

# **ATHLETICS OMNIBUS – PREPARING AN ATHLETICS TEAM**

**From the Athletics Omnibus of Richard Stander, South Africa**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The development of athletes is not a creation of modern society. According to ancient archives, documents, rock paintings, etc., athletes were developed on all continents of the world for specific purposes as far back as 4000 years BC. The very first clans practiced vigorously to increase their skills to fight against other clans to gain or defend their territories.

Large sums of money were paid by slave owners and the royal families as early as 500 BC to prepare athletes for competition. Great honour and money was at stake for the owner of the slave.

Gambling in athletics and the paying of athletes for producing excellent performances have been with us since the beginning of time.

It was common practice that the winner of a clash between individuals or clans could win a variety of incentives that varied from the loser's women and children to all their belongings and money.

Hundreds of years ago, in Race Walking for instance, wagers were placed on whether or not someone could walk from point A to B within a certain time. The distance between point A and B was often more than 100km far and there were no rules, regulations or judges to contend with.

In modern day athletics, many countries, companies, sponsors, clubs, etc. will gather a group of athletes and prepare them for high level competition.

The reasons for preparing a group of athletes for competition may vary from meeting a marketing objective, to improving social values of a community, or to change the demographics of a team.

As the Preparation Squad is prepared, some athletes will excel, while others will lose interest, become injured, become involved in other activities, etc.

Depending on the intensity of the preparation, and the level of competition, the Preparation Squad will be prepared holistically to ensure that the athlete can cope with all the challenges associated with high level competition.

Part of the preparation will be a process of selection. Through a series of competitions, the selection process will eventually identify a group of athletes which will be referred to as a representative Team of Athletes. This Team of Athletes will strive to meet the objectives of the country, company, club, etc.

The process of identifying a Preparation Squad and prepare them until they become a representative Team of Athletes, will require planning.

All interested parties e.g. athletes, coaches, administrators, parents, etc. should be engaged in the initial strategic planning session. The strategic planning session should be facilitated by the relevant Athletics Federation, company, club, etc.

The point of reference in all stages of the Preparation Plan should be regulatory documents such as the, Federation's Constitution, Fixtures List, Results of Athletics Meetings, Performance Ranking Lists, Technical Rules and Standards, etc.

The Preparation Plan once implemented, should be revisited and revised on a regular basis as the quality of the athletes improves and the size of the team increase or decrease.

The frequency of the revision will be determined by the pace that the team will develop (or not develop) and may be as frequent as every 3 months, but at least once a year.

## **2. THE PREPARATION PLAN**

Like all other projects, preparing a team for a specific event will require a professional approach and the Preparation Plan should consist of the following components:

## 2.1. BACKGROUND

Background information should be provided to motivate why a preparation strategy should be implemented to prepare athletes e.g.:

- 2.1.1. Athletes do not have enough experience to prepare for the Olympic Games
- 2.1.2. The level of excellence of the athletes must be raised to be able to compete internationally
- 2.1.3. The backgrounds of some athletes restrict the athlete from competing to his/her full potential
- 2.1.4. The objectives of the athletes are not the same as that of the Federation
- 2.1.5. There are not enough role models in the sport and new role models must be developed.

## 2.2. INTRODUCTION

As introduction, a brief explanation of the challenges the sport faces should be given, e.g.:

- 2.2.1. Athletics is potentially the sport where the most medals can be won at the next Olympic Games
- 2.2.2. Excellence athletics are taxing on the athlete's physiological and psychological systems.
- 2.2.3. Athletics is a challenging sport to work with due to the multiple disciplines
- 2.2.4. Athletics has 14 different disciplines which in essence is 14 different sporting codes
- 2.2.5. Preparation and support to reach excellence must be discipline specific
- 2.2.6. Athletics is a labour intensive sport and a co-ordinated effort is necessary to ensure that everyone involved strive towards the same objectives

## 2.3. THE VISION OF THE TEAM PREPARATION PLAN

The vision of the preparation plan should be a general statement and in line with the vision of the Federation e.g.:

"To provide an adequate support structure to enable Athletes to develop to their full potential".

## 2.4. THE MISSION OF THE TEAM PREPARATION PLAN

The Mission of the Team Preparation Squad should define where the Preparation Squad as a group of athletes are at this point in time, and where the Preparation squad should be in 5 years e.g.:

"To holistically support the National Champion to ensure that the athlete delivers career best performances at the next Olympic Games".

## 2.5. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Athletics Federation must be used as point of reference during the compilation of excellence objectives for the Preparation Squads.

**The Preparation Squads should have collective and individual objectives:**

- 2.5.1. A collective objective for the Preparation Squad to achieve e.g. to win 5 medals at the next Olympic Games.
- 2.5.2. Individual objective for each athlete on the Preparation Squad e.g.:
  - To perform a personal best in the year of the Olympic Games
  - To break the national record, Commonwealth Games Record, IAAF World Record, etc.
  - To qualify for the IAAF World Championships, Olympic Games, etc.

Both the collective and individual objectives must be written statements, in writing, with a firm date fixed to it, describing the achievement.

The line graph demonstrates a visual lay-out of how both the collective and individual objectives of the Preparation Squad can be met. By setting objectives to meet roughly between 6 – 8 weeks apart, the objectives can be met without disrupting the athlete's preparation programme.

The following time frames should be reflected in the objectives of the Preparation Squad:

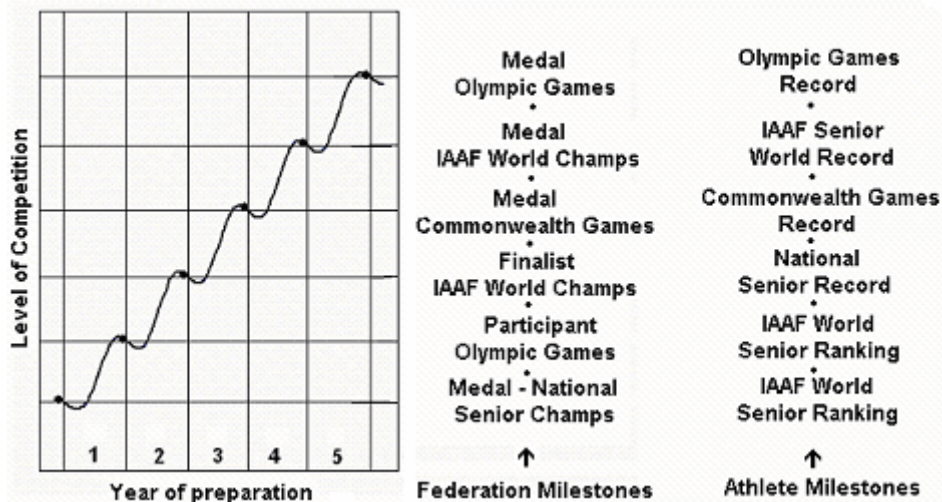
- Short term objectives – e.g. 1 year



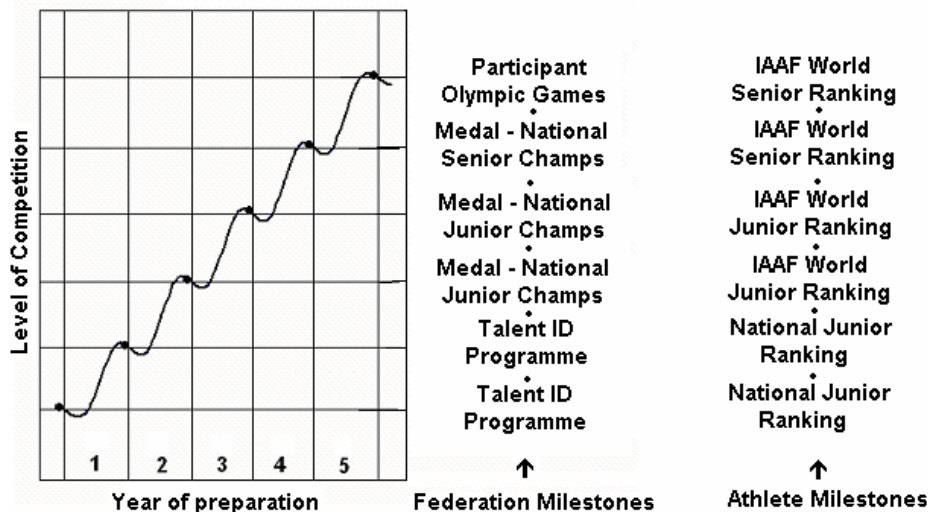
Example of setting objectives within athlete's preparation schedule

- Medium Term - 5 years, e.g. from the year before the Olympic Games, e.g. to the next Olympic Games.

5 - YEAR PREPARATION CYCLE FOR SENIOR ATHLETES



5 - YEAR PREPARATION CYCLE FOR JUNIOR ATHLETES



- Long Term – Longer than 5 years, e.g. to change the percentages of demographic representation of the team.

## 2.6. MILESTONES

Milestones play a significant role in planning the athlete's future objectives as well as keeping the athlete motivated and focused.

The average lifespan of athletes taking part in high intensity competitions such National Championships, World Championships, Olympic Games, etc. are approximately 10 years.

Once an athlete started with high intensity competitions, the average time for an athlete before winning a medal at senior level internationally, is 4-6 years.

It is therefore important to keep in mind how many years the athlete is competing at national or international level.

It is not realistic to set higher milestones to achieve for an athlete already competing 10 years internationally. It is unlikely that an athlete will win a medal internationally, if an athlete has not won a medal internationally, within 10 years after the athlete has won a medal at national level.

Records should be kept of the objectives met by the athletes. These achieved objectives become the milestones of the athlete's athletics career.

Name of Athlete	2007 Continental Games	2008 Olympic Games	2009 IAAF World Shr Champs	2010 Common- wealth Games	2009 IAAF World Shr Champs	2012 Olympic Games
_____						
<b>Age</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>24</b>
Medal						
Final (Top 8)						
Semi-final						
Quarter final						
Member of team						
Not part of team						

**Example of a line graph indicating the milestones in an athlete's career**

## 3. THE PREPARATION STRATEGY

The strategy to prepare the Preparation Squad is based on the principles laid out in the Chapter "The Modern day Athletics Federation".

The strategy should consist of the following:

### 3.1. COMPILE SELECTION CRITERIA

For a Preparation Strategy to be successful, one of the 1<sup>st</sup> principle documents that must be in place must be Selection Criteria.

- Selection Criteria will provide transparency and objectivity as to why some athletes are placed in an advantaged position and others not.
- The Selection Criteria also ensure that everybody involved in the preparation squad have clarity on what objectives must be achieved.

The Chapter on "The right athlete for the situation" deals with this topic extensively.

### 3.2. PREPARE A PREPARATION PROGRAMME

A Preparation Programme should be compiled in collaboration with the Athletics Federation and the Athletes on the Preparation Squad as well as their personal Coaches.

The preparation Plan should be based on business principles in the Chapter “The Modern day Athletics Federation”

### 3.3. PREPARE A REPORTING / MONITORING SYSTEM

Once a Preparation plan and the Preparation Squad are in place, the progress of the Preparation Squad must be monitored by a support team. The support team should consist of a group of specialists which are collectively called a Sport Academy, Excellence Centre, etc.

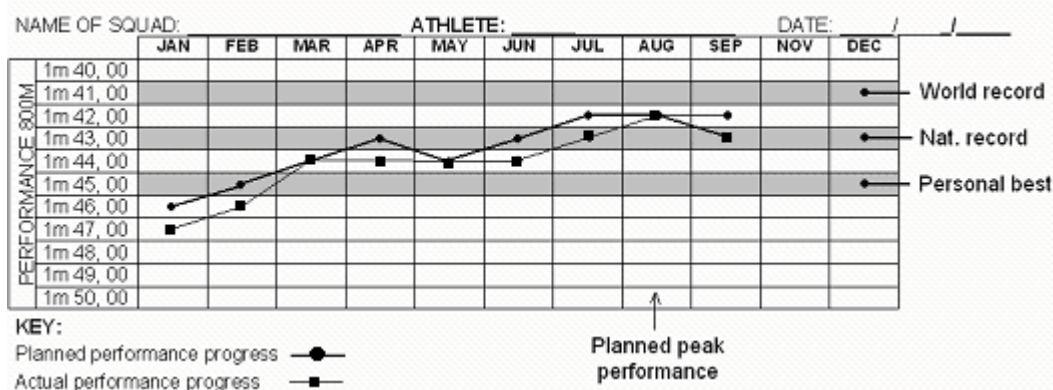
The following examples are typical documents with the main purpose to summarize the vast amount of information collected when preparing an athlete into an easy to monitor system:

EXAMPLE OF A SUMMARIZED MONTHLY REPORT OF PERSONAL COACH MONITORING THE PROGRESS OF THE ATHLETE

NAME OF SQUAD: \_\_\_\_\_ ATHLETE: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	NOV	DEC
Competed											
Competition objectives											
Training objectives											
Scientific Test											
Blood test											
Dietary consultation											
Medical consultation											
Physiotherapy											
Psychological consultation											

EXAMPLE OF A LINE GRAPH REFLECTING THE PROGRESS OF THE INDIVIDUAL ATHLETE



EXAMPLE OF A SUMMARIZED MONTHLY REPORT OF THE ATHLETE

NAME OF SQUAD: \_\_\_\_\_ ATHLETE: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Target: _____ Actual: _____	DIETICIAN: Did you visit a Dietician this month and what action did you take:
Comments: _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____
TRAINING PROGRESS: _____ _____ _____	BLOOD TEST: Did you took a blood test this month and what action did you take based on the test results:
_____ _____	_____ _____
HOW DID YOU IMPLEMENT SPORT SCIENCE RECOMMENDATIONS: _____ _____ _____	PHYSIOTHERAPIST: Did you visit a physiotherapist this month and what is the progress:
_____ _____	_____ _____
MEDICAL: Give a short description of your current state of physical health: _____ _____ _____	Psychological Support: Did you consult a Psychologist this month and what is the progress:
_____ _____	_____ _____
NB: This monthly progress report must be filled in and faxed to ASA before the 15 <sup>th</sup> of each month. Failure to do so will automatically disqualify the athlete from the Preparation Squad.	

### 3.4. PUT SUPPORT STRUCTURES IN PLACE

Once the Preparation Plan is compiled, the athletes should be provided with a support team that can prepare the athlete holistically.

The Support Team should consist of the following:

- 3.4.1. Coaching Committee consisting of a panel of event specific coaches
- 3.4.2. Scientific Testing - physiologically and psychologically
- 3.4.3. Rehabilitation support
- 3.4.4. Dietary support
- 3.4.5. Financial support
- 3.4.6. Psychological support
- 3.4.7. Medical/optometry/dentistry support

The Support Team must manage the sociological support for the athlete such as:

- Family support
- Financial management
- Career opportunities

### 3.5. EQUIP THE ATHLETES WITH LIFE SKILLS

The Support Team must also ensure life skills development for the athletes on the Preparation squad. The specific life skills the athletes will require can vary widely between gender groups, culture groups, social groups, age groups, etc.

To identify the Preparation Squad's life skills needs, a questionnaire, consisting of the following information, should be presented to the athletes to select from:

- 3.5.1. **Respecting differences** (also covers discrimination and prejudice in all forms).  
We have many cultural differences, which we need to embrace and not ridicule through ignorance. We need to respect each other if we are to interact successfully. How do we do that? What are some of the differences? All over the world we compete with athletes that are culturally different – How do we turn that into a positive experience?
- 3.5.2. **Communication**  
Do we communicate well verbally and non-verbally? Do we listen when spoken to? Are we cutting ourselves off without realizing it? We need to communicate with our team, competitors, officials, and media – learn how to do it effectively?
- 3.5.3. **Conflict Management**  
Conflict can provide healthy opportunities for learning and growth but we need to know how to deal with it. The dynamics of our groups/teams/officials will pose conflict situations – How you handle this can make or break your relationship and ultimately influence your performance.
- 3.5.4. **Creativity, decision making and problem solving**  
Do you struggle to make decisions? Are they usually right or wrong? Do you block your creativity? This limits your ability to solve everyday challenges.
- 3.5.5. **Time management**  
Do you fit everything into your busy schedule? Do you know how to prioritise? What are your time “wasters”?
- 3.5.6. **Presentation skills**  
As athletes we are often asked to speak at functions. Sometimes it gives us a much-needed source of income.
- 3.5.7. **Values and ethics**  
What are your values? Are you misdirected? Are you considered an “ethical” person? Our role models need such guidance.

- 3.5.8. **Leadership**  
Are you a leader? Do you want to be one? Do you know how to be an effective leader or follower?
- 3.5.9. **Media Training**  
Do you know how to manage the media – Radio, print, TV? Do you freeze up or say the wrong things?
- 3.5.10. **Financial skills**  
Do you know the in's and out's of banking, investment, insurance, higher purchase, agreements? Do you know how to budget? You can make serious mistakes.
- 3.5.11. **Career guidance and employment skills**  
How do you choose a career? Bursary applications. Learn interviewing skills, how to write a CV. What is expected of you and what you can expect of your employer?
- 3.5.12. **Etiquette/social skills**  
Embarrassed at a buffet because you don't know how to behave – Do you fill your plate first time or return to the table often, do you stand for every toast that is offered, can you refuse more food at a hostess's house?
- 3.5.13. **Substance abuse/drugs in sport**  
What are the effects of alcohol, drugs, smoking on your body? You want to enjoy yourself but how far can you go? What are "soft drugs"? Are all of these "vices" forbidden in sport?
- 3.5.14. **Sexual health and abuse**  
STD/HIV/AIDS awareness is essential but sex is seen as "bad" yet it is not meant to be? What about other issues like pleasurable sex in a healthy relationship? When do I know it is abuse? What do I do about the abuse?
- 3.5.15. **Forming relationships**  
Should athletes be involved in serious relationships? The options and consequences. Coping with loss of a partner/parent/coach – breaking up/divorce and death. How to build healthy relationships.
- 3.5.16. **Touring skills**  
How to prepare – visas, medical requirements, customs. What to pack. How to travel without problems. What to expect from your hosts. Tips and hints to make the tour a success.
- 3.5.17. **Using technology**  
Telephones, cell phones, e-mails and internet – What are the options and costs? How do you set up an e/mail and access it while on tours? Do you have to do a presentation and don't know how to access information on the internet?
- 3.5.18. **Social responsibility/ volunteerism**  
You are a hero but shouldn't you give something back to your community? How can you assist others? What organizations are out there – What help do they need, what time is involved, funds needed?
- 3.5.19. **Legal contracts and agents**  
What/who to avoid? Learn what the "small print" entails. Know what to look for in an agent. This could be your biggest investment – financial and promotional success or failure!
- 3.5.20. **Corruption in sport**  
Match fixing, spreadsheet betting or simply selling your sponsored goods. Who should you trust, how do athletes get involved? What information gets you in to trouble? What are the long-term implications?
- 3.5.21. **Working with disabled sportsmen and women (Includes empathy)**  
We need to understand other people – who they are – without judging or using preconceived ideas. The role you can play in assisting and interacting with disabled

athletes. What are the dynamics of such interaction? How should athletes be coaches/assisted? What is considered appropriate and not patronizing?

3.5.22. **Sponsors**

What do they expect? What do you expect? Is the deal appropriate? How far does the loyalty to the brand go?

3.5.23. **Crime prevention**

Are you streetwise? How not to be a victim. What to do and not to do. Advise to prevent incidents and what to do if you are involved in an incident – reporting, recovering, support groups.

3.5.24. **Human rights**

Do you understand your rights? Have you got voting education? Do you exercise all your rights? What if your rights are violated?

3.5.25. **Entrepreneurship/self-employment**

Key factors to success. Stages of setting up and establishing your business. Feasible and non-feasible ideas. Networking.

3.5.26. **Study guidance**

Constructive notes, revision, and exam formats. General tips and hints for throughout the year. Preparing and writing an exams. The importance of selecting the correct subjects/courses.

3.6. **PUT INCENTIVES IN PLACE – ATHLETES AND COACHES**

**“Nobody hands you excellence on a silver platter. You earn it through planning, preparation and persisting in the face of all obstacles”.**

This statement is a powerful statement, but very true. Athletes and coaches have to make significant sacrifices to achieve excellence. It is important to put an incentive scheme in place to keep the athletes and coaches focused.

The incentive scheme must have clear guidelines, must be easy to understand and easy to administer. The following can serve as a guideline to compile an incentive scheme:

3.6.1. **Who can qualify for an incentive?**

- 3.6.1.1. Any athlete on the Preparation Squad can qualify for an incentive.
- 3.6.1.2. Any athlete or coach living within the Borders of the relevant Federation.
- 3.6.1.3. The Athlete or Coach must be in good standing with the relevant Federation.

3.6.2. **When to issue an incentive?**

Incentives must be issued as soon as possible after the objective was achieved. A delay of the incentive been issued, will reduce the impact of the incentive on the athlete's level of motivation.

3.6.3. **The Incentives must differentiate between levels of performance**

The incentive system must differentiate between the various levels of excellence to allow room for improvement on the part of the athlete and the coach. Five levels of performance can be identified, e.g.:

3.6.3.1. Level 5

- Athletes who won a medal or reached the finals of the Olympic Games or the Commonwealth Games.
- Athletes who won a medal at the IAAF World Senior, Junior or Youth Championships.
- Athletes who broke a National SA Senior, Junior or Youth Record.

3.6.3.2. Level 4

- Athletes who reached the finals of the IAAF World Junior or Youth Championships.
  - Athletes who won a medal at the World Student Games, World Schools Games, etc.
  - Athletes who won a medal at a Continental or Inter-Continental Games or Championships.
  - Athletes who won a medal at the National Senior, Junior or Youth Championships.
  - Athletes who broke a Provincial/Regional/State Senior, Junior, Youth or Sub Youth Record.
- 3.6.3.3. Level 3
- Athletes who reached the finals at the National Senior, Junior Championships.
  - Athletes who won a gold medal at the Provincial/Regional/State Athletics Senior or Junior Championships.
- 3.6.3.4. Level 2 and 1  
Incentives at introductory level e.g. Level 1 and 2 should be in place to encourage the new upcoming athlete to perform better.

#### **3.6.4. KEEP CV'S UP TO DATE**

The CV's of athletes are frequently required for various reasons, e.g. to be used for marketing exercises, to monitor if the athlete is meeting the objectives, etc.

The CV's should consist of the following information:

- 3.6.4.1. The name of the athlete and the contact details
- 3.6.4.2. The name of the personal coach and the contact details
- 3.6.4.3. The event the athlete specializes in
- 3.6.4.4. The gender of the athlete
- 3.6.4.5. The age of the athlete
- 3.6.4.6. A short description of where the athlete was born, where the athlete went to school, hobbies and objectives in life.
- 3.6.4.7. A brief summary of the athlete's previous performances
- 3.6.4.8. A detailed summary of this year's performances

#### **3.6.5. EXPENDITURE**

Financial accountability is very important in any project. A budget must be compiled to finance the activities of the preparation squad. Each of the expenses must be motivated, justified and prioritized.

There must be clarity of what the financial constraints are before the preparation squad is notified of their selection and the start of their preparation.

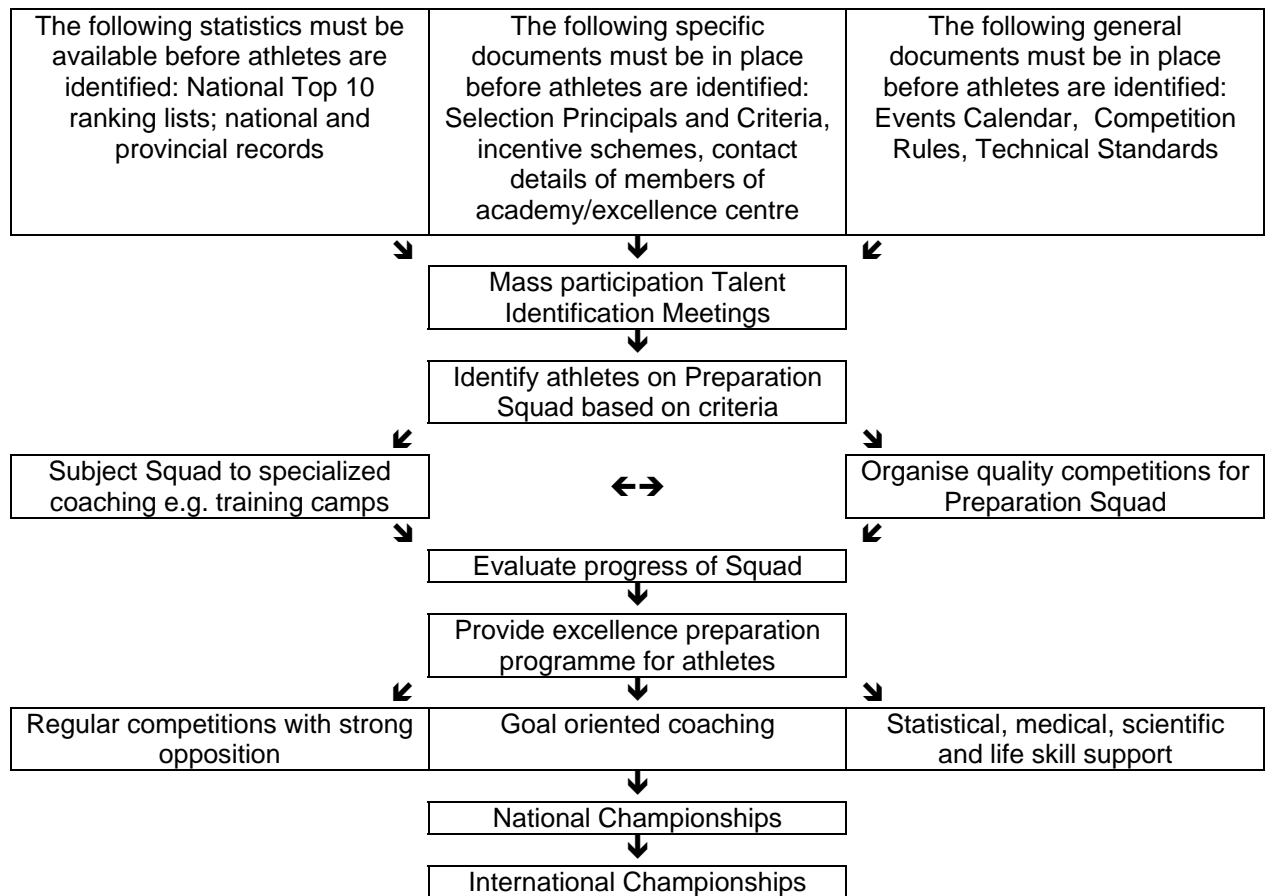
Based on the amount of money available, the preparation squad should be funded according to the following order of priority:

- A joint planning session between the Federation, the athletes and the personal coaches. The planning session must identify the objectives to be achieved, and the process leading up to the objective to be achieved.
- Competition opportunities must be identified, particularly in the period leading up to the event where peak performance is required.
- Rehabilitation support, particularly in the period shortly after the injury.
- Medical support such as physiotherapy, medicine, blood tests, etc.
- Specialist training camps where athletes and personal coaches are equipped with specialist knowledge such as bio-mechanics, sport psychology, nutrition, doping, e.g.
- Scientific testing and evaluation to identify strengths and weakness in the preparation plan
- Briefing and debriefing sessions to determine the progress of the athlete. If separate briefing sessions are not possible, monitor the performance progress of the athlete during competitions.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The following flow chart summarizes the various phases of preparation:

##### AN EXAMPLE OF A FLOW CHART OF ACTIVITIES FOR A PREPARATION SQUAD IN PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT OLYMPIC GAMES



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