



PRACTICE AND PREPARATION

Practice and preparation help athletes perform sport skills under pressure and build confidence. By learning and developing skills well before competition, athletes are more likely to succeed when it counts. Coaches can direct athletes' attention, organize practice to emulate game-time situations, and provide feedback in specific ways to get players on their team ready to compete.

IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY PRACTICE/PREPARATION FOR ATHLETES:

- Improved consistency ¹
- Increased confidence ²
- Improved ability to use sport skills learned in training during competitions ^{1,3}
- Decreased need to focus attention on the movement during execution ⁴
- Improved overall performance ⁵



PHASES OF PRACTICE ⁶

LEARNING PHASE	Skills are first being learned, which requires a lot of mental effort and attention on the movement. This is known as the cognitive phase.
REFINEMENT PHASE	Skills are understood by athletes, yet are still being mastered to be performed in various environments and situations. This is known as the associative phase.
PERFORMANCE PHASE	Skills are executed automatically (without thinking about the movement) and require little mental focus. This phase is the goal for skill development. Athletes can focus on tactics over movements or skill execution. This is the autonomous phase.

COACHES CAN SUPPORT ATHLETES BEING AWARE OF:

Attentional Control: The amount and type of focus given to performing a sport skill ⁴

- Internal Focus: Athletes focus on body parts during movements (e.g., foot placement, etc.).
- External Focus: Athletes focus on objects or outcomes outside the body (e.g., a bat, etc.).

Structure of Practice: The organization of practice helps athletes learn skills.

- Blocked Practice: Repeating the same skill before moving on (e.g., AAABBBCCCC).
- Random Practice: Multiple skills being practiced in different orders (e.g., ACBAABCCBAC).

Effective Feedback: The frequency and content of information and instruction about skills.

- Consistent, specific feedback that is congruent with performance is especially important in the learning phase. More intermittent feedback is helpful in the later phases of learning.

**See the chart on the back for how to direct attention, structure practice, & provide feedback when athletes are in each phase of skill development.*

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COACHING STRATEGIES FOR PRACTICE

Strategy	Learning	Refinement	Performance
Attentional control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use simple, internal focus cues when first introducing skills Occasionally use external cues (e.g., equipment movement) <p><i>Example: Create cues using only 1 word. For example, the cue “laces” while shooting in soccer reminds players of technique yet is external to the body</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use simple, external focus cues in feedback and instruction Internal focus cues help with corrections <p><i>Example: Cue an athlete to think about the angle of the golf club on the back swing instead of the angle of the arms or wrists</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attention may naturally shift internally under pressure/after mistakes Provide reminders of external focus cues (e.g., counting strokes, steps) <p><i>Example: Break down a volleyball serve into 2-3 key steps – have the athletes identify 1-2 words for each step that indicate external focus (e.g., “high toss”). Use these cues during games to maintain external focus under pressure</i></p>
Structure of Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use blocked practice Focus on mastery, improvement, and successful application <p><i>Example: Practice 10 repetitions of a penalty kick before changing drills</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mix in random practice Introduce low-stakes game-like drills and situations <p><i>Example: Have athletes play full tennis points with the rule that only backhand shots are allowed to be used</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design small-sided games Get creative with drills and activities <p><i>Example: Give a scenario of a pressure situation in a game and allow the athletes to choose the play they run</i></p>
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give feedback often, but not after every rep Provide movement-specific feedback Provide praise <p><i>Example: Instead of saying ‘good job’, indicate what specifically the athletes have done well in that repetition (e.g., good job following through on the last pitch)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lessen feedback frequency Use reflection questions to allow athletes to problem solve on their own Remind athletes they are “polishing” the movement, which can be the hardest to break through <p><i>Example: Ask athletes “What corrections would you give yourself based on the last attempt?”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask athletes when they would like feedback Provide nuanced and tactical feedback Encourage athletes to give peer feedback <p><i>Example: Give corrections on responses to defense or decision-making instead of movement-focused specifics (e.g., “Remember to stay between the basket and your mark.”)</i></p>

References

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