

LACROSSE FOR LIFE

A LONG-TERM ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT MODEL FOR LACROSSE

// By Duane Bratt

When children begin school, one of the core subjects they take is mathematics. However, they do not start with derivatives and calculus. Instead, they spend time learning what numbers are. This advances to adding and subtracting, then moving on to multiplication and division. It is only in late high school that calculus is finally introduced. Prior to studying calculus, years have been spent learning the key fundamentals of math.

This should be the same process in lacrosse. Unfortunately, at too early of an age advanced team tactics (ie. power plays) are introduced before fundamentals (ie. passing and catching) have been mastered. In a similar analogy, imagine a math student taking more tests than working on math problems with a teacher. Yet we do this in lacrosse, where we have young players playing more games than practicing.

Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) is an attempt by all sports, including lacrosse, to focus on natural stages of development; just like math class. Lacrosse's LTAD program is called Lacrosse for Life and was ratified unanimously by the Canadian Lacrosse Association in 2009. It is a framework for systematically training and developing physical, mental, and emotional capacities in athletes according to scientifically-recognized principles and stages of human development.

As a training, competition, and recovery model, it respects the natural stages of physical, mental, and emotional development in athletes. It applies to males and females in all three disciplines (box, men's field, and women's field). These stages are:

- Active Start, ages 0-6
- Fundamentals, ages 6-7 for females and 6-10 for males
- Learning to Train, ages 8-10 for females and 10-12 for males
- Training to Train, ages 11-14 for females and 12-16 for males
- Learning & Training to Compete, ages 15-21 for females and 17-23 for males
- Learning to Win, ages 17+
- Training to Win, ages 17+
- Active for Life, all ages



Based on clearly defined developmental stages, Lacrosse for Life provides recommendations for ratios of training-to-competition hours, points of emphasis in skills training, formats for competition, and more. When adapted to lacrosse, it provides coaches and administrators with clear guidelines for designing training and competition programs at every developmental stage to optimize long-term skills acquisition and performance.

Importantly, Lacrosse for Life allows athletes the flexibility to move between competitive and recreational lacrosse at almost any time of life. Following early athlete development in the first stages of training, and depending on talent, athletes may choose to pursue elite competition or join a recreational stream for fun and wellness. In this way, Lacrosse for Life supports lifelong wellness for the greatest number of participants even while promoting medal-winning performances.

The most visible changes that Lacrosse for Life introduces are important rule modifications at the active start and fundamentals stages. First, the net size has been shrunk from 4'x4' to 3'x3' for mini-tyke & tyke. Given that nets have been increased in major lacrosse due to the increased size of the goalies, it made sense to shrink the nets due to smaller goalies. This will lead to fewer goalies being hit in the head, fewer "easy goals" in the top corners, and improved shooting because there is less net. Second, it is recommended that mini-tykes play 3'v3' cross-floor lacrosse so that each player touches the ball more often. Third, the "fall

back" rule has been introduced for mini-tyke, tyke, and novice divisions. Whenever the goalie gains possession of the ball in the crease, all attacking players have to leave the offensive zone (no pressing). This will help teach players the importance of getting back on defence. Meanwhile, the goalie has to make a pass to a teammate outside of the dotted line. This forces the goalie to pass by preventing a player from just taking the ball in the crease. Fourth, changes have also been made to the degree of contact that is allowed. Depending upon the division, contact could be limited to body position (similar to basketball), equal pressure, place and push, or full cross-checking. This will improve individual defence by emphasizing positioning and footwork, and de-emphasizing brute force and intimidation.

At higher stages of learning & training to train, learning & training to compete, learning & training to win there are less rule changes and more information for coaches. This includes identifying the appropriate technical & tactical skills to introduce and refine, practice-game ratios, physical training windows for speed and strength, and mental skills for each development stage.

Lacrosse for Life's goal is for more kids to start playing, more kids to keep playing, and more athletes to achieve excellence in Canada's national summer sport. ♦

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