

# The Natural

DAN M. BIEBEL

**I**t was the first day of track practice, a warm, sunny day in March. Being not only the coach but a track buff of the first order, I was expecting the entire student body to want to join the team. After everyone had congregated, we had what amounted to an enviable student-teacher ratio in any class: eight kids had signed up for track.

I was devastated at first, but I knew that some of the athletes had ability because I had seen them play basketball. We started practice. Since I hadn't coached these kids and wasn't sure where the talent was, I thought we'd start by seeing who could jump and sprint. Then, I'd try to develop the others into weight people and distance runners. So I sent them all to the long jump, high jump, and pole vault pits. I supervised the pole vault because if anyone tried to kill himself, I would be negligent not to be there and watch it happen.

As practice progressed, one of the kids approached me and yelled, "Hey, coach. Greg just long-jumped 19 feet." Greg was a freshman, so I thought I'd better make sure they were measuring with the right part of the measuring tape. I hurried over to the long jump pit, a long dirt path leading up to a hole in the ground filled with sand. Greg was preparing to jump again, and I watched him at the end of the runway. He was in a half crouch, one leg in front of the other, kind of coiled up like a rattlesnake about to strike. When he was sure I was watching, he sprinted down the runway, hit the takeoff board perfectly, leaped high in the air, sailed out and

landed, textbook-style, in the pit about 19 feet from the board.

Now 19 feet is not a Carl Lewis jump, but if you're a high school track coach of a very small class, you can get excited. I felt like a jeweler with an unpolished gem wanting to hone it down and get every ounce of beauty out of it. So I made a study of the long jump. I learned everything I could: approach run, takeoff, hitch-kick, and landing. There were drills for everything. Greg lifted weights, did plyometrics, and hurdled. I envisioned him as a freshman contender for a state championship. By the end of the year I had laboriously, painstakingly, lovingly coached a great natural long jumper all the way up to 17 feet 6 inches.

## Reflecting on Success

Coaching and teaching have much in common. The way coaches and teachers motivate kids is similar. We take raw talent and try to find a communication technique that will transmit a skill in an efficient manner so that success is achieved by the learner (and also by the teacher).

In the beginning, coaching was more important to me than teaching. Success and failure, highs and lows are so easy to measure in athletics. Classroom successes sometimes seem arbitrary and difficult to measure. But, as time has passed, experience has taught me that success in athletics is shallow and fleeting and rarely satisfying. Even five consecutive state championships couldn't satisfy me, give me peace of mind, or convince me that coaching has much lasting value, although I know many (whom I deeply respect) who feel the opposite. Lately, teaching has captivated my mind, and I've thrown myself into it, hoping that it holds a higher level of significance

and something of lasting value.

## Thinking about Teaching

This re-dedication to teaching has encouraged me to analyze variables that affect the profession. One realization has been that as the years have gone by, many changes in educational theory have been implemented in the schools in which I have taught. Most of us started out learning Piaget and Maslow, and writing objectives, lesson plans, and unit plans. Now we've been inundated with new ideas: the

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Hunter model, effective schools, left brain-right brain, teaching styles, cooperative learning.

Most of these ideas were presented to us through inservices organized by well-meaning administrators, who had learned about them at inspiring conferences of one sort or another. Nevertheless, I've gotten excited about some of these "new" concepts. I give the objective at the beginning of the class, use mass and distributed practice, monitor and adjust, and reach closure.

## Rethinking Teacher Evaluation

I also volunteered (no one should do that) to chair the teacher evaluation committee in our district. Our goal was to devise an evaluation process that was complete yet efficient. We began by studying the current teaching research. We then developed criteria for what good teachers do and finally prescribed a measuring instrument for

that criteria. For the most part, administrators and faculty are happy with the new evaluation process.

Reflecting on the evaluation committee's work, however, I've often wondered whether a teacher could know all the information a teacher should know, exhibit all the criteria a good teacher should, but still be a poor teacher. Could a teacher "ace" the evaluation but "flunk" the classroom? Worse yet, I have wondered whether it would be possible to ruin a naturally gifted, novice teacher using the evaluation process. Could we take such talented people — full of life, ideas, and creativity — and turn them into dull, mediocre teachers just as I turned that 19-foot long jumper into a 17-footer? Do we squeeze the creativity,

motivation, and innate ability out of wonderfully gifted teachers by forcing them to fit the evaluation mold?

### Could Less Be More?

I hope that in the process of making teachers conform to specific criteria, we don't create "robotic" instructors who follow a set pattern so that they can score well on evaluations. Wouldn't kids be even more bored than they are now if they had to pass through a seven-period day full of instructors who are nearly alike in their teaching styles? Of even more critical concern should be whether or not this "canned" teaching approach can be satisfying to the "natural." I doubt it. I wonder how many state champion teachers never made it to

the finals because they had to change their styles to fit some evaluation process. I wonder how many of these teachers changed professions because they were stifled and frustrated.

I learned a lot that first year of coaching track, and now I have great long jumpers. I never coach them. I leave them alone. One time, another coach asked me what I did every year to get my jumpers to compete so well at the state championship. I said, "Nothing." I had this twinkle in my eye and strut in my walk that challenged him not to believe me. But I was telling the truth. | |

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