Physical Literacy - Two Approaches, One Concept

By Colin Higgs, Ph.D.

The concept of physical literacy is rooted in both academic writing and in the day-to-day activities of physical educators, recreation practitioners, and coaches. On the academic side, Dr. Margaret Whitehead's landmark 2001 paper, “The Concept of Physical Literacy,” sparked considerable interest and academic debate. On the practical side, the idea of developing physical literacy as part of Canadian Sport for Life (Long-Term Athlete Development) (Balyi et al., 2005) has been adopted and has made physical literacy a key component of current discussions about how sport, recreation, health and physical education can help Canada deal with its growing problems of increased levels of physical inactivity and obesity.

The academic approach

Figure 1 shows the components of physical literacy as drawn from Dr. Whitehead's work. These components state that:

a. In a wide range of physically challenging situations, the physically literate person will move with poise and grace, with economy of movement, and with confidence.

b. In that same wide range of physically challenging situations, the physically literate person will be able to read the situation, predict and/or anticipate what is likely to happen next as the situation unfolds, and then be able to react through movement in an appropriate manner.

c. The physically literate person has the knowledge, skills, attitude, and motivation to fully use their capacity and potential for movement.

d. The skills developed by a physically literate person will be appropriate to their local culture, and be based on the limits to their movement potential or their ability or physical disability.

e. The physically literate person will have a well-established sense of their physical self - that they feel “at home” in their body, and comfortable with their physicality.

f. The physically literate person will have a high level of self-confidence and self-esteem that comes from confidence in their body and its abilities.

For Dr. Whitehead, the acquisition of physical literacy is the result of a life-long process, in which the mind and body continuously adapt to the changes that come as a result of the human development and aging cycle. Physical literacy has the same foundations throughout life but will look very different in an eight-year-old and an 80-year-old.

The practical approach

Canadian Sport for Life is Canada’s Long-Term Athlete/Participant Development (LTAD) model. The model is based on exposing Canadians to developmentally appropriate physical activity and sport across their life spans.
The generic Canadian LTAD model divides the human life span into seven activity-related stages (See Figure 2). These are designed to provide everyone with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge required for healthy engagement in life-long physical activity. Where individuals have the necessary talent, drive, and commitment, the stages provide people with the opportunity to achieve sporting excellence.

LTAD Stages

**Active Start** For boys and girls this stage is from birth to age six. During this stage children need to develop basic human movement skills. They must also develop positive attitudes towards being active and habits of engaging in regular and frequent physical activity. At this stage, children need frequent short bursts of physical activity spread throughout the day. They also need to be vigorously physically active for at least 60 minutes every day. As a guideline, children at this stage should not be inactive for any period of one-hour or more unless they are sleeping.

**FUNDamentals**: This includes boys from age six to nine and girls from six to eight. Because of the faster maturation of girls, this stage (and those that follow) occur earlier in females than in males. This is the stage of development when children need to master fundamental movement skills. Those skills include:

- Body control skills
- Locomotor skills
- Sending and receiving skills
- Object manipulation skills

Other fundamental movement skills include higher order skills such as agility, balance, and coordination. This is also a time when children need to develop skills in various environments. To eventually develop full physical literacy, children need to learn fundamental movement skills on land (such as running and jumping) in the water (such as swimming, gliding, and diving), in the air (such as body control, twisting), and, because this is Canada, on ice and snow (such as skating, gliding, and skiing).

**Learn to Train**: This stage runs from age nine for boys and age eight for girls and ends at the start of the child’s adolescent growth spurt, which is usually around 11 years of age for girls and 12 for boys, although there is considerable individual variation. This is the time for children and youth to learn fundamental sport skills, but not to become too specialized too early, except in those few known “early-development” sports such as gymnastics, diving, and figure skating. This is the stage of development during which the brain reaches close to adult volume, and when the child’s body is exceptionally well suited to the learning and refinement of skills. This gives the late-maturing child more time to refine their skills, something that may pay dividends once the child has fully matured.

Canadian Sport for Life is predicated on the belief that every child needs to be exposed to quality programs in school and in the community at each of these first three stages if they are to have the skills, attitudes, and knowledge to fully engage in physical activity for the rest of their lives. This stage is designated: “Active for Life”. It is equally important that those individuals wishing to pursue excellence in sport, those going on to the Train to Compete, and Train to Win stages, also have this sound foundation. (For details of these later stages, see www.canadiansportforlife.ca).

For this reason, the Canadian Sport for Life model has used the term “physical literacy” to describe the combination of the first three stages of LTAD.

**Why physical literacy?**

There are good reasons why Canadian Sport for Life has adopted the term “physical literacy”. Canada is facing an epidemic of childhood overweight and obesity and governments at all levels recognize the burden that this will place on the Canadian health care system in the years to come. Governments understand the concept of literacy. One needs to learn to read as a child in order to become a fully functioning member of society; through use of the term physical literacy, many stakeholders have come to understand that children and youth need a repertoire of physical skills, or “physical literacy” – that will enable them to become physically active, and therefore healthier, adults.

Quality physical education has always been about helping children acquire developmentally appropriate knowledge, attitudes, and physical skills. Use of the term “physical literacy” makes the importance of this work more easily recognizable to others in the fields of education, recreation, health, and human development.

Whether described in academic terms, or in the language of Canadian Sport for Life, physical literacy describes an individual who is sufficiently physically skilled to use their fully developed capacity for movement to achieve their personal goals in healthy physical activity or sporting excellence. There are two approaches – the academic and the practical – but there is only one concept of physical literacy.

**REFERENCES**
