

CIAC COACHES UPDATE

Volume III, Issue II Dr. Bob Lehr, Editor

OCTOBER 2012

Greetings from the CIAC offices.

What a wonderful time of year! Summer's heat and humidity are no longer issues and we have not yet had to deal with the cold, blustery days of winter. Fall's cool nights and pleasant days are ideal for our outdoor practices and competitions. It's a great time of year to be coaching an outdoor sport.

Our state has incredible state parks and miles of scenic and challenging hiking trails. I hope you have an opportunity to hike some of them in the next few weeks.

This month's issue of Update is about Emil Zatopek. Most of our readers are too young to remember the amazing Czech runner, often described as if he was running with a knife in his chest. His track accomplishments in the 1948- and 1952 Olympics are legendary, and it is unlikely that they will ever be done again.

Best wishes to the fall sports coaches for success throughout the remainder of the season.

Bob Lehr-Editor

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Seven Lessons Learned from Zatopek!

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It is said that if you don't know history, you are apt to repeat the mistakes of history. Perhaps it is equally appropriate to say that knowing history allows us to benefit from the lessons it has to teach. It is in this spirit that we suggest taking a historical look at one of sports truly all-time greats, distance runner Emil Zatopek, and see what lessons today's coaches can take away from his life.

It has been almost 60 years since Emil Zatopek, the Czech locomotive, pulled off his incredible triple by winning the 5000m, 10,000m and Marathon in the same Olympic Games. The 1952 Olympic Games were held in Helsinki, Finland and Zatopek had already established himself as the man to beat in the 5000 and 10,000 meters. In fact, in the 1948 Olympics in London, Zatopek won the 10K and came in a close second in the 5K (mainly because he ran his qualifying heat too fast). Since that time, he set many world records in the longer distance races; so it was no surprise that he was one of the main threats to win gold in both the 5K and 10K in Helsinki. He won both, as expected in his unorthodox style (arms flailing, head back, face with a pained expression, tongue hanging out, and awkward gait). It wasn't until after the 5K that he decided to run the Marathon, an event in which he had never participated. In typical Zatopek style, he blew away the competition to accomplish a feat that is not likely to ever be accomplished again by another runner. So what coaching lessons can we learn from this humble man from what was then called Czechoslovakia?

Don't overlook the late bloomers

Until he was 19 years old, Zatopek had never participated in organized sports. To appease his friends, he participated in a 1500 meter race unprepared and untrained. He finished in 4 minutes, 20 seconds. This ignited the running bug in him. He read about the famous Finnish running hero, Paavo Nurmi's training methods and from then on, he trained every single day, rain or shine. Although it is unlikely that in the present day we will see too many world-class athletes starting their sport at age 19, the point is that there will always be some athletes that develop later than others. In order not to miss the late-bloomers it is important for coaches to be cognizant of the research on the impact of the "relative age effect" on development. As a coach, is your behavior towards the young athlete guided by the athlete's current developmental level or by the athlete's developmental potential? If current developmental level is high partly due to the relative age effect (e.g., having an age advantage due to early physical and mental maturation, leading to more experience and subsequently higher performance in comparison to athletes with the same birth year, but later birth month) you will be more likely to give the athlete more attention, more positive feedback, and more training opportunities leading to an upward spiral of "talent" development. The small advantage of being born in January as opposed to October can, over time, turn into a huge advantage as the research shows in ice hockey, soccer, and baseball.

Perfect technique is not everything

The stories about Zatopek's style of running are legendary. Anyone who has ever seen film of him knows that he was not the most stylish of runners. What is often overlooked however, is that his lower body technique was quite good, and his drive and determination overcame some minor technical flaws and individual idiosyncrasies. In fact, drive (or desire to succeed) is probably one of the most important attributes in identifying talented athletes. Research in psychology captures what we understand as drive, in sport as "grit." Grit is the ability to work harder, longer, and to persevere in the face of setbacks. The research of Duckworth and her associates indicates that grit is a crucial element in achieving great performance. Another element besides perseverance that comprises grit is passion. If you derive passion from an activity, you are more likely to engage in it in the face of obstacles and setbacks. While refining technique is tremendously important for coaches, so is nurturing and refining grit and passion. One straightforward way for a coach to do this is to focus on and praise effort rather than talent in athletic achievement (see Carol Dweck's research, as well as her article in *Olympic Coach* in the winter of 2009). Especially for athletes who lack "perfect" technique (there will be many), Zatopek's approach to running with emphasis on passion and perseverance highlights the potential of drive to trump minor technical flaws.

Don't be afraid to try new things

Through the late 1940's and early 1950's, most distance runners trained at a fairly steady pace while working to improve their stamina, especially for the 5K and 10K. Zatopek took a different approach, arguing that he already knew how to run slow. His idea was to run fast stretches (initially 100 meters, later 400 meters) interspersed with slower jogs. Today, this type of training is commonly called "interval training", but in the 40's, this revolutionary training method was unheard of. Zatopek's insight and innovative approach to training mirrors what sport psychologists suggest about Olympic champions. One of the characteristics of Olympic champions is that they are students of their sport and they are highly intelligent in their chosen passions. Champions are deeply involved in the subject matter of their sport, understanding its history and traditions without being bound or hindered by them.



Understand your athlete's training capacity and how it interacts with confidence

Okay, so not everyone can (or should) train in army boots in knee-deep snow until exhaustion, run with his wife on his back or run sixty 400's at race pace with fast jogs in between (Zatopek was known for each of these training methods). Modern sport science information, in fact, strongly advises against those training methods arguing that overtraining may be a concern and that rest and recovery should not be overlooked. However, well-known sport psychologist Jim Loehr (1994)

states that, when done properly, greater exposure to physical stress always leads to greater mental toughness. As coaches, we have to understand that each athlete is not only an individual, but also that each athlete has a different capacity for pain and “training tolerance.” The true art of coaching lies in finding the right training (and recovery) dosage for the individual athlete, not only to maximize their physiological energy systems (and avoid overtraining), but also maximize their psychological energy systems so to speak. Learning to distinguish stress that toughens (adaptive stress) from stress that weakens is a critical athletic skill to understand for both athletes and their coaches. Zatopek’s unique, challenging and “off-the-wall” workouts likely provided a tremendous boost for his confidence and for his determination to persevere in the heat of competition.

Competitive spirit

Zatopek loved competing; he was never afraid to put himself on the line. The fact that he decided to run the marathon after winning the 5K and 10K in Helsinki tells us a lot about his competitive spirit. Before the race he sought out the top runner (Jim Peters of England) because he figured that would be his main competition. In general, he always looked for new challenges, races and distances to conquer. Pursuing new challenges while simultaneously raising and elevating one’s level of skill is a pre-requisite of achieving optimal experiences or “flow states.” Such flow states are further characterized by intense task focus, a total absorption into being present. This merging of action and awareness goes hand in hand with a loss of self-consciousness. Flow is one of those experiences that makes life meaningful. From a coaching perspective, we can set the table for such experiences to occur by raising the perceived level of challenges an athlete faces above the personal average of the athlete and by equipping them with the necessary skill set to meet that challenge. For Zatopek, perhaps competing wasn’t about triumphing above somebody else, but rather about finding his own limits and seeking excellence within. Indeed, the Latin root meaning of the word competition stands for “strive or seek with.” How we approach competition as coaches, to “triumph over others” vs. to “strive and seek excellence,” will have a lot to do with how our athletes view competition.

Look for a sense of enjoyment

Everyone who came in contact with Zatopek came away with similar thoughts. He was a truly humble man and enjoyed life to the fullest. For Zatopek, running was not about medals. In fact, it is a well-known story that he gave away one of his gold medals to Australian distance runner Ron Clark, just as a gesture of respect and friendship. It was the act of running itself that made him happy, which clearly showed because his many fans adored him. Zatopek’s example urges us to cultivate positive emotions not just in our own lives, but also in the lives of our athletes because it allows us to flourish. Fredricksons and her colleagues’ fascinating research into the benefits of positive emotions (such as gratitude, interest, serenity, hope, inspiration, joy, awe, and love) support the wisdom of Zatopek. Her “broaden-and-build” theory postulates that positive emotions broaden our attention and build our resilience and response capabilities, which leads to upward spirals of flourishing. In the world of coaching, we don’t often talk about such emotions. But perhaps, heeding Zatopek’s example, we should not only talk about these emotions, but go about cultivating them, as well.

Balance

Although Zatopek's singular focus when training helped him reach the very highest level, his family life provided him with tremendous support and balance. His wife, Dana, not only understood Zatopek and his incredible training methods, but she herself was a world-class athlete. Zatopek and Dana first met at the 1948 Olympics (she finished seventh in the javelin). They married not long after. When Emil won the gold in the 5K in 1952, he just missed Dana's gold medal performance in the javelin. The Zatopek family walked away with four gold medals in the Olympics that year. Again, the research on the positive role of social support on well-being in general - and as a source of confidence in sport - highlights the wisdom of Zatopek. Having balance in life and having the support of friends and family is another lesson worth remembering.

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Module 17 – Dealing with Parents of Athletes

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