A Skill Development Model for Gaelic Games

Skills of Hurling and Football

A player requires many different skills to perform to his potential during a game situation. Not only does he need to be able to perform the underlying techniques of the game, but he needs to be able to employ them effectively at match tempo (T1: Technical Proficiency), he needs to be able to weigh up match situations and decide on the best option to take and when to take it (T2: Tactical Prowess), and be able to anticipate the movements of his teammates and synchronise with them during set play and general play (T3: Team Play).

These skills should be developed in an integrated manner along with Physical Fitness (P1), Psychological Focus (P2) and a knowledge and acceptance of the Playing Facts (P3) and in a balanced manner best suited to the requirements of the specific game.

What do we know about Developing Skill?

In some instances today, the training methods used by coaches do not fully take account of the knowledge available to us in relation to the best means to develop the 3 Ts and in particular Technical Proficiency. For example, many players are exposed to intermediate/advanced level skill drills and then challenged to perform in conditioned games or full matches without having reached a basic level of Technical Proficiency or Tactical Prowess.

The Skill Development Model outlined here attempts to provide the ideal progression by which a player will develop Technical Proficiency, Tactical Prowess and Team Play. This progression is not random but is supported by scientific research and thus provides the coach with a map or blueprint on how to develop his or her players.

The Skill Development Model

The Skill Development Model is represented in graphic form in Figure 1 below. The model outlines 5 main categories of activity that focus on specific areas of development as follows:

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Each successive category is a progression on the previous category while each individual category includes a progression in difficulty from left to right. As a result Developing players should be exposed more readily to the earlier categories of activity and to the

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earlier progressions within each category as reflected on the left hand side of the white line in Figure 1. Developed players should be exposed to the range of activities on the right hand side of the white line. Coaches should continually assess the specific development of individual players to ensure they are exposing them to the appropriate challenge for their needs and abilities.

Figure 1.

The detailed progression is as follows:

1. **Fundamentals - ABC’s / Have-a-Ball Programme**

   - **Aim:** To Develop Fundamental Movement Skills (Locomotor, manipulative and stability skills including the ABCs and RJTs of athleticism - Agility, Balance, Coordination and Running, Jumping, Throwing) and Basic Motor Skills (Catching, Passing, Kicking and Striking)
   
   - **Format:** A series of exercises with and without the ball
   
   - **Rationale:**
Basic movement skills are the foundation of all physical activity and are essential both to an individual’s development of effective motor skills and to the application of these skills in a wide variety of physical activities. These skills also play a vital role in player’s interpersonal, cognitive, and emotional development. These skills should be developed in the early years of physical development to form the basis for all further movement and motor development. Fundamentals activities should be continued throughout the career development of a player, and are typically utilised as elements of warm-up activities for developing and elite players.

2. **Technical Drills**

There are 3 progressions of Technical Drills – Basic Drills, Intermediate Drills and Advanced Drills. Technical Drills are defined by challenging players to perform techniques correctly, consistently and at increasing speeds and under increasing pressure within specific movement patterns.

(a) **Basic Drills**

- **Aim:** Technical Proficiency (T1)

- **Format:**
  The Ball does the work, the player is stationary or limiting his movement to that required by the technique.

- **Rationale:**
  There are three phases to learning a new skill and these are:
  1. **Cognitive Phase** - Identification and development of the component parts of the skill
  2. **Associative Phase** - Linking the component parts into a smooth action
  3. **Autonomous Phase** - Developing the learned skill so that it becomes automatic

The **Cognitive Phase** is vital to the development of good technique. It refers to recognising how to do a skill by identifying it’s key components by watching it performed or demonstrated. This phase also refers to those first attempts at performing the skill where the player must pay particular attention to each component of the skill. The rate of development during this phase is directly related to the quality with which the skill is taught. Using as many methods of teaching the skill as possible (Verbal, Demonstration, Video, Diagrams etc) and ensuring that the visual demonstration is of a very high standard is of utmost importance.
Once the component parts of the skill have been clearly identified by the player further practice helps assemble them, component by component, into the overall skill – i.e. the Associative Phase. Players use feedback from themselves (i.e. how the skill feels and if the outcome is successful) and from the coach (identifying where the player is making an error and providing positive corrective) to shape and polish the components into a smooth action. Rehearsal of the skill must be done regularly and correctly.

Finally, with further practice the skill may become automatic, i.e. the player can perform the skill without consciously focusing on either the whole skill or how it is made up of its component parts. This is the Autonomous Phase and is identified by automatic and consistently correct performance of the skill.

These three phases hold significant importance in the context of the Skill Development Model. In order to develop a skill at the optimum rate the coach should attempt to ensure that the player reaches the autonomous phase of development within the context of a Basic Drill, i.e. while the player is stationary. While stationary the player can focus all his attention on performing the technique correctly. Challenging the player to reach the Autonomous phase within the context of a Basic Drill allows the player to focus solely on this objective. Only then can the coach be confident that the player is ready to be challenged to perform the technique while moving or under pressure.

(b) Intermediate Drills

- **Aim:** Technical Proficiency (T1)

- **Format:**
  The Ball and the players do the work, i.e. MOVEMENT is introduced.

- **Rationale:**
  Once the Autonomous Phase has been achieved the skill may be practiced on the move. Even in intermediate drills movement is the only other factor that the player must focus on. The player should learn to perform the skill while moving before learning to perform the skill at match tempo or under increased pressure.

(c) Advanced Drills

- **Aim:** Technical Proficiency (T1)

- **Format:**
  Pressure is increased by speeding the drill up progressively towards match tempo, and by reducing the space and time the players have to perform the skill. Reaction responses, multiple techniques or physical contact may be introduced but the drill should remain a specific movement pattern.

- **Rationale:**
Once Proficiency has been achieved at Intermediate Drill level players may be challenged to perform the skill in situations that resemble the conditions of a match. In order to achieve this, speed the drill up progressively towards match tempo and introduce other skills into the same drill. Under pressure a player may need to adjust his technique to successfully complete the skill.

### 3. Fun Games

There are 4 progressions of Fun Games – Target, Court, Field and Non-Invasion. Target Games/Technical Drills are defined by challenging players to perform techniques correctly, consistently and at increasing speeds and under increasing pressure within specific movement patterns.

- **Aim:** Technical Proficiency (T1), Tactical Prowess (T2)

- **Format:**
  Fun Games are activities which help further develop Technical Proficiency while exposing players to limited decision making. Target Games are the simplest form and challenge players to use their technique to hit a target. Starting in 1’s or 2’s build the numbers to involve unstructured group work. Court Games require players to pass the ball over an obstacle like a net or zone to a receiver. They still require only limited decision but require more communication, spatial awareness and match related running. Field Games are those games that are based on alternating ‘batters’/kickers and fielders. They require greater decision making and spatial awareness in relation to where, when and how to move or ‘bat’. Non-Invasion games require players to complete a task without any direct opposition. A passing game which requires players to make a certain number of passes while moving continuously is an example of a non-invasion game, as is requiring players to move through a series of markers or spaces within a grid.

- **Rationale:**
  Fun Games require players to apply the techniques learned to fun situations. Limited decision making challenges the players to read the game and decide when and how to use the different techniques. The competition element introduces a limited amount of pressure to challenge their focus.

### 4. Game Play Drills

Game Play Drills are those drills that require players to make decisions about what techniques to use and how and when to use them to complete a task that is specific to hurling or football.

- **Aim:** Tactical Prowess (T2), Team Play (T3)
**Format:**
Game Play Drills differ from advanced drills in one key aspect. Whereas Advanced Drills require players to perform skills within a defined pattern, e.g. in a straight line between 2 cones or from one marker to another, Game Play Drills require players to perform skills while in situations that simulate those they may be exposed to in a game. Game Play Drills are sometimes referred to as Match Running Drills or Informal Drills. Essentially, as players are not limited to moving in a specific manner between set points, they must make decisions about where to move and when and how to perform the skills required. An excellent example of a simple Game Play Drill is requiring an attacker to take on a defender in a channel with the objective of reaching the other end with the ball.

**Rationale:**
From the perspective of increasing the challenge to a player’s abilities there is a vast difference between Advanced Drills and Game Play Drills. Game Play Drills train improvements in adapting technical proficiency to pressure situations and improving tactical awareness which are vital elements in ensuring a player is competent in a match situation. Game Play Drills are the essential link between the development of technical proficiency and being prepared to play in full game situations.

5. **Games**

Games is the general term for those activities that require players to operate as a team in situations specific to hurling or football. There are a number of different Game types that challenge players progressively to develop the skills required to participate competently in full-sided hurling or football matches.

(a) **Modified Games**

**Aim:** Team Play (T3),

**Format:**
Modified Games are practices that focus on different aspects of team play through games. They are often undertaken in a defined space, e.g. a grid. Many variations may be used, depending on the objective of the game, e.g. 2 v 1, 2 v 2, 3 v 2, 3 v 3. Conditioned Games can be used to develop the ability to retain possession (passing sequences), to create or reduce space (3 v 2 etc) or to develop contact or reaction skills. Modified Scoring Systems (e.g. target scores or time limits) and Modified Playing Rules (e.g. no solo, one bounce, fist pass only) can be used to focus on particular techniques or aspects of decision making.

**Rationale:**
Modified Games apply the skills learned to team situations. Players must make decisions on where and when to move to combine as an effective unit as in a real ‘game’ situation. Such games encourage awareness of time and space but also help develop specific characteristics of Team Play, e.g. support play and communication. By not limiting players to particular positions the coach allows each player to develop greater decision making skills and tactical appreciation for different aspects of play.

(b) Small-Sided Games

- **Aim:** Team Play (T3)

- **Format:**
  Small Sided Games are a version of modified games that utilise a greater number of the characteristics of full hurling or football. Smaller numbers are used to ensure plenty of ball contact for all involved. Positions may be used but it is advisable to allow individual players to play in as many different positions as possible over time.

- **Rationale:**
  Tactical Prowess and Team Play are further developed but with more specific relevance to full-sided games as the movement and open play mimic aspects of full hurling and football.

(c) Full-Sided Games

- **Aim:** Team Play (T3)

- **Format:**
  15-a-side games with players in appropriate positions. In progressing towards this stage Backs and Forwards games are an effective method of developing positioning and allow the ball to be played into an area more frequently increasing pressure and optimising training time.

- **Rationale:**
  Ultimately players train to play full-sided games. Once the earlier progressions have been achieved it is vital that players prepare for full-sided games by playing full-sided games.

In Conclusion

The progressions outlined are relevant to players of all ages. In order to maximise the effectiveness of training sessions a combination of drills and games should be used. For example, if players can only perform at the Basic level of Drills it does not mean that they should not be allowed to play any type of game. Introduce fun or grid games to
develop aspects of fitness or tactical prowess. The overriding principal is that players are set achievable but challenging tasks in order that they remain interested, excited and motivated to play.