

COMPETITION IS A GOOD SERVANT, BUT A POOR MASTER
SPEED SKATING CANADA COMPETITION AND EVENT REVIEW
CHILDREN ARE NOT MINIATURE ADULTS

Racing on Skates: Speed Skating is racing on skates. Internationally skaters race on sophisticated equipment, on adult size tracks and based on a tradition of always turning left. These rules define competition in Canada but:

- Developmentally is this most appropriate for Canadian children?
- What additional “racing on skates” opportunities might allow participants to experience the thrill of speed on ice while gaining developmental value?
- What role can speed skating play in the holistic development of all participants, who choose to participate in Speed Skating Canada's programs?

Competition is central to the speed skating experience, enabling participants to race on skates, at all stages of development. Event/competition experiences offer members many things: for athletes, an opportunity to measure the impact of practice, improvement of skills, and a battle of wits as each uses different tactics; for coaches, an opportunity to evaluate program effectiveness; for volunteers, officials and event organizers, an opportunity to provide a sense of pride and accomplishment, develop personal skills and hone team organisational skills. For all, competition provides an opportunity for social interaction, an incentive to work for further improvement, and an opportunity to gauge one's improvement against one's self and others.

Long Term Participant and Athlete Development. Canadian Sport for Life through Long Term Participant and Athlete Development¹ (LTP/AD) is a national program developed to be the basis of planning for sport excellence and the well being of Canadians. The LTP/AD is a recent model based on current scientific information available on children and adults. Speed Skating Canada (SSC) and other sports use the LTP/AD model to provide appropriate developmental-stage programs. Fundamental to the long-term development of individuals is an event/competition system which is compatible with and reinforces the objectives and outcomes of each LTP/AD developmental stage.

Competition: Servant or Master. It is natural that coaches, parents and athletes want to win; competition often drives training, dictating the type, volume, intensity and frequency of training. In an individual sport winning and personal best times are the most obvious and often thought of as important benchmarks for success. However, the objectives of each stage of development must also be considered in defining events/competitions and the establishment of benchmarks of success.

The primary objectives of physical and sport literacy², critically important for younger participants, and basic skills and knowledge which form the foundation for long term success, must be considered at least as important as winning. At the early developmental stages, physical and sport literacy goals are more appropriate than winning for long-term development as both a person and an athlete. If **competition** is to be **a good servant**³ rather than **a poor master**, the nature of the activities in speed skating events and competitions should reflect the appropriate goals for each developmental stage, including reinforcement of social, psychological and physical development objectives. Speed Skating must provide events/competitions appropriate for athletes in each stage of development from the “Learning to Train” through the “Training to Win” stages of development as part of

¹ *Canadian Sport for Life Long-Term Athlete Development Resource Paper V2* (Canadian Sport Centres, 2005)

² Physical literacy is the development of fundamental movement skills and fundamental sport skills that permit a child to move confidently and with control, in a wide range of physical activity, rhythmic (dance) and sport situations. Physical literacy also includes the ability to “read” what is going on around them in an activity setting and react appropriately to those events as defined in *Developing Physical Literacy. A Guide For Parents of Children Ages 0 to 12, A Supplement to: Canadian Sport for Life* (Canadian Sport Centres, 2008) p. 5.

³ Richard Way, Istvan Balyi, *Competition is a Good Servant but a Poor Master, A Supplement to: Canadian Sport for Life.*

Sport for Life, for lifelong participation in skating from the local to international levels.

Meaningful Competition⁴ implies a chance to succeed and even win but to be successful requires some uncertainty and excitement. Races where skaters are so spread out that they are essentially “racing on their own” do not have the necessary uncertainty and are neither fun nor worthwhile, providing limited challenge and minimal learning. Excitement is based on meeting and challenging uncertainty.

To be “meaningful” within the LTP/AD model a competition also has to have clear goals linked to the athlete’s development. The event/competition system should be structured to allow all athletes to compete in “meaningful” races that support their physical, tactical, technical, mental and social development. The appropriate level and type of competition as well as the progression from one level to another is critical to each athlete’s long-term development. The concept of continuous improvement or Kaizen⁵ underlies the progression of races. Kaizen or continuous improvement is drawn from the respected Japanese industrial philosophy.

Where Are We Now? For many National Sport Organizations, the competition structure has evolved over many years with structure and annual scheduling of most competitions based more on tradition than on sport science or an understanding of athlete development. “Although 90% of Canadians believe that sport has a positive influence on youth – they also believe that sport is overly-focused on competition to the detriment of promoting key values such as respect, accessibility, fairness, integrity and trust”⁶. Speed Skating Canada’s competition structure has evolved in parallel to SSC’s international success and in response to international competitive structures. The success is based on the tremendous efforts of dedicated volunteers working within this international framework and international competition calendar. This may or may not be aligned with the objectives of the stages of development defined in LTP/AD.

Where Do We Want To Be? To achieve the LTP/AD stages of development objectives, SSC must continually question what it does. By reviewing speed skating objectively it is possible to retain the best parts of what we do, consider alternatives, and generate new ideas. The LTP/AD project has provided National Sport Organisations with a well-documented model to study their sport systems and re-align all aspects of competition into coherent systems supporting the long-term development of all participants – athletes, coaches, officials, administrators and volunteers. By reviewing and, if necessary, adjusting the event/competition system so that it supports principles of LTP/AD, speed skating can ensure that skaters will be prepared to perform well in life and in competition, whether at regional, provincial, national or international level, while administrators and volunteers gain heightened satisfaction from participation.

How Do We Get There? This document is the first step of a process to help Speed Skating Canada not only review its events/competitions but more importantly set a framework for making longer term program decisions. It is intended as a foundational document establishing the principles for determining the potential scope of speed skating. Once adopted in principle it will be utilized as a framework for reviewing Speed Skating Canada’s events/competitions within the stages of development defined by Canadian Sport for Life. The Review Team will make recommendations, including potential implications, which will then be forwarded:

1. to the LTP/AD Working Group for consideration, then
2. to the appropriate standing committees of Speed Skating Canada to consider recommendations for change, then
3. for consideration by the membership at the AGM.

Why Guiding Principles? A set of guiding principles based on Sport for Life’s LTP/AD model and reflecting SSC’s values will be an objective foundation for event/competition recommendations. These recommendations and their rationale will be the starting point for decisions by SSC Board, Standing Committees, Branches and members.

⁴ The term meaningful competition is borrowed from *Rowing Canada’s LTAD Competition Review* p6

⁵ *Canadian Sport for Life Long-Term Athlete Development Resource Paper V2* (Canadian Sport Centres, 2005) p. 34.

⁶ *People and Sport* (Sport Matters Group, 2006) p.3

Speed Skating Canada Guiding Principles for Competition

To effectively review the existing event/competition system and propose new opportunities, it is essential to have a clear vision of how events/competitions service the mission, vision and values of Speed Skating Canada as well as the long-term participant and athlete development model. Programs must be clearly and coherently linked (training, competition/event, coaching, officiating and membership development) through principles that are the basis of all SSC activity. The principles apply to all levels and ages of participants but for the younger participants the phrase "*children are not miniature adults*" must be kept in mind for all of the principles.

These guiding principles stipulate that events/competitions should:

1. *Reflect Speed Skating Canada's values and True Sport's principles*

The purpose of Speed Skating Canada is to organize and coordinate the sport in Canada for the betterment of sport and its members. It is guided by six core values: Sport is an apprenticeship for life, Respect for others, Integrity, Excellence of effort, Safe, Healthy environment and Voluntarism.⁷

Speed Skating Canada is also committed to True Sport which is " ... a national Movement of communities and groups across Canada working to ensure a positive, meaningful and enriching experience for all who participate in sport. The True Sport Movement is based on the belief that good sport can help build lasting strengths in individuals, as well as healthy, vibrant communities and a more socially connected Canada. At the heart of True Sport there are four core values: fairness, excellence, inclusion and fun.⁸

This principle is included to ensure that the competition and event review stays aligned with the overarching goals of Speed Skating Canada and current Canadian sport trends, in addition to goals identified in the LTP/AD model and other related literature.

2. *Be a full partner in the Canadian sport delivery/youth development system*

Speed skating is only one activity in the mosaic of youth opportunity, all adding value to Canadian society. With its partner organizations, speed skating emphasizes fun and healthy living. Partner organizations include many non-sport activities such as the arts and various clubs, all working for positive youth development. Speed skating coaches, officials and administrators are not just technicians providing skating programs, but role models projecting and promoting positive human values. Through speed skating they promote sport and life skills transferable to other sports and life activities. The implied collaboration would also provide the opportunity for speed skating to learn from other sport organizations.

Factors that could be considered include learning to skate programs, length of season, unstructured play, other sports, and multi sport activities. This list does not define this principle but illustrates some of the issues for speed skating to consider in this partnership.

3. *Adjust to change in society*

For the sport to succeed, grow, and achieve Speed Skating Canada's stated purposes and values, it must adjust to changes in society. Traditionally these changes have been reactive but a review of the structure of events and competition is an opportunity to be proactive. Examples of these factors include social changes such as family, human resources including the roles of volunteers and professional staff, the development of virtual communities (social networking), travel costs, carbon footprint and issues such as the preference for certain ages to participate in team events.

⁷ Speed Skating Canada, *Mission, Vision, Values*, <http://www.speedskating.ca/mission-vision-values.cfm> (September 2008)

⁸ True Sport Foundation, *About True Sport*, <http://www.truesportpur.ca/index.php/language/en/category/39> (September 2008)

4. *Provide a pathway towards personal and sporting excellence for all participants*

The pursuit of excellence, most often defined as winning or medalling, has to be considered in the holistic context of having fun and meeting the objectives related to each stage of development. Today, competition is the very core of speed skating and events/competitions are often a primary means of attracting participants. Consideration of alternative events or types of competition is critical to expanding the attractiveness of the sport and pathways to excellence.

Because of Speed Skating Canada's Olympic success, speed skating is an elite sport in Canada and should continue to provide athletes with the opportunity to become the very best that they can be. The event/competition review must consider the relationship between the LTP/AD stages of development to the related age-appropriate events and other public displays of speed skating excellence such as national championships, team trials and international events. Optimal development and elite competition are not mutually exclusive but are intertwined and essential for Speed Skating Canada to meet its purpose and satisfy organization values.

5. *Be meaningful for all participants (skaters, coaches, officials, parents, volunteers)*

The event/competition system should be structured to allow all athletes to compete in "meaningful" races that support physical, tactical, technical, mental and social development. Each competitor must have a reasonable chance of succeeding either by winning or by meeting other challenges. Competition structures have evolved over many years. The structure and timing of many competitions are based more on tradition than on sport science and an understanding of athlete development. Traditionally speed skating events, especially championships, have been structured into chronological age categories. Meaningful events/competitions also must consider ideal ages and categories for learning to skate, competition age categories for males and females and season length.

The LTP/AD model has provided National Sport Organisations with an opportunity to reconsider their sport's basic framework. This review is intended to consider what event/competition does to support participant long-term development – athletes, coaches, officials, event administrators, administrators and volunteers. Potentially, adjustments to the event/competition system so it supports principles of LTP/AD, may well produce more skaters better prepared to perform well in life and in competition, whether at club, branch, regional, national or international levels.

The definition of "meaningful" will likely be different for stages of development, regions and even individuals. To be meaningful a competition must have defined purpose with stated goals.

6. *Be fun, safe, attractive and accessible to people of all ages, of all skill levels and from all different backgrounds*

Every person who wants to race on skates should have the opportunity to do so in a safe and affordable manner. These issues are shared by the True Sport movement. The issue of physical safety is one of Speed Skating Canada's values. But safety also implies free from harassment or interference with the individual. Fun, while covered under other principles, is the root of speed skating's success. Enhanced by its elite classification, speed skating can take positive strides to enhance accessibility for every child. *Developing Physical Literacy* identifies several underrepresented groups including: aboriginal youth, youth with a disability, girls (especially those from ethnic groups that have not traditionally valued physical activity), and disadvantaged inner-city youth.⁹ There are a great many issues regarding accessibility and many of these factors are outside Speed Skating Canada's control but others can be addressed. Some within speed skating's control include economics, personal and social perceptions, type of skates and uniforms. These are included as examples of issues that can be considered to make speed skating as accessible as possible. The concept of attractive relates to how the

⁹ *Developing Physical Literacy. A Guide For Parents of Children Ages 0 to 12, A Supplement to: Canadian Sport for Life*, (Canadian Sport Centres, 2008) p. 28.

speed skating and the events and competitions are perceived by Canadians. If they are perceived as attractive the sport will grow.

The basic premise is that the more accessible the events and competitions are the more skaters will participate.

7. Utilize the basic characteristics identified in the LTP/AD and other literature to define the event/competition objectives for each stage of development

Acceptance of the LTP/AD model implies the objectives for each stage¹⁰ with the data in three domains, physical, psychological and motor skill, defining the program. The question is: "Does the program define the events/competitions or do the events/competitions define the program?" The LTP/AD is a relatively new initiative and while programs likely adhere to many of the principles they may not have had time to adapt to others. Program and events/competitions are naturally intertwined. Therefore the review has to make recommendations based on this principle. Issues to be considered include program objectives such as fundamental movement skills, physical literacy, as well as the physical, psychological and motor domains.

8. Utilize the basic characteristics identified in the LTP/AD and other literature in the selection of event/competition activities and skills for each stage of development

An overriding principle in event activity selection should be the relationship between program objectives and the types of activities offered to the participants of each stage. The activities and skills included in events/competitions selected should highlight the goals and objectives of the stage. The most obvious reason is to focus attention on the developmental stage objectives. Having events related to the stage objectives should help parents to directly see the benefits of the programs, help teacher/coaches to maintain focus on these goals and finally and perhaps most importantly it should provide both motivation and direct reinforcement to the participants. Once the overarching goals of a program and the developmentally appropriate tasks are identified, events, including competitions for each stage of development, must be developmentally appropriate.

An example of another factor is that many sports have made adjustments to scale equipment to the physical size of children (***children are not miniature adults***). Balls were made smaller and lighter, rackets smaller, distance between bases adjusted, fields and goals smaller, children play hockey on half rather than full ice surfaces. The rationale for changing was to make the field of play and equipment more specific to the size of the children so they would have relatively similar tasks and the similar probability for success as adults. If the size of the track was adjusted to the size of the athlete would the skater have the same number of stride rate and patterns similar to adults?

High performance programs require larger international ice surfaces but are these surfaces necessary at youth level? Are there other alternatives to improve existing rink safety and reduce the need for large ice surfaces at younger ages? Does speed skating eliminate smaller facilities because of high performance requirements? Is the challenge not to find safe means to allow every Canadian access to this opportunity anywhere there is ice?

9. Define and celebrate success in relation to each stage goals and objectives for all participants.

Skater preparation for events should be related to stage of development, including elements such as skills, agility, tactics, etc. Coaches and parents need to understand that speed skating is more than winning or the times achieved. The reward system must consider all participants and reward the implementation principles

But we need to be careful not to leave behind what our sport is all about: racing on skates. With that in mind, this review acknowledges that the sport is about both racing to win and measuring individual improvement. This is achieved by rewarding personal achievement while keeping young skaters in touch with older club, provincial, national and international skaters. Success should not be achieved at the expense of participation.

¹⁰ Canadian Sport for Life Long-Term Athlete Development Resource Paper V2 (Canadian Sport Centres, 2005) p 37-44.