

# 4

## Contextual Fit

The U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee supports more than 50 National Governing Bodies (NGBs), which work directly with their respective International Federations to administer each sport at the national level. The NGBs share a similar mission: to provide Americans with the opportunity to explore sport in our country, develop their skills and ultimately have an opportunity to represent our nation at international competitions such as the Olympics or Paralympics.

Athletes' passion for sport is often sparked when they are young, when they score their first goal or simply experience the thrill of sport competition for the first time. That passion is enhanced and channeled by talented and dedicated coaches representing each NGB.

Successful coaches adjust their approach to the athletes, settings and circumstances, because they know the most effective coaching is context specific.<sup>2,3</sup> Those same coaches also recognize that holistic athlete development requires the right kind of coaching at the right time in the athlete's journey. Team USA coaches must strive to customize their actions, interactions and prescriptions to positively serve millions of members and provide inspiration for every American athlete—whether it's a young



athlete on the path to Olympic or Paralympic competition or a reserve player on a club team—to live their dreams.

## Types of Coaching Contexts

Coaching has been described as a process of guided improvement and development in a single sport and at identifiable stages of development.<sup>3</sup> The needs of a young child just beginning the sport experience journey are vastly different from the needs of a three-time Olympian at the apex of his or her career. The principles of quality coaching remain the same, but the manner in which the coach translates those principles into coaching practice will help determine whether athletes continue to develop and enjoy their sport experience.

*Participation sport* and *performance sport* are the two globally accepted labels to categorize the way in which athletes engage in sport. Participation sport emphasizes involvement and enjoyment, while performance sport focuses more on competition and achievement. Within each of these two broad types of sport engagement there are three subdivisions:

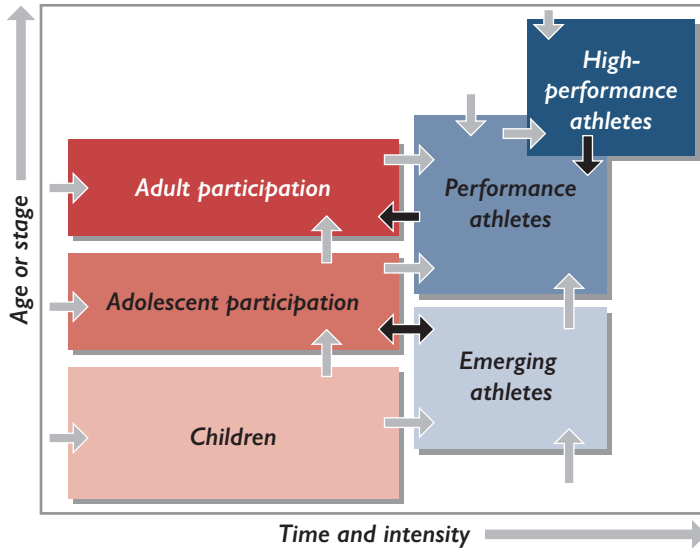
Participation	Performance
Children	Emerging athletes
Adolescents	Performance athletes
Adults	High-performance athletes

These two types of sport engagement and their three subdivisions can be found in the comprehensive sport participation map provided in figure 4.1. Note that the sectors in the map are interconnected.

Athlete development will vary across sports and be unique to each individual. Individual athletes may enter or move through and between the various groups at different stages in their lives. For example, an adolescent performance athlete may decide to transfer to a different sport; that may move him or her into a different sport engagement group.

Coaches are also likely to change from one season to the next. Although some athletes have the same coach accompany them throughout their sport journey, most athletes have to transition to a different coach when they move to a different season or stage of development.<sup>4</sup>

Because there are so many variables, sporting pathways are individual, context specific and nonlinear. This is why it is so important for each coach to adjust based on the sport engagement group of the athletes and the unique circumstances and setting.



**FIGURE 4.1** Sport participation map.

Reprinted, by permission, from International Council for Coaching Excellence, the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations, and Leeds Metropolitan University, 2013, *International Sport Coaching Framework, Version 1.2* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 20.

## American Development Model

The USOPC, in partnership with the NGBs, created the American Development Model (ADM)<sup>5</sup> to help Americans realize their full athletic potential and utilize sport as a path toward an active and healthy lifestyle. The ADM was inspired and informed by the principles that underpin the long-term athlete development (LTAD) model,<sup>6</sup> which proposed seven stages of athlete development intended to achieve three outcomes (physical literacy, improved performance and lifelong participation).

The ADM is an evolution of the LTAD model that fits the Team USA coaching context while promoting sustained physical activity, participation in sport and Olympic and Paralympic success (see figure 4.2).

The ADM's ultimate goal is to create positive experiences for American athletes at every level of sport participation. Sport administrators, coaches and parents who subscribe to the model help to maximize athletes' abilities to their full potential and improve the health and well-being of future generations in the United States.



**FIGURE 4.2** American Development Model.  
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The USOPC and its NGBs embrace the ADM and strive to use it for full benefit to the athletes, coaches, teams and organizations they represent. In doing so, the USOPC advocates these five principles:

1. Universal access, to create opportunity for all athletes
2. Developmentally appropriate activities that emphasize motor and foundational skills
3. Multisport or multiactivity participation
4. Fun, engaging and progressively challenging atmosphere
5. Quality coaching at all age levels

These principles are consistent with research-based recommendations for quality sport experiences in the American sport context. For example, the Project Play initiative in the United States has translated these principles into eight strategies for building a strong foundation of early, positive sport experiences:<sup>7</sup>

1. Ask kids what they want
2. Reintroduce free play
3. Encourage sport sampling
4. Revitalize in-town leagues
5. Think small
6. Design for development
7. Train all coaches
8. Emphasize prevention

By promoting these types of strategies and the concepts found in the ADM, the USOPC aspires to keep more children engaged in sport longer, in order to achieve four key outcomes:

1. Grow both the general athlete population and the pool of elite athletes from which future U.S. Olympians and Paralympians are selected
2. Develop fundamental skills that transfer between sports
3. Provide an appropriate avenue to fulfill an individual's athletic potential
4. Create a generation who loves sport and physical activity and who transfers that passion to the next generation

Working with the NGBs across the United States, the USOPC hopes to impact the sporting community by driving NGBs, their clubs, members and athletes to do the following:

- Have a visual model that outlines the progression of an athlete through the sport from start to adult participation.
- Drive an athlete-centric, coach-driven model that has quality coaching and coach education as key factors in the athlete's growth and positive experience.
- Organize the competition culture of the sport and competition providers in that sport to make events and outcomes as balanced and as age- or developmentally-appropriate as possible for the best sport experience possible.
- Make foundational motor skills and physical literacy a priority for all sports and all athletes as they develop and grow in the sport.
- Make sure that smart and creative activities, games and teaching methods are being utilized during practice on a daily basis for maximum engagement and retention.

## Developmental Model of Sport Participation

A complementary model to LTAD is the developmental model of sport participation (DMSP),<sup>8</sup> a model that breaks athlete development into three stages. The DMSP is grounded in the belief that, due to the unique demands of each sport and wide variance in individual athlete development profiles, no specified ages or lengths of time can be associated with each of its three phases.

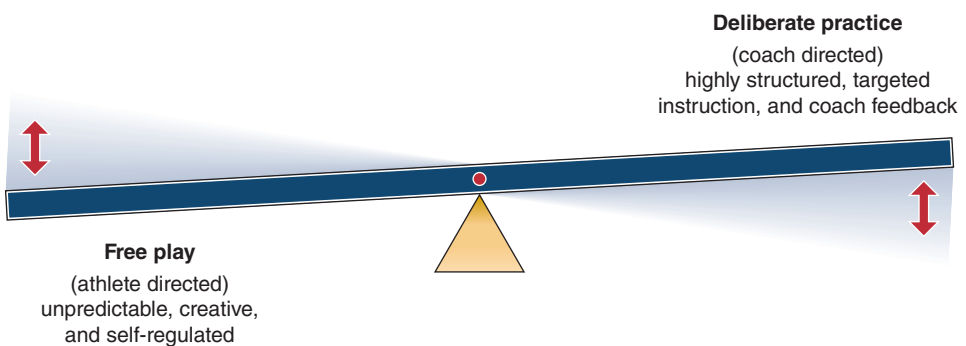
1. **Sampling phase.** Athletes take part in multiple sport activities and develop all-around foundational movement skills in an environment characterized by fun and enjoyment. Participation in this phase should not be restricted by skill level, because the goal is to maximize participation and expose athletes to the sport.
2. **Specializing phase.** Athletes begin to focus on fewer sports, possibly favoring one in particular as training demands increase. Participation opportunities may decrease at this phase, and athletes are typically grouped by skill level.
3. **Investment phase.** Athletes commit to achieving a high level of performance in a specific sport. This phase of athlete sport participation is typically limited to a small group of athletes who are identified as showing promise for high-level performance.

The DMSP phases are intended to provide a general framework for considering how athletes are developing and the type of coach they need as they move through the different phases.

Two points of emphasis in DMSP have important implications for coaching: unstructured play and sport diversification. Although it is clear that a high amount of focused, deliberate practice is needed to become a skilled athlete, research shows that expert athletes grow up in environments that allow for frequent play.<sup>9</sup> Deliberate practice is challenging and requires intense focus. If coaches fail to counterbalance such focused practice with opportunities for free play, they place their athletes at increased risk of emotional and physical burnout and overuse injuries. Free play activities are organized and led by the athletes themselves to maximize enjoyment and intrinsic motivation. The most beneficial balance between deliberate practice and informal, unstructured free play will vary based on performance level, the point in the competition season and the particular makeup of the team. Coaches who most adeptly provide the proper mix of deliberate practice and free play do the best job of fostering their athletes' talent development (see figure 4.3).

The DMSP also addresses the issue of early sport specialization by encouraging sport diversification, or sampling. Early sport diversification has proven to lead to longer, more successful involvement in sport.<sup>10</sup> Early sport specialization generally fails to help athletes achieve their best performances later in their career, which is the goal of LTAD.

Considerable evidence shows that high-performance athletes sample many different sports, as opposed to specializing in just one sport at an early age.<sup>11</sup> Most college and Olympic athletes in the United States played multiple sports until high school, and college coaches typically



**FIGURE 4.3** Balanced approach to developing athletic skill and talent.

Reprinted, by permission, from W. Gilbert, 2017, *Coaching better every season: A year-round system for athlete development and program success* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 113.

prefer recruiting multisport athletes. Sport sampling is also one of the key recommendations of the International Olympic & Paralympic Committee consensus statement on athlete development.<sup>12</sup> Due to the unique competition demands of each sport, there is no common age recommendation for when athletes may need to transition from sport sampling to sport specialization. In sports such as gymnastics, where elite-level performance is commonly achieved at a young age, LTAD timelines obviously require some modification.

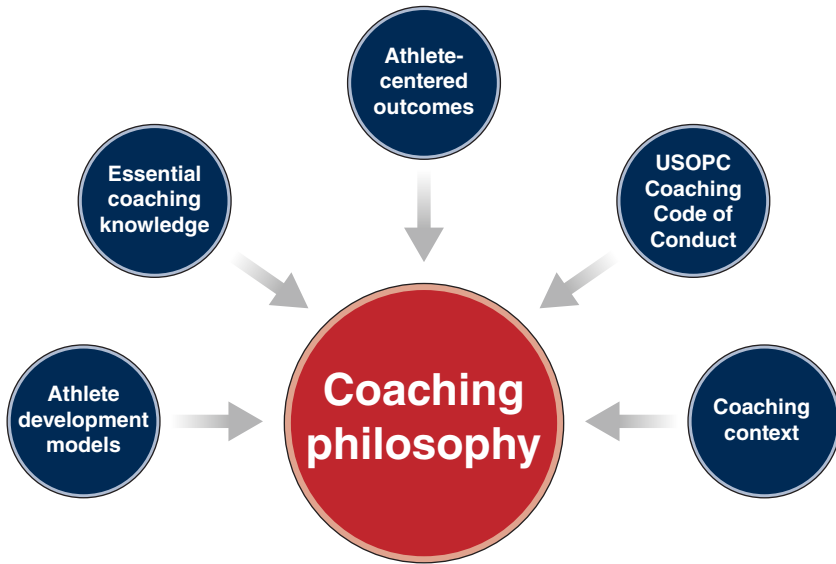
## Matching Coaching Philosophy to Coaching Context

Every coach has distinct strengths, personalities and views based on their own life experiences. These views help make up the coach's coaching philosophy. A coaching philosophy describes how a particular coach approaches his or her role, and it guides everyday coaching decisions and actions.

When coaching in the Team USA coaching context, coaches must ensure that their unique coaching philosophy is aligned with the principles and values that underpin the *USOPC QCF 2020*. The information presented earlier in this chapter regarding athlete development models and their rationales should be considered when creating and or evaluating a general coaching philosophy. When coaches move across different stages and phases of the athlete development map, they need to make adjustments to their coaching philosophy. This will ensure they are staying true to an athlete-centered, coach-driven approach that provides athletes with developmentally appropriate instruction and performance support.

The many factors that should influence a coaching philosophy when coaching in the Team USA context are depicted in figure 4.4.





**FIGURE 4.4** Factors to consider in creating a coaching philosophy.

#### CHAPTER 4 | Takeaway

A key component of quality coaching is an understanding of athlete development principles. Quality coaches use knowledge of these principles to adapt their coaching philosophy to the coaching context. The best coaching approach is one that is suitable for the sport experience in which athletes are participating and the athletes' development needs.