When learning a skill, athletes progress through some predictable stages. The table on the following page outlines some key concepts about the stages of skill development and the needs of athletes at each stage.

While each athlete can be expected to go through each stage, the time and the amount of practice necessary to progress from one stage to the next can vary greatly from one athlete to another.

The stages of skill development described in the following table (initiation, acquisition, consolidation, refinement, and creative variations) apply regardless of the type of skill or the way it is classified.

It is important to recognize the stage of skill development your athletes are at, as well as the specific needs they have at each stage. It is also important to plan your practices accordingly (i.e. select the right types of activities and the appropriate way to run them).

**Note:** It may take months or even years of practice for an athlete to reach the Refinement stage of skill development defined in the following table. Also, the vast majority of athletes will never reach the Creative Variations stage. Consequently, at the Introduction to Competition level, few coaches work with athletes who reach an advanced stage of skill execution. The focus should therefore be on ensuring the fundamentals are correct and that athletes can perform them in a variety of situations and conditions.
### Stages of Skill Development

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#### Key Points to Look For

**BEGINNER**

- The first contact the athlete has with the skill.
- The athlete may have no idea of what to do to perform the skill.

- The early stage of learning where the athlete becomes capable of (1) coordinating key components of movements and (2) executing them in the correct order, thus performing a rough form of the skill. The movements are not well synchronized or under control, and they lack rhythm and flow. The execution is inconsistent and lacks precision. The athlete has to think about what he or she is doing while performing the skill.

- Both form and performance tend to deteriorate markedly when the athlete tries to execute movements quickly or is under pressure, as may be the case in a competitive situation.

**INTERMEDIATE**

- The athlete can execute the movements or the skill with correct form. Movement control, synchronization, and rhythm are good when performing the skill under easy and stable conditions. The movements can be repeated consistently and with precision under these conditions.

- Some elements of performance can be maintained when the athlete is under pressure, conditions change, or demands increase, but performance remains inconsistent.

- The athlete begins to develop a more personal style.

**ADVANCED**

- The athlete can execute the movements in a way that is very close to the ideal in terms of form and speed. The performance is very consistent and precision is high, even under very demanding conditions and in situations that are both complex and varied.

- Only minor fine-tuning may be necessary to achieve optimal execution, and a fairly personal style is established. All components of the movement have been automated, which enables the athlete to focus on the environment while performing and to make rapid adjustments as necessary.

- The athlete can reflect critically on his or her performance to make corrections.

#### At this stage, athletes need to...

- Have a clear mental image of what correct execution looks like.
- Understand the fundamental positions, stances, and patterns of the sport or skill. Feel safe when performing the skill. Reach a comfort level with some movements or feelings that may be unfamiliar and that are part of the skill to be learned.

- Understand clearly what they have to do, and have a good mental picture of the task. Perform a lot of repetitions at their own pace and under conditions that are stable, easy, and safe. Practise on both sides, if appropriate. Find some solutions by themselves through trial and error, based on some feedback from the coach.

- Be exposed to a variety of situations, and perform a lot of repetitions under varied conditions. Have clear objectives for both form (correct execution) and the result of actions. Be challenged by more complex and demanding tasks or conditions, and find more solutions through trial and error, based on less frequent feedback from the coach. Practise the movements or the skill in conditions where fatigue prevails or that replicate competitive demands, and deal with the consequences of errors.

- Be exposed to complex or demanding competitive situations that require the skill to be executed at a very high level. Learn how to solve problems they encounter.

- Be exposed to complex or demanding competitive situations that require the skill to be executed perfectly. Develop their own solutions.

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