

# A New Journey

Published 10 days ago by [Kelvin Giles](#)

young swimmer takes a breath during a swimming session doing front crawl



Image © Shutterstock.com

I am starting another swimming season journey with a young (about to turn 12) athlete where I am trying to create an appropriate outcome for her performance aims and, at the same time, stick to what I have learned over the years about the development journey. What I write here is me 'thinking out loud' so don't expect some level of prose that is fit for high-level publication. If a word or phrase makes you think about your journey a little better, then my sharing might have been of some value.

Because I need to keep referring back to all the systems, strategies, research and conversations I have encountered about the development journey I have to be adaptable and flexible in what I create as a journey. I could easily just follow the rhythms and systems set out by the sport and school, but this would mean a failure on my behalf because both school and sport environments are tainted with watered-down adult 'high performance' language and strategies. If I am to 'fit the program to the athlete' (and not the other way around) I will need to adapt to what I see happening in front of me every session / cycle / phase and not try to blindly follow a written program. I will need to react to the ever-changing growth and development characteristics that she will bring to the table. I will need to create a journey that is appropriate to this individual and not one that is solely based on what others do or what the sport deems necessary. Far too often the sport can create its own paradigm that is not appropriate to the individual needs of the athlete. For example, I still see in the sport of swimming the notion that volume is a bio-motor quality when it plainly isn't.

My first action (and a continuing one) was to understand her current background in terms of technique, training frequency / density, previous training intensity and volume, and any social / personal changes. This examination enabled me to know 'where she is now' so that I could put together and appropriate journey to 'where she wanted to be' in (a) 6 months time and (b) the following years if she remained in the sport.

I have spent nearly all my coaching life with athletes in the 18 years and above age group and now I am trying to weave together a journey for a 12-year-old. I preach a load of things to do with the developing athlete and here I am just 2 years into a journey with a very young athlete having to walk my own talk. Here are some scattered thoughts that illustrate my rationale and decision-making for the countless elements facing me. Only time will tell how many mistakes I will make but I am hoping that I get some things right:

*First thing was to let her embrace the fact that she would be competing against many young specialists (10 sessions per week in one sport only) so the focus would always have to be on setting a personal best in training (win the workout) and competition – the journey had to remain a personal one and not one dictated to by rankings and qualifying times. The idea was to delay the 'adultification' of this young person by only agreeing to elements of the sport and school calendar that were helpful (not an easy task, especially when the culture of the school or Club is in opposition to a long-term plan). This was always a matter of trading off certain things as both the sport and the school had processes that were about 'winning now', 'selection', 'championships' and 'points' all of which add to the problem that finally results in participation numbers falling at a rapid rate in the early years of High school. Not every battle*

*was won but, hopefully, by reducing the impact of the 'winning at all ages' system in the sport and school environment, the outcome will be less traumatic.*

*Building on her all-round development in the previous year her swimming-specific commitment this year moved from two sessions per week to three per week – hopefully an appropriate increase. The volume of specific work also took a little step forward from 500-700m per session to 700-1200m per session. This increase in load was due to the need for her to take on the 100m versions of each stroke as opposed to the 50m versions she had dealt with as an 11-year-old.*

*As the commitment grew so did the need for ever-improving out-of-sport life management in terms of sleep and nutrition and the academic and social changes that the change to High School was to bring.*

*The training week and many of the individual sessions are organised so she is exposed to all elements of the journey e.g. speed, speed endurance and endurance inside a balance between technical, tactical, physical and behavioural development. The emphasis between these layers is determined by her status in the session – again the session is written in pencil. It was never going to be a slow-to-fast plan over the relevant 6-month period to the main competition season.*

*I also continue to enable the sports-specific actions and postures to grow out of a wide and deep general movement vocabulary, so I ensured that the training week visited general, related and specific activities in a balance that is appropriate to this unique individual. Last year's Swimming program that was followed by her Athletics program gave me the chance to work out this balance and there is a large proportion of 'general' work alongside the specifics of the two sports.*

*How she learns is a central decider in what the session looks like. This means that while I may only be concentrating on a couple of technical points in the session or cycle, there is plenty of variety and variability in the activities. Her techniques of Sprinting, Throwing and Jumping in her Athletics season and the techniques of Freestyle, Backstroke, Breaststroke, Butterfly, starting and turning have to be learned and progressed by using as many 'learning' tools as possible. She has to be exposed to the implicit learning of puzzles, questions, external focus and analogies alongside some appropriate explicit instruction. For example – she was timed for a Freestyle tumble turn from 12m out from the wall – turn – and back out to the 12m mark – "find ways of beating your time". She had to choose an idea, tell me what it was, and then try it several times. When it came to the part about actually driving off the wall, I reminded her of all the squatting, landing and jumping activities she was doing in her Athletic Development workouts. She also remembered 'Toes Up', 'Punch the feet into the ground', from her sprinting sessions on the track which helped her assemble some creative solutions to the turn.*

*Seldom does she do isolated drills unless she is finding it difficult to get a movement pattern right in the required speed and complexity of the pattern. I always try to get her to learn the desired specific action / posture within the total movement pattern. This learning also has to occur at a range of speeds and complexities so that it is resilient. She seems to be learning / consolidating the 'rotate, reach, catch, pull' element of her stroke development without having to revert to isolated drills.*

*Knowing that the speed of movement alters the technical model I keep the speed at no slower than 75% of her competition speed. The first question about endurance is – 'what does she have to endure?' Can't see the point of enduring a speed of movement (technique) that is too far removed from what she will have to achieve in competition. First thing is to have a technical model that holds up under appropriate speed then slowly bombard it with increased speed, fatigue and pressure in manageable doses. Her stroke skill acquisition is being learned across a range of intensities.*

*So far so good. After 2 cycles of 3 weeks (18 sessions) she has an attempt at putting what she has learned into a competition (November 30<sup>th</sup>). The stroke issue carries just two elements to check during the race. The starts and turns again carry simple cues that she has learned to own. Her job is to be self-coached and to do this we use the warm-up to give her the chance of choosing the cues and demonstrating them to me.*

*It is always interesting to watch the overall reaction to competition with the very young athlete. They get surrounded by teachers, parents, peers and officials whose language revolves around results and ranking. We spend the day talking about the main opposition – herself and the clock. “There is a season best on offer today and you need to beat Ella to get it.” Not sure how much this helps but I never change the conversation because I know that everywhere and everyone else will be consumed by and talking about ‘winning’ and ‘medals’. Our ‘de-brief’ will be led by her as she ticks off the cues and gives herself a mark out of 10 for each one. She has been taught to start with those things that were done really well and then she can add anything that needs to be better. Then it is on to the next challenge of the day with no reference to her placing or what the opposition has done – seems to suit her quite well. The great thing about sport, whether training or competition, there is always another opportunity to get that best performance, another mountain to find and climb, another season or personal best to have a go at.*

*We keep to ourselves straight after the race and keep it just me and her while she gets her breath. Then she has to have a think about what she thought had happened. The most appealing comments she made today after her races were: “The turns were better – I was closer to the wall”. “I might need to tuck into a smaller ball and try to knock more tiles off the wall”. “I think the legs were right in the 100Free – little then BIG”. I am hoping that this means she has an awareness of what she is doing under speed, fatigue and pressure.*

*My job is to find the activities where she can improve certain flawed elements and at the same time continue to consolidate those things that seem to be becoming more consistent. The ‘head position’, ‘earlier catch’ and ‘longer pull’ for both freestyle and backstroke are beginning to be more consistent when not under pressure so there is still a long journey ahead for these fundamentals.*

*Her ability to sustain an appropriate speed in the longer events is still a long way off being optimal. The trap is waiting for me to do too much, too soon in this area of physiology. The biggest tool I can create to get her to improve in her ability to sustain is to help her understand pace judgement so the idea is to set up a series of activities where she has to know at least three different speeds and how to move in and out of them. We have several years (and not 5 minutes) for her to adapt physiologically to the events but there could be some fun and variety in learning different speeds. My experience in 400m Track sprinting might come into play here where my athletes learned to “Punch”, “Dance”, “Gather” and “Hit” as part of the race model. I wonder if this might work here?*

*At the moment the resilience and repeatability progression is being done using some prescriptions used with my 400m and 800m Track runners. Mike Hurst (a colleague at the cutting edge of 400m Track sprinting in Australia) will recognise some of these units of work that I have transposed and adapted to the pool workout e.g. 3x3x300; 3x2x300; 300+200, 300+150, 300+100; descending recovery clock of 5x200; 200RP+200Max; etc.*

*The starts and turns are starting to become more understood and it is interesting to watch as she tries to convert the gym power and strength she has into these unique movement and force patterns. I, like many other coaches, still battle with the problem that “what is gained in the gym usually stays in the gym” and so I always on the look-out for those activities that bridge this gap. We have developed some fun underwater challenges for distance and time that are part of the speed and power starts to the session. She is at the stage now where she has started to choose new puzzles to solve in these elements (born of the great work of Greg Thompson in his Primary School PE lessons).*

*Enough for now – she is in the last week of her Primary School journey before having the Summer break before starting high school in late January 2020. We have 23 pool sessions before she commences the competition season proper so plenty of chances for me to learn.*

[You can find out more about me by visiting my coaching profile](#)

*If you enjoyed this you can find all my other ConnectedCoaches blogs [here](#).*

*Login to follow, share, comment and participate. Not a member? [Join for free now.](#)*