

FIVE STAR ATHLETICS

Tom McNab

It is, alas, an inconvenient truth that most of us live our lives without having enjoyed any real experience of athletics. I well remember, at the conclusion of a long jump session with Greg Rutherford, he asked me if I might show him how to throw a discus. And in discussion I found that after hundreds of hours of club and curricular athletics, Greg had virtually no experience of any events other than sprints and long jump. But Greg's sad story should really have come as no surprise to me. When, back in 1969, I had conducted a review of ten thousand Five Star certificates, there was virtually no sign of any technical event except long jump. That led me to introduce a decathlon, which led to the emergence of Daley Thompson.

It might well be thought that things would be quite different in our clubs, where the bulk of the population lies in the novice 10-13 age-group. But over the years in my discussions with dozens of these children, it is much the same. For their coaches come from a harrier-background, and nothing in their coach-education prepares them for the provision of a rich athletics education to groups of novices.

It is against this background that I am now in the process of creating Five Star Athletics, a programme which springs from thousands of hours of work with children in club and curricular contexts. Let me look, from the outset, at the end-product.

1. That every child has been exposed to competition in running, jumping and throwing. That competition is always with him/herself.
2. That each child learns the rules of each event and deploys them as an official.
3. That technical aims are realistic. That means there is no room for the Fosbury Flop in high jump or the O'Brien technique in shot.
4. That each child understands the 'why' of his/her skill and is therefore able to assist his/her classmates.
5. That each child leaves with a record of achievement.
6. That effort is constantly recognised and rewarded, whatever the level of ability.

7. That an understanding of the nature of athletics is achieved, both in the teaching and through project-based internet studies.

At this point, it might be worthwhile to address some of the questions which arise when I present Five Star to teachers and coaches.

Q. What are you now seeing that has driven you to creating Five Star Athletics?

- A. Over the past years I have attended dozens of school sports days and spoken with a host of children. What I have experienced has depressed me. For in none have I observed a single child with a measured approach in the

horizontal jumps, simply an uncertain shambling towards the take-off board. Never have I witnessed a single effective non-visual relay exchange. In high jump I have frequently witnessed two-footed take-offs and, in most triple jumps, chaotic sequences of hops and steps.

Q. So what can be done?

- A. This is not a high-tech issue, and my Five Star approach boils down each event to easily-learnt techniques. High jump provides a good example. A five-stride approach into a sand-pit through a marked 'tunnel' to a marked take-off area, ending in a 'scissors' jump (Figure 1). This can be learnt in a few minutes. In shot, frontal puts, using stone shots of varied weights (Figure 2). Easy.

Figure 1.

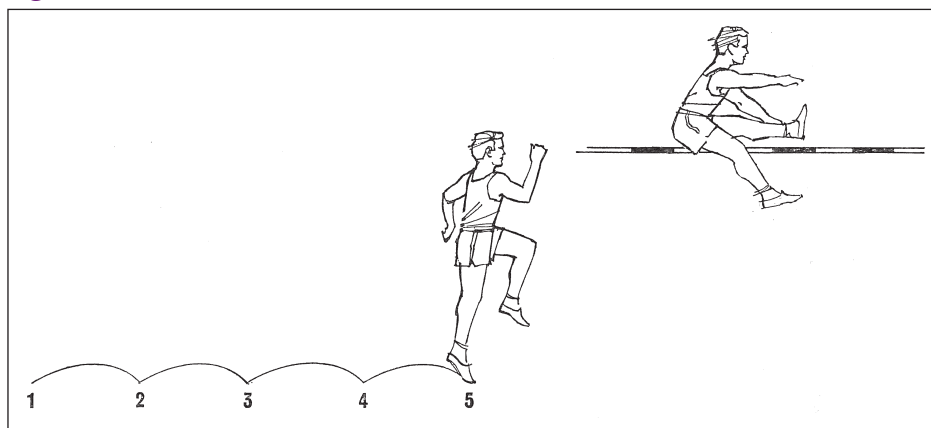
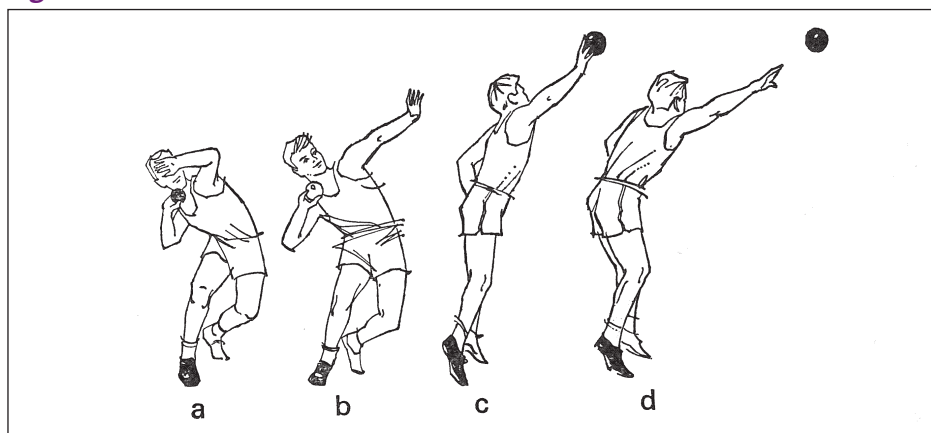


Figure 2.





Q. But surely all of this has already been done in the training of teachers?

A. If it had, then I would not have been witness to what I have described. This is another topic for discussion, and physical education should really take a good hard look at itself. It should ask if it is really providing the practical training that deals with teaching athletics (or any other sport) for a couple of curricular hours per week to thirty-odd children.

Q. Has it become too theoretical?

A. Yes. I am by nature a nerd, but most of my teaching and coaching is based on practical experience.

Q. Are there differences in your approach between club and curriculum teaching?

A. Inevitably. I have for the last few years been working with groups of 10-12-year-olds, within a club context. But curricular athletics has classes of thirty-plus, and I am using a colleague to transfer a modified version to school contexts. This is a work in progress, with consequences for changes in school facilities and equipment.

Q. Will you ultimately offer a syllabus?

A. Yes. A programme of events which will be covered in, say, a block of 12 one-hour lessons. For example, relays, long jump, high jump, shot, hurdles. Parents are given a guarantee of what their child will learn.

Q. As is done at my local swimming club?

A. Yes. Initially, in swimming, the aim is to get a child's feet off the bottom of the pool, then swimming a width, then a length. Later, other strokes and diving will be introduced. It is lesson-based and there is always progression. The same approach is applied in tennis, with Short Tennis. Alas, our voluntary athletics system is well short of this lesson-based approach and merely offers a diluted version of adult athletics. We even have 'mesocycles'!

Q. What do you mean by a group method?

A. One in which the whole group can participate at the same time, thus ensuring a high volume of repetitions, such as occurs in football with the Coerver Method and in Short Tennis. A good example is relays, which should be obligatory. It can also be expressed in long jump or triple jump, by running at it from the side of the pit, with four separate approach-runs and four children jumping at once.

Q. So an essential is a big sand-pit.

A. I had my local authority build a massive pit behind the goal, so that more than one child could jump at the same time. This means a high volume of repetitions.

Q. But no take-off board?

A. No, a 20cm board serves only as a distraction at this point for a child of 11 years. I mark out big, one metre take-off areas, using cones and talcum powder. The aim is to get high numbers of repetitions, essential for children who have no experience of jumping.

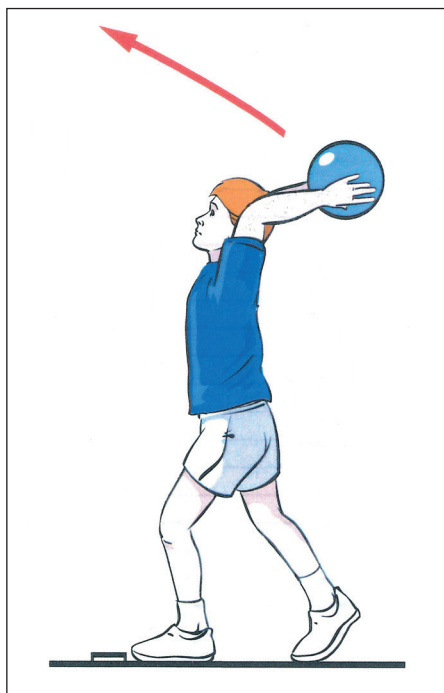
Q. Surely they will eventually have to jump from a board in competition?

A. Yes, but by that time a high volume of repetitions will mean that they have established accurate approaches, in the 7-9 stride range, with all measurements parked safely on clip-boards or mobile phones.

Q. Will this work safely in throws?

A. Yes, but only in the linear throws. Figure 3 shows it in javelin, initially using a football, and the same approach works in shot. Both provide a simple, primitive option. The aim is to get a basic throwing/putting action, rep after rep, until it becomes automatic.

Figure 3.



Q. You mention modification of equipment.

A. Yes. In shot, I buy stones from my local garden centre, then weigh and mark them. A wee 11-year-old will put a round one-kilo stone, while a strapping 12-year-old will put a two-kilo boulder. In front of them is a calibrated area so they can always see how far they are throwing.

Q. And what about facilities?

A. Most secondary schools create 400m tracks, essentially copies of senior competitive facilities, but we need much smaller areas, specifically geared to teaching thirty-odd children in groups. And I once used a playground, getting my janitor to paint me a 100m track. In many primary schools, a playground may be all that they have. Big sandpits, enclosed, calibrated throwing areas, small tracks, areas geared to the teaching of groups: that is what is needed. Clubs and schools must be much more pragmatic, more creative.

Q. And always to use simple, primitive techniques?

A. That's common sense. For example, it is worth looking at the best of our decathletes. In shot, both the Olympic champion Theison-Eaton and his wife use the step-back method (Figure 4) and throw the javelin from the withdrawn position (Figure 5) off short approach-runs. These all-rounders realise that more sophisticated techniques are a bridge too far and adopt much simpler methods. Yet our manuals suggest

Figure 4.

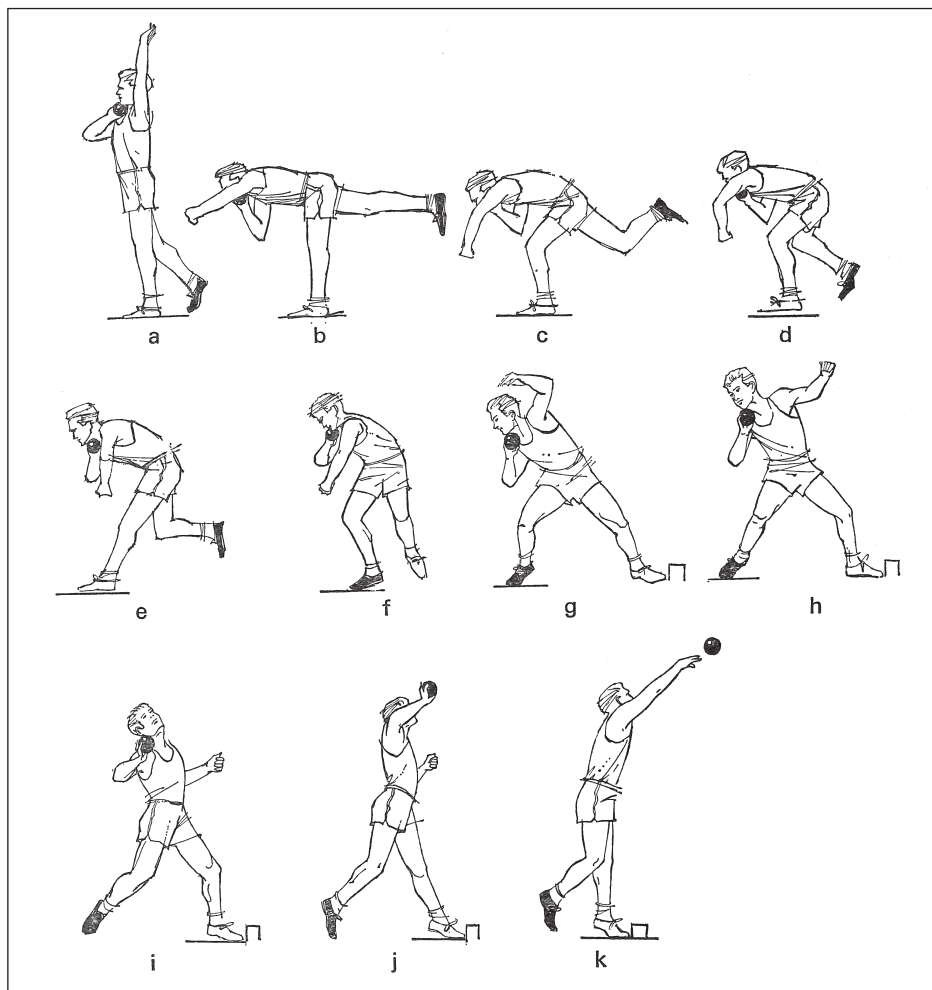
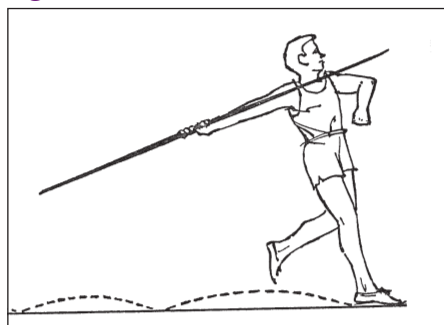


Figure 5.



advanced methods for novices, such as an O'Brien technique in shot and Fosbury Flop in high jump. I believe this is nonsense on stilts.

Figure 2 shows another example: a simple, frontal put, to establish a primitive method of launching the shot, suitable for novices.

Q. Building a sort of an initial vocabulary?

A. Exactly. I have often seen coaches engage children in what they call 'co-ordination' exercises. I doubt that any such exercises exist, and even if they

did, skills are best learnt by performing a modified version of the technique, rather than a series of abstract exercises.

The basics of most athletics events can be learnt in a few minutes. The late Wilf Paish used to tell me that he could teach anyone to put the shot in 30 seconds. I told Wilf that he was a liar, for I had clocked him at 50 seconds! But what that great coach meant was that he could teach a basic putting action almost immediately, and he was right, and the same is true with most events.

Q. What do you mean by the Five Star approach?

A. Five Star was the world's most successful athletics programme in recent times and reached 60 million children. It succeeded because it went straight to the heart of what athletics is all about, which is personal achievement. One where the central aim is time, height and distance, competing against yourself. This is particularly important with novices, for it will be the only occasion in their lives that they will bust their buns in an 800m run, jump as high and far as they can, or launch a javelin.

The First Olympics 1896

The first 'Modern' Olympic games took place in Greece and began on Easter Sunday according to the Western and the Eastern Churches. About 80,000 people attended the opening ceremony. All events except shooting, tennis and wrestling had only finals.

There were going to be 12 events, but only 9 took place. This is because for rowing and yachting the weather was awful and no countries put athletes forward for sailing. The 9 events that happened were athletics, cycling, gymnastics, fencing, shooting, swimming, tennis, weightlifting and wrestling.

In the first Olympics no world record was made for Athletics. The Australian Edwin Flack won the 800m and the 1500m. He was the ~~first~~ ^{planning to} participate. The American Thomas Burke won the 100m and the 200m. He did the 100m in 17s, and the 200m in 22s.

Camber Toss

The camber toss is a traditional Scottish event in which competitors toss a ~~tree~~ large tapered pole called a "camber". It is normally practised at the Scottish Highland Games. In Scotland the camber is usually made from a large tree trunk Larch Tree and typically 19 feet 6 inches (5.94 m) tall and weighs 175 pounds (79 kg).

Andoni

1996 Olympic Games

1. On April 6th 1996 the first modern Olympic games were held, but only 14 countries took part with 241 male athletes as no women were allowed to compete.
2. The 1996 Olympic games were held in Athens, Greece by George I, King of the Hellenes.
3. The athletes competed in 43 different events.
4. America's James Connally became the first modern Olympic champion when he won the triple jump on the opening day of the games.
5. The reward for the champion was a silver medal and an olive branch.
6. France, Great Britain, Germany and Greece had the largest number of athletes participating.
7. The Netherlands and the US took home the most first-place finishes.
8. Greece came second and Germany came third.
9. Greece won the most medals over all.
10. The joint Olympic rings represented the five major regions of the world - Africa, US, Asia + Europe and Oceania.

So no good purpose is served by spending the bulk of the time in learning techniques which are never to be expressed competitively. Any parent would think it odd if his/her child returned from a football course, without having played a competitive game. Yet that is what I keep seeing in the training of coaches in teaching novices: a pottage of exercises and drills.

Q. Are children always provided with a record of achievement?

A. This is essential. Recently, a 65-year-old man presented to me a Five Star Award that I had signed for him over 50 years ago! At this novice 10-13 stage, for most children, formal competition should consist of Sportshall Athletics in winter and Five Star-type meetings in summer. The rest of their competition should take place within their lessons.

Q. Do you stick to the formal athletics programme?

A. No. I even have synchro-warm up events, with marks out of a hundred. The children have to devise routines from their existing warm-up exercises, even adding exercises of their own, and are marked out of a hundred. I also have competitions in which the winner is the child who improves most on his/her previous best, where the children compete as pairs, with their total heights/ distances as the outcome, and relay events, again with marks out of a hundred for the best change.

Q. Let's go back to technique. You stressed earlier that much of coach education offered a sort of diluted version of adult coaching.

A. Yes, that is because it is written by

coaches with little successful experience of working with groups of novices. Thus, we have illustrations of children in advanced throwing positions or attempting a Fosbury Flop. This runs right through athletics and has no parallel in any other sport.

Q. Surely our governing bodies talk about performance pathways.

A. These are fantasies. About 90 per cent of our club population (approx. 35,000 members) is in the 10-15 age group, with only around 4,000 senior (over 20 years old) athletes. The 10-15 group is in a cul de sac, rather than on any performance pathway. What we must do is to ensure that their short club experience is a rich and enjoyable one.

Q. You talk about knowledge of ethics, rules, etc.

A. Yes. Children should learn about athletics during their time with us, whether in school or club. When I first worked with Greg Rutherford, he was illiterate in athletics. Twelve years at school and six years in an athletics club and he knew very little about athletics, either physically or cognitively. This is, alas, par for the course.

Q. What do you mean by internet studies?

A. For example: I had some children learning standing long jump, and told them about the take-off angle, which is 45 degrees. I then wrote on a white board 'The Jumping Frogs of Calaveros County' and asked them to check it out on Google. One lad whipped out his mobile and found it immediately: the Mark Twain short story of frog-jumping

competitions which still take place in California's Calaveros County. You can see them on YouTube. The others came back the next week with a mass of information, including the fact that standing jumps were in the Olympic Games as late as 1912. So I set my children weekly projects, some of the results of which are shown in this article. That is what education is all about: curiosity and the spirit of enquiry.

Q. I notice that you haven't mentioned fun yet.

A. Fun is not the central aim, rather it is the by-product of lessons. The fun, the pleasure, lies in the process of learning, in the joy of achievement. Children are skill-hungry animals.

Q. So what do you promise parents?

A. I promise them that, by the end of next summer, their children will be more skilful in athletics and know more about the sport than any children of their age on the planet. And I know for certain that this will be so. ■

Tom McNab, a physical educationist, was National Athletics Coach from 1963-78, and his Five Star Award Scheme reached 60 million children. In 1981, he was Technical Director of Oscar-winning 'Chariots of Fire', and a year later his first novel 'Flanagan's Run' reached number one in the best-seller lists. He has never lost his passion for teaching children and now puts his ideas into action weekly at Lee Valley Athletics Centre.