

## Acquiring skill

If you want to improve your performance in any given sport, you need to learn the skills that are necessary to play that sport well.

### I. Identifying necessary skills

A **skill** is defined as **the learned ability to bring about a predetermined result with maximum certainty and efficiency**. This means that to really possess a skill, you must be able to repeatedly perform an action which will achieve the desired goal, like hitting a tennis serve low and fast across the net and into the opponent's return zone. Performing the skill with "maximum efficiency" means to not waste extra energy in unnecessary movement.

Skills fall into two different categories:

- **Closed Skills**  
Skills which are performed in a closed environment, where the outcome **will not be affected by external forces**. Examples include performing a high dive, putting a golf ball, swimming competitions and the tennis serve. These are activities where no opponent is going to physically affect the performance of the skill.
- **Open Skills**  
Skills which are used as part of the wider action, and can be greatly **affected by external forces**. Examples include the lay-up shot in basketball, dribbling a football between defenders, and passing the ball to a team-mate in a hockey game. The success of the player is often dependent on the ability to perform the skill while opponents are actively working against them.

To identify what skills are necessary in a given sport, you must be aware of:

- The rules of the game
- How the equipment works to your best advantage
- How the body moves and the factors that govern its movement
- The tactics of the game
- How the skill is used within the game, and the result it achieves

### II. Practising technique in isolation

To learn a new skill, it is essential to break it down into its basic parts. Improving each of those parts will then improve the whole skill. These parts of the skill can be practised out of context as well: a basketball player will do agility training by running short distances and quickly changing direction. This will improve his/her their to grab a rebound ball and move to a position where they can pass it to their teammates. For some skills, such as pole vaulting or high jumping, the skill can seem too complex. However, for a player to understand how well they are doing, they should know that the learning process is broken down into three phases:

- **Cognitive Phase**  
Being shown how to perform the skill, "giving it a go" and learning from trial and error.
- **Associative Phase**  
Learning by repetition and practising the skill; refining the skill.
- **Autonomous Phase**  
The skill becomes automatic for the player, and changes in the skill can be made on demand to suit the tactics of the game.

By understanding which phase a player is in, a coach or trainer can give the player the right kind of feedback to increase their knowledge of the skill. If a player was serving a volleyball for the first time, a coach would not tell them every single mistake they made; that would be very disheartening! It is best to work on getting every serve inside the line, before refining the angle and speed of the serve.

All athletes will break down their game in order to practice each technique in isolation and perfect it. Improvement of each technique will lead to improvement in the whole game.

Good feedback is essential, and can be gained in many ways:

- **Visual**  
Feedback can be given through the use of video. Often if an athlete can see for him/herself what (s)he is doing wrong, the adjustment can be made more easily.
- **Verbal**  
Feedback from an experienced coach or trainer is indispensable. The longer you spend watching, analysing and working on a skill, the better placed you are to teach others.
- **Manual**  
Feedback is hands-on and often used to correct the body position of the athlete, giving him/her an idea of what the body should feel like. For example, a gymnast may be trying a new skill and require a "spotter", someone who will physically hold onto or catch the gymnast.

### III. Using the "Perfect Model"

This term describes the perfect way to perform a skill. In reality, it's a bit of a misnomer, as no two players perform any skill in precisely the same way. However, watching a top professional who has practised the skill millions of times can give you an excellent or "perfect model" of the same skill you are hoping to learn. Then you can compare your performance with theirs. For an example, let's take a skill that most people will perform in their PE lessons: **Fielding a small ball rolling along the ground.**

Follow these three stages to perfect the skill:

- **Preparation**
  1. Keep your eyes on the ball.
  2. Run to get in line with the ball so that it is coming directly towards you.
- **Action**
  1. Bend down sideways to form a "long barrier" with the left knee on the ground touching the right heel. Place the hands in a cup shape with the fingers pointing to the ground to receive the ball to the left of the body.
  2. Stop the ball with both hands.
  3. Stand up with the ball in the right hand (for a right-handed thrower).
  4. Place the right hand back behind the right shoulder with the elbow bent and take one step forward with the left foot towards the target you will be throwing to.
  5. Keep your eyes on the target with the head steady.
  6. Throw the ball overarm to the target.
  7. Throw the ball high enough so that it does not bounce in front of the receiver.
- **Recovery**
  1. Keep your eyes on the target.
  2. The throwing hand should continue its motion in line with the target.
  3. Regain balance.

Test your knowledge of performance analysis!

### Part I

Which of the following skills are "open" and which are "closed"?

1. Throwing a shot put            Open - Closed
2. Making a snooker shot        Open - Closed
3. Heading a football            Open - Closed
4. Hitting a cricket ball         Open - Closed

### Part II

Coach O'Malley is showing one of her gymnasts, Twyla, how to do a forward roll on the high beam. She first asks one of the more experienced girls to demonstrate. Twyla then attempts the forward roll as Coach O'Malley "spots" her. Once Twyla has practised a few times, the Coach talks her through the move and tells her what she has done right and what needs to be corrected.

Now answer these questions by using the words below to fill in the blanks.

**Associative**

**Follow-through**

**Preparation**

**Autonomous**

**Manual**

**Verbal**

**Cognitive**

**Perfect Model**

**Visual**

5. The gymnast is initially in the

phase of learning.

6. When the coach pushes Twyla's head further forwards and into the correct position, she is giving

feedback.

7. The more experienced gymnast performs the skill perfectly and without much effort. She is in the

phase of learning.

8. The experienced gymnast's demonstration is used as the

9. When Twyla finishes her forward roll and brings herself back into the original position, she completes her

and begins her  for the next move.