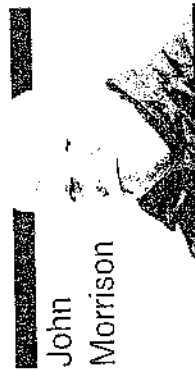


THE MIND...

Mastering the movement

Skill is the global name for a multitude of physical functions, and to execute a skill the movement needs to be perfect



John Morrison

A DEBATE rages in Gaelic sport at the moment for the better application of the rules by referees on the one hand and better coaching of the basic skills, especially the tackle on the other hand.

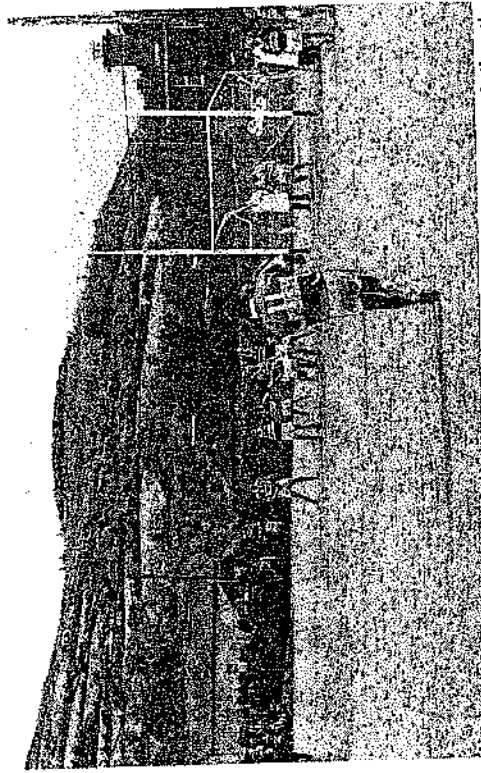
Recently, soccer in Britain and Ireland have begun to work on their football skills more after being derided for years as being less skilled than other Europeans.

Rugby has introduced mini rugby to upgrade the skills in their sport. In learning a skill, remember the technique, the global parts of a skill - for example, head down, hard foot, fast leg and chest on movement of a kick for contact, power and direction - has to be mastered perfectly first. If not, the skills, such as kicking for scores, passing, long clearance, are compromised as we exercise the process of using that technique in a game.

Perfect technique plus its appropriate game usage equals a skill. In learning a new skill or embracing a new habit, we go through four very clearly defined stages of acquisition.

Step one

Unconscious incompetence. Here we are unable to complete or give



EVERY PIECE PLAYS ITS PART...if any aspect of a skill is not performed correctly then the execution must inevitably fail

very little thought to the skill. We are incompetent and are not really thinking about the skill either, as we don't know what we don't know.

This happens to a primary school child who plays with toy cars, but doesn't think of or want to drive because he knows he's not allowed to and anyway that's for big people like daddy. Same as kicking, even if taken to watch games, kicking is just part of their children's play, throwing the ball, picking it up, attempting to swing a leg at it. Glorious in their unconscious incompetence. And anyway kicking is for daddy in his weekend games.

Step two

Conscious incompetence. Around mid-teens, if not before, youngsters

Step three

Conscious competence. Now the young players have a goal - to pass our driving test and to be a skilful kicker/player to hold a place in a team. The goal inspires us to practice as often as possible. We get as many people as possible to help us become better, such as instructors, coaches, friends, and the like. We practice, practice, practice until we pass the test and make the team. These two achievements deem us at an appropriate level of competence. We are competent, but still need to think about the basics in those first few months or more after passing the test and making the team, as we can still make mistakes or even develop bad habits. We are now at the third stage - Conscious competence, we know what we know and we know we can do it.

Step four

Unconscious competence. Here we can now focus on a number of different things, multi-tasking, for example listening to music, talking to others and so on in the car.

On the field we are varying our passes to make supporting runs after solving on the ball. Before this we would have been distracted by the extra things we can do. We can do several things together now with lower levels of concentration and not really having to think about it. Our skill is now operated by our subconscious and/or our muscle memory. This fourth stage is the unconscious competence step of a good driver/player.

Step five

The comfort zone. For me, however, there is a fifth stage. Here things start going wrong as we take our skill for granted. We don't attach much value to it where once we craved it. We start to develop bad habits, one hand on the steering wheel, not checking the mirror, but checking our texts. In football you are kicking with the head up, rushing to the target, poor contact and the like. Suddenly our bad habits hold us back, we get penalty points. We don't score as much, become a poor passer, are dropped off the team, become complacent due to favourable press reports.

Time to get real, become aware of your flaws and have someone help you spot and fix them. This is why I carry out - and would advocate them to other coaches - one-to-one strengthening or fixing clinics.

These should be supported by regular skill tests, feedback meetings, self-appraisal exercises for players. Here a player/driver needs taken back to the 'unconscious incompetence' stage and start mastering the movement all over again until the player/driver is fit to do it again and is perfect at it.

This initiates the process to have them become an excellent player again.

To perform skills perfectly it is vital to master the movement before exercising the process.

Take heed, we first make our habits, then our habits make us and all habits can be changed.