

OBSTACLES TO EXCELLENCE

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We do not coach in a vacuum. At the same time we are striving for athletic excellence, we are (always) contending with obstacles resulting from our contemporary (and changing) social order. And while advances in technology may cause the stock market to move, they, generally, have the *opposite* effect on people.

Consider: mere generations ago, you worked on a farm; you worked in the home, or you worked in a factory; but you *worked*, and it was physically exhausting. We have become a sit-in-front-of-the-box culture. Televisions, computers and video games all compete for our attention and contribute to our increasingly passive physical existence. *Our current generation may prove to be the first in recorded history with a shorter life expectancy than that of its parents.*

Once health and fitness became “optional,” they became fertile ground for marketing. The basis for most of the equipment sales-pitches is simply “You *need* this,” whether “this” is a recumbent bike with a Tee-Vee monitor affixed to it, or a chunk of stainless-steel and upholstery used to train a muscle to do something that muscle is rarely called on to do. The result is that we have come to depend on venues and equipment rather than on bodies, teachers, and coaches. (Remember: the *body* is the beautiful machine.)

Here are several other hurdles that must be cleared in the quest for excellence:

- Our food is over-engineered and over-processed, and we eat too much of it. Type II diabetes is reaching epidemic proportions and the victims are not only obese adults, but also obese children.
- Physical education (in almost every setting) is neither physical, nor educational, and it is the first place school administrators look when they must cut budgets.
- We are a result-oriented society with little appreciation for process; we want it...*now*. Failure (an ineluctable part of *any* learning process) has a price tag. Boys will gladly demonstrate *proficiency*; but will often quit before having to reveal *deficiency*. Girls often fear success if it places them “apart.” They must wrestle with the athletic need to be fit, strong, and fast, and a social order that offers them few rewards for these qualities.
- Athletically, we *play* to train, rather than *train* to play.
- We specialize before we develop athleticism and competitive maturity.
- We emphasize game-skills before (and often to the exclusion of) fundamental movement skills.
- We evaluate before we teach (always trying to find the next prodigy).
- In training and competition, we value quantity over quality, and we (generally) take a one-size-fits-all approach to drills and exercises even though one size *never* fits all.

Saddest of all, *play*, that simple-but-essential ingredient of child development, has virtually disappeared. There are no games, and there is no practice without a herd of clipboard-toting parents in attendance. Paid officials call the games and young players turn out in complete, logo-festooned uniforms.

Despite these obstacles, there are strategies for success. Here are some simple philosophical points that can help:

- Know yourself; your strengths and weaknesses, as a person will determine your strengths and weaknesses as a coach.
- Know the sport you are working with.
- Know the body, generally, and learn to know how *each* body responds to training.
- Know your athletes, and never base a training plan on the lowest common denominator. (Set the bar high, and see what happens.)
- Most importantly, you must learn to *see* movement. We all *look*; but great coaches really *see* how good athletes move and where lesser athletes fail in their efforts. If you cannot evaluate movement, you cannot hope to improve it. Speed is a recognizable quality; do you know what it looks like?
- Keep your training relevant. Trust in your own creativity to build movement and drill progressions in which game / event skills and tactics can be included.
- Make things competitive: buy a stopwatch; keep score—not so you can determine who makes the traveling team; but so you can help individual athletes improve.
- Keep training *mindful*, rather than allow it to slip into the *mindless* category (where injuries lurk). Eliminate all “filler” from training sessions.
- Learn what you don’t know and do not be limited by what you *do*. Training plans predicated on a “that’s-the-way-we’ve-always-done-it” philosophy will probably yield predictable results, but not the ones you hope for.
- Make use of resources you have (could you persuade the local track coach to help you evaluate the running form of your basketball players?), and create a resource library for yourself, fellow coaches, and interested parents.
- Finally *talk about training*. Sharing successes and failures with other coaches can pay huge dividends.

The obstacles we encounter change as we do; but the above ideas can be the constants you learn to rely on, and return to, whenever the obstacles start to appear insurmountable.