

DISCUSSION PAPER 1

SnowsportGB is starting to plan a little for the years beyond Vancouver and importantly what is expected of the organisation and indeed if it is being successful in providing for our British athletes.

The following paper is the first in a planning and consultation exercise that is seeking to engage as many as possible to understand what SnowsportGB is trying to achieve and indeed if we are progressing in the right direction.

This consultation will take the form of three parts,

- a) E-mail circulars similar to the one below, encouraging recipients to consider some of the challenges SnowsportGB faces, and canvassing opinion about some basic assumptions.
- b) Regional Group meetings likely to be held in Perth, Manchester, London and a venue in the South West possibly Cardiff. The purpose of these meetings will be to consult face to face with interested individuals and clubs on the challenges we face and listen to your suggestions as to solutions that might work in your area.
These regional meetings are likely to take place in the week beginning 19th January.
- c) Present a performance plan for SnowsportGB to the Coaching Forum at the British Championships, with a view to this becoming the backbone of SnowsportGB alpine strategic planning going forward.

General Rules of Play.

1. This is absolutely NOT a confidential document. If SnowsportGB is to succeed in assisting putting British skiers on the podium it will only be done with us all pulling together. To this end, these papers should be shared as widely as possible.
2. Please feel free to offer comments on anything you read by replying to my directly at duncanfresh@snowsportgb.com, I am aware there are many people out there who may be able to bring ideas to the table to help us get to a better solution for our athletes.
3. In order to make best use of the face to face discussions I will ask that everyone indicate if they intend to attend so that we can maximise the constructive discussions, and by that I mean that if there is such interest that in an area hundreds of people wish to come and attend then I propose that we will put on several consultations over a number of nights so that those attending can more meaningfully engage in the discussions. i.e. keep the numbers on any one discussion to a smallish level.
4. I will follow this E-mail with another in early January with further information and assumptions, and in that E-mail outline the area meetings.

I hope you welcome the opportunity to get involved in the discussions and are eager to participate in the planning. Below are the first set of assumptions, followed by a couple of proposals.

Please comment on the assumptions which are influencing the proposals if you feel they are off the mark. The proposals form the link to the next discussion paper.

ASSUMPTION 1 – What are our aspirations

SnowsportGB has to prioritise and then focus on what type of organisation it wishes to be in the context of Alpine skiing.

1. Is the aspiration of SnowsportGB simply to be to provide coaching and logistical support to our best British athletes? Or
2. Is the aspiration of SnowsportGB to deliver athlete support structures that can truly take an athlete to be the best in the world if their ability and determination supports this?

My first assumption is that we should be planning for option two, even if we do not have large numbers at the top of the tree just yet.

ASSUMPTION 2 – how to deliver success

SnowsportGB is a constituted business with a remit to support our best snowsports athletes and to manage and run our national snowsports teams.

The remit of SnowsportGB is not to provide grass roots development as this is the remit of the Home Nations, England, Scotland and Wales, so we really are only focusing on racing, the elite end and pathways into this elite performance bracket.

In relation to alpine skiing the lesson learnt from other successful British sports is that to really give our athletes the support they deserve and need, then the support structure needs to be on a professional footing, rather than relying too heavily on volunteers.

So the second assumption is that for us to build a world class athlete support structure, for this to be sustainable, we need to plan for this to be on a professional, employed footing.

ASSUMPTION 3 – sources of income to pay for it all

With professionalism comes large costs, so where can SnowsportGB bring in income to pay for this.

1. State/Government, taxpayers & lottery grants,
2. Private sector sponsors
 - a. Commercial sponsors,
 - b. Political sponsors,
 - c. Philanthropic benefactors,
3. Operating Profit (Charging for services) parents/athletes money,

Raising income through operating profit is simply charging parents/athletes more for the services they receive, however this is clearly not an attractive option as it is a tax on growth so this really leaves option 1 & 2.

Political sponsors are few in number, and are usually looking for some political leverage for being associated with the organisation and as such are not so results orientated. Also Philanthropic benefactors are generally less motivated by results.

That said both Political sponsors and Philanthropic sponsors are a little less numerous and the additional income we can realistically plan for from this route is limited but should continue to be a small but important wedge of our planned income stream.

For both government funding and commercial sponsors, this income is largely connected to athletes doing well and being high profile. In the current political and economic climate (yes even in a credit crunch) this line potentially offers the best opportunity for increasing income to the organisation. Increases both from UKsport giving funding for athletes who win medals and, much more importantly, from the many smaller business opportunities that a diverse economy such as the UK offers.

It is largely for this reason that I am assuming to match most of the targeting plans to the assumptions of pleasing this latter group, the one giving out state/government grants, and the private sector commercial sponsors. The more you win, the more coverage you get, the more attractive you are to commercial sponsors.

UK Sport Grants

It has long been a policy of UK Sport to target investment at individual athletes and not to programmes as a whole. The largest UK Sport grant is their Podium class athlete grant, worth circa £45k per annum to pay for their training programme. These athletes may also be eligible for an additional personal award (like a wage) of around £12k.

This is targeted at athletes who are generally ranked in the top 20 in the world and who have had an isolated result in the top 5 or 6. These athletes are expected to medal at a World Level event (Olympics of Alpine World Ski Championships) in the next 4 years. Importantly this criteria is not written down anywhere but this is what my experience of our last meeting with UK Sport threw up.

NOTE:

Below UK Sport Podium funding there are two other bands of support. Development Funding (typically aimed at athletes who are one Olympic cycle away from being a medal prospect, and Talent funding which is further down the tree).

Currently the entire winter sport allocation for both Development and Talent support amounts to £300k and is currently all invested in Curling, Short Track Ice-skating and Skeleton. So currently we can not even apply for Development or Talent funding from UK Sport.

We have been successful in recent years however in accessing TASS funds which are a crude equivalent. I say crude because their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) do not necessarily match with what is needed for alpine athletes, indeed only 1 of their 5 KPIs relate to talented athletes.

That said the TASS awards to all intents and purposes do map where the UK Sport Development and Talent funds should have been spent.

ASSUMPTION 4 – Delivering on Promises

On two counts this is important. The more obvious count is that if we keep telling UK Sport we are going to win a medal, and we fail to do so, then sooner or later we will lose credibility and with that comes funding cuts and our programme in peril.

The same is true of commercial sponsors, if we are winning and constantly in the press as a result, then they are happy and hang around, when we are out of the limelight then we are more vulnerable.

The second reason is more pertinent though. For most athletes and parents they do get a little excited about being offered a place in a team, be that British Children's Team, A Home Nations Team or British Senior Team. There is an expectation that in joining a National team the programme in place is planning on how to take the athlete to the very peak of their ability.

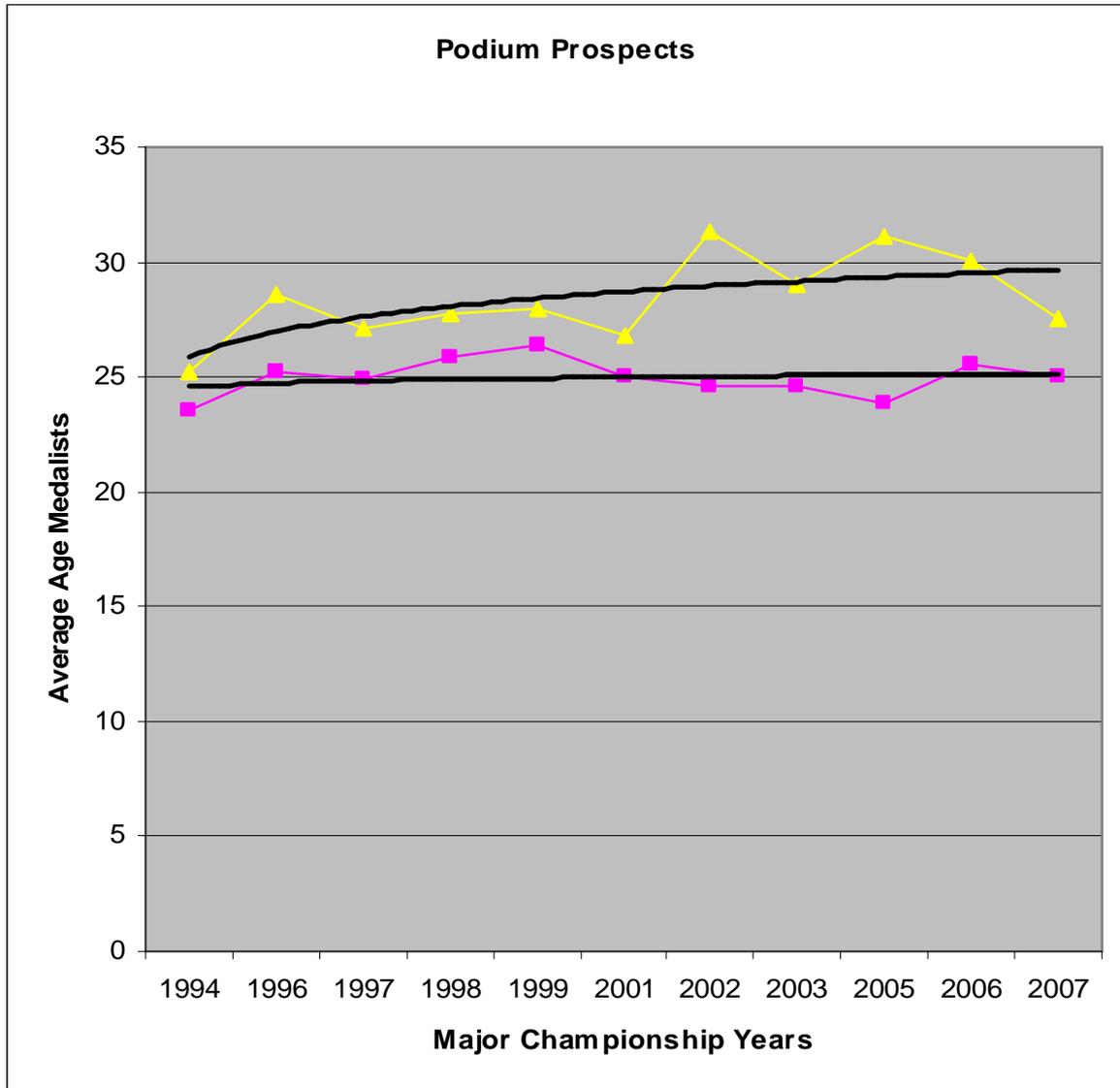
With this planning comes a requirement for honest and open feedback as to how the athlete is progressing.

Any benchmarking we design has to be in such a way that it can be easily understood by everyone affected by it, and involved in our system.

Ultimately as well as the athletes getting a fair appraisal of their progress, so do we need to know if the national team is doing its job, "Does it pass the Ronseal test?".

ASSUMPTION 5 – average and absolute winning age

Our British athletes at the top of their game will be restricted by the same physical limitations as the rest of the world's athletes such that we should put great stock on the average age that an athlete wins medals at world level events.



Pink track – Women’s average age,
 Yellow track – Men’s average age,

The above chart plots the average age of medallists across all disciplines in alpine skiing at World Alpine Championships and Olympics Winter Games since Lilliehammer in 1994.

It is also important to note that the absolute oldest medallist for men is,
 YAERBYN Patrick, 38, Bronze Downhill, Are 2007
 AAMODT Kjetil Andre, 35, Gold, SuperG, Turin 2006
 STROBL Fritz, 35, Silver SuperG, Are 2007
 KERNEN Bruno, 35, Bronze SuperG, Are 2007

For Women it is,
 DORFMEISTER Michaela 33, Gold, Downhill, Turin 2006
 DORFMEISTER Michaela 33, Gold, SuperG, Turin 2006
 MEISSNITZER Alexandra 33, Bronze, SuperG, Turin 2006
 GOETSCHL Renate 32, Bronze, SuperG, Are 2007

ASSUMPTION 6 – optimal achievement age

We could take the assumption that as we are a low lying nation and our athletes tend to start behind the rest of the world, that we should give them more time to develop so perhaps aim for our athletes to peak some time between when the average age of a medallist is and the absolute maximum.

I personally take a different view. I think we should plan a performance pathway that focuses where all empirical data says that the average human body is performing at its peak capacity. We also know that the longer past the average age of a medallist we continue, the more likely that injury and socio-economic factors will come into play and pull an athlete off an elite performance path.

I also feel strongly that we owe it to the athletes to design a system that affords them a meaningful period where they may be at the top of their field long enough to recoup some of the investment they have put in to getting there.

By planning to design a system that allows athletes to peak at the same age as the average human, in this case around 30 for men and 25 for women, then there is still a further 5 to 8 years for men and women until the absolute oldest age humans have triumphed in our sport, this potentially affords our most successful athletes between 5 and 8 years to maximise their sponsorship and endorsements from the sport. I think ethically this is important. It is ethically questionable that we should plan a system where we make concessions to an athlete's ability so that they are on a slightly lower development curve such that they only get one realistic shot at a world level event then their career is over. Leaving them no window to capitalise on the 15 to 20 years of endeavour that has gone into them developing.

What I am saying here is fundamentally different to saying we should not support a later developer, rather what I am saying is that whilst we do support a later developer, we design our system and measurement of 'the system' around planning for an optimum definition of success.

ASSUMPTION 7 – Using FIS points as a measure

The current British team selection policy is based in FIS points and I feel that for the upper end of our SnowsportGB policy this should also be the case.

The reason I am fond of the FIS points is that because of the adders, the F factor, the points per second that are integral to calculating FIS points, we are also being given a measurement in performance between the athlete concerned and the best in the world.

For the purpose of the selection policy and for this discussion all points discussed are taken from the FIS list issued end of April in each season.

FIS lists can give you a measure of an athlete's performance as a % relative to the best athletes in the world which World ranking does not. If there are 100 athletes in a race their placing in that race tells us little of how far in real time they are behind the winner and thus how much they have to improve to win the medal. FIS points do tell you these incremental improvements.

ASSUMPTION 8 – benchmarking against existing selection policy

We currently have a SnowsportGB selection policy based on FIS points and I would like to keep in its current form. This policy has always been based on measuring an athlete's performance behind an average of the top 10 athletes in their discipline, in their age, in the world.

The argument is that athletes who come out of children's racing invariably show spreads in ability behind this average of the best in their age group. Some athletes are perhaps 4% behind the best, and other athletes may be 10% or 15% behind the best, but historically there has always been a desire for the Home Nations to support these athletes and try and find training solutions for them.

Thus our SnowsportGB selection criteria seeks to provide separate improvement pathways towards a world class end goal *BASED ON WHERE THEY ENTER OUR MEASUREMENT SYSTEM* not based on where they may want to go to.

One small problem with the British Selection Criteria is that for both men and women an arbitrary peak age of 30 has been used for all the athletes. So an athlete who is 12% behind the best in the world in their age (band 7) in first year FIS has been given an improvement path that only reaches the best in the world at age 30. An athlete who is 5% behind the best in the world (band 4) in first year FIS, has an improvement pathway that only reaches the best in the world at age 30.

A decision seems to have been reached at some point in the past to treat men and women equally on this count, and the women's improvement pathway is also all tapered to 30. Yet we can see from the average age of major championship medals that 30 is considerably older than where a female athlete needs to be to realistically have her on course for a medal.

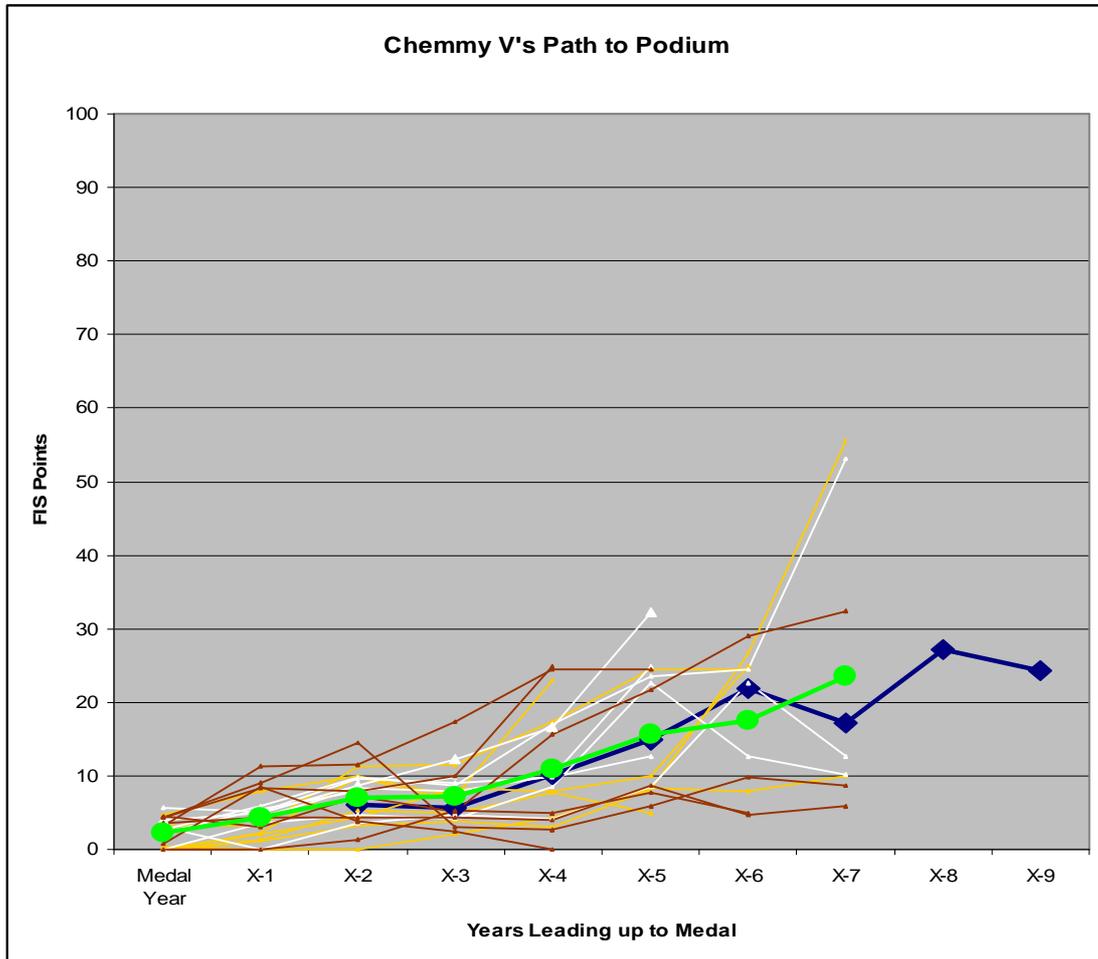
Whether we keep the existing selection criteria as is, or whether we change the criteria to take account of the true average age of women peaking is a worthy discussion, but I personally think that spending a long time discussing this is a red herring. I think there is a case to leave it as it, it is just that the athletes and parents have to be made aware of the performance levels required to be on 'The Path to Podium'.

ASSUMPTION 9 – That we can meet these expectations

Below is a graph displaying three key bits of data,

1. The FIS point improvement traces of every female athlete to have won a GS medal at every World Championships and Olympic Games since Vale/Beaver Creek in 1999. I have recorded every person who has won a GS medal then recorded their FIS points for the 8 years (or as far as their records would go back) preceding that medal win. All the gold medal tracks are in gold, all the silver medal tracks are in white, and all the bronze medal tracks are in brown.
2. I have averaged the FIS points collected at each year out from the games to give the green line which is 'The Path to Podium',

3. I have also now shown in blue the performance of Chemmy in relation to this indicating her preparations for Vancouver. (Obviously for Chemmy we are now half way between X-1 and X-2 as we are mid season and this data was taken from end April last year)
- 4.



Green line = 'The Path to Podium'; Blue line = the performance of Chemmy

Chemmy would appear to be bang on track to be in the window that could win a medal at Vancouver.

Key Observations

1. Even Chemmy, our most talented female skier of a generation, has struggled to demonstrate consistent improvements year on year of greater than 5 FIS points each year.
2. The average improvement of the best skiers in the world (by definition the medal winners) shows an average improvement of 3 FIS points each year. The green dot at X-7 is 23.55 and the dot at Medal Year is 2.30, in 7 years leading up to a medal winning performance, the average of all GS medal winners improvement is only 21.24 FIS points.
3. The third and final point to note is that at Vancouver Chemmy will be 28 years old, so in actual fact although she is on target for a medal at Vancouver and Sauchi, to win in Sauchi at 32, she would be one of the oldest medallists of all time.

PROPOSAL 1 – Planning for Success

From all the assumptions outlined above I am now going to distil them into a graph that should form the basis of what SnowsportGB aspire to give our athletes at the upper end of the performance spectrum.

I am purposefully not, at this stage, detailing what other partners in this process should be doing, as that is the next discussion, but first let's agree what SnowsportGB should be planning for, and can realistically expect from our athletes within the system.

Below are two graphs that are developing the information detailed in the graph above, 'Chemmy V's Path to Podium', one for men and one for women.

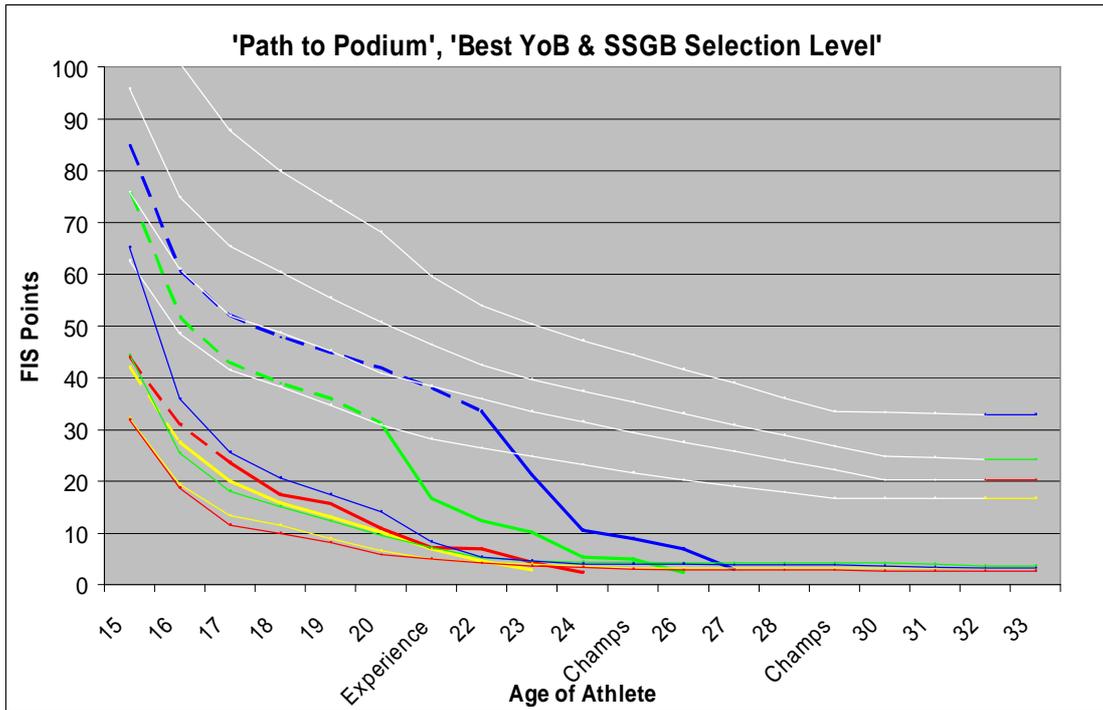
The graphs no longer show all the individual medal tracks preceding the medal winning performance, rather they only show the average 'Path to Podium in each of the respective disciplines, SL, GS, SG, and DH, (this is in bold thick line).

I have also included the FIS points of the average of the best 10 athletes in each YoB in each discipline, and the SSGB selection policy level 4 line for each discipline.

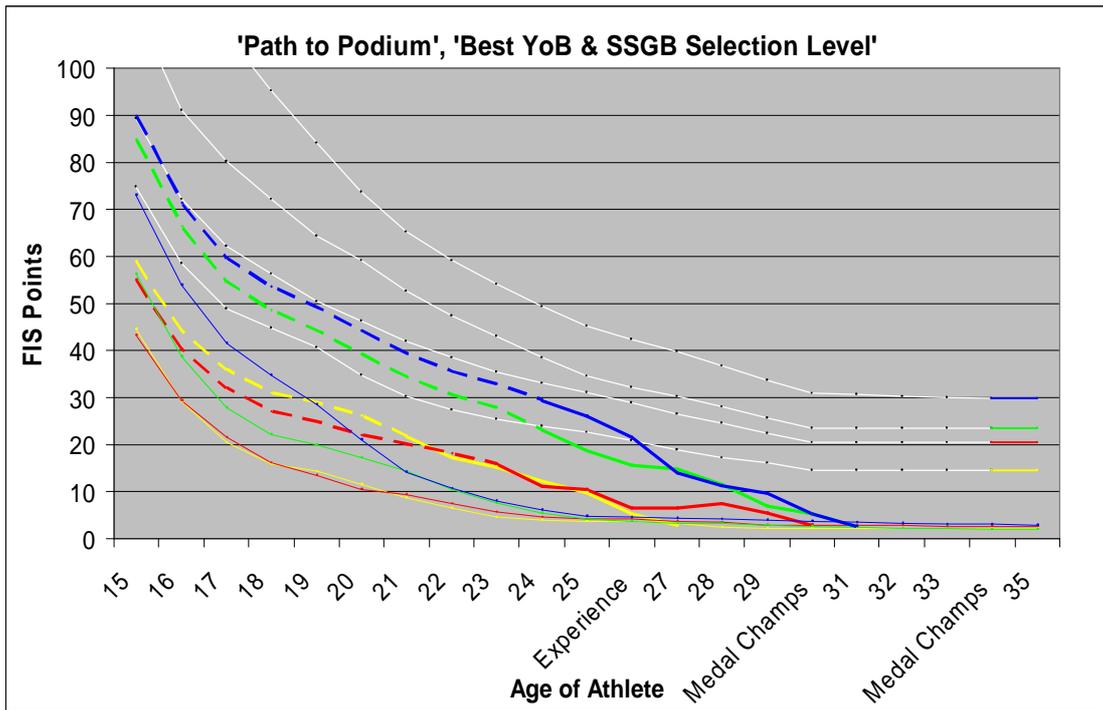
Finally where the 'Path to Podium' hard data runs out (where the thick solid coloured line ceases), then I have projected backwards to the age of 15 using the same improvement path as the average for the 'Bests 10 in the world by YoB', this projection is shown in a bold coloured dotted line.

For the most part this exercise now gives a visual and fair improvement path that athletes need to be on in order to:

1. Pick up any UKsport funding in the future,
2. Stay on and progress within regional funding (TASS Core up to TASS 2012, and in Scotland Highland Institute up to Scottish Institute),
3. Become interesting targets for larger scale commercial sponsors, and
4. Be on track to have a possibility of 4 to 6 years at the very top of their profession to really earn some returns for all the previous years investment.



Women's Graph



Men's Graph

Colour	Discipline	Thick Solid Line	Thick Dotted	Thin Line	White Line with
Yellow	Slalom	Medalist Path to Podium	Estimated progression into 'Path to Podium'	Average of Best 10 in world by YoB per discipline	Yellow on end
Red	GS				Red on end
Green	SG				Green on end
Blue	Downhill				Blue on end

Key Observations:

1. There seems to be an unusual large blip in Women's speed 6 years out from a medal, this data was taken from 21 different medallists from Vail/Beaver Creek 99 through till Are 07. Closer analysis reveals that several female medallists specialised in tech to a high standard then switched to speed, which they had not focused on for years hence the fast improvement in a few seasons.
2. Despite the different points per second for SL, GS, SG and DH, the actual FIS points that medallists have leading into their medal winning performance are remarkably consistent. The Women's speed blip aside, the biggest difference being 15 FIS between men's GS and DH points 8 years out from when they medal.
3. Again the average improvement of the best in the world is only around 25 FIS points in 8 years for the women and 20 FIS points in 8 years for men.
4. It would be fair to say that the SnowsportGB selection matrix on its own, is currently not giving a good indication of medal winning potential for our female athletes.

My first proposal is that SnowsportGB, if it is to attract the larger pool of funds noted in assumption 3, the government grants and commercial sponsorships, then we should be planning pathways for our athletes that map far more closely into the 'Path to Podium' rather than solely relying on the current SnowsportGB selection matrix.

Whilst suggesting this, it is also important to note that any measure of success has to be balanced against what evidence we have of the improvement paths of the best athletes in the world, as evidenced by their 'Path to Podium'.

As mentioned above I am also proposing that we plan to take an athlete to their first major championships with a chance to medal, at the average age that the rest of the world medal at. This would also mean in the sense of an Olympics to try and have the athlete going to a games 4 years earlier to gain experience.

Obviously not everyone's birthday exactly matches in with an Olympic cycle, but with World Champs every second year, this principal should be possible.

The next discussion paper will centre on what is realistic to expect from SnowsportGB to achieve with its athletes in development terms in the years an athlete might be on the team.

Clearly it is more difficult to improve at the very cutting edge of the sport, hence the rather slow average improvements. That said for both Men and Women, there is a pretty consistent improvement line for all disciplines that does not significantly demonstrate the exponential curve that we might expect.

PROPOSAL 2 – Defining key strands that make an elite athlete

This second proposal leads on from the first in that, if the first proposal is to think of some outside measure that would tell us if our programmes are working and let the athletes know if they are progressing on schedule.

Then the second proposal is to flesh out some broad headings that would be considered necessary in an elite athletes training programme, so that we could make some suggestions as to how much of each of these headings an elite athlete might require.

The importance of defining the strands is that these elements need to be acted on to differing degrees throughout an athletes career from when they start right through their career.

Identifying these important strands is crucial because,

1. Below 15 years of age we have no FIS points to benchmark against so it is hard to know what improvements a child is making, and
2. FIS points are an end goal, but all athletes need small measurable mini goals to aim for and achieve to help them stay motivated and on track along their journey. Identifying a number of strands and benchmarking improvements along the way in them will give athletes targets to aim towards to let them know if they are staying on track to a goal of reaching their optimum potential.

END.