The United States has surpassed 300 million in population and the number of youth bowlers in USBC leagues stands at approximately 450,000. Bowling in the United States, from a youth development perspective, is loosely structured...relying primarily on individual local coaches and volunteers to develop bowlers.

Of course, certified coaches provide coaching and youth leagues provide opportunities at the local level in the United States. But, this is far less structured than some youth development programs in other parts of the world, especially in Asia. To illustrate, Malaysia, a country less than 10 percent of the size of the United States, has just under 1600 bowlers in its formal youth development program. Yet, in the 2006 World Youth Championships, Malaysia earned 8 medals (4 Gold and 4 Bronze). The United States earned 2 bronze medals, both from the same bowler.

This leads to some interesting questions when it comes to elite youth bowlers' development. How is youth development and coaching handled in each country? How effective are the systems? And, will Asian nations with strong development programs begin to dominate international competition?

**Youth development in Malaysia**

Malaysia is a country of less than 25 million people. If you ask any international coach which country has the best youth development program, they will all respond in unison, Malaysia.

Specifically, Malaysia is the blueprint of excellence when it comes to elite youth development modeled by other nations. In 2006, Malaysia will spend more than $2,000,000 on the U18 program alone. The development program consists of six levels of federally funded development: elite youth development (U12, U15, U18), National Youth Squad, National Team Back-Up squad and the National Team. And, with such support, this system has helped develop many champions.

Specifically, Malaysian bowlers earned 32 victories in 2006, including open events and international medal competitions. In 2006 alone, Malaysian bowlers earned medals at the Men's World Championships, Asian Championships and the Asian Games. And, they should be a main contender at the Women's World Championships in Mexico later this year.

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Moreover, Malaysian youth bowlers dominated last year's World Youth Championships, winning the individual events with a gold medal in Boys All Events, Girls All Events and the Girls Masters. In total, Malaysia earned 8 medals (4 Gold, 4 Bronze).

Malaysia has a history of investing in bowling knowledge. Nearly every well-known international coach has made a stopover in Malaysia. These include Sid Allen, Tom Kouros, Bill Hall and Bill Taylor. This investment is a hallmark of the Malaysian effort to build a bowling nation.

Development in Malaysia began with a small budget from the National Sports Council in 1988 with a pilot program initiated in a suburb of Kuala Lumpur (Selangor). Two coaches were sent to the United States for a six-month period to learn more about coaching. Allan Lee and Razib Yahya studied under Dick Ritger and Tom Kouros among others. It was a study trip and it was taken seriously and professionally. Upon their return, the development program was created.

Out of this program, coached by ex-national team veteran Allan Lee, came Shalin Zulkifli, a national team mainstay and world-recognized bowler. Zulkifli was named the World Bowling Writers Player of the Year and earned the 2001 World Tempins Masters title, the only woman to win. If you recall, Chris Barnes won this prestigious event last year.

In one year, the program expanded from one program to a program in every state. Today, the program has nearly 50 program sites, 1,500 bowlers and approximately 100 certified coaches.

Bowling in Malaysia is treated as an elite sport and has a well-structured elite youth development program organized by age-group: U12, U15, U18. Each year, a competitive national selection process chooses bowlers for each level. Along with a committee, determine if a bowler is prepared for the next level of training. In each age-group, in all of the 15 states, bowlers train under a coach, certified in the developmental curriculum. This structure is supported by paid staff to help run and manage the program in each state. Specifically, each has a full-time Development Officer and a full-time Chief Coach to manage the administrative and implementation of the national curriculum. Each program site has a paid part-time coach for each age group. Each part-time coach, working 7 hours weekly, is paid a monthly stipend of $100 to $200 depending upon certification level.

Development is the key. I personally wrote the youth curriculum as a developmental progression through which bowlers can develop to the next level based on a readiness for the increasingly advanced skills. Bowlers practice three times each week for two hours in each session under the guidance of a certified coach. In the training design, players learn new skills each week and the training is uniform across the entire country.

After graduating from the elite development program, the best elite bowlers are able to train in the National Youth program in centralized training in the Kuala Lumpur area. Bowlers have the opportunity to live at the Bukit Jalil Sports School housed on the grounds of the National Sports Council.

In addition to the youth development program, there is a national junior circuit throughout the year. More than 200 bowlers participate in each leg which is sponsored by several national and international companies with additional support from the National Sports Council. The government funds travel, lodging and a food stipend for a number of the bowlers to participate. Elite bowlers are supported to bowl in the Open tournaments throughout Asia. Each open event includes the Asian Bowling Federation Tour stop as well.

Coaching in the United States

We have about 450,000 youth bowlers here in the United States. These are geographically dispersed throughout the United States in about 6,000 centers. Most individual centers have a youth program, which means the average center has about 80 youth bowlers per center.

Many of these bowlers bowl in multiple leagues, and the age group of this 450,000 bowlers range from as young as 3 (possibly younger) to age 22.

USBC view of coaching

USBC fundamentally restarted a bowling coaching program in 1996 and rebuilt the program from scratch. In the initial stages of the coaching program there were...
two levels of coaching, Level I and Level II, that were specifically aimed at youth bowlers. The teachers of these classes were required to have been at the Level they were teaching for at least one year, and to teach a Level II class, the instructor also had to be a Level I coach for a minimum of one year.

The adult portion of the coaching program initially was Bronze, Silver and Gold levels. The Bronze class was taken as a three-day course with a test at the end. A coach had to be Bronze for a year, and then could take the Silver Class. The Silver Class was three days and included a test that was multiple choice, as well as an essay exam where the student watched a video of a bowler and explained what they would do, as a coach, to improve the student’s game.

The rigorousness, with which the tests were given, varied from instructor to instructor...making it easy to pass the class or very tough. Also, the difficulty of the tests, the material and the grading of any essays went up with each level.

The Gold Level was attained initially through appointment by a Board of Coaches administered by the USBC.

Since the merging of ABC/WIBC/YABA and USA Bowling Coaching into the USBC, the “coaching tree” has again changed, albeit slightly. No longer is Level I and II aimed exclusively at developing youth bowlers. The Coaching program has been merged into one curriculum with, starting at Level I and working its way up to Gold, all pertaining to all bowlers. The material and classes are now aimed at skill levels of bowlers instead of age groups. Whether this was a good decision or not remains to be seen.

The Gold Level has also been changed to a series of 4 discipline/skill sets that each coach must show an expertise in before becoming a Gold Level Coach.

According to the USBC, as of March 14 of this year, 29 Gold Coaches, 65 Silver Coaches, 270 Bronze Coaches, 2645 Level I Coaches and 347 Level II Coaches have been trained.

Development of bowlers

There are many pressures faced by youth coaches today, beyond just developing the athlete. Proprietors, in many cases, believe that the adult bowler is more important to the business than the youth bowler. Because of this “short term” outlook (more dollars now, not worried about developing new clientele), it becomes difficult to develop bowlers. There are certainly a number of center owners/managers who will work with coaches/youth directors. The practice time needed to develop bowlers can be costly.

The Level I and II programs do lay out a very specific method for leading youth bowlers through the stages of development from rolling the ball between the legs to taking a four-step approach to discussing the issues involved in timing. Most youth coaches in the country have at least a Level I class under their belt, and hopefully many now pursue Level II at a minimum.

However, there is no requirement, unless created by the center or the youth director, that any coach in a youth program has any type of formal training in coaching. This often leads to coaches who happen to be good bowlers becoming coaches just because they are good bowlers. Many times I’ve heard it said, just because a person is a good bowler does not make them a good coach. Conversely, just because a person is a good coach does not make them a good bowler.

Most of today’s youth coaches are volunteers (as they are at the youth level in many sports) however, unlike other sports, the coaches for High School and College are also volunteers. This causes many of the coaches at the higher levels to forego taking these classes to achieve the different levels of certification.

Is It successful?

This seemingly haphazard system seems to have worked over the long run:

- The 2006 RJL list of Top 100 coaches included 98 who are from the United States.
- The 2005 list included 99 coaches from the United States
- Of the 64 players on the PBA exempt list in the 06-07 season, 60 of 64 were born in the United States.
- At the International Friendship Games in 2005, the United States Junior Team USA claimed 9 Gold Medals (out of 12), 4 Silvers and 3 Bronze. This included the top 4 girls in the singles.
- At the 2006 Tournament of Americas the Team USA and Junior Team USA claimed 15 Golds, 9 Silvers and 5 Bronzes.
- Diantra Asbaty won the QubicaAMF World Cup, bringing home one of the two Gold medals given out in that event.

In summary, the system in place, while somewhat scattershot, is obviously effective at both developing bowlers and coaches. Considering the size of the population that bowls, it becomes very unrealistic to have a
highly structured program in effect for developing and accomplished bowlers throughout the United States, such as exists in Malaysia.

There are certainly parts of the program that leave much to be desired. High School coaches of “lettered” sports are required to take a class called the “National Federation of High School Sports Coaching and first aid training”. Something similar, designed for high school volunteer coaches, such as a Level 1 coaching class, would help. Having bowling center proprietors and youth directors who encourage and push their coaches to continue their education through additional classes and continuing to broaden their education through reading of magazines and books about bowling will certainly help continue the forward momentum that coaching in the United

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Similarities, but is gap widening?

There are two glaring similarities in youth development and coaching in Malaysia and in the United States. In the United States, coaches volunteer their time while in Malaysia they receive a small amount of pocket change, but without the dedication of trained and certified local coaches, both systems would grind to a stop or produce less with unqualified coaches.

Secondly, youth bowlers in each country have the opportunity to compete against each other frequently in high-level tournament play, like local Junior Gold and the Milo Junior Circuit. As the bowlers mature on the lane, these ongoing tests help the bowlers develop confidence and improve performance.

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