The Athlete Bank Account (ABA)

The ABA is a set of scales that determine whether we are likely to be injury-free and in a high-performance state, or not. Each and every week, the balance of all forces, actions, and behaviors will tip the scales one way or the other.

There are no neutral actions or states. Every action moves us closer to our performance goal or takes us further away from it. What do you think the single most powerful influence on our bank account is? The answer, believe it or not, is our posture; the shapes and joint positions when we sit and stand.

Posture is the foundation of everything that we do, and as it is our greatest opportunity as well as our greatest threat it defines the idea that:

"Every moment moves us closer to mastery or further away from it."

The structure and function of the body – deficits/limitations

Broadly speaking, our musculoskeletal systems (the muscles and bones that move us) have two layers: an outer layer of large, strong 'mover' muscles and an inner layer of smaller, tonic muscles. Tonic muscles are designed to work a lot of the time, which is helpful as they are the muscles that largely hold us up and stabilise our skeleton and joints when we move.

Weakness of our inner, stabiliser muscles (termed deficits) is very common and is a typical cause of stress injuries, such as sore backs and shoulders. As well as being a strong risk factor for injury, deficits limit the performance of the big muscles because the joints can't achieve optimal shapes and forces. Deficits may be due to the way we use our bodies, such as sitting on our bums watching TV, or they may be the results of design imperfections.

All of the mechanical functions of the body – strength & power, quickness & agility – can be improved if the deficits and limitations are identified and targeted. The key messages are:

1. Because everything connects even the smallest or most imperceptible factors matter (e.g. posture), and
2. Every moment counts – am I reinforcing the wrong action or pattern or am I encouraging a better one?

"Build from the small stuff out."

Every day (the body is a 24hour machine)

Long-term athlete development is to sport what school is to a traditional career. Thousands of hours are needed – perhaps as many as ten thousand. That's a very big number. Divided by 365, the number of days in a year, the answer is more than 27. If you practised for only 1hour every day of the year it would take more than 27 years to accumulate the number of hours believed necessary to achieve mastery.

Whatever the precise number, the ***only*** way that any person can expect to reach a very high level of performance is to contribute something every day.

Example:

Each week:	*total hours:*
2 training sessions	3
2 school PE periods	1.5
1 game	1.5
	6 hours of conditioning 'opportunity'

There is a range of opportunities at school and training, including:

- Postural and mechanical fundamentals of exercise and injury-free
- Speed, agility, and quickness conditioning
- Work capacity (esp. cardiovascular capacity)
- Adopting the attitude of an athlete: the 'big engine' personality

"Every minute available provides an opportunity."

The 'big engine' personality

Sir Isaac Newton's law of inertia states that, unless acted upon by an outside force, a body in motion will stay in motion while a body at rest will stay at rest. Human behavior operates the same way. Your desire and capacity for exercise (and activity in general) is proportionate to the amount of work you are used to doing.

A big engine drives confidence and ambition, self-expectation and self-responsibility. The more you do, the more you have to lose and the harder you will work to defend your efforts and achievements. The foundation of athletic development is your capacity for work.

"The simplest and most overlooked quality in every champion is the amount of work they are prepared to do."

Practice makes perfect/makes permanent

The main law of training (of all sport) is adaptation or change. Long-term development is simply adaptation, due to a variety of influences and in a host of different ways, over a long time period – years.

There are two fundamental components to the process of long-term adaptation:

1. Understanding your priorities
2. The accumulation of the elements of change

Priorities

Athletic capacities interact and they are, therefore, co-dependent (vertically integrated). Two of the most basic athletic qualities are core strength and stability, and work capacity.

Mechanically speaking the body is weakest in the area immediately above the pelvis and below the last rib – the core. As the body's largest articulation point, the core is vulnerable if the muscles that stabilise it are not strong and engaged correctly.

Deconditioning of the core muscles can begin from a very young age (5y/o - school age) and, because a weak core destabilises the whole body and thereby impairs physical learning, it is a foundation capacity for ***everything*** else.

Work capacity is to your physiology what commitment is to your behavior; it raises everything up. Simply put, it is the amount of work one can do. It is defined according to the job but broadly we can think of it as encompassing cardiovascular capacity (because this is the physiological process that ultimately underpins all metabolism) and time on task. For swimmers this means the hours every week in the pool, for cyclists the hours on the bike, and for running sports it is the hours spent on the feet.

What's especially important about our general capacity for work is that, like cardiovascular capacity, it underpins the pursuit of other capacities. For example, if I am unfit and not used to spending time on my feet I will not be able to regularly train high intensity capacities such as quickness, agility, or speed. In so much as the outcome of any development process is the product of the work done and the frequency with which the work can be done, a low capacity for work is a significant limitation.

Accumulating the elements of change

The human body resists change. It uses a process called homeostasis to keep specific internal parameters at set values, such as body temperature. It also resists change, ironically, due to motor learning that underlies skill development.

Hundreds of hours spent performing a specific action embeds a set of instructions that are not easily moved.

To modify an existing set of the instructions we have to accumulate a volume of new actions to exceed the day to day repetition of the current habit. This is the most significant expression of the athlete's bank account.

The doctrine of the ABA: "Each and every week, the balance of all forces, actions, and behaviors will tip the scales one way or the other", tells us that to change a habit we can't

merely apply a new pattern. We have to apply the new pattern more or less all of the time in order to overcome the inertia of the current habit. This, more than anything else, is the reason our skills and actions tend not to evolve once they are in place. We simply don't generate enough momentum each day to displace our habits.

For sports people strength and conditioning should not be an end in itself. It matters only to the extent that it improves the quality of sports practice. For this reason it is essential that what's learnt or developed in conditioning is applied at practice. The greater the overlap between conditioning and sports practice, the greater the improvement in performance.

Summary

1. Every moment moves us closer to mastery, or further away from it
2. Build from the small stuff (muscles, posture), outwards
3. Build a functionally strong core and a very large capacity for work
4. Don't stop. There is no time to waste and your results will be the equivalent of your work ethic – how well you manage your priorities each and every day
5. Long term athlete development is about developing and accumulating skills = brain power. I have a saying for my athletes:

   "I will take smart over brave any day but champions are made of both."