

HOW SKILLED AND LESS-SKILLED GAELIC FOOTBALL PLAYERS PRACTICE KICKING: DELIBERATE OR NOT?

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Introduction

Deliberate practice is activity designed to advance a current aspect of an individual's performance that requires improvement. It is characterized as being mentally and physically effortful, highly relevant to improving performance, not immediately rewarding, or inherently enjoyable (Ericsson et al., 1993). However, when athletes retrospectively recall their practice histories they rate these activities as enjoyable, rewarding, and as less relevant (e.g., Ward et al., 2007), which they might not have done during the activity itself or the practice might not have been deliberate. When left to their own devices, skilled athletes may engage in deliberate practice activity to improve their performance and rectify weaknesses, which should have its predicted characteristics. We test this hypothesis in a controlled environment using skilled and less-skilled Gaelic football players as they practice two different free-kick tasks.

Methods

Forty-five adult Gaelic football players were divided equally into three groups: skilled (SK), less-skilled (LSK) and control skilled (CSK). Players completed pre- and post-tests involving two free-kick skills (out of hands, off ground) to score a point. The SK and LSK groups practiced the two skills over four practice sessions, each 30 min in duration. They were free to self-select their activities during practice. The characteristics of deliberate practice were examined during practice using established measures of mental effort, physical effort, motivation and enjoyment.

Results & Discussion

The SK participants practiced the skill they were weakest on from the pre-test significantly more than the skill they were strongest on, whereas the LSK group did the opposite. Although both groups improved their overall outcome scores for kicking from pre- to post-test (whereas CSK did not), the improvement for SK was on the weakest skill, whereas for LSK it was on the strongest skill. SK rated their practice as less enjoyable, more physically and mentally effortful and less motivating compared to the LSK group. Our findings support the prediction that experts when left to their own devices engage in deliberate practice activity (Ericsson et al., 1993), whereas less skilled individuals do not.

Conclusion

Skilled Gaelic football players engaged in practice activities that contained the characteristics of deliberate practice, whereas less-skilled players did not.

References

1. Ericsson, K. A. et al. (1993). *Psych Rev*, 100 (3), 363 – 406.
2. Ward, P. et al. (2007). *High Ability Studies*, 18 (2), 119 – 153.