Malcom Arnold on Colin Jackson's development

by Jim Alford

Malcolm Arnold is the current Director of Coaching for the British Athletics Federation. Formerly he was the Chief Coach responsible for sprints and hurdles. In more than 20 years of coaching international class athletes, he has worked with, among others, the 1993 110 metres hurdles World Champion and world record holder Colin Jackson (GBR).

NSA: Can you say something about how you first met Colin Jackson and what your first impressions were?

MA: I first met Colin when he was approximately 14 years of age. I attended a prize giving at his Regional Schools Athletics day, when I was National Coach in Wales. Even as a young athlete his reputation had gone before him. He was a very good all round athlete and featured prominently in most ‘power’ events. He did quite well (not outstandingly well) in schools competitions and he competed in numerous events in the National Young Athletes League for Cardiff AAC. I think his strength was that he had already decided that Athletics was for him! He was a very bright, alert young man, who had an obvious attraction to the sport across the spectrum of sprinting, jumping and throwing.

NSA: Was there anything you had to emphasize particularly during the early stages of his training? If so, how did you go about it?

MA: He worked with a local coach at that time, when I was coaching Nigel Walker (13.51sec). Colin eventually wrote to me, asking if he could join my coaching group. Ultimately he did at the age of 17 years. Initially, he trained around 4 times per week, increasing to some 12-14 sessions per week in 1993-4. The first project was to improve his hurdle clearance technique. He did not have a very good ‘natural’ posture and tended to walk awkwardly with toes pointed out. This was cured very quickly once Colin became aware of it. It was evident, even at this early stage, that Colin was very perceptive and a very quick learner of physical skills. Good clearance technique came very quickly. He was quite small at this stage and to this day is probably the smallest hurdler on the scene (1.80m/74kg).

NSA: What do you consider to be the main attributes that helped Colin to become the world record holder?
MA: His natural strengths were his percepti
on and understanding of the training pro
cess, his ability to work hard, his natural psy
chological strength and an excellent basic
speed. He was very good at jumping, throwing
and running events and jumped 7.96m (w)
as a junior. There was some discussion when
he was a junior about doing the decathlon or
becoming a long jumper. However, when he
became World Junior Champion in Athens
and ran 13.44sec, it was obvious that his fu
ture lay in hurdling!

It is during these formative years that I had
the greatest and most important input. Colin
is very interested in the training process and
gives very valuable feedback to me in the
coaching situation. As the years have gone
by, my input has diminished, because of his
excellent understanding. I now tend to oper
ate as a consultant rather than a coach. I
think that is not unusual in the coaching
process.

NSA: What sort of work would he do to
develop:
  a) Endurance
  b) Speed
  c) Technique
  d) Flexibility?

MA: In the early years, the work was set out
in the following fashion:
Endurance took the form of building up a
sound general base of aerobic fitness through
steady running and general exercise circuits.
Aerobic fitness was not his strength and he
found very great difficulty in this aspeet of his
work.

Speed work came as an overlay, after aerobic
work and strength endurance activities. Ses
sions were split between speed endurance
and absolute speed development (read the
B.A.F. book on hurdling for examples of the
activities).

Hurdling technique was first developed over
repetitions of 6-12 hurdles and then refined
by running at speed over 2-12 hurdles. I am a
great believer in developing hurdling tech
nique over a larger number of hurdles (speci
ficity).

Flexibility was developed by the usual tradi
tional methods, concentrating particularly
upon the hip joint and hamstring and lower
back complex of joints and muscles.

One of the significant reasons for his success
is the development of explosive strength
through lifting heavy weights. Colin has a
very high relative strength, which explains his
dynamic approach to hurdling.

NSA: In what year was Colin first able to
enjoy the opportunity for warm weather
training and at what times of the athletic year
and for how long a period does he now find it
most beneficial?

MA: Colin first went warm weather training
with my group of athletes, when he first
joined me. We went to Portugal at the time of
the year when the athletes were starting their
preparations for the competitive season. This
timing meant that the athletes could return to
the UK in good form, ready for the important
early meetings. Since he has been able to
afford to go warm weather training more fre
quently, he has spent long periods of time in
Australia and Florida, but mainly in prepara
tion periods. This has allowed a high quality
of work to be undertaken away from the
British winters! He will stay away for periods
of up to three months at a time.

NSA: In view of Colin Jackson's superb per
formance over the 60 metres hurdles indoor,
do you consider his preparation as being one
of double periodisation and do you consider
indoor competition as an essential part of the
elite hurdler's training?

MA: There have been two types of approach
to Colin's indoor programme over the years.
There has been a specific preparation for
indoor events. There have also been years
when he has merely reduced the volume and
frequency of work three to four weeks before
indoor competition and spent a little time on
speed work and block practice, before com
peting. The latter process has been the more
usual one.

NSA: What are your views on the placement
of the starting blocks and starting technique
for the 110 metres hurdles in general?

MA: Starting in sprinting and hurdling is a
very specific skill and has to be prepared for
and practised. It is both a physical and a men
tal skill. Concentrating on the communication
link between the starter and the athlete is
paramount. Starting in hurdling is a little
more complex than in sprinting. The sprinter
can run as hard as possible. So can the hur
dler, but he must fit seven or eight strides
very accurately into the gap between the
starting line and the first hurdle! The first
thing an athlete must learn to do is to react to
the sound signals from the starter and to
ignore all else. The second thing he must do
is ignore all other signals from other athletes
and the spectators. Once the athlete has
learned that discipline of reacting to the
starter, he is on the way to starting success.
The other aspect of starting is the physical one. Colin Jackson has a very high strength weight ratio, developed by weight lifting. This means that he can propel his body very quickly at the first hurdle. His starting is successful because of these factors.

Block placement is to suit the athlete. The seven stride approach to the first hurdle severely compromises the starting position and should be avoided. The eight stride approach is to be commended, together with a 'medium' position in the blocks.

NSA: What form does Colin’s warm up for competition generally take?

MA: Colin’s warm up for competition varies in length according to climate. In Britain’s inclement weather it can take forever but, in hot and humid conditions, it will be shortened. The content of the warm up is as follows:

a) Jogging two laps.
b) Flexibility exercises as specified above for up to 40 minutes.
c) Striding - say 3x40m, increasing in speed.
d) Specific hurdles drills.
e) Starting rehearsal from the blocks.
f) Compete.

NSA: Does Colin pay any special attention to:

a) Diet, including ergogenic aids, vitamins sports drink etc.,
b) mental preparation.

MA: Colin takes great care with his diet during competition times, especially over weight control. He has no particular mental preparation programme.