

Athleticism

Rediscovering the Joy of Movement

Vern Gambetta
Gambetta Sports Training Systems, Sarasota, FL

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Where have all the athletes gone? At first that may seem like a very naïve statement, but lets examine it further. Look beyond the numbers. We have better performances that we have ever had, but there are more injuries and fewer athletes able to sustain high performance levels for an extended career. How have we gotten to this state? What is missing? It is athleticism. We know it when we see it! We talk about it, but do we know how to develop it? What is it? Lets begin by defining the term. Given its widespread use in the world of sports performance I was surprised that I was unable to find an acceptable definition so I came up with the following definition of athleticism. Athleticism is the ability to execute athletic movements at optimum speed with precision, style and grace. It is certainly not a very complicated definition. It is easy to see when someone has it.

My observation is that, we have increased specialization and sacrificed overall athleticism. This is the downside of the emphasis on specificity in training as well as the emphasis on early specialization. Sometimes we are lead to believe it is an either-or proposition. Produce a better athlete or produce a better shot putter or high jumper with refined specific skills. Ultimately the goal is to produce the best possible athlete who does a particular event. In this case not only will performance be enhanced, but injuries will be reduced.

Some of the downside is the apparent conflict in terms of time and effort. With the same amount of training time available is it possible to train to improve athleticism without sacrificing specific skill training. First of all we need to eliminate the distinction, the two are not mutually exclusive. They are co-dependent and intertwined, one enhances the other. There is time within the context of the existing structure to fit in athleticism components. It just needs to be made a priority.

There is a saying that “You don’t need to see different things, but rather to see things differently.” Sometimes we overlook the obvious. In the incessant search to improve sport performance we have gotten away from the essence of it all.

The foundation is athleticism. The foundations for athleticism are basic coordinative abilities. According to Drabik (Children & Sports Training) the coordinative abilities are:

Balance – Maintenance of the center gravity over the base of support, it is both a static and a dynamic quality

Kinesthetic Differentiation – Ability to feel tension in movement to achieve the desired movement

Spatial Orientation – The control of the body in space

Reaction to Signals – The ability to respond quickly auditory, visual and kinesthetic cues

Sense of Rhythm – The ability to match movement to time

Synchronization of movements in time – Unrelated limb movements done in a synchronized manner

Movement Adequacy – Ability to choose movements appropriate to the task

The coordinative abilities never work in isolation, they are all closely related. They are the underlying foundation for and the prerequisite for technical skills. Once the coordinative abilities are developed better athleticism is sure to follow. It is imperative to look for every opportunity to incorporate elements of athleticism in all aspect of training. Specific sport skills are a combination of patterns of complex motor programs. They are patterns that can be reproduced when we tap into the wisdom of the body. Though experiencing all different patterns of movement we learn to let things happen. We learn to let the motor program run. We cue an action that will result in a “chain reaction” of efficient movement. We need to emphasize a free play approach that results in fluidity and improvisational skills.

Should we try to teach every movement and then coach it? Or should we allow the athlete the joy of discovery through exploration. There seems to be a worry about them getting it wrong! My answer to that is: What is wrong? There must be a spontaneity and anticipation, not a robotic programmed approach. It has been my experience working with athletes at all levels in a wide variety of sports that athletes will find their own best way of doing something if they are put in a position where they have to adapt. They are very adaptable. We need to encourage an extemporaneous approach much like a great jazz musician improvises.

What has caused this decline in athleticism? There are several factors:

Early specialization in one event is a serious problem that has contributed to the decline in athleticism. The broader range of motor skill developed through free play and exposure to many varied motor programs is a big limiting factor. The choice is to produce better athletes or produce highly specialized athletes with a skill ranges very specific to their sport. Ultimately the goal is to produce the best athletes who participate in various sports.

One sided training with an emphasis on one or two components of performance rather than a blend. The components of performance and therefore training are: speed, strength, stamina, suppleness, skill and recovery. There is a synergistic relationship between all components therefore all components must be trained during all phases of the year in varying combinations

Monkey See – Monkey Do Syndrome. Just because an athlete has been successful with a particular training method does not mean that the method is the best or should be copied. It is my experience that many athletes are successful in spite of, not because of their training. Make sure that what you are doing is based on sound training principles and a good progression.

“Nobody gets hurt, but nobody gets better.” Training that is so conservative or narrow that the athlete is never challenged will not produce results. The justification for many machine oriented strength training programs is that they are “safe.” In fact, because they fail to challenge the athleticism of the athlete they might actually predispose the athlete to injury.

It is always easy and convenient to look to the “Good old days” as being better. The simple fact is that before the advent of specialization athletes at the high school level and even at the college level participated in several sports. It was not unusual to see a high school athlete play football, basketball and track. This was not so bad. The athlete may not have been as good early, but once they did chose to specialize they had a broader base of motor skills to draw upon to enhance their specific sport skill. Sometimes it is good to look back to gain perspective to move ahead. We cannot go backward, but we must look for ways to enhance athleticism that has been lost due to early specialization.

Training must have a purpose that will transfer the training to the event. With a base of athleticism specific training will be even more purposeful. The basis of training athleticism is rooted in running, jumping and throwing which encompass the whole spectrum of human movement. The body is a link system; sometimes this link system is referred to as the kinetic chain. Athleticism training is all about linkage – it is all about how all the parts of the chain working together in harmony to produce smooth efficient patterns of movement. The brain does not recognize individual muscles. It recognizes patterns of movement, which consist of the individual muscles working in harmony to produce movement.

The fact that we live, work and play in a gravitationally enriched environment cannot be denied. Over reliance on machines will give us a false sense of security because they negate some of the effects of gravity. Gravity and its effect

must be a prime consideration when designing and implementing a functional training program or we are not preparing the body for the forces that it must overcome. We cannot ignore gravity, it is essential for movement. It helps us to load the system. Therefore we must learn to overcome its effects, cheat and even defeat it occasionally.

Understanding and training athleticism is a challenging process. It demands creativity and imagination. It is often contrary to conventional wisdom as represented in current mainstream sport science research that emphasizes specificity and measurable outcomes. Do not be limited by conventional wisdom use it as a starting point and move forward while thinking and acting outside the box. You and your athletes will enjoy the day to day challenges of training with the results a higher injury free performance level.