

Practice Design Considerations

In this outline, I've listed a few areas to consider when creating your practices to best optimize your potential for getting your athletes to meet their goals. For a practice to be effective, as you know, there is more to it than just workouts. We need to plan for athlete learning and engagement and then be the teacher who can execute that plan!

These areas are the ones that I utilize and reflect on when I am planning a season, a week of training, or a practice. I also reflect on these areas to reorient my focus when going on deck to ensure I am as efficient as possible (timely and effective), with no wasted time, and achieving maximum engagement. These areas are *Learning principles, Learning Motivations, Deliberate Practice, Feedback types, Autonomy-Supportive Coaching, and Practice Design features*. You might use these areas to cross-reference your practice/teaching plans.

Of course, there are many other areas and features one might add to this list, but these are the ones I feel are important to start with. Some are deeper than others but equally important. For example, *Feedback types* are simple but they help you reflect on how much time you're spending in a certain style and allows you to make a preplanned decision on which feedback types you want to employ during a given practice session. Whereas deliberate practice has books on books of ways to get better in this area.

Ultimately it is important to remember that even if we write the greatest practice plan in the world, it will still be mediocre if it's not coached with spirit. Therefore, on deck, you will often hear me ask, "What is the goal/spirit of the practice? Coach that!" It is because I don't want you to be a robot and repeat what the practice says, I don't like coaching with robots! You'll need to bring out the practice's spirit in your own way to TEACH it to your swimmers. Hopefully, this information gives you the platform to write that awesome practice but coach it better than anyone else can too!

A Note on Component Skills and Progression

All sports skills, regardless of the degree of complexity, from running an intricate passing route and catching a thrown ball in a football game, to running a short distance in a straight line in a 100-meter track race, require the ability to perform multiple skills. These related skills, such as focus and emotional control, and the ability to read and react to performance conditions including opponents, weather, and teammates; are referred to as component skills. When selecting skills to teach, coaches first must clearly identify all component skills that will influence an athlete's ability to perform the target skill successfully. This task often proves to be a difficult and overlooked step in designing effective learning activities. Once done, however, coaches can then plan to progress each component by utilizing the information in this outline. I provide progression outlines I currently use for the 4 competitive strokes at varying levels for your convenience.

To help decide and prepare for what skills to teach and when

Learning Principle	Sample Coaching Strategy
Does the athlete have prior knowledge of a skill that can help or hinder their learning?	Have athletes explain or demonstrate a skill before attempting to reach it to gauge readiness to learn the skill
How does the skill difficulty level affect the athlete motivation during the learning process?	Ask athletes for feedback on the difficulty of learning activities to help find the right challenge-skill balance
Does the athlete fully understand the skill you are trying to teach? Do they have to basic component skills needed to achieve skill mastery?	Try describing and then walking through the steps needed to perform a skill before teaching it to your athletes.
Can you combine deliberate practice with targeted specific feedback?	Identify in advance feedback cues and feedback bandwidths to help athletes meet learning and performance standards.

To help guide practice ideas that improve group and individual athlete engagement

Motivational for Learning Types	Teaching the Value of Training
<u>Attainment</u> : Personal satisfaction one feels when performing or learning a skill	Teaching specific skills like turns, dives, how to execute the butterfly legally.
<u>Intrinsic</u> : When an athlete experiences the joy of training and reconnect them with their love for the sport. Moments when the athletes lose themselves in the activity.	Encourage and design practice to create a sweet spot or flow. Do this with a challenge slightly above the skill level of a swimmer and can only be accomplished with 100% focus/support.
<u>Instrumental</u> : Little incentives in the form of rewards.	400IM Dream Team Caps, IMX T-Shirts, ect.
<u>Goal Importance</u> : The subjective value that athletes place on the goal of the learning activity.	Provide rationale for selecting a particular approach to practicing a skill.

What is deliberate practice and what are some coaching strategies to create the environment

Practice Features	Coaching Considerations
Demands full concentration and accurate mental images of the skill	Provide sufficient demonstration and verbal instructions before initiating athlete deliberate practice. Use video, teaching cues, and keywords to help athletes focus on critical components of the skill or tactic. Set aside time during practice to athletes to reflect on their performance and discuss with coaches and peers.
Requires near-maximal physical effort and sufficient recovery	Provide athletes with frequent rest periods both within and between practices. Keep deliberate practice sessions short and intense. Focus on quality of practice activities as opposed to amount of time spent in practice.
Involves well-defined and specific goals for practicing just beyond the comfort zone	Closely monitor and track athlete skill development as frequently as possible (during and after each practice and competition when possible). Combine objective performance data (statistics) with subjective information (coach observation) to identify critical performance gaps and to offer the correct level of difficulty for training activities.

Not perceived as enjoyable because of effort requirement	Avoid designing practice sessions that include only deliberate practice activities, include some activities, particularly at the end of practice, that are less demanding and more enjoyable. Allow some time for athletes to practice or refine their strengths.
Focus on long-term improvement with coaching support.	Expect many failures and setbacks because of the focus on closing performance gaps and the high demands of deliberate practice. Identify and immediately reinforce small improvements in any aspect of the skill or performance. Encourage and support risk taking and recognize effort and positive attitudes towards practice.

Information on certain feedback types and suggestions on how to implement them. Typically, these are most powerful during deliberate practice.

Feedback Types	Considerations
<u>Augmented Feedback</u> : an observation made by the coach	Quality Change-Oriented Feedback (Identifying errors or undesirable behaviors) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is given in a considerate tone of voice • It is focused on the behavior, not the person • It is coupled with solution options from which the athlete can select • It is based on clear and realistic learning goals familiar to the athlete. Promotional-Oriented feedback (recognizing desirable or correct behaviors.)
<u>Task-intrinsic Feedback</u> : insights that the athlete generates from their own observation	As a rule, coaches should encourage athletes to learn how to use their own task-intrinsic feedback as much as possible. Coaches should limit their use of augmented feedback to situations when it will help direct the athlete's attention to the critical sources of task-intrinsic feedback. During competitions athletes typically have limited or no access to coach-augmented feedback so coaches need to teach their athletes how to adjust based on intrinsic feedback.
3 questions to ask before providing feedback.	What type of feedback should I give? How should I give the feedback? When should I give the feedback?

Some of the best learning comes from deliberate practice or opportunities where the athletes learn on their own. The following are some behaviors and examples to help guide this experience.

Coaching behaviors	Practice Design Examples
Provide opportunities for initiative and independent work	“Great by Choice” is a schedule activity for 5-10 minutes during practice for athletes to identify which skills they want to work on and how they want to practice those skills. Athletes are not forced into participating in the “great by choice” training time, instead they are given freedom to practice the skills they believe are most important to helping them improve their performance.
Provide choice within boundaries	Allow athletes to choose a practice activity from a coach prepared list of activities.
Give rationale for tasks	Explain the advantages of adopting a particular training approach or using a specific practice activity
Acknowledge feelings and perspectives	Listen openly and nondefensively to athlete feedback during practices and use this feedback to adjust future practices.

Solicit athlete input	Actively seek athlete feedback on practice activities to learn how athletes view practice activities.
Avoid controlling behaviors	Recognize that a skill or practice activity can be executed in several ways; do not use ultimatums or coerce or shame athletes into performing the skill your way.
Transition Time	Scheduling 5-10 minutes of free play at the beginning of practice is recommended because it serves as a mental and physical transition to practice while allowing athletes to reconnect with their teammates.

Here are some of my favorite practice design checklists. Pairing this with all the information from above allows me to create a timely practice that doesn't have too much or too little of anything.

Practice Designs	Features
4 Practice Design Factors (Used in my coaching daily Reflection)aa	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set challenging and specific practice goals <i>Major and Minor Focuses</i> 2. Keep athletes physically and mentally active throughout the practice 3. Give athletes choices and ask them for input on practice design 4. Create competitive game like practice activities
John Wooden's 8 Principles of Practice Design	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Fundamentals before creativity 2. Use variety 3. Teach new material at the start of practice 4. Quick transitions between activities 5. Increase complexity from practice to practice 6. Condition athletes for learning 7. End on a positive note 8. Avoid altering a plan or lesson <p>(Bonus): Briefly end on a new complex skill to prepare for next practice.</p>
The 15 P's of Perfect Pedagogy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plan 2. Prepare the learner 3. Prepare a protected learning environment 4. Present the task efficiently 5. Pretest 6. Provide opportunities for plenty of practice 7. Practice should be pertinent 8. Practice should be purposeful 9. Practice should be playful 10. Practice should be progressive 11. Practice should be paced 12. Practice should be personalized 13. Provide feedback 14. Praise performance 15. Project poise, patience, and passion