

Discuss the differences between skill, ability and technique and explain how you would structure practices to enhance these components of fitness.

Skill, ability and technique are vital if you want to be good at any sport. The definition of skill is 'the learned ability to bring about pre-determined results with maximum certainty, often with the minimum outlay of time or energy or both.' (Applying Psychology to Sport, Barbara Woods page 32) For example the result is something that was intended to happen, e.g. score a goal in netball, and must not be just chance. Skill needs practice for it to be gained.

Ability is something that you are born with or develop early in your life. Since it is normally inherited from your parents then if your parents were good at a particular sport, then chances are you will be too. Some examples of abilities are: flexibility, hand eye co-ordination and speed. Although you can improve these aspects, if you are born with no speed, you will never become a world-class sprinter.

Technique is how we string our different movements together to produce one movement e.g. to perform a high jump you would have to combine the speed of the run up, with the drive of the landing foot, and then bend your body to clear the bar.

The type of practices used to improve skill will vary between the type of skill being learnt and the type of learner. There are 2 main types of skill, open and closed. An open skill is one that is directly affected by the environment, and therefore the skill will be different each time it is performed. For example when playing netball an interception would vary depending on the weather conditions, court conditions, speed of the ball, and the position of the opponent. A closed skill is one that has no outside influences, and therefore is the same each time it is performed. For example someone throwing a shot putt.

Therefore for closed skills one should do a fixed practice, this involves repetition of a skill, allowing the motor sequence to become perfected and therefore the movement will become automatic. This is an ideal way of practicing a serve in tennis. For open skills a variable practice should be used as this allows the learner to practice in a number of different environments, and therefore develop skills to adapt to these situations. This will help to prepare the athlete for different situations they might find themselves in a game.

Serial/discrete skills are those made up of a number of parts. These can be practiced as separate parts, then put together e.g. a gymnastic floor routine. The handstands, cartwheels and flips can be mastered, and then made into a tumble.

As I mentioned earlier, the type of learner effects the development of skill. Effective learning involves keeping the learner motivated, promoting enjoyment and encouraging achievement. There are 2 main ways teaching groups; command style and discovery style. Command style involves the teacher

instructing the learners and they copy the teacher's actions, this gives clear information, allows the teacher to monitor safety and is an easy way of demonstrating a skill. The disadvantages are the teacher has little opportunity for the teacher to give individual feedback, and the learners won't learn to think for themselves. The discovery style is the pupil being taught by the teacher giving clues and the pupil therefore working out how to perform the skill themselves. This enhances the self-confidence of the learners, but the disadvantages are it is time consuming and needs to be adjusted for each student's ability.

If the learner was fit, motivated and experienced then they would need positive and negative feedback. This type of athlete would benefit from massed practice sessions where they would have no recovery and test their skills under fatigued conditions, like they would be in a game situation. Experienced performers will then act on intrinsic feedback to improve their performance. An example of this would be a tennis practice where the coach throws balls into different areas of the court and the player is forced to play different types of shot.

If the learner was less experienced then more positive feedback would be needed to keep the athlete motivated. This learner would benefit more from a distributed practice, where the practice is split up into sections. Here the performer is given rest between sessions where the next practice is explained, and extrinsic feedback can be given.

Ability can be improved by practices, but not improved to any significant degree. For example a tennis player would be able to improve their shoulder flexibility by stretching.

Technique can be improved by coaching and using pure-part, whole-part-whole or progressive-part learning. Guidance can be given visually, verbally or manually, or a mixture of these. Pure-part learning is learning, practicing then perfecting separate parts of a skill, then putting it together. For example in tennis the serve is made up of a toss, pulling the racket back, the strike, and then the follow through. The techniques would be taught separately, and then put together to form the serve. Whole-part-whole learning is similar to the pure-part method, but an introduction is given before breaking down the skill. Progressive-part learning lets the athlete have initial experience of the skill, and the learner progressively performs more parts of the skill together to eventually do the whole skill.

Technique also needs encouragement in the form of feedback. Beginners need a lot of positive feedback, so that they know what to repeat and this also helps to keep them motivated and build their confidence. The feedback also needs to explain what was good about the performance, for example the tennis serve was good because the technique was good as the throw up was the correct height, the preparation was correct and the strike was good as you reached up high. More experienced athletes' benefit more from negative feedback as this helps them improve their weaknesses and keeps them motivated. Too much negative feedback can lead to de-motivation though.

From researching this I have found that there is a clear relationship between all 3 components:

$$\text{Skill} = \text{ability} \times \text{technique}$$

However, were as skill and technique can be taught, ability is something that you inherit from your parents, and though you can improve on it, if your not born with it you will never have it. Therefore, if a child is born with little flexibility they aren't likely to become an elite pole-vaulter. By looking at the equation we can assume that elite performers must have been born with ability, then develop their technique, so they can perform their skills at such a high level. From reading Kelly Holmes' autobiography, she proves the equation true, as she was born with natural talent, which she discovered at Primary school age, then started training, where she improved technique, then developed her skill, which allowed her to win 2 gold medals.

Skills and techniques can be improved with training, the training methods used will vary whether the skill is open or closed, and the type of coaching being used, and whether the coach is teaching an individual or a group.

Of course some nations will be better at some sports than others, because of their resources. For example, Switzerland has mountains and snow in winter, so it is not a surprise that they have lots of good skiers. Since England rarely gets snow, we are immediately put at a disadvantage, and a child might be born with natural ability, but never know, because they wouldn't have the opportunity to try skiing.

The body type will also affect an athlete. For example, an endomorph wouldn't run a marathon, as it would be extremely challenging, and they probably wouldn't have enough determination to do it.

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