

COACHING ASSISTANT MANUAL



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DEVELOPING YOUR COACHING SKILLS: HOW ATHLETES LEARN

It is really important to recognise that people learn in different ways. Generally each individual has a preferred way of learning whether it is an intellectual activity or a physical one. For example:

- Some like to learn as much about the new skill as possible before they have a go. It could take them some time before they try out the skill and they may choose to watch others for a while as they analyse what is going on.
- Others just want to dive in and have a go. They do not mind making mistakes and in fact quite enjoy doing so. They may be good at self correction.
- There are some who like to watch demonstrations. These could be provided by you, the coach, a picture, someone else or a video.
- Verbal instructions can help others rather than the visual. The instructions will need to be clear and pretty precise.
- Some athletes will need the time to go and think about a demonstration before they have a go.
- There will be some who prefer a combination of the above.

Think of athletes in your group who may fit into any of the skill learning styles above. Use the boxes below and identify what it is that they do. In the end box record what you need to do. Some examples have been included.

Style of Learning	What they do	What do you need to do?
The thinker	Stands at the back quietly	Make sure they can see and hear
The 'have a go' athlete	Always first in the queue	Let others have first go
The watcher	Always asks for a second demo	Go to their group early on
The listener	Ask for more information	Give clear information and a quiet demonstration
The Combination		

As a coach you need to be aware of the differences in learning styles and to remember that if an athlete does not understand an instruction it is probably an error made by the coach not the athlete. A real skill in coaching is to find different ways to say the same thing for individuals within the group.

STAGES OF LEARNING

Whatever their preferred way of learning, people tend to progress through a series of stages when they are introduced to new skills.

Stage one: the Understanding or Introductory stage. They have to think about what they are doing. The novice is making efforts with the basics; many will make errors as they do so, some will learn it quickly and move on.

Stage two: The Practising or Intermediate stage. Once they have managed the basics then they make fewer errors. The athlete begins to refine the skill and can perform it reasonably well and regularly. With some skills it is a stage that athletes could stay in for quite a long time. They have mastered the basics yet are still prone to errors and uncertainty.

Stage three: The Maintaining or Advanced stage. The skill can be reproduced with minimal effort and concentration on a regular basis. It can also be achieved in a variety of settings and circumstances.



THE ROLE OF THE COACH IN DEVELOPING SKILL

Whilst the stage of learning is important, what is more important is your role as a Coaching Assistant at each of these stages. For all coaches it is important to develop both verbal and non verbal communication skills for all athletes.

Style of Learning	Coaching Assistant or Coach needs to	What do you need to do?
The Understanding or Introductory stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use simple explanations and demonstrations • Emphasize and praise the correct action, regardless of outcome • Give intermittent feedback, taking care not to give too much or be too complex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 key points • Check for understanding • Build on the key points above • ‘The arm was in the right position’ • Again use the key points before and after an attempt • Avoid adding another point not yet introduced
The Practising or Intermediate stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the athletes practise the right action under the correct conditions • Use questioning to get athletes to give their own feedback, analyse and correct their own performance • Avoid jumping in with feedback too quickly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the technical models • Is the action at the right intensity or speed? • ‘Where do you think your elbow was?’ is better than ‘your elbow was low’. • Let them have more than one go. If the key points were clear, self correction can occur if you allow it to.
The Maintaining or Advanced stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use minimal interventions • Help athletes to set new goals • Never assume that learning has stopped • Help athletes to practise to maintain and fine tune skills • Help athletes to perform skills under pressure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observe more • ‘What would you like to achieve’ better than ‘tonight you will.....’ • Revisit skills or progress existing ones • Include a skill unit regularly • Create opportunities for competitive situations

PRACTICE STRATEGIES

You have now established how athletes learn by progressing through the stages and the sort of things you should do to assist their learning at each stage. Your aim is to help their learning and ensure retention rather than forgetting. To do this, it is useful to think about more general practice strategies such as:

- Determining whether the learner views the skill as simple or complex?
- Should the coach introduce the whole skill or break it down into parts?
- How should you introduce complex skills?
- Should you have fewer and longer practice sessions or more frequent and shorter sessions?
- How useful is mental practice?

Techniques are the basic building blocks of skilled performance and are simply the most efficient way for that individual to solve a physical task or problem within the rules of the sport.

A simple skill is one that an individual can perform with very little practise and can quickly move into the second stage of learning.

Complex skills are ones that an individual finds more difficult and take more time to learn. The same task presents different difficulties to different people, so do not assume that everyone should learn things the same way or at the same pace. The same task also presents different difficulties to the same person at different stages of their growth and experience.

Simple and complex are relative terms when used to describe athletic skills. Coaching skills means that we must evaluate how the learner views the skill. It does not matter whether the coach views a skill as simple or complex; it is the athlete's thoughts and views that decide the difficulty of the task.

As a general rule:

- Introduce a skill by a demonstration and/or an explanation
- Let the athletes have a go
- Observe them carefully several times to ensure what you are seeing is a consistent picture
- As necessary, provide some feedback about the action, not the outcome. This will show you whether a particular athlete finds the new skill simple or complex
- If it is simple, they can continue with practise
- If it is complex, you will need to consider which of the different ways to teach complex skills to use.

WHOLE AND PART LEARNING

If the technique proves to be complex for the learner and the athlete is having difficulty trying to grasp the basics, you may need to break it down. For example, you may break it down into component parts and practise each part separately before putting it back together.

Triple Jump provides an example:

- Having tried the whole triple jump technique, you might practise a single part of the movement e.g. step phase and then put it back into the whole movement practise – hop, step, jump. This whole-part works quite well where there is a lot of information to be gained and where the components are largely sequential, as in the triple jump.
- It can then be put back together again, either by gradually putting the components back together or by returning to the whole technique.
- However, there is still some argument for trying to teach the technique as a whole. While the component parts are easier and quicker to learn and accomplish, there may be poorer skill retention.
- There is some evidence to suggest that if the action is practised as a whole, it will take longer to learn but retention is better.

Breaking down complex actions into sequential parts may result in short term gains; practising it as a whole will take longer but long-term retention is better.



SHAPING AND CHAINING A COMPLEX SKILL

Breaking things down into parts does not work so well where the component parts need to be carried out simultaneously and or rapidly, such as in sprint hurdling or the shot putt. Here the time between take off, landing and movement across the circle is very short and the leg, arm and trunk actions all happen at the same time. Skilful execution depends on the correct and smooth coordination of the parts, and dividing the technique by body parts tends to interrupt the timing. If learners are struggling with this type of skill you can practise in two ways:

- Simplify the action, modifying or leaving out some parts and then add them back in later. This is referred to as shaping and is suitable for complex actions with simultaneous parts. It involves:
 - demonstrating and explaining the whole action
 - demonstrating a simplified technique that includes the most important actions
 - letting them practise the simplified technique
 - gradually building on the strengths, developing the weaknesses and adding components until the technique is shaped into the full action.

Sample shaping of a complex skill – the hurdles

Hurdling is frequently seen as a complex skill by beginners because of the technical rules of the event, as well as the fear and apprehension learners may have about hitting the hurdles. The essential thing in hurdling is rhythmic sprinting. Shaping the hurdle skill should encourage this rhythmic sprinting, remove any fear factor and gradually introduce the technical elements. Here is a possible sequence to shape this skill over several sessions:

- athletes sprint over 5-10 sticks on the track. Sticks are adjusted so that athletes have 3 strides between
- sticks are replaced with very low obstacles that offer no resistance if hit
- hurdles set at the lowest height and with no, or low, toppling weights replacing low obstacles
- hurdle height is gradually increased to competition height and the hurdle spacing moves to competition distance for the learners' age group

- Breaking it into parts is referred to as **chaining**, as it is like the links of a chain. This is suitable only for complex actions with sequential parts as it involves:
 - demonstrating and explaining the whole action
 - demonstrating and explaining the first part / link of the chain, and letting them practise it
 - demonstrating and explaining the first two parts / two links, and letting them practise the two parts
 - demonstrating and explaining the first three parts, then letting them practise these three together and so on until you build the whole technique.

Sample chaining of a complex skill – the javelin

The javelin throw can be broken down into the following links:

- Link 1 Standing Javelin throw
- Link 2 3 step approach with implement withdrawn and throw
- Link 3 5 step approach with implement withdrawn and throw
- Link 4 9 step approach, withdraw and throw
- Link 5 13 step approach withdraw and throw

Chaining is quite different from shaping:

- In chaining each part is practised just as it is performed in the finished, whole skill.
- In shaping the first attempts may be so rough or simplified that they hardly resemble the finished skill at all.

FREQUENCY AND INTENSITY FOR SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Often the timing and frequency of practice sessions is determined by factors outside your control such as the availability of facilities or equipment, the convenience of athletes or your own time constraints. However, it is worth thinking about how to make the most effective use of practice time. Ideally, having some practice most days is highly effective for learning, providing there is:

- appropriate time for rest and recovery
- motivation to maintain effort

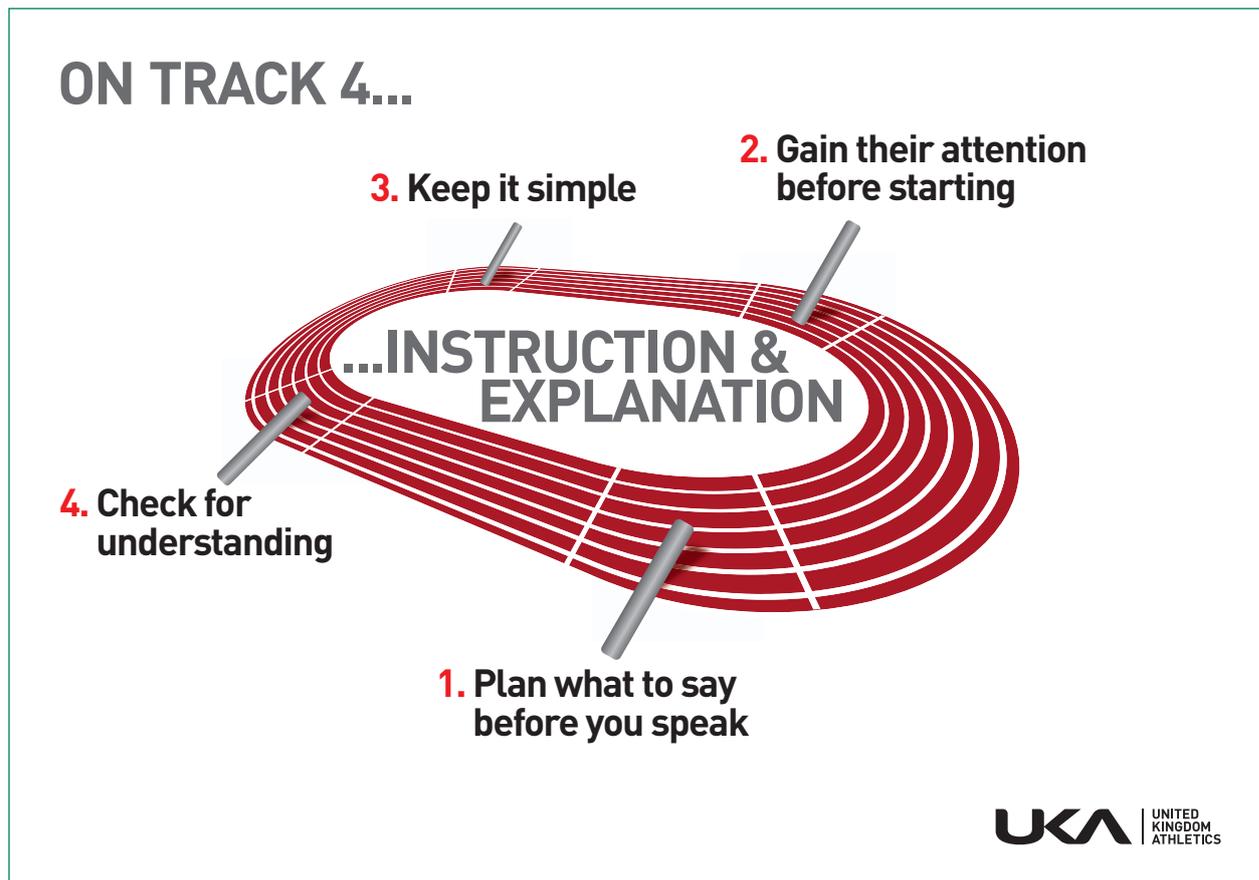
However, you also need to consider the type of technique. Certain types of skill learning will require different approaches and more discrete techniques, such as jumps and throws. They appear to benefit from the short term gains accrued from longer skill practice sessions. However, these gains may be more readily lost over time for retention is often poor. Fatigue and motivation can also become a problem. The development of more continuous techniques, such as the running events, seems to benefit from shorter, more frequent skill training sessions. Short term gains may be less but long term retention is good.

In general, remember:

- Consider the age and stage of development of the athletes
- The more experienced and motivated the athlete, the longer and more frequent the practise sessions can be
- Fewer, longer skill practice sessions tend to produce more rapid short term gains but retention and longer term learning is seldom high
- Shorter, more frequent skill practise sessions usually result in better long term learning and retention
- Provide more rest and recovery time where the skill is potentially demanding, e.g. hurdling, or dangerous, e.g. pole vaulting.

“HOW2” SKILLS - INSTRUCTION AND EXPLANATION

Look at the 'Instruction and Explanation' process. What do the four points really mean and what should you actually do or say?



“HOW2” SKILLS - INSTRUCTION AND EXPLANATION

Instruction and Explanation	Why?	How?
1. Plan what to say before you speak	New group, new situation and new role. They are excited, you are nervous and need to be precise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write it down • Test it • Practise it • Make it loud!
2. Gain attention before speaking	They all need to hear You need to be in control Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decide where to stand • Can they see you • Can they hear you
3. Keep it simple	So they know exactly what to do Does it suit the group and the mix?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear language for the age of the group • Provide 1-2 key points • Speed and tone of voice • Be aware of non-verbal messages
4. Check for understanding	To make sure that they heard and understood Avoids embarrassment To check that your explanation was clear and understood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask at least one to repeat a key point. • ‘What was the first key point?’ if there are two points. • Ask another If they have not understood then it is up to you to make sure that they do!

If you watch a coach who has these skills it may appear easy. It is if you practise! Write down the questions that you will use, practise saying them out loud and be confident. Ask your Supervising Coach for feedback on things that will help you improve. Be specific – ‘Was my voice clear?’ For example is better than ‘How was it?’

The instruction and explanation has been clear, the athletes are warmed up, and the Supervising Coach has asked you to demonstrate a new activity to the whole group. What do you need to do?

“HOW2” SKILLS - DEMONSTRATION

ON TRACK 4...



3. Repeat silent demo more than once and from different angles

2. Focus attention on 1-2 key points

...DEMONSTRATION

4. Check for understanding through questioning and/or practise

1. Position so all can see and hear

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In your preparation you will have made a decision about the following:

- Does the group need to see someone doing the activity first? If yes then you will need to prepare for that.
- What level is the group at in terms of the activity and their stage of development? This will have an impact upon the complexity of the demonstration.
- Is the group at the Understanding or Introductory stage; the Practising or Intermediate stage; or the Maintaining or Advanced stage of learning this skill?
- Can you do a demonstration that will be accurate for the group? If the answer is no then who will you ask to do it or will you use video or pictures?

“HOW2” SKILLS - DEMONSTRATION

Demonstration	Why?	How?
1. Position so all can see and hear	Can you see all of them? Make sure that they are not distracted by others, i.e. their parents / guardians or athletes Can they hear you? Are they facing the sun or a bright light?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If needed then move around • Ask them if they can see you if not sure • Ask if they can hear you • Make it fun and whisper to check • Ask the other coach to check for you
2. Focus their attention on one or two key points	Even adults struggle with more than one point! It will help you to focus on the points as well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear on what you will say • Use simple words for the key points • Be quiet when you do the demonstration so they can watch
3. Repeat the demonstration more than once	Children like to mimic so let them get a good idea They cannot take it all in at one go.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move your position if needed to ensure that all can see / hear • Stop and refocus the group on what it is they need to see • Maybe use slow motion
4. Invite questions and let them practice	Involve them Check for understanding Did they really see what you wanted them to? You may need to repeat They learn by doing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check to hear if they got the key points; ‘Give me one key point’ is a good start • They will tell you what they saw – let them, it tells you if you were clear • Watch them closely, it will tell you if they did hear

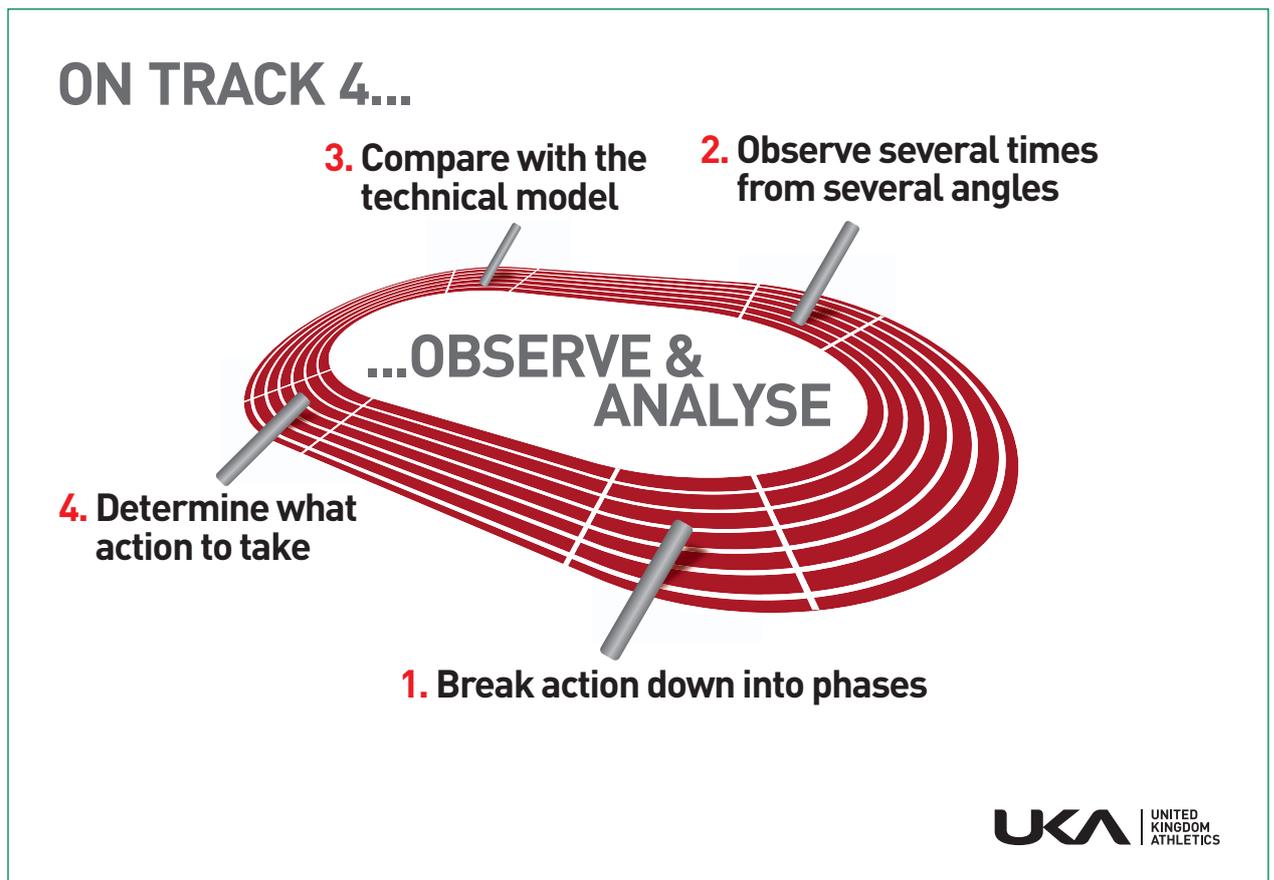
Let them have at least two attempts before you think about feedback.

“HOW2” SKILLS - OBSERVATION & ANALYSIS

Watch and then begin to compare what you see with the technical model for the activity that they are doing. They may all be doing the activity well; alternatively there could be many variations from the technical model that you are looking for. So what do you do? Before giving any feedback to individuals it is important that you consider the following:

- Let them have more than one go. Remember that when learning something new, self correction can happen as they have more attempts. If the coach intervenes too early then it can delay individual learning.
- Look for the key points that you highlighted in the demonstration. If the process is correct then they will need to master these before progressing.
- Look for errors across the group that will help them all to progress. It may be that the key points that you have started with are too demanding at this stage. They could equally be too easy and you will need to move them on more quickly than you anticipated.
- If you are not sure then a quick discussion with the Supervising Coach could help.

Below is a reminder of the process you were introduced to. Remember that even if you are not organising this part of the session it is a really good opportunity to practise your skills.



“HOW2” SKILLS - OBSERVATION & ANALYSIS

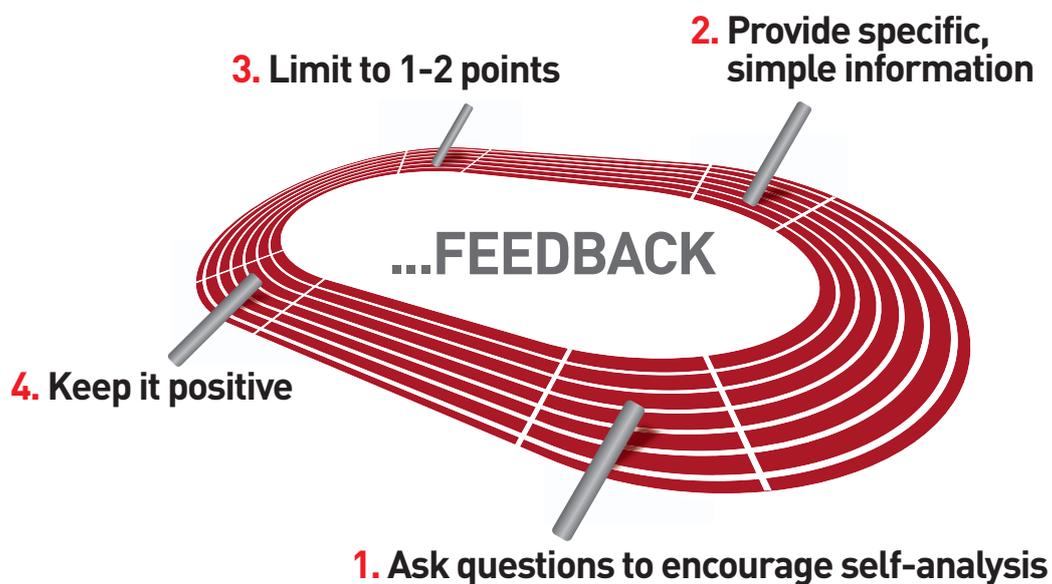
Demonstration	Why?	How?
1. Break down the action into phases	Most athletic events are full of complicated movements You can only see one or two at a time It is easy for you and them to be distracted by other movements It gives you points to focus on.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember those key points that they were given • Use the technical model
2. Observe several times from different angles.	Things do look different from another view Movement can be hidden by a limb It mirrors the process that you did in the demonstration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move around regularly and view from all four points • Front, each side and the back • Decide which is most helpful for that movement and that athlete
3. Compare what you see with the technical model	You want to get the athlete to be able to perform as needed for that event. It provides a clear model to work from.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep the model with you until you are confident
4. Determine the action to take	Take time to think Did they understand your demonstration? Are there issues common to more than one athlete?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes nothing • If something needs to change when can it be done? • How will it be done? Take your time

This is one of the most challenging yet extremely rewarding parts of coaching. One of the essentials is to develop a ‘coaching eye’; the ability to observe those movements that really makes a difference to the athletic performance. It needs practise. When you are watching any activity you could practise focussing on a particular movement. For example, can you compare the technical model for jumping to a footballer jumping to head the ball or maybe throwing in using the throws technical model? What about a netball player as they jump or a hockey player as they run or strike the ball? If we want the athletes to practise then as coaches we also need to take opportunities to develop our skills.

You have done all of the above. You have identified some areas that they are doing well and also some that they are struggling a bit more. Now time for some feedback!

“HOW2” SKILLS - FEEDBACK

ON TRACK 4...



“HOW2” SKILLS - FEEDBACK

Look at the process and consider the following:

Instruction and Explanation	Why?	How?
1. Ask questions to encourage self analysis	Highlights intrinsic information available to the athlete What did they see? What did they hear? What were they aware of as they did the activity? You can learn about the type of feedback that suits them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you notice about your flight? • Tell me about the sound that your feet made as you ran up • What position was your arm in as it went behind you in that drill? • What were you looking at as you ran over the hurdle?
2. Provide specific simple information.	When learning something new it is important to be clear. Use language and terminology that is appropriate to the age group and event group It will reinforce the learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You could say, 'What I saw was...' • Avoid only saying 'good' or something similar. It may have been but you need to be precise about what was good
3. Limit to 1-2 key points	For the same reason as in the demonstration. Keep it simple and clear. Use the key points from the demonstration. Any more will confuse both them and you!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind them of the key points or even ask them what they were • Use intrinsic questions if you can as above
4. Keep it positive	It keeps the focus on what you need them to do. Any criticism can be included alongside a positive. Two positives to one negative is a safe rule. The whole focus is on helping them to learn, to stay interested and to achieve.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep it honest – they will know if they deserve the praise • You achieved this but I noticed that... • You could use intrinsic questions to get them to focus on what they did and where there may have been errors

It would be useful to ask your Supervising Coach to observe your coaching and keep a note of the feedback you provide to the athletes. Do you jump in with your observations, “I noticed that your shoulders were hunched” or do you use questions to encourage self reflection “what position were your shoulders in during the end of that run?” It is all too easy as coaches to jump in with our observations regarding what we have seen and there are often many things to pick up, don't forget the athlete can only focus on 1 – 2 points at a time, keep the feedback relevant and in relation to the same points for that session.

There is great value in trying to draw out and raise awareness of the athletes own “intrinsic” awareness. By asking a questions such as “what position were your arms in at take-off?” Encourages the athletes to reflect on their own sense of awareness, this can be developed from a young age.

At trackside we often hear “good” “well done” “faster” “relax those shoulders” etc. What do these statements mean to the athlete? What does good really mean? Was everything about it good? Without specific feedback how will the athlete know how to replicate the situation for the next repetition? The timing of the feedback is also important; consider how they process it if it is shouted during a repetition as opposed to when they have time to discuss it at the end.

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