

Skills & Drills vs. Games

Over the past few years, there has been significant debate among coaches and parents as to which approach to teaching athletic skills is best.



Coaching used to be driven by a more instruction-based, rote-learning approach, where coaches told you what to do. Drills were done repetitively to make skills automatic, as in layup lines in basketball or line passing drills in soccer, for example.

However, a new way of thinking has recently come about which suggests the rigid nature of such a coaching philosophy eliminates the possibility for players to learn how to adequately think and adjust as they would in a game. In essence, players should do most skills training in environments that mimic game-like conditions. This allows players to actively learn a skill and figure out how and when to make the necessary adjustments for a given situation.

The Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model, pioneered in the late 1990s by Dr. Istvan Balyi, backs up this more modern view of coaching theory and sports training structure. In this model, there are six phases of athlete development (for late-specialization sports) which require different points of emphasis to best develop well-rounded athletes.



The LTAD model (stages)



Stage one (ages 6-9)

The earliest stage involves playing multiple sports in fun environments with lots of competitive gameplay. The ultimate goal is developing the ABCs of athleticism (agility, balance, coordination, speed), thereby making children more physically well-adjusted in their movements. These base attributes serve to provide them with a firm platform as they specialize in sports through their teenage years.

Stage two (ages 10-14)

The second stage involves a more in-depth exploration of the technical elements of individual sports, along with an introduction to their associated tactics. This also includes learning other important aspects of enhancing performance, including good hydration, nutrition, warmup, cooldown and other aspects of taking care of your body to be able to perform at your best. At this stage, you will be training more



than competing (75-to-25 distribution). This training should lean heavily on drills that allow for guided learning — such as coaching — instead of ones that lean on repetition in stand-still environments.



Stage three (ages 15-18)

During the critical third stage of the model, you should have a 50-50 training-to-competition ratio. That training time should be focused on providing competitive games that also help players to further understand the tactical elements of their chosen sport. Drills at this stage should recreate in-game scenarios for athletes to solve real on-field problems.

“The more I practice, the luckier I get.” — Gary Player, pro golfer with nine World Golf Championships

Game-like training

In sports, the more competent players are quickly able to adapt their execution of specific skills, such as passing, trapping, shooting, etc., based on the specific situation that they are facing at each moment. While repetitive drills allow players to build up a certain level of competency in their execution, the conditions of standing beside a cone to practice a header 10 times or skating with the puck toward the goal with no obstacles in your way will not translate to game situations.

If you want to improve your game, come up against stiffer competition — from age group to age group, or from youth teams to college to the professional leagues. Ensuring you can execute skills under duress is all-important to figuring out how to do it consistently.

The ‘pick-up’ effect

Some of the most celebrated sporting icons today honed their skills by playing pick-up, backyard games against family members and friends. These moments allowed them to figure out the genius they had as they found ways around problems that would crop up for them in the rink, on the court or on the field of play.

For example, hockey great Wayne Gretzky skated and played with his friends for hours on end at the rinks close to home, and soccer icon Pele learned his skills playing barefoot in the streets with his friends.

However, sports in the last 20 to 30 years have become much more structured and rigid. Now, you spend all your playing time with one team or another, learning from one coach or another, under supervision. While in the past these periods of free play went hand in hand with training sessions under the eyes of formal-school or club coaches who repetitively taught skills through isolated drills, sports nowadays include very little time for children and youth athletes to play freely.



The good thing is that most modern coaches are beginning to bring these game-play concepts into their coaching, providing most of you with opportunities to be a little more creative and inventive in finding solutions to problems that pop up while playing.



To those of you whose coaches prefer to stick to repetitive drills, as you enter your teenage years, make sure to find time to practice your sport in less restrictive environments. That will allow you to get a better feel for the game.

Anything you can do to separate yourself from the thousands of other teenage athletes playing your sport in high school will make a big difference.