

Long-Term Athlete Development Canada: Attempting System Change and Multi-Agency Cooperation

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NORRIS, S.R. Long-term athlete development Canada: attempting system change and multi-agency cooperation. *Curr. Sports Med. Rep.*, Vol. 9, No. 6, pp. 379–382, 2010. This text provides a synopsis, as well as some greater detail, concerning the “Canadian Sport for Life” project Long-Term Athlete Development Canada (LTAD) initiated in 2004. The genesis of the project may be found in the Canadian Sport Policy released in 2002 by Sport Canada, the sport participation and performance agency within the Canadian Heritage Ministry of the Canadian Government. The project has grown from relatively humble beginnings to become a system-wide movement and catalyst for change that encompasses not only sport participation and excellence, but also aspects to do with education, health, and general recreation. Additionally, it involves all age groups (cradle to grave). Although the project was initiated on behalf of performance sport, it is a clear example of how sport can influence and interact with many facets of a society. In Canada, LTAD clearly is tied to a philosophy that spans a broad narrative from healthy active lives to elite sport performance.

INTRODUCTION

This article will provide an overview of the move toward a more systematic and agency-aligned sport and activity environment currently evolving in Canada. Although the central theme has been and is one of a long-term athlete development (LTAD) “pathway,” the reality is that the process is not isolated to that single endeavor, but rather involves a much more complex reevaluation and overhaul of aspects involving physical activity, sport participation, education, health, facility availability, funding, and interagency relationships, as well as the pursuit of excellence in elite sport events. The use of the phrase LTAD and the specific word “athlete” may be slightly misleading in their overall use here, in that LTAD in this Canadian context provides a hypothetical framework to guide a movement or process for change to an entire system of sport and physical activity in the country and that the word “athlete” has a global application to all children in their formative years (i.e., every child being an athlete, since life is an athletic

event). However, in the specific pursuit of eventual elite sport performance, there is a clear expectation that this framework will provide a “golden thread” to both initiate discussion and lead to the design and implementation of programs focused upon high-performance sport delivery and identifiable outcomes for Canada.

GENESIS

The root of the LTAD concept in Canada lies in the 2002 release of “The Canadian Sport Policy” (4) by the Canadian Government after a 2-yr process of engagement and consultation with various government jurisdictions, the Canadian sport community, and a multitude of other organizations, agencies, and interested parties involved in sport. The essential vision of this policy is for Canada to have (by 2012) “a dynamic and leading-edge sport environment that enables all Canadians to experience and enjoy involvement in sport to the extent of their abilities and interests and, for increasing numbers, to perform consistently and successfully at the highest competitive levels.”

Canadian Sport Policy; Four Strategic Pillars

At the heart of the policy are four strategic pillars, (Table) all prefixed by the word “enhanced.” These four pillars concern participation, excellence, capacity, and interaction.

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TABLE. The four strategic pillars of the Canadian Sport Policy 2002.

Canadian Sport Policy 2002
Enhanced PARTICIPATION
Enhanced EXCELLENCE
Enhanced CAPACITY
Enhanced INTERACTION

The “enhanced participation” aspect simply is focused on the drive to have a greater percentage of Canadians engaged in sport activities, no matter the level or form of participation. The “enhanced excellence” pillar reflects an expectation that with a more inclusive and quality-based (programs) participation stream, the Canadian high-performance elements would have the basis from which to strive for world-class results, assuming appropriate focus of resources. The third pillar, “enhanced capacity,” refers to the expected elements required to support the first two endeavors, for example, coach and instructor education and development, the availability of facilities, the development of sports medicine and sports science expertise, allied research and technology involvement, as well as the development of a long-term vision for the hosting of major sporting events, ongoing volunteer procurement, coupled to sustainable leadership and funding scenarios. The final pillar focuses upon the need for “enhanced interaction,” specifically “increased collaboration, communication, and co-operation” between all stakeholders in the Canadian sport system and associated, allied, or supporting agencies.

Political/Government Support

The LTAD interest grew directly from the “enhanced participation” and “enhanced excellence” material contained within the Canadian Sport Policy and led to firm political commitment at both the federal and provincial levels of government in 2004 and 2005 (Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Ministers’ Annual Conferences), whereby commitments were made to the development of both generic and sport-specific LTAD guides for Sport Canada (Canadian government agency responsible for sport, from participation to high performance) and the national, provincial, and territorial sport organizations. In 2004, Sport Canada assembled an expert group to lead the process of developing an overall guide for LTAD, this culminated in a resource paper (2) being produced in 2005. In addition, this group aids directly or facilitates the development of LTAD guides and associated materials for each of the federally supported national sport organizations.

CANADIAN SPORT FOR LIFE

The Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) (2) document initially was compiled as a basic “pop science” resource and guide, as well as a deliberate “lightning rod” or catalyst to inspire (or even incense) discussion and action. This step absolutely was necessary to overcome an obvious inertia to change in the Canadian system, particularly at a time when there was increasing recognition and vocalization of various challenges or negative consequences (*i.e.*, high dropout rates from organized

activities and sports, increasing obesity, poor or nonexistent collaboration between agencies).

CS4L as a Catalyst

The CS4L document, although obviously focused upon Canada, highlights typical challenges faced by many nations where sport and activity simply has evolved over time without any common vision between the multitudes of interested parties. A key aspect of the document is the need to review the underlying rationale(s) for having children and youth participate in sport, ascribe some clear goals, and provide a solid evidence-based (recognizing that in some areas solid information still may be lacking) framework for sport program design. In other words, the CS4L was designed to spur organizations to work both within themselves as well as with other allied agencies to design multiyear curricula of both generic activity and sport-specific programming, primarily centered on ages 6 to approximately the mid 20s (the typical entry and development to high-performance sport age continuum), but also to recognize the need for a seamlessly linked sport/activity system right across the life span (*i.e.*, from “Active Start” to “Active for Life”/cradle to grave). As further emphasis to this last point, subsequent material has been (and continually is being) developed that centers on specific age groups (see www.canadiansportforlife.ca). Figure 1 provides a simple pictorial representation of the lofty global vision, namely the eventual capturing of as near 100% of the Canadian population in a sport/activity continuum that covers the breadth of active pursuits from early age involvement and skill development, recreational involvement, competitive age group sport, high-performance elite sport, and personal health and enjoyment-based activities.

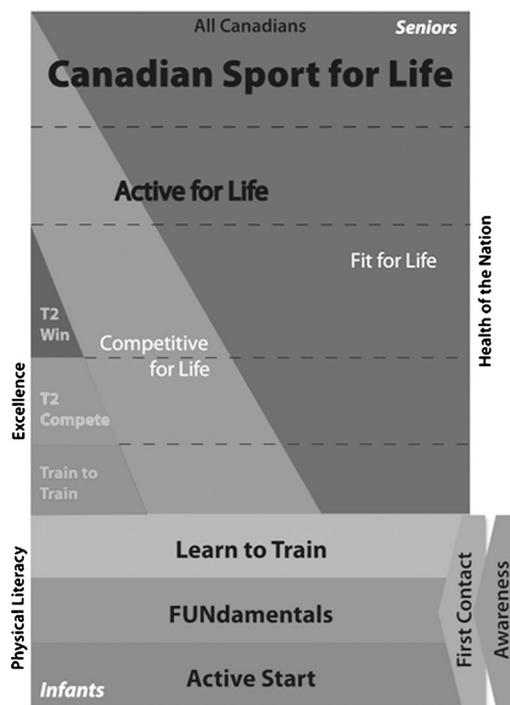


Figure 1. Overall schematic of the Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) (Courtesy of CS4L/Sports Canada expert group, August 2010).

A Guiding Framework

The overall framework and terminology for the CS4L, in terms of the sequential “stages” or phases of the long-term, multiyear LTAD, were adopted from work previously undertaken by a member of the expert group (1), since these already had had some exposure within the Canadian sport community and were in use by several other countries (see later comments in the Challenges section). This overall framework has been improved upon continually and adapted as other expert input has been garnered from various individuals and agencies. The current overall framework is provided in Figure 2. Obviously, it should be recognized that there are several influential authors and viewpoints in this area (athlete development) (3,5, and sample Bibliography) and these excellent commentaries have been (and still are) referred to during the evolution of the CS4L movement.

Growth and Maturation

A critical element for the entire process is to communicate clearly the need to recognize the impact of growth and maturation upon the developing child/adolescent/young adult and the repercussions of ineffective or inattentive sport/activity programming. In addition, the complexity of these aspects across four broad categories (physical, mental, cognitive, and emotional) must be an emphasis yet expressed in such a way as to be understood readily by all involved. Further, the role and extent of competition through the various stages has been and continues to be a highly emotional debate. All of these areas need a great deal of further (rigorous) investigation so as to be able to provide more precise guidance for those charged with designing age-group sport and activity programs. This last point illustrates the need for continued research and academic/expert thought and debate concerning all aspects of age-group sport, including the preschool years.

Participation and Excellence/High Performance

As a concluding note in this section, one could be forgiven for thinking that the CS4L is not a focused LTAD guide. This partially is true, and one should be quick to recognize that the

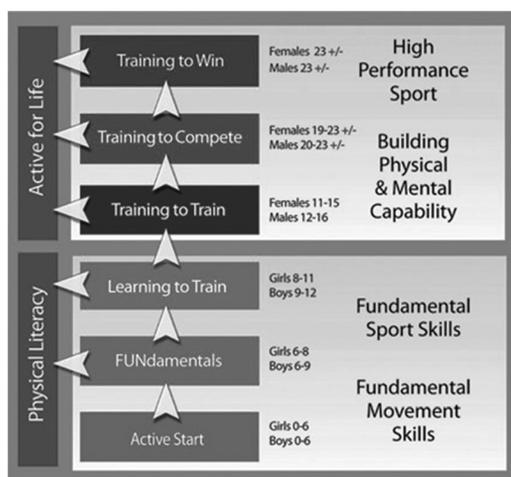


Figure 2. Overall framework for the Canadian Sport for Life/Long-Term Athlete Development Canada (CS4L/LTAD) multiyear phases/stages (Courtesy of CS4L/Sport Canada expert group, August 2010).

CS4L simply is the starting point for a movement of change within Canada and that highly specific material covering a number of areas (*e.g.*, stage by stage curricula, males vs females, role of competition/competition review, high-performance programming, athletes with disabilities) needs to be and is being developed. The next two sections deal with some of the main challenges the CS4L project has faced and the successes or positive outcomes to date.

CHALLENGES

System Inertia, Resentment, and Hostility

By far the most intimidating challenge has been the inertia in the system. Although initially the project looked to be quite small (just change Canadian Sport), though itself a daunting task, the realization that age-group sport influenced and was influenced by so many factors was almost overwhelming for those involved at the inception of the project. The fact that the Canadian Sport Policy concerns the interests of 14 government jurisdictions (and a host of other stakeholders) alone is a prime example of the scope of the challenge to bring about meaningful and appropriate change. Coupled with this inertia has been a surprising degree of resentment and hostility from many different sources: a sports system largely run by volunteers at the community level who already are overburdened and short on capacity, cross-agency jurisdiction sensitivity, parental attitudes, and even other experts and academics.

Top-Down Approach, Parents, and Competition

The top-down approach where this has been a government funded, Sport Canada, and National Sport Organization-led project has and continues to have specific challenges. A fundamental weakness of this approach has been that the real programming takes place at the grassroots level, which is several degrees of freedom away from the control or oversight of a sport's governing body, so although the upper levels of sport may now clearly be knowledgeable and in step with the project, the real challenge effectively is reaching the regional and local levels.

Mentioned previously and of enormous significance is the issue of parental attitudes and beliefs concerning age group sport. An initial statement is that a strategic imperative is the appropriate education of parents concerning LTAD since parents largely run the local and regional sports systems in Canada, but of course, this in and of itself is a massive task. Add to this the fact that there often are deep-rooted, almost opposite, prevailing beliefs and attitudes at the community and regional levels due to an unfortunate lack of knowledge concerning child/youth development and effective sport programming. One can imagine the challenge this poses.

Allied to the parent commentary is the issue that many age-group sports gradually have evolved around a comprehensive competition system and calendar. One could be quite caustic and observe that the administration of a competition schedule actually does not require any technical programming or knowledge and that overzealous competition schedules detract from effective development programs. A key point in Canada

is that in many (but not all) local age-group sport situations, the children and young adolescents are placed in the hands of the least-qualified, least-experienced, and least-paid (if at all!) instructors/coaches, exactly at the phases of their lives where qualified and experienced instructors are required and something that would not be tolerated in other activities (e.g., schooling or music).

POSITIVES

A Momentum and Movement for Change

However, great progress has been made across all areas, and the degree of change moving across the various agencies and percolating down through the system is significant. Certainly, with each passing year the building momentum of the CS4L has captured more and more segments of the entire system. A very important component that has aided the process is that the LTAD has produced a seemingly universal language that is transferable across stakeholders in a seamless fashion and that once people are immersed in it they are able quickly to identify what a particular element involves, even if it is outside of their immediate jurisdiction.

Cross-Agency Communication

Despite earlier comments concerning hostility, the CS4L has been a remarkable catalyst for cross-agency communication, and Canada has seen increased alignment and collaboration at the federal level and provincial level (e.g., sport, health, and education); specific committees, task forces, or consortiums being struck to deal with issues (e.g., CS4L and Joint Consortium on School Health); and increasingly regional areas and municipalities working together on interlinked programs, as well as sports and sports clubs interacting with each other to deliver their programs more effectively at every level.

Critical Review and Continual Improvement

An interesting phenomenon that has arisen is the almost universal willingness within the system to adopt a much higher level of critical review and a genuine desire to embrace the need for continual improvement (Kaizen). This, of course, is a hallmark of a high-performance system and illustrates a real change in the culture of the sport delivery and administration landscape for Canada. Allied to this is the realization and expectation of improved sports programming at all levels, something that the Coaching Association of Canada has reacted to by completely overhauling its coach-education programs.

Spurring Research and Resource Production

A crucial area where progress is being made is the increasing involvement of academics and researchers in the supply of pertinent information and the willingness to become involved in controlled investigation of issues pertaining to LTAD. This aspect is extremely encouraging and has obvious importance to provide evidence to ensure that appropriate material and actions are implemented (or discarded) within the scope of CS4L.

Finally, as of January 2010, 35 National Sport Organizations had completed their sport specific LTAD guides, and

another 7 were close to completion. In total, 83 new programs had been developed and were in various stages of implementation aimed at improving sport delivery.

CONCLUSION

The CS4L project has made a significant impact on not only sport programming in Canada, but also the realization that it is a crucial element in the complete cultural landscape of the country with symbiotic relationships with health and education and links to all aspects of Canadian society. Therefore, although the project was initiated on behalf of performance sport, it is a clear example of how sport can influence and interact with many facets of a society. In Canada at least, the notion of LTAD is tied clearly to a philosophy that spans a broad narrative from healthy active lives to elite sport performance. After close to 6 yr of activity, the CS4L has colossal momentum, but the surface of what is truly possible only just has been scratched.

In closing, I have chosen to direct the reader to a range of resources that provide context, clarification, and further learning, in addition to specific references (see Bibliography).

Acknowledgments

The author thanks the members of the CS4L "expert group" (Istvan Balyi, M.Sc., Dr. Mary Bluehardt, Charles Cardinal, M.Sc., Dr. Vicki Harber, Dr. Colin Higgs, and Richard Way, MBA) and to Sport Canada (Carol Malcolm-O'Grady).

The author was funded by Sport Canada (Canadian Heritage, Government of Canada) Long-Term Athlete Development Project.

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