

# Training Smarter (Part I)

Coaches are constantly faced with the challenge of teaching various sports skills to their athletes within the limited time they have during training. Therefore, it is critical for coaches to structure their training sessions in a way that enables their athletes to learn the various skills as quickly as possible. This two-part article will examine some of the common practice methods which coaches employ during their training sessions and their effect on learning sports skills.

## Types of Practice

The most common form of practice which coaches use during training is known as blocked practice. Blocked practice refers to a practice sequence in which the individual rehearses the same skill repeatedly. This is typically done during skill drills, where athletes practice a single skill several times before moving on to the next skill drill.

At the other end of the spectrum is random practice where the athlete performs a number of skills in a random order, avoiding or minimizing consecutive repetitions of a single skill.

## How is each practice useful?

Numerous researchers have investigated the effects of both training practices and all have reached the same conclusion – blocked practice produces superior performance during practice while random practice produces superior learning when measured on a delayed test of retention. What does this mean?

For example, two tennis coaches want to teach three skills (serve, forehand and volley) to their respective students. One coach employs the blocked practice method and the other coach uses the random practice method to teach his students the three skills. At the end of the training session, the students who went through the blocked practice session will perform better than those who were in the random practice session.

However, if the same students were to be tested a week later, the students who were in the random practice session would show a better retention of these skills better than those in the blocked practice session.



## When is a practice useful?

If the students are mainly beginners, blocked practice would be useful in helping them learn skills quickly and building their confidence in performing those skills. Coaches can then introduce a “semi-random” practice sequence where the skills are performed in small blocks of 3 – 5 repetitions and rotating them in a random order.

For more competent or competitive athletes, there is no evidence to suggest that blocked practice could be used to improve their skills any further. However, it still can be used as part of a warm-up routine. Competitive athletes will benefit from random practice as it more accurately reflects the nature of a game situation i.e. skills are performed as the situation demands it and there is only one chance to execute the skill correctly.

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