



Differentiation and individualization - a must in the training of talented sportsmen

by Marta Bon / EHF Lecturer

ABSTRACT

The path to the elite sports result in handball is long and difficult; it is open only to individuals that have above average motor and physical abilities, suitable and unvarying personal characteristics, moral qualities and other mental aptitudes. External factors, such as organisational and expertise level of the club and coach, also influence the development and success. The beginning and an important part of this path is represented with the training of children and youth and a question: Will the sport of young people utilise its enormous educational potential and turn talents into stars, who will keep winning and at the same time stay happy? It is possible, yet the incorrect approach can result in the loss of handball talents or become a source of negative experiences, stress and pressure. Largely, this depends on a discipline, policy of the sports clubs, associations and society in general; yet mostly it depends on a coach who has daily contact with players in the training process. Handball training is carried out in groups that are usually very heterogeneous and require specific type of work. Differentiation and individualisation are coaching methods for working with a diverse group of handball players. A coach can achieve this by precise organisation of training, which allows practising various exercises within a specific individual task. It is also recommended that several coaches or specialist coaches participate in the work with the youngest categories.

Introduction

The article describes the differentiation and individualisation of children at the time of general, educational and sports development. Slovenian society still considers »team building« as procedures for achieving equality and uniformity in the team. In extreme cases this leads to a "single society", where everyone has to think, work and speak as one. On the other side, practice demands from a coach to increasingly develop creativity, elite success and talents, which require different way of working. Talented are those individuals with motor abilities and morphological characteristic developed to the point that allows them to become, with suitable development and external factors, elite handball players. Beside talents there are also exceptional individuals (stars). They have above average abilities in one or more areas of morphological or motor status as well as personal characteristics that demonstrate the potential for development into a star



sportsman in a selected sport. Personal characteristics of a star sportsman are as a rule very specific. They are manifested outwardly as an individual being difficult to lead, different and unpredictable. If the coach does not recognise this potential it is very likely that a sportsman will be perceived as disturbing and unsuitable for the team or even sport. It is possible that the coach will try to mould the sportsman to his liking. In reality, such talented individuals need a special type of leadership with differentiation and individualisation being key components of such leadership. Children encounter this in the primary school education.

In principle it can be differentiated:

TALENT; individuals have (slightly) more than average developed all the basic abilities and characteristics (motor, morphology) and less developed dimensions of psychosocial status

TALENT; individuals have highly above average developed one (or few) ability and the other abilities average.

TALENT; individual have highly above average developed one ability and the other abilities average. If the player has manifested leadership personal characteristics, it is very likely for him to become a star of a specific sport.

All the listed talented players have a potential to become elite players, however, the important external factors have to be fulfilled (good coach, encouraging environment in a club, good team players, general development of a sport).

Sports Talent provides checklists and tests to more easily and objectively evaluate whether a young athlete possesses average or exceptional athletic talent. The systematic approach to measurement provides data on the potential of young talent that can then be compared to national averages. This ground breaking, easy-to-follow guide will provide much needed insight on how to develop talented athletes to their fullest potential, while providing ways to support them in a positive and productive manner.

INTRODUCTION: DIFFERENTIATION OF CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

Training in sport is similar to primary school education as they both work with children. Physical education in primary schools is the only subject that in higher forms differentiates the educational process of children according to gender in the majority of Slovenian schools. This is so-called gender educational differentiation. The purpose of any type of educational differentiation is for



teaching process to be more friendly and suitable to developmental level of children and their interests, previous knowledge, motor, cognitive, emotional and social characteristics. Educational differentiation is as a type of academic work that has been present in the organised education since its beginnings. According to Strmčnik (1995), it first appeared as a result of two principles: adaptation of the education to the developmental level of children and the gradual principle of the teaching process. First differentiation in general education (in the time of Komenski, 17th century) separated children according to gender, age, social status and knowledge. Those were times when everyone had his place according to his birth given social status. Later – in the time of capitalist production relationship – external differentiation set in, which separated children according to their abilities, nevertheless, strong influence of class distribution was also present.

The purpose of today's educational differentiation, which started with the movement for new school in the first half of the 20th century, representing mainly an organisational measure and most often separating the children according to their academic efficiency, is adaptation of the teaching process to pupils; guiding, advising and socialisation »that should unite the pupils through occasional differentiation« (Strmčnik, 1995, p. 82).

DIFFERENTIATION IN SPORT

When discussing one or the other type of training, it is always debatable at what point the use of such method is wise and when do its effects become unwelcome. Strmčnik (1995) stated that the right to educational differentiation depends on specific basic rules – reasons for differentiation and the time span of differentiation. It is sensible to separate the participants for short periods of time according to their abilities, interests and needs, in order to better facilitate their optimum development. At the same time many authors note that differentiation, which separates the participants permanently (for various educational reasons), is not only unfair, but also regressive.

It is fact that in groups with equal proportion of players, problems arise as a result of the level of their participation. Usually more able players control the group and accept less able players only as long as their participation is within certain limits.



When these limits are crossed, more able players quickly regain control. This results in motorically less able players being less active during practice, compared to more able players that also require more of teacher's attention (Doupona, 1995). Consequences of such practice are that less able players fall behind in the development of motor abilities, mainly in their technical-tactical knowledge.

The main reasons for differentiation according to the abilities lie in the differences in physiological characteristics – natural, biological (physical) differences.

How do coaches see differentiation and individualisation? Despite many similarities with schoolwork, training has its specifics. Apart from mini handball where it is suitable and desired for girls and boys to practice together, training of older age categories is carried out in groups of same gender and very different motor and morphological status, personal characteristics, motivation, values etc. There are also many other differences, yet coaches often do not consider them

Practice demonstrates following situation:

- No firm ideas about individualisation
- No knowledge on talent identification
- Insufficient knowledge about working with talents
- No initial explanation of group characteristics, except for age and length of training
- Programmes for boys and girls are practically identical
- Individual development of children is not emphasised
- Coaches do not mention the need for respecting differences and distinction

WORKING WITH TALENTS

Successful coaches have usually broad horizon, whereas that of the talented star is limited, as it suffices to »only« perform relatively small spectre of tasks in an excellent way (e.g. good shooter). The work of a coach and talented star cannot be seen from the same point of view, it has to be complementary and in the framework of total handball team. This can become a source of problems (Mayer, 2004).



A coach who builds his authority and respect on fear is automatically stopping a constructive thinking of players, let alone their creativity. Every ownership of the exclusivity of factors starts a dysfunctional conflict, as excessive authority of a coach endangers the status of talented player, in particular a future star. In contrast, star behaviour rocks the position of a coach and decreases the group cohesion. The group usually splits in two camps that fight for domination. Furthermore, one-sided consideration of the group also takes away coach's authority and stops the initiatives of special players. This becomes even more difficult to control, as special player stops trying, because he does not feel valued enough. A wise coach constantly emphasises the competences of each individual and points to the necessity for cooperation and interdependence as means for reaching common goals. In this way, coach awards status of biggest responsibility to a special player, which will facilitate creative freedom and will also include in the team status necessary organisational standards and goals of the handball team. If the management of the club does not agree about the need for such structure, then the development of such player is questionable.

4. WHAT TO DO?

A handball team with constant progress and high motivation finds itself in situations before important matches that can be solved only with extreme efforts; at that time the players work under strong pressure from outside (spectators, management, friends...). Situations like this result in high emotional tension that can be released in creative or destructive way. Players act very differently in such situations and very often particularly talented players see such challenges as an emotional pressure. They know what is expected of them and they are not sure if they can succeed. Therefore, it is suitable to introduce talented players to different tasks and missions within the team already in practice with the use of various methods of differentiation.

It seems most appropriate for a coach to clearly present to the players a special (tactical) mission of a talented or special player and gain approval from everyone involved (probably also from the management). In this way a coach can present and emphasise a role of the key player in order to achieve a common goal. This goal acts like an immune system, preventing the infection with potential conflicts that could endanger a successful working of a unit. Therefore, if a coach wishes for a talented player to fulfil his expectations, he not only has to ensure a special status for such player but also has to achieve that this status is accepted by other team players. It does not mean to give such player complete freedom and



everlasting privileges, as talented player will not be able to show all the abilities without the support from the entire team.

5. CONCLUSION

Same as a coach needs a trust of his players, which he acquires with honesty and expertise as well as with the power deriving from his status, a talented player also requires an opportunity to be different and original, whereas the handball team requires a winning and tolerant atmosphere. This should be created in order to achieve the goals of the club, which are set by all the team players together. Among the talented players a so-called special player has even more exposed role and it is appropriate for all the team members to be aware of it. Other players have to understand that they do not miss out with differentiation, quite the opposite they will gain and be rewarded with the team success. Star player has to understand that his teammates offer him support to accomplish all his potentials. Talented or star player will be satisfied that his special abilities are recognised. In order to achieve success in such team, the task of a coach is to work daily on the relationships within the team. First, he needs to accept that players are his partners and that he has to act in their best interest. Differentiation brings more work and involvement, both in time and emotions. Differentiation and individualisation start with communication, which is often complex, as it is almost a rule that talented players are complex and demanding when talked with.

Some advice to coaches for more efficient communication with talented players:

- Try to put yourself in their position
- Be a good listener
- Player has a right to list his demands, yet they do not have to be met.
- Communicate with respect
- Establish a personal contact
- Stop the monologue within the player
- Rephrase the message the player is sending
- Check the details
- Try to find what has the player omitted in communication and the reasons for it.
- Write down the message if possible



- Follow the non-verbal communication

Whilst knowing all the players and their roles in the team, good coach has to accomplish that everyone needed for the achievement of common team goals will also have common long-term interests.

The team, in which individuals complement each other, also has its mixed interests due to the complexity of the situation. This is a part of everyday process and dealings in all the clubs. No club can evade mixed interests of its individuals. The key to control the changes is in transforming destructive mixed interests into creative and constructive.

Good coach has to as a leader create environment that enables successful communication and mutual respect. Only then he can in the training process achieve synergic effects of creative mixed interests, which derive from the diversity of people in the team.

Mutual trust between the players has to be actively developed, as this will lead to cooperation and cohesion of players and management, who undoubtedly have different points of view.

Successful management in sport is therefore teamwork based on mutual trust and respect, as well as cooperation and communication.

Successful leaders:

- Have flexible style of leadership
- Know themselves well
- Are aware of the effect they have on others
- Have balanced opinion of themselves
- Accept their weaknesses
- Can recognise strong points in other people
- Accept different people
- Can control mixed interests
- Create environment that facilitates learning and sports development

Many factors of differentiation and individualisation can be realised already with structure and organisation of training. This will be presented in the practical part of lecture.

EXAMPLES:



1. **MODEL: one permanent coach; organisation of training, setting the exercises that allow division of roles and individual approach within a single task**
2. **MODEL: permanent coach + specialist coach (e.g. for goalkeepers)**
3. **MODEL: permanent coach coordinates: one coach for specific tasks of players (e.g. special coordination of players) + specialist coach (goalkeepers)**
4. **MODEL: work on stations; TALENTED players are coordinators of work on the stations**
5. **MODEL: differentiation in various parts of the practice; only in the final part; main part and warm-up are common**
6. **MODEL: INDIVIDUAL APPROACH: practical work and theoretical work/ or practice --- talk**
7. **MODEL: differentiation according to playing positions in training and matches**

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