

Climbing the ALPS to skill

Your effectiveness and success as a player depends on a variety of factors, and most these are within your control



John Morrison

IN THIS year's National League Ciaran McKeever, Jamie Clarke, Sean Cavanagh, Joe McMahon, Stephen O'Neill and Bernard Brogan have each been in a rich vein of form.

Like all top sports people they perform their skills smoothly and are exciting to watch. They make difficult actions seem very easy.

Few see the hours of practice done over years which enables them to become highly skilled. They literally climb a mountain of practice to reach the top.

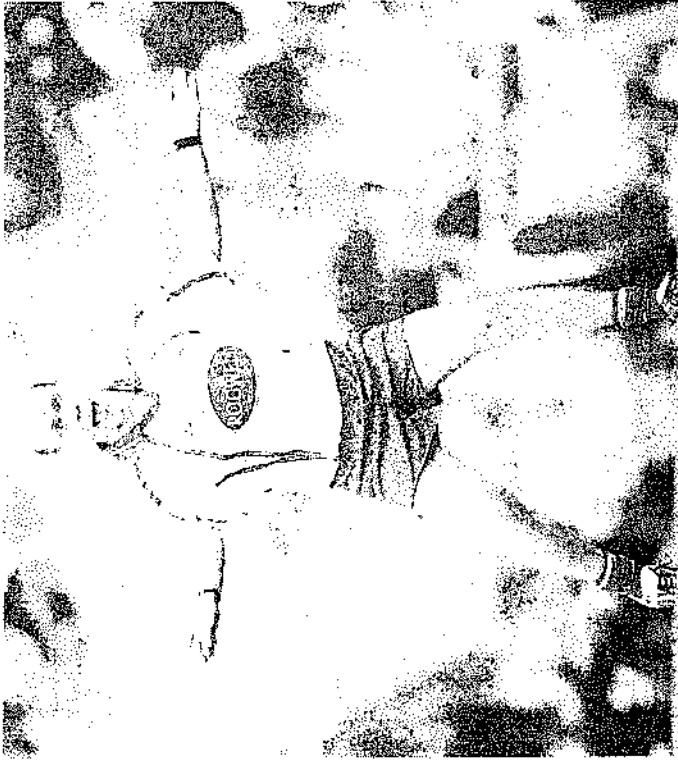
I call the mountain of skill preparation the ALPS.

A is for ability

Ability is our make-up as a person. Ability is inherited from our parents. If you are tall, strong and well co-ordinated you may have a natural ability for midfield in Gaelic, or to play basketball. These abilities are inherited, natural and can't be learned. They are our basic strengths for sport.

L is for learning

By learning the techniques of a sport and practising the skills, you can use your ability to become skil-



PETER CAVANAH... The master of making the game look easy

Picture: Brendan Moran / SPORTSFILE

ful. Techniques are the basic movements in sports and each technique has a finite number of global parts. For example, the pick up. Heads and eyes focused on the ball, then over the ball, last stride is in is long to crouch easily and lift. If you use a short last stride the pick-up goes horribly wrong and becomes a foul.

These global parts combine to form the whole technique and we usually combine a number of differ-

ent techniques into a pattern of movement. For example, running to catch a ball, catch it, then bounce or solo before passing the ball on by a kick or hand pass. This is what we call skill.

P is for practice

We must practice, practice, practice the basic movements of our skills for many, many hours to master the movement to exercise the

process - that is, to use the technique as a skill. This is order of learning through practice. If you don't master the basic movements, flawed skill execution results.

Perhaps the reason why Gaelic sport thinks it needs so many rule changes is more because our skills are not taught or learned well any more and many coaches don't know how to break techniques down into their basic global parts. For example, the pick-up, catches, tackle, block, and so on.

S is for skill

Skill refers to a standard of performance, such as scoring goals, defending well or winning a game. Skill is our ability to choose and perform the right techniques at the right time, successfully, regularly and with a minimum of effort and little or no thought. To the observer the skilful player is successful in his play because they seem to do this easily and seem to have plenty of time. Peter Cavanagh, Jamie Clarke and the like come to mind.

Thus skill in sport is a combination of physical and mental qualities. Players need to have a variety of techniques. They need to know what their opponents are doing now and what they are likely to do next. Players then have to decide what techniques and skills to use when and where.

Decision making is a vitally important part of skill. Unlike ability, we are not born with skill. We have to learn to be skilful. Get it wrong and we make a mess of the game. To

fix it, coach it, don't make more rules on it. There are four elements to performing skills.

Input

Receiving information through our senses and feelings, through our eyes ears, muscles, joints. The more practice, the more information the better it is.

Processing

Processing the information by our brain and selecting the relevant information for the situation and deciding what to do. Flawed technique and skill means poorer decisions and, consequently, mistakes.

Output

When taking action - for example, passing, tackling, closing down or scoring - we react to the situation through our decision making.

Feedback

We see if our actions were successful or become mistakes. Feedback from our senses, coaches, statistics, video analysis and the like help us to improve for the next time. Maybe we do more playing than learning today and so our games suffer. Techniques are basic movements. We use them to build skill. Being skilful means using techniques effectively, consistently and efficiently. They need huge amounts of practice.

Bit like climbing the ALPS.

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