

Lachlan Tighe...Talking Tactically

Website bowls coaching column

(November 2009 column)

Expertise & Expert Performance

In Feb.2009 I contributed a column on these bowls websites which I titled 'Success is all in the mind'. My reference was an article in that weekend newspaper about a book by a Dr Ericsson in which I cited a few excerpts from the newspaper review of his book to reinforce my own approach.

Well, eight months later I finally acquired this 898 page book 'Expertise and Expert Performance'. As you can imagine I am still ploughing through it; what I will do for this column is borrow, paraphrase and translate into 'bowls talk' the relevant pages read so far. The book is that good – if you are striving for expertise (coaches) and expert performance (bowlers). Especially those of you one year away from the pinnacle of bowls, the Games 2010 in India. Read on MacDuff.....

INTRODUCTION

Record breaking gold medallist performance levels are attained by the champions (think bowls think Bryant, Glasson, Safuan, Siti Zalina). However in the course of time other bowlers/associations are able to design training methods that allow them to gain that (same) level of performance of these earlier champions. After a while these training methods become part of the regular and current coaching of all who want to excel and expect to be at the new level of performance.

TIME

The best training environments are not sufficient to produce the best bowlers; there are substantial individual differences even among bowlers in the same squad. Expert performers have kept diaries on how much time they spend on training and it is found they spend around the same amount of time; but the best of them spend more time on activities specifically designed to improve performance, thus called deliberate practice. A prime example is a bowler in solitary supervised practice working to master specific goals or objectives determined by the coach.

Deliberate practice attributes the rarity of excellence to the scarcity of optimal training places (in bowls), and, to the years required to develop the mechanisms that support expertise and expert performance. Most individuals don't recognise that sustained training and effort is a prerequisite for reaching expert levels of performance.

Experience differs greatly from deliberate practice. Where individuals concentrate on trying to go beyond their ability deliberate practice includes mental demands of problem solving and other aspects of learning. It requires concentration which can only be maintained for a limited time. Some experts only train for an hour as it is too intense beyond that time span

INTENSITY versus PLAY

The essence of Ericsson's study is that expert performance is acquired gradually and that effective improvement of performance requires the opportunity to find suitable training tasks that the (bowler) can master sequentially – typically the program design is done by the coach. This deliberate practice presents bowlers with tasks that are initially outside their current reach of reliable performance, but, can be mastered over practice time by concentrating on critical aspects and refining performance through repetitions after feedback via the coach. In this manner the requirement for concentration sets deliberate practice apart from mindless routine performance training and playful engagement (of practice such as pairs).

STRUCTURE, PLANNING, MEASURE

Though individuals have to train in isolation at times, it has been found that the amount of time spent in team related training programs correlates reliably with the enhanced skill levels of the team (and its members).

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In addition to acquiring skill, it has been shown that experts (bowlers) continue to improve performance with more experience gained with deliberate practice in structured training. The challenge for bowlers keen to excel is to avoid the focus on technical delivery and to acquire the other skills (mental & tactical) to support their continued learning and improvement. By actively seeking out demanding tasks as set by their coach that force the bowler to engage in problem solving and to stretch their performance, these expert bowlers overcome technical automaticity and refine cognitive skill. This bowler and their coach identify specific goals and objectives to meet improvement in set aspects of performance. Programs are designed to suit that focus that includes feedback and skills repetition. After a time this bowler as expert will learn how to control, monitor and evaluate their own skill performance in training and in events.

To go even further the bowler and coach need to increase and change their regular training activities to take on new and different types of strain or pressure on the new found skills.

Experts continually search for training activity that optimises skill using effective and intense training programs.

Deliberate practice is meant to assist improvement in performance, though, the change has to be measurable and integrated into game related skill developments. This type of practice requires attention and concentration though for all that some lapse in standard of measured performance will occur, hence the need for corrections and repetitions.

INNOVATION, GAMES SENSE

One study cited was a reference to experts capacity to handle pressure, emergencies. The study showed that where experts simulated the pressure situation beforehand and practised, they were reliably more successful in dealing with the actual event (and perceived pressure). In sport this is a reference to the games sense approach to coaching.

Expert players rely on planning out consequences of game related moves in order to (learn) how to select the best choice of delivery in the tournament. During this deliberate practice the expert will rely on the same planning mechanism to improve their ability to select the best shot choice (in the event). One study has the experts 'think aloud' while applying their practice delivery in training. It was found the expert chose similarly to that which they learned best from their deliberate practice. Incidentally I have explored this where squad bowlers are to 'nominate' their delivery in training.

This practical approach is intended to understand how expert (bowlers) plan and select the best shot in a given game situation. Typically they analyse the game and delivery options for any bowls head by practiced set heads in training.

By spending time in training analysing the consequences of shot selection, bowlers can increase the quality of their choices. With study, bowlers can refine their choice and make decisions better and faster. It has been found experts recognise choices and better choices immediately whereas a competent club performer takes longer.

Practice aimed at improving cannot be performed mindlessly, nor, independently of the relationship to the game, hence games sense approach. Accomplished individual coaches play an important role in guiding the expert bowler in their development.

CONCLUSION

As a theory deliberate practice asserts that improvement in performance does not happen automatically or casually as a function of experience. Improvements are caused by changes in cognitive mechanisms where the brain and nervous system control performance and the adaptation of the body. The challenge in the attempt to attain the level of an expert is to induce specific changes that allow performance to be gradually improved.

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At the highest level of expert performance (which for us is Commonwealth Games) the drive for improvement will always involve search and experimentation at that expert threshold even for the masters of any field (bowls) dedicated to redefining the meaning of excellence.

Regards,
Lachlan Tighe.