

Discuss the Differences between Skill, Ability and Technique and explain how you would structure practices to enhance the components of performance

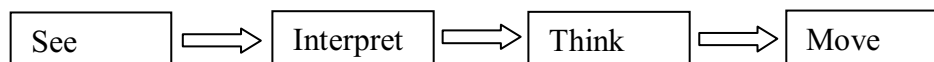
Skill, Ability and Technique are words that are often used in sports literature and by coaches. They are sometimes taken to mean the same thing; however, this is not the case. Each has its own implications and concepts, but the terms are often linked. These aspects of sport are important in the training programmes and practices of athletes and need to be evaluated to learn how these practices should be structured to develop performance.

Skill is sport specific. It exists within all sports but each sport entails different skills. A skill is seen as a coordinated act, involving a group of movements put together in a consistent and smooth manner. There are many interpretations as to what constitutes a skilful movement because views vary from novice to expert level. Skill has been defined by a number of different experts. The following are two definitions:

“An organized co-ordinated activity in relation to an object or situation, which involves a whole chain of sensory, central and motor mechanisms.” (Welford, cited by Galligan et al 2000)

“Excellence of performance – the successful integration of a hierarchy of abilities (all of the abilities we have) appropriate to a task under given conditions.” (Prof. G.P. Meredith)

Both of the above quotes show the distinct link between skill, ability and technique. Skill can be broken down into a number of different formats. These are: Cognitive skills, Perceptual skills, Motor skills and perceptual motor skills. Cognitive skills involve the use of a person's intellect. Thought processes such as calculations, for example: working out goal difference in football or working out remaining points available on a snooker table. Perceptual skills involve the interpretation of stimuli i.e. how information received is processed. Motor skills involve joint and muscular control when performing an action, for example running or walking. These separate skills are all needed in order to be successful at a particular sport so skills are referred to as 'perceptual motor skills'. This is a process involving thought, interpretation, movement and cognitive skills:



(Galligan et al 2000)

An example of a skill in football is shooting. By using the processes mentioned above it is possible to describe how skills are performed. First the player sees the ball, the goal and players around. The player interprets the information from his/her eyes and makes out the opposite defenders have made space, there is a clear shot at goal. The thinking part is the decision to shoot or pass and then the action of retracting the leg then striking the ball. All these stages happen in a very short period of time and it is those who make the correct decisions the fastest who are the most successful players.

For it to be possible to perform a skill in any sport, the ability to carry out the necessary training or practice is required. In general, people are born with abilities (innate) or they are developed early in life; which explains why so many of today's sporting successes started at an early age e.g. Tiger Woods picked up his first golf club when he was three years old.

“Abilities are often seen as the building blocks of sport.” (Galligan et al 2000)

This quote from the 'Advanced PE' textbook shows how without the basic ability, skills learnt will never develop fully. An example of a specific ability in relation to football is speed and balance.

These are fundamental to the sport and the basic ability of players to move quickly and control themselves whilst doing so are worked on at every training session.

“Motor abilities are innate inherited traits that determine an individual’s co-ordination, balance, skill and speed of reaction.” (R. Arnot et al 2000)

The difference between skill and ability is that a skill can be taught and changed and ability is something that cannot be taught. However within the correct learning environment it is possible to develop the innate skills. To complete a particular skill Technique is needed as well as the ability. Technique is often confused with skill but there is a clear difference. Skill is the performance of an action, whereas technique is how the action is performed. The method of performing the action is important because an effective technique means more success in achieving any goal. For example, when shooting in football, striking the ball just above centre with the laces of the boot and head over the ball is a technique used to give maximum power and keep the ball down and on target. The link between the three terms is now clear. For a skill to be performed successfully, Ability is needed as well as an effective, reliable technique.

$$\text{SKILL} = \text{ABILITY} + \text{TECHNIQUE}$$

(Galligan et al 2000)

There are different ways to practice these components of performance. As every sport requires a different type of skill, which indicates that there are different types of skill. The classification continuums can be used in conjunction with each other to build up a profile of a particular skill. One of the continuums is Knapp’s open-closed continuum, which involves skills being categorised into open or closed skills. An example of an open skill in football is a tackle as it is entirely dependant on the situation. This makes it difficult to improve upon an open skill because each situation is different. The only way to improve is through experience, so if the same situation arises again a player can deal with it more effectively. Closed skills can easily be improved because there are no physical outside influences on the athlete. E.g. A penalty kick in football is a closed skill as it can be practiced without influence from other factors. There are coactive skills in which the other competitors cannot physically influence an individual’s performance e.g. 100 metre sprint running. Interactive means other performers are directly involved in the form of active opposition. This helps in the identification of:

- The best practice in learning and aiding skills
- The decision on the environment
- The breaking down of skills so it is possible to focus on certain areas
- A deeper understanding of the sport.

There are two main types of practice used to develop skills:

1. Fixed practices – The repetition of an activity allowing the skill to come naturally to the performer. This would improve the reliability of the skill.
2. Variable Practices – The variation of the conditions under which the skills are performed allowing development of skills and the ability to adapt the skill in different environments

There are two ways in which practices are organised:

1. Distributed Practice – Involves the division of a practice session into sections so feedback from the coach is more positive.
2. Massed practice – A continuous session with no breaks so performers are reliant on intrinsic feedback.

To apply this to a sport (football is the main area of study in this investigation), it is necessary to understand the skills involved in it. Shooting in football consists of discrete, self-paced and

interactive skills. In other words; it has a clear start and end, the performer decides upon the timing of the skill and other performers are directly involved. Here is an example routine:

1. An effective technique is learnt (kick with laces, head and knee over the ball)
2. The ball is repeatedly kicked to the same position in the goal (the ball is struck at the same place)
3. The ball is fed from different positions requiring the player to adjust their body position.
4. Match situation.

The first two parts are fixed practices because it is the same movement being repeated. The third has elements of fixed practice but is ultimately variable as the situation is changed for instance one time the ball may be along the ground but another time it might be in the air or at a different speed. The fourth is variable because there are an infinite number of possibilities in a match situation.

The type of teaching and practice implemented varies for the level at which the player is performing. To start with much training will be isolated or in small groups to build on basic technique but with experience will come increased massed practice. The most popular method of teaching a skill is to break the skill into segments and then putting them together and can be done progressively or individually. An experienced performer often uses mental rehearsal as a fundamental part of their training where they visualise their performance and/or goals.

Practices would have to be structured in a way that would most benefit the player. In a sport such as football there are so many skills and techniques in play that it would be impossible to use one training routine. Using ability as a starting point would be beneficial because it focuses on the individual needs of the performer. The technique will then be developed to suit the performer through isolated practice. The new skill acquired can be placed in competitive situation to hopefully make the skills learnt, performed consistently. There are a limited number of practices for ability. As stated before it is innate, and flexibility, stamina and hand/eye co-ordination are dependant on various factors such as muscle type and nervous structure. However, it must not be forgotten that abilities can be enhanced.

To conclude, it is possible to say that there are different practices for different skills. There are those that can require solely muscle strength and little technique and those which require a whole host of sub-routines to be performed. Various factors need to be considered, the main one being the level of the performer and the sport. Skill is developed by having a good ability and the correct technique to suit the individual's body type. The type of guidance is important and a broad range of teaching techniques should be introduced to find the most effective way of preparing performers for a performance. It is my belief that there is no right or wrong technique, the best technique is the one that suits the individual and it is usually those with 'irregular' techniques who are often successful for example cricketer Muttiah Muralitharan has his own developed technique but is one of the most successful spin-bowlers of his time. Skill is a very broad term in sport and cannot be used on its own when talking about a performance, ability and technique need to be incorporated because they are the fundamentals of skill and this link is shown through the research of many experts.

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