



## A strategic approach to practice

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Whether playing sport, practicing a musical instrument, learning to drive or studying schoolwork, understanding how to practice most effectively has great potential to accelerate learning and make more efficient use of practice time. For sport skills, the American psychologist Robert Singer introduced a Five Step Strategy that could provide a framework for more effective practice. The Five Step Strategy is ideally suited for many track and field events, and is worth considering for any coach looking to guide a developing athlete as to how to practice more effectively. Indeed, many coaches may recognise several of the steps as aspects that they already explicitly encourage athletes to engage with. So what are the five steps within the strategy?

- **Readying:** The goal of the first step is to prepare the learner for a high quality attempt; his/her body position should be suitably balanced, his/her mind free from distractions, thinking positively about how he/she will perform. This step often involves some preparatory action, such as a rocking motion prior to beginning an approach run, to help tune in to the body. In addition, simple breathing exercises or cue words might be used to control arousal levels. It is important to stress that the optimal mental state to enhance learning (i.e., how relaxed or fired up the performer needs to be) is likely to depend both on the individual and on the skill being practiced – a multi-eventer may like to be calm before high jump, but fired up before throwing the shot. The specifics of the readying step may be unique to each learner, but the goal is the same: the learner is ready to deliver a high quality action.
- **Imaging:** In the second step, the learner images the desired action and/or outcome. As with readying, there is considerable flexibility within this step for an individual-specific approach. For example, the learner may use kinaesthetic (i.e., focus on feeling the movement) or visual imagery. If adopting visual imagery, the learner may rehearse the action from their own perspective (internal imagery), or as though observing themselves performing on camera (external imagery). The learner may view the entire action, or may pay particular attention to how one particular element of the movement looks or feels. Regardless of how it is achieved, the goal of this step

is for the learner to have clearly established what he/she is trying to achieve within the attempt.

- **Focus:** During the third step, the learner focuses his or her attention on one relevant cue, using this intense focus to block out potential distractors. For the high jump, the learner might concentrate on a point in the sky/ceiling over the bar. For the long jump, the learner might focus on the first check point in their run up. As with the preceding steps, what the learner focuses upon is less important than that the learner adopts a specific focus on a relevant cue, thus “closing the door” on potentially disruptive thoughts.
- **Execute:** Expert performers can execute skills without conscious thought. The preceding steps have primed the learner to do likewise. When everything feels just right, the learner should “just do it”, as the Nike advert advocates, without consciously thinking of or trying to control anything about the act itself or the possible outcome.
- **Evaluation:** In the final step, the learner engages with all available feedback to assess the performance outcome and the movement by which it was achieved. For example, a javelin thrower might attend to how the action felt, to the way the javelin travelled through the air and stuck in the ground, as well as to the distance travelled. In addition, the learner should pay attention to the effectiveness of each step in the routine (Was I ready? Did I obtain a clear image? Etc.), adjusting any procedure for the next attempt, if required. Undertaken correctly, the evaluation should be as detailed and mentally taxing as the performance itself.

Researchers have consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of Singer’s Five Step Strategy for enhancing practice quality and thereby accelerating learning. Here are some key points to consider for any athlete/coach implementing this approach:

1. The Five Step Strategy is an intensive way to practice; wait until the learner wants to engage in more structured, serious practice before introducing the full strategy.
2. Most players/athletes will instinctively follow some of the steps outlined within the strategy. When working with a learner, start by identifying what they already do, and develop their strategy from there.
3. The Five Step Strategy should not be implemented on every practice session. Sometimes you might be experimenting with a technique, exploring directions for improvement. At other times, you might be trying to recreate a competition environment, challenging the learner to perform under specific conditions. In both instances, the Strategy is likely to disrupt your goals for the session. However, when you have identified a clear learning goal, applying the Five Step Strategy may accelerate their learning.
4. Although at first glance the strategy may appear to be formal and rigid, there is considerable flexibility within the 5SA to adapt each step to the needs and experiences of the individual learner while providing a clear framework to promote higher quality practice.
5. The strategy consists of a number of individual skills (arousal regulation, imagery, concentration), each of which may need to be practiced before being effectively utilised within the strategy.
6. Learners using this strategy will perform fewer repetitions within a set amount of practice time due to the increased time required to adequately prepare and evaluate; the higher quality of these repetitions will more than compensate for the reduced number.

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