

<b>Title</b>	Why is it important to practice deliberately?
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<b>Audience</b>	Athletes and Coaches
<b>Background</b>	This document is based upon the author's personal opinion and is not a scientific study. Hopefully it stimulates some debate and internal reflection amongst readers.

### **What is Deliberate Practice?**

You may have read one of my other blogs regarding [The 10,000 hours rule](#).

Deliberate Practice is a phrase used by the psychologist K.Anders Ericsson to describe how "continued, vigorous effort" is a vital requirement during the 10,000 hours of practise that it takes to become great at something. It is also known as Deep or Purposeful Practice by some authors.

### **How it applies to you**

To many, training is a necessary evil. It's an event that happens several times a week where you reluctantly head to the club in all weathers, get told what is in the session, deliver it and then go home.

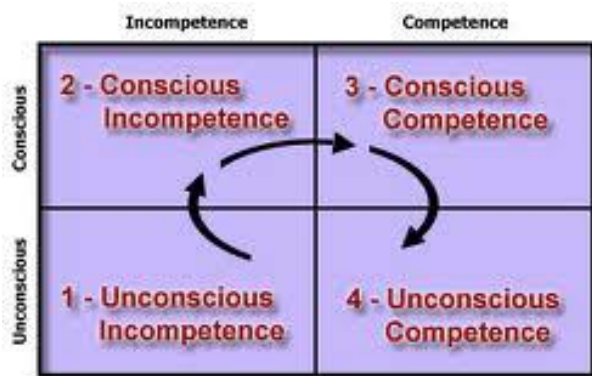
However, to world class performers this is the most important part of their week.

It is when they get the opportunity to improve that fraction of a percent that might mean the difference between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> place. It is the time when they correct the mistakes from their last event and it is the time when they can safely try new things and evaluate the results.

Only when you get into this mindset and focus 100% can practice become deliberate.

Regardless of the outcome there is something to learn every time you compete. If you have just smashed your PB or won a race by 10 metres there are things to learn. There may only be 1 or 2 negative points to iron out in training, but just as importantly, there will be things that went well that should be captured and re-used every time you compete.

Practising something enough will result in it becoming unconsciously rather than consciously applied. Take driving as an example. When you first get into the driver's seat there is so much to learn and remember. You have to think about which way to turn the key, which side the wipers are on, when to press the clutch pedal and how to do a hill start. However, when you have been driving for 10 years all of this is done unconsciously. You jump in, and do all of these things simultaneously without pausing. The same principle applies to walking, running, throwing and jumping. As a child you fell over and then you learnt, practiced and improved. To go from being a toddler to a world class athlete you need to keep expanding your skills, practicing them and improving.



Conscious Competence Learning Matrix

The illustration on the left explains one theory on how we learn, broken into 4 stages.

1. You don't know that you can't do something.
2. You understand that you can't do something.
3. You can now do something but you must think consciously about how to do it.
4. You do it well without even thinking about it.

Image from Fissionchicks.com

Think about one element of your sport that you do unconsciously and think back through the 4 stages.

### So, now we know how you learn and improve, how do you practice deliberately?

As coaches we are trained to use a variety of delivery methods that help each athlete to learn a new skill or technique. If used correctly these methods will create an environment or framework in which deliberate practice is possible.

The delivery methods need to be adjusted for each technique and each athlete. Sometimes it's better to let people try something without instruction and learn for themselves what feels right and what doesn't (guided discovery). Sometimes we need to break the process into bite sized chunks and do them one by one (chaining) or sometimes we will pick out just one part of the chain and work on that (whole part whole).

The Deliberate element is when you apply one of these delivery methods, acquire the technique and then practice it until you start to do it naturally and consistently well (unconscious competence).

Let's look at some examples:

In golf, professionals will spend hours and hours working on specific shots from certain positions that they will encounter on a course. If required they will hit ball after ball from an uphill slope in a greenside bunker. They will adjust the power, stance and swing until they are happy with the shot and then repeat it many times.

In football, we have heard many stories of David Beckham practicing his trade mark free kicks long after everyone else stopped training so that he knew how best to bend the ball around the opposition wall and into various parts of the goal.

In athletics, top long jumpers will break down every single phase of a jump. The approach run, take off, air time and landing are all broken down into small segments and practiced many times over until they become 2<sup>nd</sup> nature (unconscious competence).

## **It doesn't have to be boring!**

There will always be an element of drills, analysis, feedback and adjustment to training but it is also possible to be creative and create fun and exciting drills.

One of the most commonly used examples of this is Futsal, a mini version of football created in Uruguay in the 1930's. It is played on a small pitch and with a heavier ball than football. As a result players must learn to keep the ball on the floor (as it's too heavy to lift and head) and they must learn to create space and pass really effectively to beat the opposition defences. Futsal is a fun way of acquiring and deliberately practicing skills that can be used in Football. Because Futsal has been fundamental in building skills in countries such as Brazil it is now started to be adopted in the UK. <http://www.ukfutsalassociation.co.uk/>

With prior planning and a bit of creativity, Coaches and Athletes in any sport can establish what technique they want to practice and then develop a game or drill that isn't necessarily linked to the event that they compete in. Running is an easy one as many games already exist to teach fundamental skills such as reaction, acceleration and agility.

Initially a game may be quite basic and seem dull but as with Futsal it can be developed by changing the equipment, changing the playing area, changing the number of players or by imposing restrictions on the players, for example stand on one leg whilst throwing to alter balance and use of the upper body.

In his book, Bounce, Matthew Syed tells of training session as an elite Table Tennis Player. He had been training hard up to the age of 19 and had reached a good level of ability. However, he then started to be coached by Chen Xinhua a top player from China. Xinhua didn't play Syed in training as his previous coaches had; he simply threw dozens of balls at him from different angles, at different speeds and with different spin all at the same time. This forced Syed to adapt his footwork, speed, shot play and mental strength. When Syed conquered this, Xinhua made the table bigger so that he had to move up another level. Over the next 5 years his world ranking position "rocketed". He wasn't training harder or longer than before, he was training smarter.

To get started, think about the minute detail of the technique that you want to focus on and then think about other sports or games that use the same movement. From here you can create a session that is much more interesting than repeating your usual drills many times over.

## **Further Reading**

History of Futsal - <http://www.futsal.com/index.php/history-of-futsal->

Video of Futsal - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOI9SjQpc\\_Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOI9SjQpc_Q)

CNN Money - [Download Article](#)

The Talent Code by Daniel Coyle

Bounce by Matthew Syed

