

Sports skills: the 7 skills steps you must master in every sport

By Wayne Goldsmith

- **Learning sports skills is a 7 step process from learning the basic movements of the skill to being able to perform the skill under competition conditions**
- **Practice does not make perfect: performance practice makes for perfect performances**
- **It is important to practice skills in a way which simulates competition**

Every coach, every athlete, every media commentator and every fan will tell you that the fundamental element of all sports is skill - kicking and passing in football, throwing and catching in cricket and baseball, diving, turning and finishing in swimming, tackling and passing in rugby and rugby league, passing and shooting in basketball and netball. Learning, practicing and mastering the basic skills of sport is one of the foundations of coaching, sports performance and athletic training. However, just learning the skill is only the first step in the process. It is no longer the case that "Practice Makes Perfect" if the goal is to win in competition. Athletes do not fail in competitions because their skill level is poor: they fail because their ability to perform the skill in competition conditions is poor.

There are 7 Skills Steps You Must Master in Every Sport to be successful.

So what is Sports Skill?

For the purpose of this article, let's define Sports Skill as:

"The ability to perform a sporting skill consistently well at speed, under fatigue and pressure conditions in a competition environment".

People talk a lot about skills in sport.

"It's all about the fundamentals" some say.

Others insist, "Skills are everything".

It is hard to disagree but.....there is a huge difference between learning a skill and learning to perform the skill consistently well at speed, when you are fatigued, under pressure and trying to execute the skill in front of thousands of people.

Performance Practice:

Want to learn and master a basic sports skill? Find a coach, learn how to do it then practice, practice, practice.

Want to learn and master a basic sports skill so that you can enhance your performance under competitions conditions....then practice, practice, practice will not cut it: **you need Performance Practice.**

Performance Practice is a logical, systematic 7 Step process that takes athletes from the execution of the basic skill to being able to perform the skill under competition conditions.

The 7 Skills Steps of Performance Practice:

Skills Step 1: Perform the Skill. This is the first, and unfortunately for many athletes, the last step in their skills learning program. Coaches come up with a drill, athletes copy it, try it and learn it.

Skills Step 2: Perform the Skill very well. Skills mastery comes from regular practice combined with quality feedback from coaches and may incorporate the use of video and other performance analysis technologies - including the best one of all...*the coach's eye!* It is about here that most coaches stop coaching the skill, believing that if the athlete can perform the skill really well, and it looks like it does in the coaching textbooks then they have done their job.

Wrong.

The skills learning job is not even 30% complete.

Skills Step 3: Perform the Skill very well and at speed. Can you name one sport where the ability to perform sports skills really slow is a winning strategy aside from some elements of golf? Technical perfection at slow speed may look great for the text books, but unless the skill can withstand competition level speed (and included in that is competition accelerations, competition agility requirements and competition explosiveness) then it is not competition ready.

Skills Step 4: Perform the Skill very well, at speed and under fatigue. Think of the "danger zones" in all competition sport. The last 20 metres of a 100 metres freestyle. The last 5 minutes before half time in football. The final ball of the final over of the innings. The last play in the game. Many, many competitions come down to the quality of skills execution during the last 5% of time and being able to perform fundamental skills when tired, dehydrated, glycogen depleted and suffering from neuro-muscular fatigue is a winning edge in all sports.

Skills Step 5: Perform the Skill very well, at speed, under fatigue and under pressure. How many times do you see athletes miss simple targets or drop balls or make errors at critical moments - "danger-zones" in competitions? There is no doubt that emotional stress and mental pressure impact on the ability of athletes to perform skills with quality and accuracy.

Incorporate the element of pressure in skills practices in training and ensure that training is more challenging and more demanding than the competition environment you are preparing for.

Skills Step 6: Perform the Skill very well, at speed, under fatigue and under pressure consistently. Being able to perform the skill under competition conditions once could be luck, but being able to do it consistently under competition conditions is the sign of a real champion. Consistency in skills execution in competition comes from consistency of training standards. Adopting a "no-compromise" approach to the quality of skills execution at training is a sure way to develop a consistent quality of skills execution in competition conditions.

Unfortunately many athletes have two brains:

Training brain- i.e. the "brain" they use in training and preparation. "Training brain" accepts laziness, inaccuracy, sloppiness and poor skills execution believing that "it will be OK on the day" and everything will somehow magically be right at the competition;

Competition brain – i.e. the "brain" they use in competition.

The secret to competition success is to use "competition brain" in every training session.

Skills Step 7: Perform the Skill very well, at speed, under fatigue and under pressure consistently in competition conditions. This is what it is all about. The real factor in what makes a champion athlete is their capacity to perform consistently in competition conditions.

Performing a basic skill well is not difficult. But add the fatigue of 75 minutes of hard competition, the pressure of knowing the whole season is on the line with one kick, the expectations of the coach, the manager, your team-mates and the fans and all of sudden that basic skill is not so basic: it becomes the equivalent of juggling six sticks of dynamite blindfolded and only using your toes!.

Practice does not make Perfect:

In the old days, people would say, "Practice Makes Perfect". We now know that all that does is help you to perform the skills in practice.

Some people moved on and said, "Perfect Practice Makes Perfect". Only true if the goal is to perform skills well for the textbooks.

The real issue now is "Performance Practice Makes for Perfect Performance": to Practice skills consistently under the conditions to be experienced in competition and success will follow.

Recapping

Just learning and mastering sports skills is not enough: it is no longer "Practice Makes Perfect" or "Perfect Practice Makes Perfect". Coaches and athletes must spend as much time, energy and effort learning to perform the fundamental skills of their sport in competition conditions as they do to learning and mastering the basic skill. Coaches should progress athletes systematically through the 7 skills steps to ensure they can perform fundamental sports skills in competition conditions: to do less is to rely on luck, the bounce of the ball and some good fortune - none of which are strategies for consistent success.

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