance right as they possess a limited view of what counts as success in the game and a lack of knowledge and understanding about the feelings and emotions of their young players. Those who take this approach risk distorting and retarding the personal development of young players. The

outcome of placing the emphasis solely on winning, is that too many young players can become doomed to experience permanent failure.

It is not uncommon, therefore, for some players to come to see themselves as failures as a result of adopting the expectations and beliefs of their parents and/or some coaches and peer group (influenced also by parents and coaches) that the only measure of success is victory. Hence the negative behaviour in competition when they make errors or experience the fear of losing.

A different emphasis

By placing the emphasis on performance goals and on becoming a better player children would learn the skills necessary to win games whilst also developing their self confidence as they master the different aspects of the game. They would learn to analyse their performance more efficiently and begin to understand and appreciate what counts as good play. They would learn to appreciate the importance of regular practice to get things right; to give a hundred percent effort in a contest without any fear of losing and without any fear of failure that can come with defeat - because they would no longer see defeat as failure. They would learn that doing one's best (effort) and skilful performance are highly valued in our social life and are essential for both future success (as winners) and for the personal satisfaction that often comes from feeling a somebody. Children would begin to develop a positive self image.

Some years ago, when I was the Director of Coaching for the BA of England, we became aware of these issues in our weekend camps when coaching national development groups. Parents would phone to ask their sons and daughters how they were doing. What they wanted to know was who their children had beaten or lost to that day. This was a typical question when the players returned home. The asking of such questions indicated a lack of understanding of the point of development work in which the emphasis was on teaching young players how to master the craft of playing badminton. Our sessions were not used for competitive trials and games in which players might be scared to experiment with new ideas and practise new techniques in case they lost. So we discussed this with the players and advised them that the answers to questions about how they had got on should be, "I can now hit a more powerful smash", "I have improved my defence and my tactical play as the front player in doubles...etc". These were all performance goal answers. Any other sort of answer and the players would have missed the whole point of their weekend camp. They would have wasted their time and ours.

Young players would benefit more if adults and coaches would take into account the different sorts of goals and give praise where due for

different sorts of achievement. If they did so it would be one area in which we could claim to have got the balance right.

In the next article I will discuss how we might create the right environment for young players.

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By Jake Downey

Article 3. Create the right environment

In the previous two articles I have emphasised the importance of the development of the child as a person and player before winner and discussed the need to get the balance right between personal development and winning. To what extent this becomes possible depends on the environment we create within badminton for young people to grow up in.

In recent years the growth of junior sport in general and badminton in particular, especially since it became an Olympic Sport, has developed so rapidly that we are compelled to become aware of the harm that organised competitive badminton can have on children. All too often, in the pursuit of success, it would seem that insufficient thought is being given to what we are trying to achieve in organising badminton to the extent that we do for young players.

Initially we ought to teach children to play badminton as an enjoyable social game, one which they will find interesting and challenging; as such it is a game which they should continue to find worthwhile to play as adults. For the talented players it will provide a medium in which they can gradually express their talents at various higher levels of play, e.g. club, county, and country. In these respects badminton can make a contribution to a person's development and quality of lifestyle. Unfortunately it can also help to retard that development if the wrong environment is created. It is too easy to create an environment that can negate our efforts on children's behalf and present obstacles to the work that goes on in developing talented young players - those with the potential to become future champions.

The pressures on young players to succeed in modern sport are huge, to the extent that many children are unable to cope with them. How to reduce unnecessary pressures, if not to eliminate them entirely, is a problem that needs to be resolved. One possible solution is to create a learning environment in which young players can develop technical skill, tactical understanding; learn to think critically, acquire rational beliefs and values, grow up fit and healthy, experiment and play without the fear of losing – an environment in which the adventurous independent spirit can express itself. From such an environment will emerge future champions.

The Learning Environment

The Junior School Years (7-11)

Nowadays, although children are starting to play as young as six years of age I want to consider first only the years from seven to eleven. In physical education we often refer to these as the skill hungry years when children are keen to develop their skill in many activities. These years are crucial for laying the foundations for future successful performance in sport. Below are some suggestions on what should take place in a good learning environment.

Short Badminton: Children can the game more effectively on a shorter court, with a lower net and with shorter rackets. In this way the game can be adapted for children to experience the full range of strokes and movement, which they are unable to do on a full size court.

Learning by imitation: Children should be shown videos of top players in action or given the chance to watch a skilful local player demonstrate strokes so they can have a go and try to copy it. They learn quickly in this way if given the chance to do so.

Basic Racket Skills: They should be shown some basic technical skills, e.g. the forehand and backhand grips so necessary for the later development of good stroke production; the throwing action for the smash, clear and dropshot; some midcourt strokes and forecourt strokes with the 'kill' added as they try for the winner.

The feel of the movement: This is essential for skilful play whether in performing strokes or travelling in the court. Children should be made aware of how to hit the shuttle hard and soft, how to run quickly and lightly, how to jump upwards, sideways, forwards and backwards, and land lightly; how to hit the shuttle whilst in flight during a jump. They need lots of ideas to try out for themselves.

Practice: 'Practice makes perfect what one practises'. It is not necessary to give children set practice routines. At this age they need actions to practise but to do so in their own way and at their own rate. It is more important that they understand the point of a practice, e.g. the importance of the high clear as a building shot, i.e. to move the opponent into the rearcourt and make time to get back into position to cover the opponent's replies. And when to attempt a winning shot if the chance arises. It is also important that they experience co-operative practices, in which they help each other to improve, as well as competitive practices in which they test each other.

Playing games: they should play lots of games in which they can try out what they have been learning in their tactical play. When to use building shots and attempted winning shots to try to beat the other player(s). Games,

however, need not be solely competitive with the aim being to beat another player. They can also be co-operative as when they see how many hits they can achieve in a rally, or how many times out of ten hits they can dropshot the shuttle in the forecourt. The emphasis here being on trying to beat one's own previous performance.

Encouragement: Children at this age are keen to play and usually try their best. They should be given lots of praise for their efforts and not just for the result. They should be encouraged in having a real go and in being adventurous.

Sportsmanship: This should be emphasised throughout, e.g. being fair and truthful about line decisions; showing respect and consideration for other players.

Play: It should be remembered that children are at PLAY and we should try to keep it that way. They play for their enjoyment, not ours, and in their PLAY the result is not of primary importance to them – unless adults get involved and make it important.

Other Sports: Children should also be encouraged to take part in many different activities, e.g. tennis, swimming, athletics, skateboarding, rollerblading, cycling, ice-skating, football, netball, cricket, softball, rounders, gymnastics, table tennis and so on. All these sports help to develop a range of movement skills and general fitness as well as keeping badminton in perspective as just one good sport amongst many others.

Winning: Children should be deterred from placing too much emphasis on winning or losing which becomes possible only if adults show by their example that they also do not place too much importance on the result. The emphasis always should be on trying one's best and a contest seen as a measure of progress in learning to become a better player.

Benefits: The benefits of such an environment will be seen in the performance of the children. A healthy interest in and enthusiasm for sport in general and a self-confidence and self esteem which comes from their increasing competence in the different sports that they play. This is what is in the interests of young people and this is what we should promote for the future. From such an environment will emerge the future champions.

by

Jake Downey

Article 4 Don't over-specialise

In this article I want to consider the development of young players during the Secondary school years (11- 16).

These are important years as they are such significant physical and mental changes taking place. Children experience puberty, adolescence and the growth spurt, in which bones and muscles develop at different rates as, as they grow into young adults. During this 11-16 age period children are also developing their knowledge and understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. For the keen young athlete sport can play an important role in his/her self development. It is important therefore that parents and coaches are aware of the various influences that help to shape their lives during this period. Badminton cannot be learned in isolation – it is very much a part of a total social context.

The future champion

To some extent this is the period when many are looking for the future champion – that rare player with the ability and potential to attain the highest standards. Indeed it may be possible to identify young players with talent and potential but it is certainly not possible to identify the future champion. There are too many 'ifs and buts' attached to such a prediction when making judgements about the potential of young players.

For this reason I believe it is futile to attempt to predict the future of children at an early age. What we should do is to create an environment in which young players can progress happily developing their talents at their own rate until such time as they decide that "Badminton is for me!" and then commit themselves fully to achieving excellence in the game.

General skills, fitness and health

The type of environment needed is similar to the one described for junior school children. Young players between 11-16 years need to develop their general ball and movement skills to a greater extent, their tactical awareness, their general fitness and health, their

sporting and competitive attitudes and, of most importance, work hard in practice to develop their badminton skills. This is best achieved if allowed to develop naturally through participation in a full physical education or sports programme in school and/or in extra-curricular activities. Too specialise mainly on badminton can hinder such a development.

In my experience many of the top players I have met have been skilful in a range of sports which would indicate that time must have been spent on those sports and not just badminton. Unfortunately, perhaps because of poor physical education programmes in the schools or because of too much emphasis on badminton, too many young players have limited experience in other sports and are sadly lacking in their range of movement skills and tactical awareness.

Other sports

Team games such as football, rugby, basketball, netball, volleyball and hockey are not only excellent for developing general fitness and tactical awareness but also for developing a range of movement skills so essential for badminton, e.g. starting and stopping, dodging and swerving, jumping and landing. Rounders, softball, baseball and cricket help to develop hand and eye co-ordination and throwing and catching skills. Tennis, squash and table tennis help to develop general racket skills and tactical understanding.

Athletics contributes to endurance, strength and speed, whilst such sports as ice and roller skating are ideal for developing body control, posture and balance as well as a feel for the flow of movement. Gymnastics and swimming are excellent for all-round fitness, body awareness, flexibility, strength and power. These and other sports: wind surfing, surfing, skateboarding, cycling, skiing and climbing all contribute to the promotion of skill, general health and fitness to to keeping badminton in perspective in a sporting lifestyle.

Specialisation

I believe that narrow specialisation need not take place until a player has reached the age of 16 or thereabouts. A good time to begin is when GCSE's or their equivalent are completed and when young players are able to leave school.

No doubt many readers will immediately feel concern and denounce this as too late to specialise. Their concern would be unnecessary. A well organised badminton programme with the emphasis on achievement in the development of skill through meaningful

practices and lots of games play and competition would soon raise the players' standards; and as long as the players have experienced a rich range of other sports and developed a healthy attitude to badminton they should possess all the ingredients necessary to achieve future success – if they want to. There is ample evidence of this among top racket players:

Bjorn Borg – talented at table tennis and ice hockey as well as his tennis.

Boris Becker – football as well as tennis.

Judy Hashman – first class tennis player as well as 10 times All England badminton champion.

Anne Jones – in three world championship table tennis finals as well as being Wimbledon tennis single champion.

Nora Perry – County tennis player and World badminton World doubles and mixed doubles winner.

Jane Webster – County tennis and World badminton Doubles champion.

Martin Dew – county cricket, single figure golfer and world class badminton.

Morton Frost – four times All England champion - played a lot of football and athletics before he decided to concentrate on badminton.

All these players specialised at a later age after first playing lots of sports. I am sure that the same can be said of many other badminton champions.

Unfortunately to take part in a variety of sports takes time. You might ask how to make such time to fit other sports in when badminton is so time consuming. One answer is to cut down on badminton commitments and make more effective use of the time available. If young players fully appreciated the importance of regular practice and made time to practise properly then it might be more in their interests to compete in less tournaments during the season and to attend less squad sessions. This however may often be more difficult than it seems. There is a problem.

Problems for talented young players

I often think that the worst thing for any young player is to show their talents at too early an age. Overnight the player can become the future champion. He or she is expected to play for the school, the county juniors, the regions, the national schools squad, the national governing bodies squads and so on. They are expected to attend practices, team matches and tournaments. Eventually the player does not have a life of his own – all other sports and activities have to be sacrificed for badminton. Even in the off season sessions are arranged to get ready for the season and precious time is taken up from doing other sports. Promising players end up with several coaches and officials each one running a different squad all competing to ensure that the young player attends their sessions and plays for their team. Non attendance at a squad session or a tournament can result in being dropped from team or being denied help. Very little of this is in the interests of the player and certainly does not help in their development as players. But that is a problem for parents to sort out and prevent when it gets out of hand. If they apply the yardstick of what is in the interests of their children as persons first and players second – they will make the right decisions.

Some general recommendations

1. Between 11-16 years of age the emphasis should be on the development of skill through regular practice and play.
2. General skill and fitness should be developed through participation in a variety of sports and play.
3. Badminton should be seen as part of a healthy life style in which study, other sports and social life all have an important part to play.
4. Parents and coaches should encourage young people to participate in a variety of other sports and maintain a balanced social life.
5. Players should be given the choice of not having to attend squads without it jeopardising their selection for teams.

6. Parents and coaches should carefully monitor the amount of attendance at squad sessions to ensure that young players are not neglecting other important activities.
7. Parents, coaches and officials should allow for a slower rate of improvement during important school examination years.
8. Parents, coaches and officials should make allowance for growth changes in children and be sensitive to the concerns of children who may be late developers – all this especially in the area of performance in competition.
9. Parents, coaches and officials should keep winning and losing in perspective and not attach too much importance to them during the players' formative years. They should encourage players to do the same. It may be difficult to keep winning and losing in perspective in a competitive game especially when 'trying to win' is what the game is all about. But if competition is seen as a learning experience and a means of testing one's progress as a player, then winning and losing can be kept in perspective. As Bertrand Russell once wrote about the significance of sport, that "the loser always lives to fight another day".

This period between 11 and 16 years should be about getting better at the art of playing badminton.

By

Jake Downey

Article 5 – The ‘Play’ Days are over (the 16-18 year olds)

In the previous article I discussed the development of young players from 11-16 years of age. I suggested that they ought to concentrate mainly on skill during these years as well as participate in a variety of other sports so as to develop a larger range of movement skills. I stressed that there was no need for narrow specialisation and that parents and coaches need not worry that doing other activities might hinder future success.

Round about 16 years of age there should be more need and interest in specialising and more opportunity for doing so. It would be quite usual for young athletes to narrow their focus to one or two sports only at this time.

Awareness

During this period coaches, parents and officials should be aware of a number of factors which can affect young players' development. These are: the effects of the growth spurt on fitness and co-ordination; self consciousness, lack of self esteem, a poor self image, leaving school, getting a job, unemployment, lack of money: so unable to afford practice courts, restrings, shuttles and entry money for tournaments. There are also 'A' levels and higher education and with these the conflict of choice – to try to make it in badminton or work towards a career. There are some players who give up everything for their badminton and try to earn enough to pay their way or obtain funding from encouraging and ambitious parents. Amongst these are young players who are misled into over-estimating their potential with the inevitable lack of success and sense of failure.

Doubts

I think that many parents must also have doubts at this stage – having put perhaps five years or more of their time and money into their children – some may wonder whether it is worth continuing. Is there a future in badminton for their child and, if so, is that future in the best interests of their child or ought not he/she start looking seriously towards the future and get down to working towards a career of some sort?

I wonder also how many young players who do have the ability to reach the highest levels find that they cannot afford the costs of doing so. At the present time the more talented the player the more the player is expected to attend squad sessions, team practices, team matches and enter tournaments. How many of these players fail to attain their potential because of lack of money. In demanding so much are we perhaps risking losing our future champions through no fault of their own.

At this point you might wonder what all this has got to do with the development of players between 16-18 years of age. It is important because if we want to help the young person to develop as a player then we need to know about the player as a person and the background to that person.

Now is the time when the first signs of the young adult emerge – personality, character, values, enthusiasm, commitment, ambition and potential talent. Along with their experience and results these are all features which enable us to judge whether or not such young players are worth investing in. If they are then we should invest in them with all the resources we have available to provide the opportunity for the gifted players to develop their talents to the full.

Commitment

In return we should demand and expect a commitment to the work necessary to attain the highest standards possible. There will obviously be some players who will continue to play and make a partial commitment to becoming good players because they enjoy the social side of the junior tournament circuit; but they know they will never commit themselves fully to reaching the top. Either they believe that will not be good enough or they will have other ambitions. But for others (including those who go into higher education) who do aspire to the top and believe they can make it, this period is the end of the beginning.

To some extent the play days are over. Time, money and effort must now be spent on mastery of the art of playing badminton. The quest should be in pursuit of excellence. The work is hard, time consuming and requires concentration and thought, self discipline and sacrifice, as is the case when trying to master a craft. There is much to learn and get right.

The more talented one is the less is the amount to learn.

The more passionate one is about the game the less there is the sacrifice.

*The more determined one is the less the struggle to succeed.
The more one enjoys the challenge the less it seems like work.
The more disciplined one is the more is one likely to succeed.*

It is through the work involved that players soon discover whether or not they are really committed to the game and to reaching the top. The moment of truth comes when they discover that the demands of the game are more than they are prepared to accept.

Self Learning

The mastery of one's craft is a gradual process and the good coach will plan sessions and competitions carefully so leading the player forwards stage by stage. The coach will be there to guide, lead, advise and inform. But in the end all learning is self learning and it is the player who ultimately must be responsible for his/her own progress and achievements.

At this age most experienced and talented players should be skilful in performing the strokes, moving and applying tactics. Now what is required is practice and more practice in order to play with that degree of control and accuracy needed for top class play. No more the 'hit and hope' shots but instead, to be certain that the shuttle will go exactly as directed from whatever part of the court it is hit from.

It is now that players should acquire the habit of learning from the experience of competition. They should be able to analyse their own play and that of their opponents and then decide what things need more practice or what must be learned to defeat certain opponents next time. Unfortunately too many young players are poor analysts and fail to learn from competitive play. Perhaps it is that they don't have to think for themselves with coaches and parents there to serve as mental crutches. Too often they fail to recognise what was good about the play of their opponents and how to combat it. Even a victory can provide insights into the state of one's own play and an indication of what needs working on.

Speed

With the improvement in racket and movement skill can come the development of speed and power. Practices for speed hitting (fast racket work) are essential, particularly in the midcourt and forecourt. Linked with this is quick, light footwork - the ability to 'dance' lightly on the balls of the feet. Fast hands and feet are the hallmarks of the good player. In addition there is the need for explosive power - the ability to accelerate quickly from a static

position, to change direction quickly or thrust upwards into a jump. Speed, strength and quality of movement develop with practice and being made aware of how one does what one does.

The body

Now also is the time to learn about one's body and how it works: what and how to feed it, make it fitter and look after it so as to prevent or recover from injury. For any aspiring player the body is as important a tool as the racket. A healthy body fit for badminton can mean the difference between success and failure in top class badminton.

Attitudes

Finally, and of most importance, are the values and attitudes a player adopts. For just how important is success if at the end of the day players are lacking in fairness, tolerance, honesty and respect and consideration for others. Badminton is a sport and Sport is of value in our culture because it exemplifies such ideals.

Sport should provide an environment which allows individuals to express their talents to the full which is why so many players undoubtedly value it. But it also provides an environment in which individual freedoms should be restricted by social obligations and it is in this respect that such ideals as fairness, honesty and respect for others determine just how players behave in sport. In the heat of competition in the effort to win it is sometimes difficult to abide by such ideals and to do so is another test of character that Sport provides. Without such ideals Sport loses its point; with such ideals young players gain the opportunity to fulfil themselves as persons – as sports men and women.

It is not easy to develop these qualities in young players for they apply to social life in general but we are lucky that sports provide a rich environment in which to do so. We can help young players to be more responsible by giving them responsibility to participate fully in their activity, e.g. to experience umpiring others' games in tournaments or to share in the running of a club or a tournament; by assisting in the coaching of younger players.

We should expect young players to conform to reasonable standards of behaviour both on and off the court. We should ensure that all players get equal consideration, the stars as well as the others. It is important that young players learn that though success can bring privileges that in itself does not imply that privileged players should ignore their responsibilities to the game and to other people in it. Above all we, as adults, also have much responsibility

and should not forget that we can teach most by example. If we can get all these features of the players' development right the we could be well on the road to seeing not only future world champions but also well balanced responsible athletes.

By

Jake Downey

Article 6 – Preparing to become a future champion

Introduction

In the previous articles I have focused on the development of the junior player and argued that winning is not the only important goal in these developing years. What is important is that we should try to get the balance right between personal development and the pursuit of success and to do that we should provide the right sort of environment for children to grow up in; an environment in which badminton is a part of Sport and Sport is a part of a much greater social environment in which other sports and activities, school and social life must contribute to children's development. It is in such an environment that the future champions will learn and develop the mastery of their craft – badminton.

Now let us consider what else is required to reach the top.

Planning

First, a plan is required – a long term plan. Young talented players need one if they are going to stay in the game long enough to reach the top. Most All England and World champions, with few exceptions, are at their peak and win these titles between the ages of 22 and 26. Now work backwards. Nowadays many players start playing as young as eight years of age. Many are already competing in tournaments at 10 and 11 years of age. Just think how many 16 year olds you know who have been on the junior tournament circuit for 5 to 6 years with another 6 to 10 years to go before they reach their full potential. Consider the amount of coaching, practice, squad sessions, tournaments and team events that take place. Consider all the pressure on them to maintain their standards, to live up to the expectations of others and to achieve success. A total period of 12-14 years of serious participation in the game providing that they aren't burnt out, injured, or drop out before then. So players need a long term plan to prevent this happening. One of the main aims of such a plan will be how to maintain the young player's interest and enthusiasm in badminton until he is capable of challenging for major international titles in 12 –14 years time.

To achieve this the planner must consider all the stages in the young player's development up to that age, decide what goals to

set within each stage and then calculate *the minimum amount of work and competition required to attain those goals*.

To some extent I have already suggested the basis of a long term plan. I have divided junior development into three main phases: 8-11, 11-16, 16-18 years. In each phase I have suggested some general goals, e.g. skill development, healthy exercise in a variety of sports for general fitness, interest and enjoyment, social development and keeping winning and losing in perspective.

A long term plan must also include more specific badminton related goals. There are two main types of goal here: performance goals and competition (outcome) goals. It is important to understand the connection between these two when aiming to become a future champion.

Goal Setting

Players need to set realistic performance and competition goals if they want to make positive progress to becoming better and, subsequently, more successful players.

Performance goals: are those set with regard to players' technical and tactical skill, fitness and attitude. Players may, for example, decide to improve their technical skill, e.g. backhand defence; their tactical skill, e.g. to create space or force a lift from the forecourt; or their attitude, e.g. determination and perseverance. They will work hard in practice to improve these parts of their game and then test them out in competition. If there is a 25% improvement, e.g. more consistency (less errors), greater accuracy, more openings made or rallies won through good tactical play the players will have achieved something regardless of whether they have won or lost. They will have become better players.

Competition(outcome) goals: are rather more difficult to achieve as these are dependent on playing against others. Of course, if players work hard in training and practice to attain their performance goals, then they will be more likely to achieve their competition goals.

In competition the main goal is to beat other players although this does depend on who they are. Some players will be of a:

(a) lower standard, (b) similar standard, (c) higher standard.

Obviously the higher the standard of the opponents the less control players will have over the outcome – winning.

There are two types of competition goals:

1. **Tournament goals:** In a tournament players will meet other players of different standards. Consequently tournament goals will vary according to the operational standard of different opponents. If a player is playing in a tournament against players of a similar or lower standard a realistic goal might be to win the tournament. If the players are of a higher standard the goal might be to see how far one can go in the tournament, to score a certain number of points or to go to three games with a better opponent.

2. **Team Goals:** Success in tournaments will give others some idea of the operational standard of players in competition. This will undoubtedly increase the chances of being picked for a team, if playing for a team is the goal. Unfortunately players have little control over selection as being selected is not always dependent on the results but on the opinions, whims and the aims of the selectors.

Setting realistic goals:

To become a better player it is important to set realistic performance and competition goals. Both types of goal must be set. A player can only make progress into higher levels of play by continually working to achieve performance goals. Players who try to win in competition against players of a higher operational standard without doing the work necessary to improve their performance standards will be doomed to failure and frustration. They would be setting unrealistic and unattainable goals. They could also find, if they don't do the work, that they get left behind by players of a similar standard.

My advice to players and their coaches, is to think carefully and make a realistic evaluation of the player's performance standards and the operational level of play. This can be done as follows.

1. Evaluate performance:

What the player can and cannot do: technical and tactical skill, fitness and attitude – and the standard at which these are done, e.g. fluency of stroke production, accuracy, consistency; the right shot at the right time; speed of movement and so on.

2. Practise and train to raise the standards of performance:

As well as practising by repeating practice routines designed to improve skill and fitness, it is also good to practise new skills and ideas while playing 'friendly' competitive games in which the result does not (or should not) matter. In such games the emphasis must be on using the new skills and ideas even at the expense of losing.

Note: This is why formal squad sessions can be so pointless. Players practise their skills together and then end up playing games and completely ignore what they have been practising as they try to win. They do so because they believe, often rightly so, that the team will be picked from the winners in the squad 'practice' games. Consequently too many players fail to make the progress they are capable of.

3. Enter competitions to test out progress

(a) Enter competitions with players of a similar and lower standard so that new ideas can be tried out against the lower standard opponents under less pressure and in more controllable situations. Enter such competitions, also, with the positive intention to beat each opponent and win the tournament.

Note: If the player is one who worries about what others will think about a loss to a weaker player then new skills etc could be purposefully tried out for the first game only. If that is won continue with the new skill for subsequent games. If lost, revert to a normal play and win.

(b) Enter competitions with players of a similar and higher standard and set goals against particular 'better' opponents, e.g. to win at least one game, to score ten points in each game.

4. Evaluate performance in competition

This should be done regardless of winning or losing. What was learned about the progress from this competition? Was anything lacking? What needs to be worked on in practice and training?

5. Evaluate the opponent's performance

What did the opponent do to you? What were the strengths and weaknesses? How should the opponent be played next time?

6. Return to the practice court

Work on the different aspects of performance that were found to be lacking in some ways in the competition. I remember reading a quote some years ago by the most successful female tennis player, Martina Navratilova. *"My matches are won on the practice court and in the gymnasium."*

7. Return to competition

Test out progress again and repeat items 4,5, and 6.

Performance and Competition

As the game is a contest its sole logical point is that a player should try to win. In order to win a player must play better than the opponent. Competition against others is essential in the progress towards being a better player. But that progress only occurs if, in competition, players give 100% effort to try to win. If not it will not be possible to make an accurate assessment of their progress and whether they are doing the right sort of work in preparation, i.e. whether or not they are achieving their performance goals

Conclusion

This procedure should take place for anyone who wants to become a better player regardless of the level at which one plays. It may not be followed as formally as I have explained here but nevertheless it must occur. Even when playing in a club, young players should evaluate their performance after each game at the club. In fact games at the club are an ideal setting to try out various ideas and skills. For example a player may be trying to develop a sliced smash and so hits only sliced smashes in each game. If players work conscientiously at one thing they should improve and become better players.

For the keen tournament players, determined to reach as high a level as possible, such a procedure is essential. Young players will only make their dreams through the work they do in practice and training in their progress towards become better players

Another quote, by another tennis player, Pat Cash.

"I'm a realist. I don't dream dreams. My approach has never been to let my dreams intrude. Sure as a kid, one day I suppose that I thought I might play at Wimbledon that it might be good to be there one day, I guess. But now, here, the only approach can be to

play better, and that way you improve so much you just might happen to reach the last stages.” He went on to win Wimbledon

This is an approach all young players should develop. It is the only approach which will enable them to become better players and good enough to become future champions.