

BE PATIENT WITH TALL YOUNG ATHLETES

Peter Bristotte - February 18, 2019

Before starting a discussion on this, that could potentially be controversial, let me give you the whole picture. One of the things that I love about this country is the sport culture and how families are willing to invest/support their children to develop in sports. No matter how athletic or talented you are (or not), you will find a place for you to play the sport you love. There are clubs with a “play to win policy”, others with a “play for fun” policy, others with an equal playing time policy, others with a high performance policy, where the best athletes will play more. And that is the beauty. Because there are so many different philosophies in the clubs out there, every young athlete can find a place to play. And my guess, as a foreigner, is that this is one of the key factors for the success of this country at the Olympic level: from the incredible amount of kids playing sports it comes to statistics for soon or later an Olympic champion to be found. And in my view that is how it is supposed to be. Make room for everyone, every level of talent and athleticism, give them an opportunity to compete, and everyone will learn lessons for life, no matter if they are becoming Olympic athletes, regular moms and dads, professionals in other fields. The sport will be part of their lives and those people will have a chance to live better.

When it comes to a high performance program, to develop athletes to the highest level, collegiate level or even professional level, you must think on a long term development. Athletes must develop their athleticism, their skills, fundamentals and game understanding in a more complete and holistic approach in order to achieve the highest level at the right time and with chances to excel at the highest level. And it takes time. And by time I mean years. If you are looking for having a one good season only, or to win within one or two seasons, this article probably is not for you. This article will be more interesting for those who want to develop an athlete to compete at a collegiate level, or even pro. In the case of volleyball, the pro level would come after the collegiate level, in another country.

It is well known that for an athlete to have better chances to succeed at the collegiate/pro level, they must be tall. Better said, the taller the better. However, it is pretty common to see at young ages, when you have a tall athlete (or many tall athletes) in a team, that that kid is not as coordinated, as agile, as skilled or as athletic as that other kid who is not that tall. That shorter kid, at young ages will excel better than the tall ones. But, if adults (parents and coaches) and the (tall) athlete are patient and keep working hard, that story will change soon in the future.

Movement sciences discuss motor coordination development, skill development, body awareness development and many other related areas based on the biological growth and development. What many of us forget or simply ignore is that humans do not grow/develop in the same way, at the same speed. If you do some research you will notice that height is determined by your DNA, your genetics, and there is not much you can do to change that. People with a DNA that determines they will be tall, will be tall. Short people will be short people. Period. Science has already shown that tall people take longer to develop their “tool kit”: motor coordination (gross and fine), body awareness, skills, etc. Here are the reasons:

Specially up to ages 12 or 13, even 14, when you learn a new movement or the size of your body/how much space your body and limbs take, your body awareness (the fancy name for this is proprioception), your neurons make new connections (synapses) and those connections take time to be developed. In those connections there are precious information, such as how long do you take to lift your arms, or to take a step, or even more complicated, how far the ball should be from your eyes so you can contact it with the palm of your hands with a straight elbow so you can apply full power by using a perfect leverage system... Well, when your body size changes, when you are growing up, every smidge your limbs grow, your neuron connections get messed up. That body that your brain took time learning how to move correctly no longer exists. Now it will take some time for your synapses (the neuron connections) to readjust. And that is when you see the difference between the tall and short people. Because short people usually reach full body growth earlier (the fancy name here would be to say they are early bloomers), their brains “learn” their bodies faster and don’t get messed up that often. Hence, the motor coordination, the proprioception development, the body awareness and the skills will develop faster (than tall athletes) because those synapses will not need to change that much. Tall athletes on the other hand, the late bloomers, are constantly changing the size of their bodies, specially their limbs, even more often during their growth spurt, and that means their brains will take much longer to understand and learn the new body. Once the brain is almost “done” learning it, they grow a little bit more and now the brain has to learn it all again. That is when you see that tall kid, who was almost mastering a fundamental, in three or four weeks it seems they know nothing once again. And that is true: their brain has to “relearn” everything once again. Another factor to make it even more complicated: tall people usually take longer to develop their muscles, strength, speed and power. Done: when they are young, you have short athletes who are more coordinated, more athletic (faster and stronger), who master the fundamentals, at the same time you have tall athletes, who don’t even know how to run properly, are slow and weak and all floppy.

Now imagine this: you have a group of tall young athletes. You know that they are all floppy and uncoordinated now, but you manage to nurture an environment where they fall in love with the sport and are eager to learn and develop. You go to a competition and you play a team with athletes that are much shorter than your athletes (maybe they just want to win this season?). Guess what happens? Your team gets crushed! No panic! Well, if you have a long term goal in your mind, you shouldn’t panic. Just keep working with your athletes. Soon in the future, maybe in the same season, if you play that same team again, you can tell a different story.

The short athletes soon in the future will have to hustle to prove themselves because tall athletes soon will develop their body awareness, motor coordination, skills, strength and speed and now, if you are in a sport where “height matters”, the tall athletes will excel over the short ones. Not saying the short athletes are out, but they will have a much harder job to stand out among the tall (and now well developed and athletic) athletes.

So for all of us, athletes (specially the tall ones), coaches and parents, please be patient with the development of the tall young athletes. Keep supporting them and giving them “court time” not only to develop their brains and bodies, but to learn how to deal with the pressure. Coaches, give court time to your tall young athletes and let them “play poorly”, that is ok. Just make sure you choose the right moment to let them in (and/or take them out), manage your subs so all your



Loudoun Elite Volleyball - LoudounEliteVB.com
The Travel Teams program of
Loudoun County Volleyball Club - LoudounCountyVolleyball.com

players have opportunity. Let the “shorties” play well with the “tallies” playing bad. Let your kids have fun, let them grow!

If you want to talk more about this, send me an e-mail: **coachpetervb@gmail.com**