

Chapter 3: Planning

by Rebecca Layton

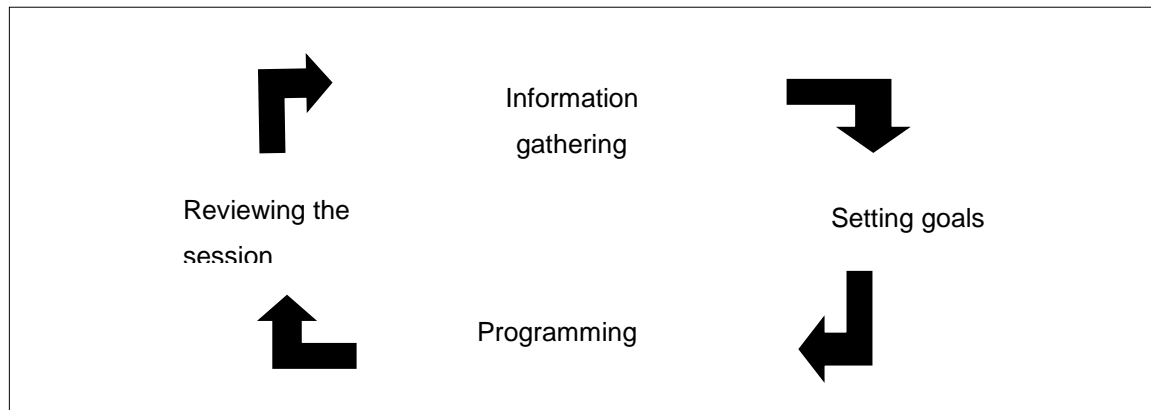
Coaching is often described as both an art and a science. The process of planning allows an effective coach to bring these two important elements together in a coherent and organised manner. When a coach takes the time to plan their teaching strategies, activities, sessions, seasons, and even their athlete's longer-term career, they are able to develop their athlete on a day-to-day basis, with a longer-term outcome in mind. That outcome may be very performance oriented (that is, win a gold medal at the state championships), or it may be more developmentally oriented (that is, teach the technical skills of the sport while developing confidence, teamwork and a habit of physical activity in players). Either way, planning will help a coach to achieve their desired outcome.

Effective planning helps ensure that the coach:

- . has the necessary resources available when they need them
- . provides a safe environment
- . makes effective use of the time available
- . challenges the participant through progressive development
- . includes all participants, regardless of their level of ability
- . maximises enjoyment for themselves and their athletes.

Good planning involves the following steps:

Figure 3.1: The planning process



This cyclical process applies whether a coach is planning a session, a season or an athlete's career. This chapter will predominantly focus on season planning.

Depending on the nature of the sport, a season may run for a term, several months or a year. Essentially we are talking about planning for a phase of training that leads to a key competition, but in a non-competitive skills-based program, it may be more closely related to a phase of development (for example, in a swimming school it might be related to a level of skill development or a school term). More advanced coaches who are concerned with the longer-term development of an athlete will also be considering a multiyear plan, such as a four-year plan, that looks at developing skills for an athletic career, rather than for a single competition. All coaches, however, should always think of their session and season plans within the context of the overall development of the athlete. Asking the question, 'How will this activity or session contribute to the development of my athlete?' is always a good reminder that a coach and athlete are working towards a longer-term picture.

Issues to consider when planning

There are a number of issues that a coach must consider as they start to develop a season plan.

Age and physical/emotional development of the athlete

It is important for coaches to remember that people develop at different rates and that some athletes may be physically mature with good strength and body awareness, but their emotional and social development may not currently match their stage of physical maturity. Conversely, coaches will also be faced with athletes who are socially and emotionally very mature, but whose physical development is lagging. Being aware of the individual abilities of athletes will assist the coach to plan sessions that challenge their strengths, but also develop aspects that are currently lacking.

Balancing other non-sport commitments of athletes

It is very easy for coaches to forget the other aspects of athletes' lives. Keeping a balance is increasingly important in our hurried modern world. Coaches should consider the athletes' workloads at the office or school, work travel commitments, family activities and even just some 'down time' so the athletes can remain well balanced and fresh, and happy to come to training or a game. Students in particular may have peak study times that coaches should factor into

their training schedule. Talking regularly with athletes about other aspects of their lives will help to ensure that sporting workloads do not create undue stress.

Involving the athlete/parents in the planning

Traditionally many coaches may have developed and even implemented a plan without any consultation with the athletes. This kind of approach is often ineffective as it does not allow the coach to gather sufficient information about the athlete, such as their preferences or workloads. Nor does it promote commitment by the athlete to the plan. By involving athletes in the planning process, coaches can gain a better insight into the individual needs of the athlete. Athletes will also have a better understanding of the training they will be doing and why it has been scheduled that way.

When working with junior athletes, coaches should also consider what involvement their parents have in the planning process. This can be done in a number of ways. For instance, at a pre-season meeting the coach might gather information from parents and athletes about their experience in the sport, the athlete's strengths and weaknesses, and what their goals are for the season.

As the coach develops a plan, it is important to communicate it to both the athlete and the parents. In this way the parents also gain an understanding of the coach's expectations of their child and how the child's specific needs will be catered for. Involving the parents and the athlete in this process can also help the coach to understand whether they have similar goals for the athlete, or whether the coach might in fact be dealing with driven or 'pushy' parents and a less-motivated athlete. Involving the parents will also help to gain their commitment, which is very important as parents are often the ones who will be transporting the athlete to their sporting commitments. If the parents have greater 'buy in', they will be more likely to have the athlete at training on time, and they may even offer to assist in some way.

Meeting individual needs in a group training context

As coaches gather information about the current abilities of their athletes, they will realise just how different each athlete is. This can be quite daunting when developing a plan, as they will need to ensure that it caters for the individual needs of each athlete. Differences can include physical ability, emotional/social maturity, understanding of the techniques and tactics of the sport, learning preferences and motivation. By getting to know the coach gets to know the

athletes better, coaches will be able to better cater for these needs and adjust their coaching style to individual athletes to get the best performance from them.

In terms of planning, coaches need to develop an overall plan for their team or squad, but then they may need to make some adjustments or modifications for individual athletes. For example, a coach may have developed a plan where the focus of training for the coming month is the development of endurance, which includes some particularly long sessions that will be mentally tough for some athletes to cope with. Within the broader plan for this phase of training, the coach may decide to make some adjustments for an athlete who has an interstate school excursion and cannot make it to all the sessions, or they may choose to end a session early for a particular athlete who is not coping well mentally with the challenges of this phase of training. Keeping notes on these kinds of adjustments to the plan is important, as it will help in evaluating the effectiveness of it at the end of the season. It will also help in planning the next phase of training, as it provides information on how the athletes cope with the demands placed on them.

Understanding the physical, technical, tactical and psychological demands of the sport

Each sport has its own unique demands. Some sports are more physically oriented (for example, cycling or swimming), while others are more technical (for example, archery), tactical (for example, team sports) or psychologically demanding (for example, marathons or iron-man triathlons). The greater the coach's understanding of the unique demands of their sport, the better they will be able to prepare the athletes for these specific demands. Observing elite players, talking with experienced coaches, attending sport-specific coaching courses and reading sport-specific coaching manuals/articles will all help the coach to gain a deeper understanding of what it takes for an athlete to perform well in their sport.

Case study

Mary is the coach of a group of young showjumpers. During a session she notices that one of her riders, Jake, is not performing well. He is not balancing his horse well and seems to be riding and jumping tentatively. Mary focuses her feedback on the technical aspects of Jake's jumping with very little success. Realising that something out of the ordinary is happening, she pulls Jake aside to try to reinforce her instructions, thinking that perhaps he does not understand them. Jake explains that he understands what she wants him to do, but that he had a nasty fall from his horse recently and no longer feels confident to be jumping at the level at which Mary has set the jumps. Mary realises that Jake does not have a technical problem with

his jumping at all, rather, he has lost confidence in himself and his horse. She quickly sets up a smaller series of jumps at the far end of the arena and works with Jake and his horse to master a simpler activity, while still observing the riders at the other end of the arena. By recognising the significant psychological challenges involved in jumping, Mary is able to rebuild the confidence of Jake and his horse over the lower, simpler series of jumps. With some careful attention over the next few sessions Jake and his horse are soon jumping confidently.

Season planning

Planning for a season may seem quite daunting at first, but following the planning process just outlined will assist in tackling the process in an effective way.

The first step for a coach is to gather information about their sport and their athletes. The plan should have a direct link to the necessary attributes for the sport, so it is important for the coach to clearly identify what the relevant attributes are for the level of athlete being coached. This may differ depending on whether it is a junior talent identification squad or an adult social team being coached.

Some attributes of the sport for the coach to consider include:

- . technical skills — catching and passing the ball, moving into space, starts and turns in swimming, racquet strokes and moving around the court in tennis, etc.)
- . tactical skills — decision-making, set plays or race tactics
- . physical demands — speed, strength, power, endurance and flexibility
- . mental skills — arousal, focus, relaxation, confidence, motivation, fear, etc.

The skills identification matrix at Appendix 2 is a useful tool to assist in identifying the attributes for each sport. Observing elite players, talking with experienced coaches, attending sport-specific coaching courses and reading coaching manuals/articles will help in identifying these attributes.

Coaches also need to gather information on each athlete's current capabilities. This can be done in a variety of ways depending on the nature of the sport, the level of athlete, and the resources and time available. It may be as simple as watching them at training for a few sessions and making some notes on their strengths and weaknesses, or it may involve some simple testing such as the 'beep test', which is a field test for aerobic endurance. If a coach has access to sports science support, this can be useful to do more formal testing on the athlete's

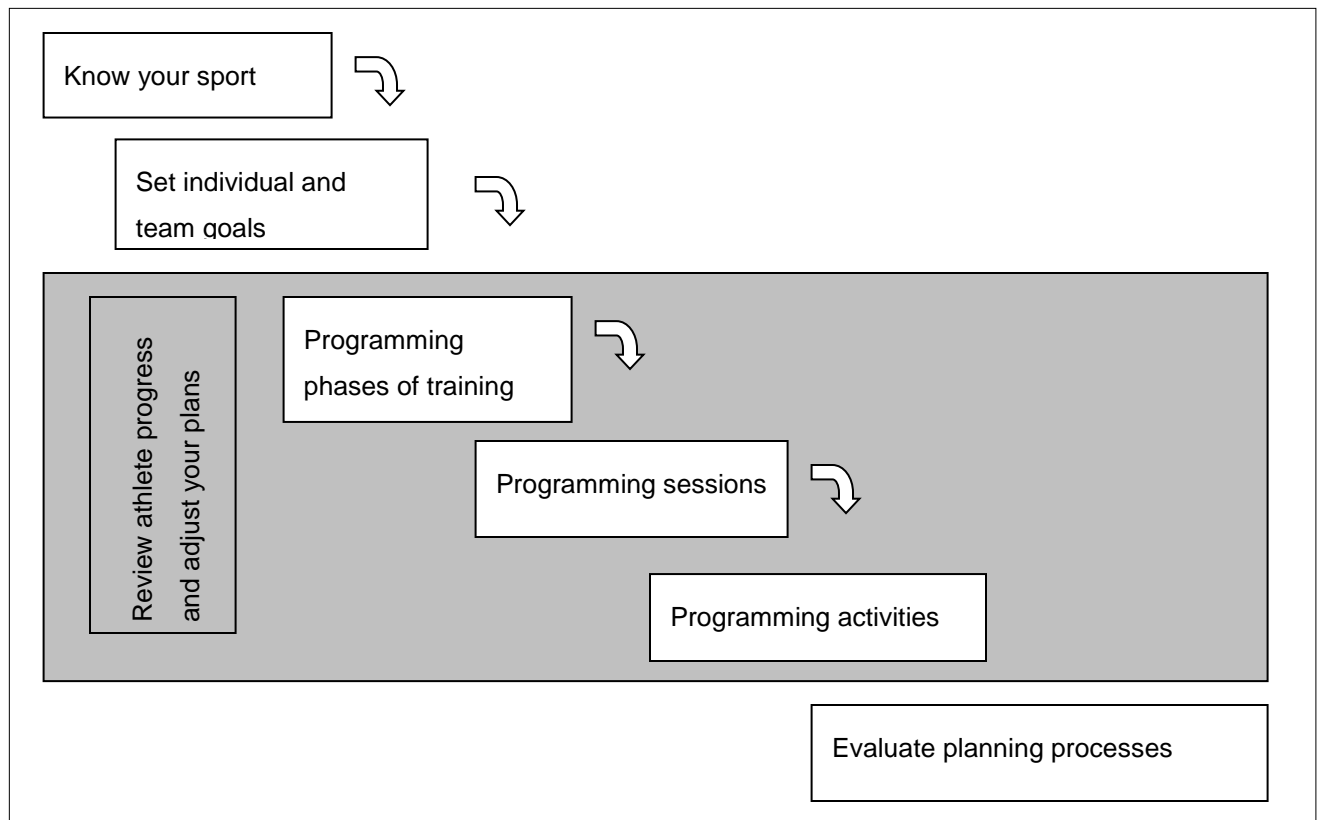
current capabilities. Either way, it is useful for the coach to keep records of the results so that they can refer back to them throughout the season to help monitor progress.

The next step in the planning process is to set goals for the team/squad and the individual athletes. The coach's personal preferences will dictate how this is documented, but the goal-setting table at Appendix 3 might provide some guidance. Note that the table includes space for the coach to consider individual goals that relate to the athlete's communication skills, their attitudes to sport (for example, fair play, respect, responsibility, etc.), and their levels of physical, emotional and social maturity. All of these 'softer' skills also make a significant contribution to their performance and development.

Once the coach has developed a picture of where they are heading (that is, the end goal), the next step is to fill in the detail by programming the phases of training and then each session and activity that will lead to the end goal. As the plan unfolds through the season, the coach should regularly monitor the athlete's and team's progress and adjust the plans as necessary, perhaps adding more emphasis on a particular aspect of physical development or focusing more closely on the tactical aspects that have been shown to be weak in lead-up competitions.

The following diagram illustrates the relationship of these elements of planning.

Figure 3.2: The relationship between the elements of planning



Phases of training

Most season plans are broken into three phases of training — the preparation phase, the competition phase and the transition phase.

Preparation phase

The beginning of the season needs to commence with a preparation phase, the purpose of which is to build the physical, technical and psychological skills and abilities that will be needed for competition. While this preparation phase may have some low-key competitions within it (for example, 'friendlies' for team sports, or club events for individual sports), the outcome of these competitions is normally not important as they are generally used as a marker to monitor athlete progress and to help the coach make necessary adjustments to their plan. It is important to allow sufficient time for this phase of training, as short cuts taken during this time may be exposed during the competition phase. By the end of this phase all physical capacities and technical elements should be developed to a high level.

Competition phase

Most sports' seasons will culminate in one peak event — either a competition (for example, regional championships), a grand final for a team sport, or in a more non-competitive sport, an event such as a games day or a 'come and try' day. This peak event will mark the end of the competition phase of the season. The focus of this phase of training is on producing the best possible results in the key competition event, and fitness work should be just sufficient to maintain the capacities developed in the preparation phase. The focus in this phase is usually on skills, and mental and tactical preparation.

This phase often includes some lead-up competitions where athletes can test their skill development and finetune their performance. Choosing these lead-up events can be critical to the success of the plan, ensuring that the athlete maximises both their preparation for the main competition and also their recovery between each competition. Going into each of these lead-up competitions with a clear goal will help athletes to stay focused on the aim of that specific competition. Goals for a lead-up competition may in fact be process goals (for example, move the ball quickly from defence to attack at each change of play), rather than outcome goals (for example, win the game by five points). Setting process goals during the lead-up competitions can help to keep athletes focused on the important elements of their performance. This will ultimately assist them to reach their final outcome goal at the peak competition. For team sports with weekly games that culminate in a grand final, athletes will need to perform well each week to ensure that the team makes it to the final series.

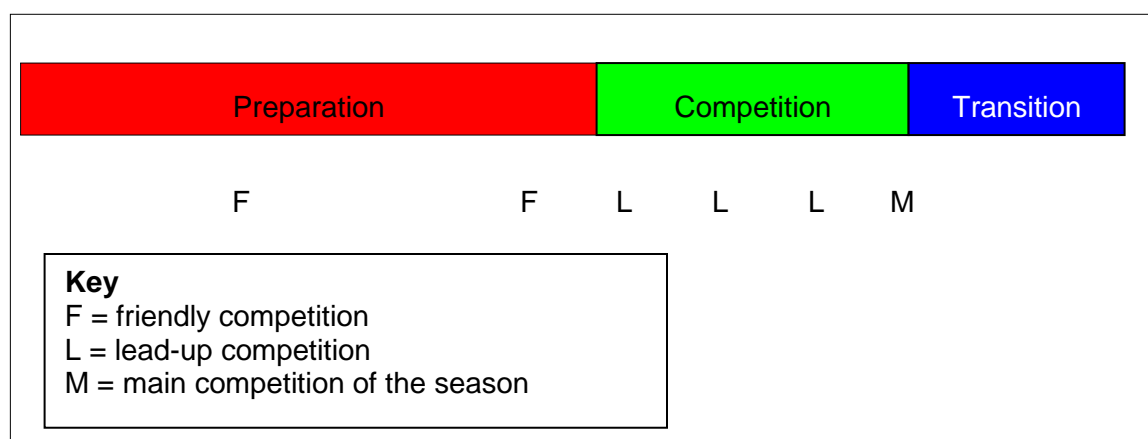
The challenge for the coach is to adjust the athlete's training load to allow them to peak (or reach maximum athletic performance) at the time of the key competition. Peaking has both a physical and mental component, as do all phases of training. Many sports rely on the technique of tapering to provide the athlete with the best possible performance at their peak event/s. Tapering involves a reduction in the volume and intensity of training to allow the body maximum capacity to recover and repair prior to competition. Timing the taper to allow for peak performance at the main competition without allowing physical capacities to decline is like walking a tightrope. Athletes must have sufficient stimulus to maintain their peak physical preparation without overdoing it and entering the competition in a fatigued state. Careful management of nutrition and rest are also important when tapering.

Transition phase

After the peak competition is over, athletes wanting to continue in the sport will normally move into a transition phase of training where they may take a brief break to recover both physically

and mentally. They will then usually undertake some cross training or low-key games to maintain a level of fitness in preparation for the next season. Over a number of years this allows for progressive development of the athlete's physical capacities, with each season of training able to commence at a slightly higher volume and intensity than the previous year, as the athlete has maintained their fitness through the transition phase. This transition phase is also a good time for athletes to attend to any injury rehabilitation needs (for example, strengthening a weak shoulder).

Figure 3.3: The phases of training in a season



The duration, focus and intensity of each phase of training will vary for each sport and perhaps even for each individual in the squad/team, depending on their current level of physical, technical and psychological development. This is where it is critically important that the coach knows the athletes well — their individual physical abilities, strengths and weaknesses, and likes and dislikes — as this will influence planning for them.

The training plans on the following pages provide examples of season plans for gymnastics, cycling and netball.

Case study

Igor has been coaching a squad of talented junior middle-distance runners for several years. He has come to know the athletes well over the years and has recognised some very different preferences in the runners. Michelle is a talented 16-year-old who is also strong academically. She is an exceptional violinist and regularly competes in eisteddfods. Michelle is very good at balancing the various components of her life and always appears in control and focused, even at times when her workload is very high. She plans her time well and has clear goals for herself in all the aspects of her life.

Igor understands Michelle's need to be involved in planning her training. It is important to Michelle that Igor talks with her regularly about her progress and they discuss the training plan regularly to modify it around Michelle's workload.

Justin, on the other hand, is relatively new to the sport. He is a talented runner, but does not have much experience yet. Justin is always concerned with the times that he does in training, even when the focus of the activity is meant to be on skill, not speed. He gets very anxious about performance, to the point that if there is a tough training session coming up and he has not been happy with his times lately, he will find excuses not to attend the session.

Recognising that Justin is quite stressed about his training performance, Igor has decided to work quite differently with him. At the beginning of the season he spends some time with Justin discussing his goals, and they broadly map out the competitions he will do and the phases of training together. From then on, though, Igor does not discuss Justin's training plan with him in any great detail. Justin seems to prefer to deal with his training as it happens, rather than knowing in advance what he will be doing. He finds that he copes much better with the work if he does not have time to 'stew' over a difficult session or phase that is coming up in his program.

Some tips for building a plan

- . Work backwards from the peak event
- . Schedule in other lead-up events along the way to help track the athlete's progress
- . Consider the timing, duration, volume and intensity of workload of each phase of training and set minor goals for each phase
- . Build a series of session plans that will meet the minor goals for each training phase — once again it is often easiest to work backwards from the end goal for that phase

Building inclusive plans

When developing a plan, it is important to ensure that it meets the needs of all the athletes in the squad/team. This may require the coach to think about:

- . physical barriers to access (for example, facilities, modifying equipment, planning for other needs such as travel to 'away games')
- . social barriers to access (that is, team/squad dynamics and the coach's role in building these in a positive way).

The process of planning for an athlete with a disability is no different to the process for an able-bodied athlete. It is important to talk to the athlete about their abilities and any limitations they may have. Remember that they are the expert about their disability and will be the best resource for solutions to overcome it. In terms of planning, the coach may need to consider that progress for an athlete with a disability could be slower due to a physical or intellectual impairment and they may require additional support or modifications to equipment and activities. This can become increasingly difficult to manage in a more competitive environment with the added limitations of competition rules. Coaches need to think laterally and work with administrators and officials to break down unnecessary barriers. For example, in equestrian sports there are very strict rules about the riding equipment that can be used in competition. Riders with a disability, however, can be assessed and apply for an equipment exemption card that will allow them to use a special piece of modified equipment to allow them to compete, but will give them no unfair advantage in the competition.

Evaluating progress

Once the season plan is in place, it is important to think about how to evaluate the athlete's progress. Keeping records on athlete performance in both training and competition will help to monitor their progress over time and assist the coach to reflect on what modifications might need to be made to the training plan.

The coach's personal preferences will determine what system is used for keeping training records. For risk management reasons coaches should, as a minimum, keep a copy of the overall season plan and a copy of each session plan and any modifications made to a particular training session. Including a space at the bottom of each session plan to make notes on these changes is a good idea. It is also good to get in the habit of taking 5–10 minutes at the end of each session to evaluate its success. Keeping notes on what worked well, what did not, how specific athletes coped with the session, and ideas for what to include in the next session is a very useful exercise. For example:

Session evaluation

- 1 'Knee high' drill was a disaster. My explanation was not clear enough and none of the kids got the point of the exercise. Need to spend time next session explaining this better and use Clayton as an example.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 2 | Paul was very sluggish today. Need to talk with him and check how he is feeling. Looked really slow and tired. Workload too heavy for him? May need more recovery time between these tough sessions. |
| 3 | Movement around the field was much better today. Need to look for a different activity to reinforce this next week. |

Setting goals for the season and each phase of training that are specific and measurable will help the coach with evaluation. As a coach progresses through the season, having measurable goals for specific phases makes it much easier to check if the program is on track. It is important to remember that in most sports there will always be some 'gut feeling' from the coach about how an athlete is progressing — it is impossible to measure everything. It can also be useful to meet with an assistant coach at key points throughout the season to check their opinion of athlete progress.

Scheduling review periods into the planning process can also be helpful, both to measure performance and to actually make modifications to the plan before the key competition. Regular checks on performance are better than irregular ones, as they allow the coach to make smaller adjustments to the plan before things go too far off the rails.

There are many reasons why a plan may need to be modified:

- . injury/illness
- . initial goals were inappropriately set — too high or too low
- . athlete development has not occurred according to plan
- . non-sport factors have impacted on the plan (for example, school, work)
- . the aims of the athlete have changed
- . access to facilities or equipment has changed.

The process of modifying the plan should be based on:

- . a re-evaluation of the athlete's goals
- . a reassessment of the levels of fitness and technical skill of the athletes
- . an evaluation of the competition that they will be facing (for example, capitalising on weaknesses in the other team/competitors)

- . adjustments should be discussed with the athletes and/or parents so they understand why the plan has changed.

Evaluating planning processes

At the end of the season it is also important for a coach to review the effectiveness of their plan. This can be done by speaking with athletes, parents and other coaching staff to get their opinions on the season. Some questions a coach should consider include:

- . Were the goals realistic?
- . What did the athletes achieve by the end of the season? What were their strengths?
- . What weaknesses remained?
- . Did training sessions prepare the athletes physically and mentally for the level of competition in which they were competing?
- . Was there adequate opportunity for recovery within and between sessions, or were the athletes becoming ill, injured and run down?
- . Did the plan allow for the other elements of the athletes' lives (for example, school and social commitments)?
- . What should I do differently next time?

A review of the season should also include the coach reflecting on their own coaching styles and methodologies. Some key questions a coach should ask themselves include:

- . What aspects of my coaching did I plan to improve this season?
- . What were some indications of improvement (try to think of some specific examples)?
- . What areas did I have difficulty with (for example, modifying activities to suit the needs of a specific individual, or keeping communication focused on positive performances)?
- . How can I avoid these difficulties next season?
- . What specifically do I want to work on to improve my coaching (and thus the athletes' performance) next season?

Summary

For many coaches, planning the training season can seem quite a daunting task. Using the information-gathering, goal-setting, programming and reviewing model outlined in this chapter,

coaches can take a logical, stepped approach to planning and, through open communication with the athletes, develop a plan that will meet their individual needs.

Remember, good planning will lead to better performance and more enjoyment for both the coach and the athletes.

References and further reading

Australian Sports Commission 2005, *Disability Education Program Activity Cards*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra.

Australian Sports Commission 2005, *Playing for Life Activity Cards*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra.

Australian Sports Commission 2001, *Give it a Go!: including people with disabilities in sport and physical activity*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra.

Australian Sports Commission website (www.ausport.gov.au).

Bompa, T 1983, *Theory and Methodology of Training*, Kendall Hunt, Dubuque, Iowa.

Galvin, B and Ledger, P 2003, *A Guide to Planning Coaching Programs*, Sports Coach, Leeds, United Kingdom.

Goodman, S (ed.) 1993, *Coaching Athletes with Disabilities: general principles*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra.

Pyke, F (ed.) 2001, *Better Coaching*, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra.

Rushall, B and Pyke, F 1990, *Training for Sports and Fitness*, Macmillan Education Australia, Melbourne.

Snyed, S 2006, *How to Coach Sports Safely*, Sports Coach, Leeds, United Kingdom.

Sports Coach UK website (www.sportscoachuk.com).

Stafford, I and Balyi, I 2005, *Coaching for Long Term Athlete Development*, Sports Coach, Leeds, United Kingdom.

Appendix 2:

Skills identification matrix

Use the first column of the table below to list the important skills of your sport. You may also like to give them a ranking for the order of their importance to good performance. Then use the 'Athlete' columns to note down the athletes' current ability level for each of these skills. A coding system (for example, 1 = strong at this skill, and 5 = weak at this skill) may help to summarise their abilities. You may prefer to modify this table to suit your individual needs and preferences.

Skills of the sport	Athlete's name:	Athlete's name:	Athlete's name:	Athlete's name:	Athlete's name:
Technical skills					
Skill 1:					
Skill 2:					
Skill 3:					
Skill 4:					
Skill 5:					
Skill 6:					
Tactical skills					
Skill 1:					

Skill 2:					
Skill 3:					
Skill 4:					
Skill 5:					
Skill 6:					
Physical skills					
Speed					
Strength					
Power					
Endurance					
Flexibility					
Balance					
Agility					
Other					
Mental skills					

Skill 1:					
Skill 2:					
Skill 3:					
Skill 4:					
Skill 5:					
Skill 6:					
Maturity and experience					
Physical maturity					
Emotional maturity					
Social maturity					
Playing experience					
Communication skills					
Other					

Appendix 3:

Athlete goals

Use the table below to record goals for the athletes. Do not forget to make them SMART — specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (that is, set a date for their achievement).

Athlete name:

Date:

Technical skills

Tactical skills

Physical skills

Mental skills
Other