

The ABCs of Footwork



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Improving footwork for sport performance offers the collateral benefit of reducing injury potential, since enhanced control of the center of gravity in motion will do the same for the human body that upgrading the engine, brakes, and suspension of a car does for the performance of the vehicle. It is also useful to consider that the “physical education” programs in many school systems are anything but physical and educational. The end result is, too often, human bodies trying to acquire complex sport-movement skills before mastering basic movement abilities. (Who, among the coaches reading this, has not encountered the all-star wunderkid player only to discover that he or she is unable to skip?) Teaching a progression of quantifiable and qualifiable movement skills with integrated upper, middle, and lower body mechanics is a fun and relatively easy part of training.

Develop a repertoire of exercises the way you would go about expanding any training concept: in a carefully drawn progression of drills going from simple to complex, and increasing the speed of any drill only after you have mastered it at a slow, controlled pace. The ideal way to build this repertoire of exercises is to work on perfecting three or four movements in a training session, reviewing these movements in subsequent sessions, and adding an additional drill or two as you go. The drills you choose to include should reflect identifiable, sport-specific movements. This enables you to easily relate the training to the sport; something that always speeds the learning curve along.

Changing the Training Demand

A simple way to add greater strength and proprioceptive demands to an Agility Ladder session is to place the ladder on a gentle hill. Now, you will have to work against resistance when you move up the hill; and you will have the assistance of the hill when you come back down.

A simple drill like the THREE-COUNT SHUFFLE (see picture over page) now has many new options to choose from. Facing forward when you move up the hill gives you the increased resistance; coming down backwards forces you to move and balance at a slightly faster pace than normal as the hill's gradient causes you to accelerate. You can reverse the effect simply by working backward up the hill, and forward down the hill. Then: rotate the ladder ninety-degrees so that it lies across the slope of the hill. Doing the same drill, now, will involve resistance/assistance within each repetition. If your right shoulder is pointing up

the hill, you will face resistance each time you push off of your left foot and extra eccentric loading on that foot as you decelerate your return off the right.

Using an Agility Ladder can help you move faster, better, and safer. By keeping these simple ideas in mind, athletes can acquire ever more complex movement skills through ladder training, and the learning can come surprisingly fast.

The ladder, then, can be a gratifying element of training for sports, where acquiring new skills is, generally, a long and difficult process.



THREE-COUNT SHUFFLE (forward): Stand just to the left of the ladder, facing along its length. Step into the first space with your right foot; step in with your left foot; step out to the right side of the ladder with your right foot; and repeat the other way. The rhythm is Waltz-like: ONE-two-three, ONE-two-three...and the word cues are: IN-in-out, IN-in-out; or: RIGHT-left-right, LEFT-right-left.

Training Tips

Here are some simple ideas to keep in mind while learning ladder drills:

1. Go as fast as you can, not as fast as you can't. The idea is to complete the drill correctly, rather than trip and drag the ladder halfway through because you are attempting to go at a speed you cannot control.
2. Rhythm before tempo: Find the rhythm or meter of the drill, and hear your feet achieving that rhythm before you attempt to increase the tempo (pace) of the exercise.
3. Word-cues: If the rhythm eludes you, use word-cues (In-in-OUT; in-in-OUT, for example) and be sure to say them out loud! Trust me on this:

feet are hard of hearing; but they will do what they are told if you actually speak the cues.

4. Most athletes are completely unaware of what their arms are doing while they are concentrating on where their feet are going. The coach must facilitate the inclusion of the upper-body. Always pay attention to what an athlete's arms are (or are not) doing. In all cases, arm movements must be integrated with foot movements (and facilitated by strength and stability through the body's core). Learning drills as simple foot-placement exercises without including proper arm mechanics will not produce functional results.