STAGES OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCE	DEVELOP	CONSOLIDATE	REFINE	MAINTAIN
Key Points to Look For				
The first contact the athlete has with the skill. The athlete may have no idea of what to do to perform the skill. The athlete is given a global idea of what the skill is and how to perform it (key movements).	The early stage of learning where the athlete becomes capable of (1) coordinating key components of movements and (2) executing them in the correct order, thus performing a rough form of the skill. The movements are not well synchronized or under control, and they lack rhythm and flow. The execution is inconsistent and lacks precision. The athlete has to think about what he or she is doing while performing the skill. Both form and performance tend to deteriorate markedly when the athlete tries to execute movements quickly or is under pressure, as may be the case in a competitive situation.	The athlete can now execute the movements of the skill with correct form, good movement control, synchronization, and rhythm when performing the skill under easy and stable conditions. The movements can be repeated consistently and with precision under these conditions. Some elements of performance can be maintained when the athlete is under pressure, when conditions change, or when demands increase. However, but performance is usually inconsistent in these situations. The athlete begins to develop a more personal style.	This stage is achieved only by the best athletes in the world. The athlete can execute the movements in a way that is very close to the ideal in terms of form and speed but may develop a personal style that is efficient for their physical make-up. For example, two players may possess the same variety of skills, but they will use different skills in a given situation due to differences in stature, speed, stamina, strength, and suppleness. Only minor fine-tuning may be necessary to achieve optimal execution. The performance is very consistent and precision is high, even under very demanding conditions and in situations that are both complex and varied. The performance of the skill/tactic is highly automated which enables the athlete to focus on the environment to pick up visual cues in order to make rapid adjustments as necessary. Players can now read and react appropriately to changing tactical situations. Personal interpretation of movements or personal movements can be combined into unique patterns in response to specific competitive situations. The athlete can reflect critically on his or her performance to make corrections.	Once a skill/tactic is refined or a capacity has been achieved, there is a need to ensure it does not deteriorate or is not de-trained during different points within a season.

STAGES OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCE	DEVELOP	CONSOLIDATE	REFINE	MAINTAIN
At this stage, athletes need to…				
Be in a rested state. Be introduced to a skill or tactic under controlled, constant, easy and predictable conditions. Have a clear mental image of what correct execution looks like. Understand the fundamental positions, stances, and patterns of the sport or skill. Feel safe when performing the skill. Reach a comfort level with some movements or feelings that may be unfamiliar and that are part of the skill to be learned. Focus on the global execution of the skill/tactic at much less than game-like speed.	Understand clearly what they have to do, and have a good mental picture of the task. Perform a lot of repetitions at their own pace and under conditions that are stable, easy, and safe so the skill's basic execution becomes reliable and repeatable. Training activities are controlled by the coach and are generally characterized by "block learning" which translates into a high number of repetitions of the task. The skill can then be incorporated into game-like activities so there is transfer from the practice environment to the game environment. (e.g. fielding a ground ball and knowing which play to make when there is more than one baserunner on base). Practise on both sides of the body, if appropriate. Find some solutions by themselves through trial and error, with feedback and correction from a qualified coach.	Have clear objectives for both form (correct execution) and the result of actions. Be challenged to perform under varying conditions that replicate competitive demands (read & react, game speed execution, under stressful conditions, different environmental conditions, in a fatigued state, etc.) and that simulates different points within a game. Find more solutions through trial and error, with less frequent feedback from the coach. Work on developing power and accuracy in performing the skill in competition, on demand, as part of their athletic repertoire. Build a bridge between success rates in practice drills/activities and successful performance in a game. To be trained using block learning until a relative mastery of skill execution is reached (7 out of 10). Then random conditions should be introduced by the coach.	Continue to devote many hours to training under complex and/or demanding competitive situations that require the skill to be executed at a very high level. Must train and apply their skills sets regularly at the greatest level of competitive difficultly to stretch their performance limits. Learn how to solve problems they encounter. Use block learning to improve/maintain skill proficiency and correct technical errors, but shift the majority of training to random conditions. Add a mental stress to training (i.e. requiring a certain success rate) to further stretch their limits. Explore all training elements including those that are not visible on the diamond, such as diet and nutritional programming, weight training, and suppleness and flexibility regimens to improve performance.	Monitor and evaluate performance regularly for any deterioration in execution of skills or conditioning. Implement training or conditioning for any identified deterioration in skill or capacity usually with a lower level of training or practice than was necessary to reach the refined stage.

STAGES OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCE (FIRST EXPOSURE)

Introduce means that the player is learning an element (skill or tactic) for the first time and is given a global idea of what the skill is and how to perform it (key movements). Players should be introduced to a skill or tactic under controlled, constant, easy and predictable conditions. The pursuit of this objective requires concentration in a rested state. The focus or emphasis is on a global execution of the skill/tactic at much less than game-like speed.

DEVELOP (LEARN)

After players have been introduced to a skill/tactic and have a fairly good understanding of what it should look like, the skill/tactic must now be repeated continuously and correctly in order to make it reliable. This is still an early stage of learning where the athlete is learning to coordinate the key components of the movement and execute them in the correct order to perform a rough form of the skill/tactic. The movements are not well synchronized or under control and lack rhythm and flow. The execution is inconsistent and lacks precision. The athlete must think about what he or she is doing while performing the skill. Both form and performance tend to deteriorate markedly when the athlete tries to execute movements quickly or is under pressure, as may be the case in a competitive situation. The develop stage is still part of the learning process with the focus on improving the success rate (outcome).

In this stage of skill development, the skill or tactic's fundamental components are usually learned through structured practice or training sessions. However, the skill should also be performed in game-like activities so there is transfer from the practice environment to the game environment. The key objective is to automate the basic performance so that the player can perform the skill with some consistency (moderate success rate) and fairly good mechanics. Training activities are controlled by the Coach and are generally characterized by "block learning" which translates into a high number of repetitions of the task. The speed of execution is gradually increased from less than game-like speed to more game-like speed. However, speed of execution should be reduced if the player exhibits lower rates of successful performance. In the "develop" phase of learning, players must be engaged in repeated practice of the skill/tactic, so its basic execution becomes reliable and repeatable. Many hours of formal training will be required, along with opportunities to apply the skill/tactic in practice and competitive settings. Qualified coaches must lead training sessions, so players can receive appropriate feedback and correction of the skill/tactic. Skills/tactics can then be incorporated into game-like situations, forging the link between "theory and practice" (e.g. fielding a ground ball and knowing which play to make when there is more than one baserunner is on base).

CONSOLIDATE (STABILIZE)

During this skill development stage, the athlete can now execute the movements of the skill/tactic with correct form, good movement control, synchronization, and rhythm when performing the skill under easy and stable conditions. The movements can be repeated consistently and with precision under these conditions. Some elements of the performance can be maintained when the athlete is under pressure, when conditions change, or when demands increase, but performance remains inconsistent.

During this stage of skill development, the athlete must now be challenged to perform under varying conditions (game speed execution, under stressful conditions, different environmental conditions, etc.). The player is working on developing power and accuracy and performing the skill in competition, on demand, as part of their athletic repertoire. The Coach helps to build a bridge between success rates in practice drills/activities and successful performance in a game. Block learning will still be used until a relative mastery of skill execution is reached (7 out of 10). Then random conditions should be presented. The Coach must create training conditions requiring the player to perform under game-like conditions (read & react, at game speed, etc.) simulating different points within a game.

REFINE (PERFECT)

This skill development stage is achieved only by the best athletes. The performance of the skill/tactic is highly automated which enables the athlete to focus on the environment to pick up visual cues in order to make rapid adjustments as necessary. The athlete can now execute the skill/tactic or movements in a way that is very close to the ideal in terms of form and speed but may also develop a personal style that is efficient for their physical make-up. For example, two players may possess the same variety of skills, but they will use different skills in a given situation due to differences in stature, speed, stamina, strength, and suppleness. At this stage, the execution of the skill may look different from another player's execution. Personal interpretation of movements or personal movements may also be combined into unique patterns in response to specific competitive situations. The performance is very consistent and precision is high, even under very demanding conditions and in situations that are both complex and varied. Only minor finetuning may be necessary to achieve optimal execution. The athlete can also reflect critically on his or her performance to make in-game corrections. It is expected that players involved in drills/games will read and react appropriately to changing tactical situations.

As with all stages of skill development, many hours of practice are required in a variety of training and competitive settings to refine skills. The significant difference is that players must train and apply their skills sets regularly at the greatest level of competitive difficultly to stretch their performance limits. Block learning can still be used to improve/maintain skill proficiency and correct technical errors, but the majority of training will involve random conditions. The Coach must add a mental stress to drills (i.e. requesting a certain success rate) to further stretch players' limits. Improvements in performance may be partially contingent on training elements that are not visible on the diamond, such as diet and nutritional programming, weight training, and suppleness and flexibility regimens.

MAINTAIN (PRESERVE)

Once a skill/tactic is refined or a capacity has been achieved, there is a need to ensure it does not deteriorate or is not de-trained during different points within a season. Players in this stage of skill development can preserve consistency in the execution of the skill/tactic or level of conditioning usually with a lower level of training or practice than was necessary to reach the refined stage.