OVERVIEW

YOUNG PEOPLE AND ATHLETICS IN THE G.D.R.

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Athletics in the G.D.R. have continuously advanced since the country’s access to the international sports arena. Year after year G.D.R. athletes win first places and medals in the most important international championships. Around the world people speak of the “secret” of G.D.R. sport and especially of athletics.

The basis of these successes is a well planned development of sports. This is supported in every respect by the state, which is very favourably disposed to the mass character of sport and, above all, to the promotion of children and youth sports. The XI Congress of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, held recently, once again stressed the desire to develop sports as a part of the daily life of an increasing number of people and especially of young people. In Directives issued by this Party Congress, the development of sports was specified as Party programme and, thus, as state programme: “In promoting physical culture and sport, emphasis must be placed on both the mass character of such activities and on the
need to increase performance levels... Consistent promotion of competitive sports and young athletes, the systematic development of sport-related sciences and medical research, and the lasting improvement of the facilities and equipment for training and competitions will prove increasingly effective in stimulating athletes to top performances and medal-winning participation in the Olympic Games, World and European Championships and other international meets. It is necessary here to make comprehensive use of the results of science and technology.

A short extract of the Youth Law of the G.D.R. (1974) shows that these are not new demands and statements but that they have been prescribed in the law of the Republic for many years. Article 34 of the Youth Law reads: “Physical culture and sport belong to the life of youth in the socialist society. Regular participation in sports is a need and a task of all young people to develop their personality. The socialist state guarantees physical culture and sports in all fields of life and promotes the activities of the German Sports and Gymnastics Union as the initiator and organizer of sports”.

The German Athletics Association (D.V.f.L.) of the G.D.R. as one of the biggest G.D.R. sports associations, harmoniously integrates itself into this development process. According to the membership figures, the D.V.f.L. of the G.D.R. is placed fourth in the country. At present, there are 189,479 members in the athletics association. It is an important fact that 80.8 per cent of the members of the D.V.f.L. of the G.D.R. are children and young people. One can say with certainty, it is the association paying greatest attention to the development of athletics for children and young people. The following table illustrates the structure of the D.V.f.L. of the G.D.R.:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.625 members under 6 yrs</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94,302 members 6-14 yrs</td>
<td>52.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30,654 members 14-16 yrs</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17,838 members 16-18 yrs</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34,445 members over 18 yrs</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
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Additionally, there are 10,611 athletes active in two sport associations.

The interest taken in athletics as well as the successes of top-level athletes of our association in international sports events have considerably and continuously contributed to an increasing number of young members (see table on the following page).

But a large number of participants is only one side of the medal. The association would remain unsuccessful without management structures, or people to set the whole complex of children and youth sports in motion. For this reason, the D.V.f.L. of the G.D.R. is interested in a strict management system guaranteeing permanent all year round sports exercises, training and competitions.

The central management, the Presidium of the association, coordinates all questions and tasks with the 15 county athletics boards and the 260 district athletics boards. In approximately 2,800 athletics sections, which are the smallest units of the association’s structure, countless voluntary helpers, instructors and officials put the programmes of the association into practice.

The Athletics Association of the G.D.R. takes pride in its members who enthusiastically devote their spare time to sports. Above all, they educate our
children and young people to become fighters and engaged young personalities who, in addition to sports, stand the test in daily life too. In interviews, most of our successful athletes mention as the cradle of their success their instructor and their sports section where they made their first steps in athletics. The 16,638 instructors of the association have created through their dedicated efforts the basis of the association's cadres and performance pyramid and have laid down the foundation-stone of many successes. It should be noted here that the ratio of instructors to athletes is 1 to 10. The fact that most instructors are awarded with honours of the association or with the title "Meritorious Instructor of the D.T.S.B. of the G.D.R." shows that their work is highly appreciated. Their activities are respected and recognized in their working collectives and in local press media.

Understanding the popular basis of our association as well as its structure, without which any development would be impossible, the question remains how the talents are selected from the circle of the 80.8 per cent of members? How are they promoted and coached to become top-level athletes?

It is not possible to answer these questions comprehensively. For this purpose a more differentiated and detailed analysis and explanation would be required. Essentially, however, it starts with a quite simple but systematic and continuously practised system of screening and selection of talented children. In our country children start school at the age of 6 or 7 years. It is almost unnecessary to mention that the sports lessons are conducted with great attention from the very first school-day. On the basis of proved teaching programmes much importance is attached to the training in the various track and field disciplines. At the same time the children begin to take part in sport outside of their school lessons in the school sports clubs or sections of the G.D.R. sports organization D.T.S.B., in which qualified sports teachers and instructors work with the young people. It is only logical that the co-operation between the sports teachers and the various sections of different sports clubs guarantees the successful screening of talents. They, above all, have the opportunity to find new talents among the children as well as to test their perspective aptitude for a sport. A carefully established and organized competition system aimed at these age-groups enables the instructors to find their little talents who meet the demands of the respective sport.

In this connection, the Spartakiad Games seem to be a magic word. Beginning with manifold school competitions in track and field a pre-selection...
for future competitions is made. In regional competitions (e.g. several schools of a G.D.R. district) an ongoing selection of athletes takes place and the winners of these competitions qualify for participation in District Children and Youth Spartakiad Games held at the end of each school year in early June. These competitions have become more and more the source of talents for athletics. From these competitions the talented children qualify for the next higher form of Spartakiad competitions – the County Spartakiad Games. In these meetings of the best young athletes of approximately 10-20 districts, participants have to show a very high ability level and the “mesh of the sieve” becomes more narrow. Finally, the central competitions of the G.D.R. Spartakiad Games take place in Berlin or Leipzig every two years. There, usually, nearly 2,000 athletes in the age-groups 13, 14, 15 and 16/17 years compete in track and field for medals and points on behalf of their counties, districts, sports clubs and sections. One need not underline that, following the above mentioned qualification system, this competition is the biggest objective of every young athlete. There are only a few top-level athletes in the G.D.R. who did not follow the Spartakiad path. Heike Drechsler, Ulf Timmermann, Marlies Göhr, Marita Koch, etc. – can all be found in the official protocols of these competitions, not always as winners but at least as participants. It is only too correct if we use in our association the slogan “Spartakiad Games the jumping – off place to Olympics”!

Analogous to the Spartakiad system there is a championship system of the association starting with district championships, continuing through the county championships followed by the annually held G.D.R. championships
of several age-groups starting with the age-group 13 years at national level.

In top-level junior sports the systematic training starts with a general basic training. The most talented children from school sports clubs and sports groups of sections of the D.T.S.B. of the G.D.R. continue to be coached at training centres of which, as a rule, one or more exist in each district of the Republic. This, mainly, takes place at the age of 10-12/13 years. Under the guidance of experienced instructors the systematic sports oriented training begins at this stage with the aim of realizing talents. On the basis of scientific and pedagogical methods and principals, a manifold form of training generally prepares future high level performers and enables the determination of aptitude and selection of talented athletes. It also contributes to the education and training of all-round developed personalities. Under the conditions of daily life and the obligations to be fulfilled at home and at school, this first stage of training is carried out in the towns and communities of the country.

In the course of this phase of the child's sporting development, keeping in mind the specific features of the age and of the athlete's biological maturity, first examinations, tests and competitions, especially in multi-discipline events, take place with the aim to determine the "coachability" of the athlete, his capability and readiness as well as his ability to take stress. Normally, the child in the age-group of 10-12 years will first compete in nearly 50-60 multidiscipline events. This underlines the fact that the principle of manifoldness is primary. In this connection, of course, the especially favourable age of learning is taken into consideration and, in addition to speed in general, certain basic sports motor abilities and motor coordination will be efficiently trained and developed. It is a matter of fact that real talents develop under equal conditions and in general training. The aim of this stage is to restrict the broad basis by finding out talents meeting the requirements of track and field disciplines, i.e. of the 42 Olympic disciplines, in the best possible way.

Having finished this first stage, the most talented boys and girls have the opportunity to improve their sports capabilities at a children and youth sports school or at a county sports club under the guidance of qualified coaches, instructors and teachers. But the path to the winner's platform in international sports events such as Olympic Games, World and European Championships is still very long. Now, training in groups of special disciplines, subject to a completely new rhythm of life and under other strains of life and training, only those who have really gained all qualities to reach highest performances will succeed. In the case of top level performance, of course, the assessments of the physical aptitude of the athlete play an important role, but more and more the athlete's entire personality is required. Attitudes, motivations, the ability of mobilization, will, fighting spirit, and mental alertness are components which, as a result of the unity of education and training, play an important role in the development of a top-level athlete. Numerous competitions, tests, performance diagnoses and examinations increase for coaches in the sports clubs the value of an assessment of the sporting aptitude. At the age of 14 or 15 years (but there are, of course, cases
of a later determination) it is already quite certain what discipline is the most suitable for the athlete.

In most cases the 15 year-old athletes have already achieved good performances in their future special discipline.

The talent that begins to show very early in some athletes means participation in junior highlight events such as World and European Junior Championships as well as friendship tournaments of socialist countries is possible. We have had several examples recently in our association such as Ilke Wyludda, Ines Wittich, Kathrin Krabbe, Heike Tillack and Karsten Wichert.

This further path of specialization, training and development of high sports performances is not followed by all athletes that have been delegated to sports schools. The athletes retired from active sport, who due to their individual upper limits are not able to meet the requirements of competitive sports, have all opportunities to continue their school and vocational training in the society. But the athletes who have cleared this hurdle as well now tackle the highest objectives of competitive sports under the guidance of well-proved collectives of coaches, physicians, scientists and sports managers. After highlights in junior events, successes in Olympic Games become their objectives. To this end they work systematically together with the management of the association and with the sports clubs.

Through a systematical process of screening and selection and a comprehensive promotion of competitive sports by the party and state leadership as well as by the incorporation of the knowledge of several sciences and, not least thanks to the dedicated activities of innumerable diligent volunteers, the G.D.R. athletes have gained a good reputation for success all over the world and they want to keep it.