

PERFECT PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Former UK Athletics performance director MAX JONES highlights the basics of teaching skills to athletes

IN THE vast majority of events skill is a key element to successful performance and indeed, up and down the country, stadiums are full of athletes and coaches trying to improve skills every Tuesday Thursday evening and Sunday morning. The reason for spending hours perfecting skills is that more often than not the skill element is the deciding factor between success and failure. Better skills will save energy maximize power and minimize the risk of injury.

Personally I have spent more hours than I care to remember trying to perfect skills of athletes, sometimes being frustrated but often being rewarded by a sudden breakthrough in performance due to a new plateau of skill being attained. With a background of athletics coaching since 1969 until 2000, I, like many coaches, developed a regime for improving skills largely through trial and error.

I must say I picked up very little on skill training from written literature in those 31 years and most of the pearls of wisdom, which will follow, are the product of empirical experience. Here I have listed some of the golden rules of skill-learning that hopefully will help coaches and perhaps shorten the learning curve to a little less than 31 years!

• Skill first - sweat second

FOR those readers who have played either squash or tennis, it is remarkable that at a start of a game hitting a ball is not too much of a problem. Yet one hour later it is difficult to put a racket on the ball due to fatigue making coordination difficult.

The athlete needs to be fresh to be able to perform skills well and to concentrate on the task in hand. A fatigued athlete cannot perform skills at a high level and indeed any attempt to improve skills in a tired state will be counterproductive.

Coaches should always place the skill element of the coaching session near to the start of the session and certainly not after any element of hard training. Remember, skill first and sweat second !

• Positive coaching

THERE are many instances of coaches

coaching by negatives which can be encapsulated by the Harry Enfield catchphrase "Don't do it like that, do it like this." As coaches we are looking for faults in an athlete's technique so that we can correct them and, by doing so, improve the skill. But if we are not careful we tend to live in a world of negatives - "That was wrong", "it was poor", "it could be better", etc.

If we are not careful our well-intentioned criticism will give the athlete low esteem and a complex. I have found that athletes respond to encouragement and positive coaching and the poor long jump trial should be used, for example, in a positive way by the coach saying, "You had excellent approach speed but you did not lift off the board as you can do, so next time ..."

This is far better than, "There was no lift off the board so next time ..." with the athlete walking back to the end of the runway despondent.

Always start your coaching statement with a positive and you will find that the athlete will take the negative positively. Keep the session positive and upbeat and always remember, athletics is supposed to be fun!

• Coaching follows observation

IN my early coaching career I would want to say something on every throw that an athlete took and I would jump in at the deep end and comment on every occasion presented. Often a new athlete would come along and, after witnessing the first throw, I would put the world to rights, pointing out what was right and what was wrong and giving XYZ improvements.

Coaches should always watch several throws before giving an opinion because only then is a pattern established and a true assessment given. A single throw, jump or run can be a one-off for the athlete that may never be repeated and therefore any corrections may be counterproductive. Coaches should remember that often silence is golden and that it is better to choose your moment and be sure of your diagnoses.

• KISS

I HAVE always been a great believer in

keeping things simple and the title line KISS stands for keep it simple stupid. A coach may have great depth of knowledge but their task is to convert this knowledge into something that is easily understood.

It is of very little value to an athlete to be told that they have just contravened Newton's third law, which is why they are lying face down in the long jump pit! What the athlete really wants to know is where to put what limb to eradicate the lack of balance in the jump.

The coach must always give clear and concise coaching comments that are understood by the athlete. Life is complicated enough without having to sit a university entrance examination every Tuesday evening.

• Treat the cause not the symptom

IN any skill there are basic fundamentals that if nailed down will ensure success. Far too often a coach will be dealing with faults that are not the root cause of the incorrect technique and ignoring the real cause of the problem.

Take, for example, a discus thrower who is falling off balance at the front of the circle. Many coaches will spend time and effort trying to correct things at the end of the throw when the cause of the imbalance is at the back of the circle due to the athlete not being balanced on entry to the turn. Until this basic fundamental is corrected the symptoms at the front of the circle will continue.

Coaches should always stand back and ask themselves the question: "What are the symptoms and what is the fundamental cause?" Until the latter is corrected the technique will always be flawed.

• Quality not quantity

IT is a commonly used phrase - "practice makes perfect" - yet this is far from the truth because only perfect practice makes perfect. Sloppy skill practices will only lead to ingrained faults because practice makes permanent.

The coach and the athlete should think of a skill training session as a scale of justice with a fight for supremacy between good skills and

Poorly performed skills. If, at the end of a session, the imaginary scales are heavily in favour of the good performances it will mean that the athlete can leave the session a better performer.

To win the battle, the coach should keep skill sessions short and focused with the athlete concentrating on each trial. As well as keeping such sessions fatigue-free, the coach should avoid poor weather conditions since it is difficult to win the skill war in freezing horizontal rain!

Try to avoid having a set number of trials written down since it is always best to finish on a high note rather than the session tailing off despondently - "Those last three throws were excellent - let's finish there - well done."

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• To drill or not to drill?

I ONCE invited world discus record-holder Wolfgang Schmidt over to the UK to give a series of lectures on the discus event. On one particular night he demonstrated endless drills to the coaches and on the way back to the hotel I asked him which of the drills he favoured. None, was his reply. "I basically used only the standing throw and the full turn but, when I attend clinics, the coaches just love drills so I show them all the drills I know."

After 30 or so years of coaching I came to the conclusion that the majority of drills in any event lend little to the development of the basic event skill. The good coach should decide which few drills to take on board to develop the skill of the event and disregard the unhelpful ones. Always remember this piece of advice - 50 per cent of drills are a complete waste of time, but the problem is, which 50 percent?'

- **Develop the athlete**

ALWAYS try to develop the athlete during the coaching session. Don't just give the athlete instructions but involve the athlete. Don't just give an instruction in isolation but always give a reason for the correction.

It is also beneficial to ask the athlete, "How did that last jump feel?" which is a good question and will eventually develop the athlete into a thinking athlete. A thinking athlete is usually a good athlete. The more experienced an athlete becomes, the more that they will become involved in skill development.

- **It's a nasty world out there**

THE coach should be aware that making a skill change is only the first step in making the change good enough to hold up in the face of fierce competition.

Initial technical changes should take place in a closed situation, well away from pressure and competition but the change must then be tested in an increasingly open situation such as a training competition, local competitions and finally competitions that matter, just making a technical change in a training session is not the end of the story - just the start of the process.

- **Everyone is an individual**

THERE is no such thing as the perfect technique. All human beings are different and a technique that suits say, Sarah Claxton in the sprint hurdles, may not be ideal for the tall athlete such as Kelly Sotherton.

The coach has to fit the technique to the athlete not the athlete to the technique and their squad should contain a variation of styles since their squad is not cloned from the world record-holder.

- **Coaching isn't just a movie**

FOR many years I coached by eye only and I became pretty good at spotting faults and correcting them but I always thought that something was missing. In 1983 John Powell, the former world record-holder in the discus, came to stay with me and he introduced to me the concept of coaching by sound!

Powell put forward the view that each event had its own rhythm of sound so that the sound of the feet in, say, the discus or a long jump would give out a rhythm from which the coach could glean information.

Getting the athlete to hear the

rhythm of their event would be a huge benefit to improving technique. Next time you get close to an elite performer close your eyes and listen to the sound the athlete makes and tune into the event's rhythm.

The above are just a few of the coaching hints that I developed through trial and error over the years and hopefully those coaches starting out on their careers will find them useful, helping them perhaps to make a few less errors.