

Athlete Development: Phases of Learning Model

Coaches, athletes and sport scientists alike have long sought to understand how to develop excellence or talent in individuals, and swimming is no exception. Fortunately, much work has been done in the field of talent development that we may be able to learn from in understanding the development of excellence in swimmers. Of most relevance is research by Benjamin Bloom (1985) in which he studied 120 individuals who had achieved excellence in a variety of domains (art, athletics, music, academics). He wanted to assess if common pathways to achieving excellence exist and, if so, to describe these pathways.

Bloom found that successful individuals went through similar phases of development and, furthermore, that the phases he identified were very similar to a 3 phase model of learning put forth years earlier by an educational researcher (Whitehead, 1929) -- thus adding greater support to his findings. It makes sense to think about applying this model of long-term development to young swimmers. The model is presented and discussed in the following sections. As you read through this model, think about whether or not the information fits with your experiences and what you have witnessed with the development of athletes. Additionally, while some recommendations are given, you are encouraged to think about how you might apply this model within your program.

Phases of Learning Model (Bloom, 1985)		
ROMANCE	PRECISION	INTEGRATION
Fun Encouragement Exploration Freedom Develop love of sport Need immediate rewards	Technical Mastery Skill Technique Habit of Accuracy	Integration of Knowledge and Skills Individuality Insight Realization that sport is significant in one's life

Key points

- Learning needs to occur sequentially in the three phases but the length of each phase will vary across individuals.
- Moving to the "Integration" phases before graduating from the "Precision" phase does not provide the athlete with the proper training or technical skills to succeed in the next phase.
- Learning, training, and development occurred without long pauses or delays.
- "Unless there is a long and intensive process of encouragement, nurturance, education, training, the individual will not attain extreme levels of capability in the particular fields" (Bloom).

Summary of the Romance Phase / The Early Years

- Coaches instilled a "love of sport" in the children
- Child-oriented family environment
- Child learned about a strong "work ethic"
- Child encouraged to be self disciplined and responsible
- Early success a primary factor for many of the athletes to continue in the sport

Recommendation: At an early age, it is important to have "fun" and "love of sport" instilled to sustain them through the Precision and Integration phases. Work to build this foundation in the developmental years. Additionally, it may be important to teach and expect responsible behavior; and, we need to help our young athletes experience success on a regular basis.

Summary of the Precision Phase / The Middle Years

- Environment of structured, systematic learning -- typically a 4-6 year period
- Emphasis on technical skills
- Worked with a 'master coach'
- Parents make sacrifices of time and money
- Transition from recreational swimmer to being 'a swimmer'

Recommendation: We need to ensure that the athlete is equipped with solid physical and technical skills. Additionally, during this phase we should expect a greater commitment to swimming from the athlete and their parents.

Summary of the Integration Phase / The Later Years

- Has an understanding of technical skills and information and can apply and integrate this information
- Surrounds self with others who share the same goals and commitment to the sport
- Continues to study/train with a 'master' coach and trains many hours a day

Recommendation: Coach, you are the 'master' coach we are referring to...it is important to recognize the crucial role you play in the long-term development of your athletes. It is your responsibility to 'arm' yourself with the knowledge necessary to optimally develop the athletes.