

Right on the Target

Biathlon Canada shoots for Victory

At a 1999 general meeting, Biathlon Canada discussed the progress of Canadian biathletes on the world stage. The response was not positive. Canadian competitors were being consistently outclassed in all of the major international competitions, and the prognosis for future results didn't look any better, so Biathlon Canada resolved to try something different.

They hired a new high performance coach, Daniel Lefebvre, to coach the Canadian senior biathletes at the national training centre. But as things evolved, Daniel's assignment ended up being modified.

"To really make an impact, I realized that I needed to start with a younger group of athletes, where I could really count on getting full buy-in for the type of training that I wanted to do," recounts Lefebvre, now the principal at Own The Podium, a sports training consultancy that is supporting the drive for medals at Vancouver 2010. The type of training he wanted to pursue was in line with LTAD principles, including everything from revised training loads and periodized planning to ongoing physical testing to monitor PHV.

"The first thing I said is that we need to start with talent identification," says Lefebvre. He was convinced that the best way to build champion biathletes would be to start with raw athletic ability, not necessarily young biathletes that were already training in a biathlon club. Lefebvre wanted to start with talent and attitude, not athletes who were doing biathlon perhaps simply because they had the money and the time to make biathlon an activity or pastime. He was resolved to avoid reinventing the wheel and so followed training regimens and athlete science already proven to work.

"I called the U.S. team and looked at their talent ID program," says Lefebvre. "I saw that it was exemplary and I decided that we would do the same."

Biathlon Canada had given him \$50,000 per year to run the juniors program. Based on the type of equipment, athletes required and the rigorous training that he wanted to do, he determined that his funding would only be enough for 10 athletes. He decided he would choose those 10 from the biggest pool possible so he could increase his chances of finding the diamonds in the rough.

He went into 25 schools that were within 15 kilometres of the training facility. His logic was simple: he wanted to be sure that his athletes would be able to attend training during the year without the undue stress of extra travel costs, and without the lost time and fatigue associated with long-distance commuting. As Lefebvre saw it, there was no point making the investment in these athletes if they were going to burnout and quit because of difficulty getting to training each week. His screening tests were strenuous and extensive.

"We site tested at schools," says Lefebvre. "We did the box jump, speed test, all sorts of tests. We looked at hundreds of athletes and only chose 10, because I only had \$50,000 to buy roller skis, skin suits, rifles, ammunition – all of the things that I felt they needed to feel special, that they were involved in something important."

Lefebvre was an early leader in applying the concepts that are now familiar to Canadian Sport for Life's LTAD pathway. He gave his Training to Train young 13-15 year old charges annual training plans, and he involved sports medicine staff to cover health assessments,

physical monitoring and nutrition education for his athletes. And his training was rigorous – so rigorous that 3 of his athletes quit the program by the end of the first year.

“I was taking them to Cape Breton Island for road training on bicycles when they were 14 and 15, and I had them cycling 1000 kilometres over 10 days,” says Lefebvre. “I was giving them really heavy, intense training loads with cycling and roller skiing. We stayed at a youth hostel, no TV, no phone, no video games. Another time I borrowed my dad’s chateau and took them kayaking for 2 hours on the lake. As soon as they got back to the house and thought they were done, I’d have the roller skis waiting and they’d do another hour.”

Lefebvre had them training between 255-300 hours during the first year, and within 3 years, all 7 of his biathletes were medalists at junior world championships.

“Norway and Scandinavia were wondering, who are these guys?” chuckles Lefebvre. “We weren’t even targeting Torino 2006. We were targeting Vancouver 2010, but after only 3 years in the program one of them had already made the Olympics and finished in the top half.

“Jean-Philippe Le Guellce started in 2003, went to compete in Poland after only 4 months and placed 33rd - on the plane home said to me, ‘I want to be a world champion.’ It sent a chill up my spine. And the next year he was world junior champion in France. He won the gold, the silver in the pursuit, and he became the first Canadian male biathlete to ever medal in either a junior or senior world championship.”

From 2003 onwards, Lefebvre’s team of young biathletes swept the Canadian championships every year.

“Youth, junior – all of them medaled in every category,” says Lefebvre. “They won over 100 Canadian championship medals, and I would say each athlete has 40-50 medals now, including Canadian and North American competitions.”

All of them are now entering the ranks of senior competition, and they are setting their sights on Vancouver 2010.

“The LTAD was a great guide,” says Lefebvre, praising Biathlon Canada’s early adoption of LTAD. He considers the periodized planning and guidelines for testing and training volumes as essential to everything his group of biathletes have achieved.

“If you’re expecting to be training 1000 hours a year when you’re 25, you’ve got to be doing 300, 400, 500, and 600 in your teen years or you’ll never get there,” says Lefebvre.

Few would argue with him now. Considering the unparalleled success of his athletes, Lefebvre has reinforced LTAD’s case for periodization and maximized training when it most counts – the sensitive periods of physical adaptation during adolescence and post-PHV. And if these Canadian biathletes can continue to set the pace, we shouldn’t be surprised if we see them on the podium in 2010.