

THE RELEVANCE OF PRACTICE IN PÉTANQUE PERFORMANCE AND COMPETITION

by Philippe Geraud

Ask ten pétanque players what their practice routine is and you're bound to get ten different answers ranging from "I usually practice one or two hours per day" to "I don't think practice is necessary" or "I usually get all the practice I need when I play." This is not surprising, given that our approaches to training and practice are often very individual and largely influenced by whether or not we believe that practice is useful, our age, the amount of available time at our disposal for practice, our level of energy, discipline, and whether or not we aspire to higher levels of competition.

New players with adequate hand-and-eye coordination can easily learn the mechanics of pétanque. The basic rules governing how the game is played are fairly easy to remember. Most new players find it relatively manageable to pick-up a boule and throw it without too much difficulty. In fact, anyone who has been exposed to and played games that involve body mechanics similar to those used in playing pétanque, be it golf, bowling, or bocce, may already have certain "natural" advantages since their neural pathways are already wired for gauging distance, follow-through, and "reading the terrain." These new players may also be somewhat familiar with focusing techniques they may have picked-up playing other sports, techniques that can be applied when playing pétanque.

Haphazard play, luck, and lack of skill can only get one so far, however. Many players who begin playing with-out having first acquired a firm foundation, through proper instruction and practice, in the proper way to hold a boule, read the terrain and point in various ways in order to adapt to the terrain may find themselves hampered by the unpredictability of their throws. Soon enough, lack of form, accuracy and predictability quickly takes its toll and leads to frustration on the playing field. This is often due to

poor habits which have been acquired early on and which were never corrected; habits which have now become ingrained. Unfortunately, bad habits are very difficult to break once they have been acquired and have become part of one's individual style.

The debate over the importance of skill building, training and practice goes clear back to the 19th century when Sir Francis Galton wrote his, at the time, seminal book *Hereditary Genius*, positing that "superior" athletes, or most top performers for that matter, "are genetically predisposed to achieve a certain level of performance, regardless of the intensity and manner in which these athletes train to attain a certain level of excellence." He stated that champions who demonstrate "maximal performance" do so through inherited physical and mental attributes, though he also acknowledged the importance of training and practice in order to reach high levels of performance.

Though Galton's approach, which focuses primarily on genetic predisposition, still finds acceptance in many circles even today, his theories have been disputed by researchers in the academic fields of kinesiology, exercise science, and sport psychology. Today, the research points to an effective training/practice regimen, one that focuses on the development of physical, technical, tactical, and mental skills, not the genetic profile of the athlete, as the primary determinant of superior performance. This "holistic" approach to skill building really began in the '60s when psychologists began to examine how top athletes acquire and develop new skills. Two researchers Paul Fitts and Michael Posner, identified the three stages that most athletes go through when developing superior skills for competition:

- a. Cognitive phase: during this phase the athlete "intellectualizes the task." During this phase activity is deliberate and involves active thought but also a considerable number of errors.

b. Associative phase: this is a transitional phase where movements are repeated over and over again. Repetition of the movement leads to the development of what is commonly referred to as “muscle memory.” During this phase, fewer mistakes are made.

c. Autonomous phase: during this phase, movements become ingrained. The body goes on “autopilot” and there is less conscious attention to the intermediary steps that constitute movement. Movement is fluid, automated and does not involve conscious deliberation.

Interestingly, according to these researchers in sport psychology and training, the bulk of skill building takes place during the cognitive and associative phase. According to recent research, skill acquisition can only take place when both our minds and bodies are placed in a position of discomfort. To be effective, training must stretch the boundaries of comfort slightly beyond our level of competence.

“...the way to get better at a skill is to force yourself to practice just beyond your limits.” Maria Popova

Yet, we often seem to get “stuck” at a certain level of performance and often fail to progress to a higher level of skillfulness despite the fact that we may have practiced often and played the game for decades. The “Deliberate Practice” model for peak performance convincingly sheds some light on the reasons for this phenomenon. The “Deliberate Practice” theory was first popularized in 1993 by a team of researchers led by K. Anders Eriksson of the University of Florida, assisted by his colleagues Watson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer. Their research concluded that simply playing a game for a number of years, or for that matter engaging in a profession for many years, does not guarantee higher levels of proficiency. In fact, being considered an “expert” by peers, according to K. Anders Eriksson, is no guarantee of higher performance.

Inherent to the “Deliberate Practice” model is the “10-year rule,” also known as the “10,000 hours of practice” school of thought, first developed by H.A. Simon and W.G. Chase in 1973. The 10-year or 10,000-hours rule was further developed by Eriksson and his colleagues and applied to the domains of chess, music, and sports. Further research, conducted from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s supported the assertion that in order to reach the highest level of international competition, top performers must spend at least a total of 10,000 hours of practice in order to reach the preeminent levels of expertise. One study concluded that a common denominator between regional, national, and international competitors was the amount of practice each group put in with the most accomplished practitioners’ putting in close to 10,000 hours, while “good” practitioners’ averages were around 7,800 hours and for the least accomplished group about 4,600 hours.

These studies also indicated that targeted “Deliberate Practice,” conducted individually, rather than playing games where one may only get a single chance to make a particular shot from any given location, is the way to progress significantly. Perfecting a shot requires repeated efforts to figure out the mechanics of trajectory. It may take ten or more attempts to figure out the best arm swing, height, speed, and approach to get it just right. By repeating this action time and time again a player is directly involved in the process of problem-solving, gaining immediate feedback from one’s efforts thus allowing us to adjust one’s playing style to improve control and accuracy.

Eriksson’s “Deliberate Practice” theory focuses heavily on the benefits of rigorous, highly focused individualized practice. It identifies several main components required for practice to eventually lead to higher performance:

- a. *Focus on technique:* This may seem self-evident but in order to be effective, this stage requires problem-solving and finding solutions to technical problems as opposed

to repetitive execution of a movement or skill that one has already mastered. One of golf's greatest players, Sam Snead, once said "It is only human nature to want to practice what you can already do well, since it's a hell of a lot less work and a hell of a lot more fun." Thus repetition, with an eye towards gradual refinement of performance and difficulty best fulfills the requirements of "deliberate practice."

b. *Involve both the physical and the mental:* Developing a higher level of concentration through practice is a key goal of the process. One popular anecdote is that Tiger Woods developed his legendary mental skills through practicing meditation and focus. Tiger's father, Earl Woods, would often cough or drop his clubs at the precise moment Tiger would attempt a shot in an effort to develop Tiger's ability to focus during practice.

c. *Stay goal-oriented:* "Deliberate Practice" training works best when goals are clearly defined. Philippe Suchaud, during one of his interviews, stated that he would place boules in a circle and shoot each one until he had gone through the entire circle. Only when he had completed this routine successfully would he allow himself to leave the practice field, having achieved his goal of completing the sequence without missing a boule. Goal-focused training is a factor both in day-to-day deliberate practice and in establishing long-term targets for eventually attaining expert performance.

d. *Get constant and immediate feedback from performance:* This phase is best achieved by having another person available to observe, preferably a coach, or a fellow-player, to provide one with immediate feedback. This can also be achieved through going over video recordings of individual practice performance right after practice. As an alternative, keeping a daily journal of practice sessions can be extremely useful. Some researchers encourage not only documenting what exercises are performed but also noting one's degree of success and adaptations for performance as well. They also recommend keeping track of thoughts and emotions during this phase of training.

e. *Be motivated and committed to improve*: Motivation and discipline are both necessary to successfully implement individual training targets. In addition, commitment paves the way towards investing the necessary amount of effort and time required to reach higher levels of expertise according the “Deliberate Practice” model.

Twenty-three years after Eriksson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer’s seminal study, “Deliberate Practice” research has expanded to various areas of sport training and competition. Researchers are still trying to understand to what extent the model can be adapted comprehensively and effectively to various sports including: swimming, soccer, wrestling, gymnastics and Ironman triathlon to name a few. Though conclusions vary, there seems to be a “...consistent relationship between cumulative training and expertise” (J. Baker and B. Young) using the “Deliberate Practice” model.

Consider for a moment Thailand’s approach to training: the now-deceased Queen of Thailand introduced the sport of pétanque to Thailand after she spent several years in Switzerland during the ’40s. She became so enthralled with the game, which she played regularly, that once she returned Thailand she lost no time in making sure that pétanque was adopted by the police and the military as way to promote focus and concentration. As she was the Queen and Thailand’s King and Queen are deeply revered (one can be thrown in jail for speaking ill of them) her personal enthusiasm for the game became the nation’s. Pétanque is now, according to several sources, Thailand’s first official sport. Most of the best players in Thailand are found in the military where service members selected for pétanque training receive an additional stipend of 1,000 Euros per month (approximately \$1,000). Most service members who have been selected practice several hours per day. Practice nearly always starts with a session of stretching and meditation. Their daily practice regimen focuses on drills that stress form, accuracy, and predictability. Mental preparation and focusing exercises form an integral and important part of the training regimen, especially amongst the top

players in the military selected for international competition. This approach seems to have paid off. The Thai women's team has beaten the French women's pétanque team in the World Championship now for the seventh consecutive year.

Unfortunately, we in the US, unlike France and Thai-land, lack a specialized network of training schools where rules, proper techniques, etiquette, and good habits are taught in a formalized, progressive, and uniform way. I believe this may be hurting US competitors, especially as we aspire to enter the arena of international competition. The first step is for us to be aware of our deficiencies and to come to the realization that skill development through a well-designed training program focusing on the mechanics and mental training of pétanque is the best way to increase one's levels of expertise. Once we become aware of this necessity, we must find effective strategies designed to grow our skills with excellence as our primary goal.

As I wrote this article I happened on a very interesting piece in the sports section of the Wall Street Journal. This piece entitled "The Phenom Who Chose to Be Terrible" chronicles the career of Dominic Thiem, a 22 year old Austrian tennis player who was a rising star and ranked number two as a junior until his coach determined that Thiem's double-handed backhand was hindering him from making the kind of progress he needed to transition to a more professional level of play. Adjusting from a two-handed backhand, which affected the strength of his return, to a one-handed backhand became an immediate liability for Thiem as he began to lose to players he used to beat in previous matches. Following this change of technique, Thiem did not win a match for one and a half years. Yet despite this, altering his style from a two-handed to a one-handed stroke helped him develop the kind of backhand strength that he needed in order to progress as a major contender leading him to his first grass-court title earlier last month in Stuttgart, Germany beating world-class player, Roger Federer.

The Thiem story illustrates how making drastic corrections to one's technique and style, especially if one has become comfortable with one's particular manner of playing and especially if these have contributed to earlier successes, are often necessary if one is to make quantifiable improvements. If not corrected, these same habits can keep us from living up to our potential as champions. The path to superior performance resides in the courage to challenge our preconceived notions, commitment to training, degree of discipline, and our application of "Deliberate Practice" methodology.

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