

Second Edition

# PLAY PRACTICE

Engaging and Developing Skilled Players  
From Beginner to Elite



**Alan Launder • Wendy Piltz**

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# **Play Practice: Engaging and Developing Skilled Players From Beginner to Elite, Second Edition**

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Human Kinetics

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# foreword

Over the past quarter century, our understanding of how to best teach and encourage children and youths to become skilful players, to enjoy active participation in sport, and to commit to a physically active lifestyle has expanded enormously. Throughout this period, Alan Launder has played a pivotal role in creating successful approaches to teaching sports. Now in cooperation with Wendy Piltz, one of his former students and colleagues at the University of South Australia, he has produced a new edition of his successful book *Play Practice*.

This work extends the ideas presented in Launder's original work. It clarifies the Play Practice model and provides detailed information about how to use this innovative approach, helping learners understand sport through a series of experiences that gradually introduce them to the techniques and games sense needed for skilful play. Most important, it emphasises the satisfaction that can come from participating in a well-played game and explains the role that teachers can play in developing and sustaining good game habits that positively contribute to the sport culture of a school, a community, or a nation.

Alan Launder has combined a lifelong involvement in sport of all kinds with the roles of physical education teacher, teacher educator, coach educator, track and field coach, and world-class pole vault coach. His book *From Beginner to Bubka: An Australian Approach to Developing Pole Vaulters* has become the standard work in the field and has greatly influenced the teaching and coaching of this event around the world.

Wendy Piltz has also participated in a variety of sports, including representing Australia in women's lacrosse and cricket. Like Alan, she is an avid snow skier! Her professional expertise, developed through her roles as a physical education teacher and coach in a variety of sports and levels, along with her responsibilities in pre-service teacher education and coach education have continued to connect this approach to high-quality pedagogical practice.

Alan helped create an innovative formation program for physical education teachers at the University of South Australia, and Wendy has sustained it. There, Wendy has played a key role in embedding the principles and processes of Play Practice into the program, ensuring that the protocols for planning, observation, provision of feedback, reflection, and assessment are aligned with Play Practice. She has also carried out practice-based qualitative research with pre-service teachers around the efficacy of this approach for the consistent development of novice educators.

I have no doubt that *Play Practice, Second Edition*, will find a worldwide audience and will greatly enhance the capacity of teacher educators in physical education, physical education teachers, and school and youth sport coaches to not only help players develop skill and more advanced understandings of techniques and tactics but

also communicate the positive role sport can and should play in their culture. This outcome will inevitably contribute to developing physical education and sport programs that positively affect players, coaches, parents, and the public.

Daryl Siedentop

Professor Emeritus

Ohio State University

# preface

The proper work of a writing is to arouse to thinking those who are fit for it.

Leo Strauss

The aim of this book is to clarify key concepts of Play Practice and to extend and expand the practical advice presented in *Play Practice: A Games Approach to Teaching and Coaching Sports*, first published in 2001. This edition will ensure that the innovative ideas presented at that time continue to have a great influence on professional practice.

These ideas have become increasingly important because, especially in English-speaking countries, teacher-education programs have tended to move away from an emphasis on practical activities and sport and, associated with this shift, away from the vexed question of how best to teach them. Because physical activity and sport should be central in the focus of such programs, there is a need to show how the principles and processes of Play Practice could be embedded into professional preparation, both in teaching and coaching.

It was also important to outline both the theoretical (if retrospective) underpinnings of this innovative approach and to provide examples of similar ideas developed by other professionals in the field. These are included in the supplementary electronic chapters available with the book (visit [www.HumanKinetics.com/PlayPractice](http://www.HumanKinetics.com/PlayPractice)). This was necessary because in the early stages of the evolution of Play Practice, there was no direct input from theory. Nor, apart from the work of Alan Wade, who introduced the use of small-sided games to teach the principles of tactical play in soccer, was there evidence of support for Play Practice in the work of other professionals at that time. Play Practice was initially a purely pragmatic approach that was driven by the search by an inexperienced teacher to find worthwhile alternatives to traditional methods. In those early days, it was based solely on going with what appeared to work with youngsters, especially those reluctant and resistant learners who are found in every class in every school.

However, although the first edition of *Play Practice* was aimed at novice teachers, it rapidly became clear that teachers and coaches at all levels were attracted to the ideas presented in it. Given the many common elements in the roles of the physical education teacher and sport coach, this was not surprising.

With deep and diverse roots, Play Practice has taken shape through many years of reflective tinkering, where ideas have been developed, trialled, discarded, or improved and accepted. While this process did not meet the standards of rigor expected from formal research, it did partially meet the criteria for experimentation suggested by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Greatest Show on Earth*. There, he suggests that ‘to

experiment means that you do something, you manipulate, you change something in a systematic way and compare the change either with a control, or with a different change.’ Since practice has preceded theory in many aspects of modern life, most notably in the evolution of the steam engines that powered the industrial revolution, it is clear that innovative ideas that have been generated through the same process of reflective tinkering could be useful in guiding future practice in our field. It is therefore interesting to discover the degree of support for Play Practice that has emerged since the first book was published. So it is now clear that Play Practice not only has sound theoretical underpinnings but also an expanding body of work from professionals in both teaching and coaching that supports it.

Here, it is especially worth noting the work of Paul Balsom, who in his booklet *Precision Football* details an approach to improving critical elements of skilled play with elite soccer players that parallels Play Practice. Although Balsom arrived at his ideas independently, another highly successful coach, Mark Williams (a graduate of the University of South Australia), has built on the ideas presented in the original book to develop innovative methods for the teaching and coaching of Australian Rules football.

In the first book, it was suggested that juxtaposing the words *play* and *practice* might seem to create an oxymoron. For *play* implies free, open-ended activity, which is an end in itself, while *practice* suggests repetitive, closed behaviour that achieves future goals. However, the term was carefully chosen to describe an approach to sport education that harnesses the immense power of play to create challenging and enjoyable practice situations through which players, young and old alike, can be motivated to play their way to understanding, competence, and excellence.

The secret lies in the integration of play with practice through games and challenges that have been carefully structured to achieve specific outcomes. Of the latter, one of the most important for youngsters is the enjoyment gained from a growing sense of improvement and mastery. In fact, in his acclaimed television series, *The Ascent of Man*, Professor Jacob Bronowski captured this, the essence of both sport and of Play Practice, when he said ‘The most important drive in the ascent of man is his pleasure in his own skill. He loves to do what he does well, and having done it well, he loves to do it better.’ Clearly sport provides an ideal vehicle for young people to become involved in activities that they can do well, where they have the opportunity to strive to do better. However, with competition comes pressure to win, not merely to play for the sake of the game. This pressure can range from the need to meet the expectations of an entire nation when competing in the Olympic Games to dealing with the ill-informed comments of a single parent watching a junior competition. Whatever the source, pressure to win can lead to many of the problems that continue to bedevil competitive sport at all levels, from Little League baseball to the Olympic Games. Indeed, in an over-reaction to these problems, some members of the physical education community believe that competitive sport should be eliminated from the curriculum entirely and replaced with fitness, wellness, and co-operative activities.

However, while recognising these problems, we believe that it is impossible to ignore the immense power of sport to attract people into the world of physical activity. Whatever their limitations, professional sports provide a continual supply of role models, along with unending free advertising for the brand!

However, if it is to fulfil its potential as a humanising activity, we do need a radically different vision of sport that is far removed from a win-at-all-costs mentality, the sport entertainment industry, and the politically driven excesses of countries such as the former Eastern Bloc. It must always be rooted in the sport philosophy that has underpinned physical education for more than 100 years. It must be the sport of William Morgan, of Naismith, of De Coubertin, of Teddy Roosevelt, and of all those participants who have competed honourably and with respect for their opponents through the years. So if competitive sports are to be included in the physical education curriculum, they must always be structured to ensure that they remain both a humane and a humanising activity.

Here, the roles of the physical education teacher and the sport coach are critical, for who can better ensure that sport retains its value as a humanising experience? Many have had a lifetime of joyful involvement in sport; often, their whole lives have been changed by their participation. It has brought them many of their best friends, their most cherished memories, and their most significant achievements. They can, by their every word and deed, demonstrate a sound philosophy of sport in action.

We can begin by replacing all of the trite, hackneyed, misleading, and just plain wrong injunctions to win that are plastered around changing rooms with the Olympic motto, pure and simple. We must encourage youngsters to focus on the struggle and not the result, to treat their opponents in any sport as the surfer treats the big wave, as the skier approaches the mountain, as the kayaker views the turbulent river: as challenges, not as adversaries. As participants focus on the challenge, not on the opponent, they may experience not only greater enjoyment but also improved performance.

Above all, in schools and in communities everywhere, sport must be for all, not only for the elite. The essential premise of this text is that every child should have the opportunity to participate in enjoyable and challenging sporting activities. They may then learn fundamental truths about themselves and about life, and they may also become more tolerant supporters of sport and those who play it, as spectators, parents, or coaches in the future. Equally important, many may learn that they have infinitely more talent than they or their teachers and coaches could possibly imagine. For it is becoming increasingly clear that sporting talent is not the rare gift that we have often thought it to be but is often simply a function of the opportunity to participate, along with intelligent encouragement.

Teachers and coaches should remember that first experiences, like first impressions, can be crucial. This is especially important if youngsters have already had unfortunate experiences in community sport. They need to understand that many youngsters are more frightened of the possibility of failure than they are thrilled by the possibility of

success. So Play Practice is underpinned by the idea that if youngsters develop a deep love and understanding of sport through positive early experiences, they are more likely to make a lifelong commitment to physical activity and a healthy lifestyle. As a result, Play Practice may prove to be an important tool for sport educators because it replaces mindless games and mechanistic training methods with purposeful practices and pertinent challenges. In this way, Play Practice may counter the serious threat posed by the sedentary amusements of television and computer games as we strive to capture the hearts and minds of young people.

It is important to understand that while the original driving force in the evolution of Play Practice was a search for better ways to encourage reluctant and resistant beginners to even participate, the principles that have emerged can be employed at the elite level. As training volumes increase in the drive towards excellence, play becomes work, enjoyment diminishes, and the motivation inherent in joyful participation is lost, prompting even talented athletes to retire early. Play Practice counters this by providing a framework for developing a vast range of enjoyable and realistic practice scenarios that simulate the demands of high-level competition while retaining the crucial element of play.

*While it has a coherent framework, it is not necessary to understand and apply Play Practice as a complete package.* Teachers and coaches can start by making one small adjustment to a practice situation or one simple modification to a game, by using a working model of technique, or by trying an innovation such as an action fantasy game. In this way, it is possible for them to gradually move towards this innovative approach. This means that they can trial elements of this model and begin to develop some confidence in it before they make a total commitment. Ultimately, this may prove to be the greatest strength of Play Practice because the history of education is littered with good ideas that were not successful in the harsh realities of schools.

An additional advantage, and one not to be undervalued, is that Play Practice can make the learning environment more enjoyable and professionally satisfying for the teacher, as well as for students. A teacher who creates enjoyable learning situations and sees a positive student reaction will respond with greater enthusiasm, and may even smile more often! This then becomes a reciprocal process, where the positive attitudes and improved performance of both teacher and students spiral upwards to create ever more positive learning environments. This is not a pipe dream. It is exactly what happens a thousand times over in the real world when inspired teachers and coaches give their lives to lead young people towards a better future.

While Play Practice can be especially valuable for sport educators at the beginning of their careers, it has already proved to be a useful resource for experienced teachers and coaches, who have quickly identified similarities between this approach and the methods they have devised for themselves. For them, Play Practice simply provides a framework that helps them to clarify and expand their own ideas. For example, the terms *simplifying*, *shaping*, *focusing*, and *enhancing* are only new definitions for processes that have always been used by effective teachers and coaches. However,

when they are precisely defined, as in this work, the concepts they represent are easier to understand, employ, and improve upon.

It is now widely accepted that sports and games have the potential to make an immense contribution to the lives of individuals, to communities, and to nations. This places a huge responsibility on the shoulders of those who, like the authors, offer advice to teachers and coaches on how best to introduce youngsters to sport and physical activity. So while this work may ‘merely’ be about teaching sport, even using cartoons to make specific points, it is not a simple ‘how-to’ book, nor is it a ‘dumb bunny’s guide to teaching games’. On the contrary, it may force some readers to undergo a paradigm shift in their thinking.

Part I presents a radical analysis of the nature of skilled performance in sport. It begins by defining the key terms *skill* and *games sense*, goes on to detail the other elements of skilled performance in sport, and finally proposes how an understanding of the process of being skilful is critical to effective teaching and coaching. This analysis of the nature of skilled performance in sport is then integrated with a statement of the conditions under which youngsters best learn. The result is an innovative pedagogy that enables teachers and coaches to help youngsters become confident and skilful players who understand sports and want to continue playing as part of an active lifestyle. This is necessary because, despite the immense potential of sport to contribute to the lives of young people and to communities around the world, many critical issues in teaching and coaching remain unaddressed.

Part II supports these ideas with practical examples of how to introduce a range of sports and shows how a sound understanding of the nature of games can help students transfer teaching and learning principles across sports with similar structures. The practical information provided is invaluable to both the students and professionals who read this book.

As readers work through this book, they will discover that key ideas and concepts are repeated. This is intentional, since revisiting and repetition are critical in any learning situation, and they are absolutely essential when innovative concepts are encountered for the first time. For example, readers will find specific Play Practice mantras, such as ‘What is tactically desirable must be technically possible’, repeated in different contexts.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that while we believe that this book will help teachers and coaches meet the challenge of helping young people grow to love sport and incorporate it into an active lifestyle, it is not intended to be the definitive statement of how to teach all sports. Rather, we hope that it will provide a springboard for new ideas, ideas that will make the tasks of teaching and coaching easier, more rewarding, and infinitely more enjoyable.

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# introduction

## The Influence of Sport

To teach people how to play and to want to play is to enhance their potential for humanistic experience. To develop a society of players and a culture devoted to play is to contribute to a civilized humanistic future.

Daryl Siedentop

Over the past 100 years, sport has become a dominant factor in the culture of most countries, even those poverty-stricken nations still struggling to provide basic services for their people. The great invasion games of basketball, field and ice hockey, lacrosse, and the various football codes are played and watched around the world by billions of people. The attraction of these games lies paradoxically both in their simplicity and their complexity. They are simple in the sense that ball possession and position clearly indicate the state of play at any instant but complex in that games of this type present the players with problems that can be solved tactically and technically with a vast range of responses. In the same way, net games, such as volleyball, tennis, table tennis, and badminton; target games, like golf, archery, lawn bowls, and tenpin bowling; and striking and fielding games, like cricket, baseball, and softball, all present players with innumerable technical, tactical, and psychological challenges.

While ball games are especially popular, the disciplines of track and field, the challenges of the alpine sports, the precision of gymnastics, and the unique appeal of the aquatic sports all attract millions of participants around the world. In all of these sports, the skill of the great performers is such that their body control and movement represent images of perfection that are an ephemeral art form. At the same time, the tactical and strategic aspects of many ball games are akin to the magnificent game of chess. Most importantly, when played in the true spirit of competition, sports bring millions of young people into activities where they can begin the process of extending and defining themselves, thus expanding their awareness of their own potential. Indeed, sport has an almost unique capacity to provide experiences that can help us to achieve this, a notion superbly captured by Michael Novak (1988) when he wrote the following:

If I had to give one single reason for my love of sports it would be this: I love the tests of the human spirit. I love to see defeated teams refuse to die. I love to see impossible odds confronted. I love to see impossible dares accepted. I love to see the incredible grace lavished on simple plays—the simple flashing beauty of perfect form—but, even more, I love to see the heart which refuses to give in, refuses to panic, seizes opportunity, slips through defenses, exerts itself far

beyond capacity and forges momentarily of its bodily habitat an instrument of almost perfect will.

Sport flourishes because in one way or another, it engenders emotions such as these in billions of participants throughout the world. Unfortunately, the influence of sponsorship and advertising, of television and of money, often seem to overpower the true reality of sport, which is simply the story of one person's struggle against another or against the natural environment. Indeed, what is rarely mentioned is that the real attraction of sport is the pleasure that players experience when a movement task is done well. The sweet feeling of clean contact when a ball is properly hit, of mastery when it is controlled or caught, of satisfaction when intelligent teamwork produces a goal or thoughtful defense snares an interception, of thrill when a wave or a slope is mastered, of pleasure when a personal best performance is achieved: These are the magical moments we remember long after the result is forgotten. More than any other factor, they are the reason we continue to play even when our bodies can no longer sustain our dreams.

Perhaps one of the most astonishing manifestations of the attraction of sport occurs in Japan. Here, thousands of people, many of whom could never afford to play a round of golf on a real course, spend hours hitting balls from tees in tiered driving ranges that can accommodate hundreds of players at a time. Perhaps, as Pulitzer Prize winning author John Updike once suggested, the simple, clean contact with the ball, followed by the tracking of its flight towards the target, really is enough for one to gain pleasure from golf.

However, although some philosophers may disagree, there has to be more to sport than this, these mere ephemeral moments of pleasure. And, of course, there is! Indeed, the benefits of physical activity and sport have been extolled by physical educators for more than 100 years. Above all, sports have the potential to play a special role in the lives of young people growing up in the complex societies of the modern world. For while sport can contribute to the lives of people of all ages, it takes on special significance during adolescence. Dr. Roger Bannister, ever famous as the first man to run the mile in under 4 minutes, observed:

What significance does sport have for the individual? I think adolescence can often be a time of conflict and bewilderment. These years can be weathered most successfully if a boy develops some demanding activity that tests to the limit his body as well as his mind. Each adolescent has to find this demanding activity for himself. It may be mountain climbing, running, or sailing, or it may be something quite different. It may not even be sport at all. But in the absorption in this pursuit, he forgets himself, and it fills the void between the child and the man.

Although we agree with the over-riding philosophy here, it is clear that his views apply equally to girls. However, instead of simply allowing adolescents to discover this demanding activity by themselves, they should be introduced to a range of experiences that are broad enough to provide a choice while ensuring a solid

foundation.

While these initial experiences should be enjoyable, there is a growing acceptance that challenging and stretching youngsters in their formative years can contribute to their total well-being. Indeed the prophets of positive psychology argue that when people are totally committed to a task, completely absorbed in it, they operate in a state of flow (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Here, as they draw on everything they have to meet the challenges they face, young people are contributing to their own development. Sport in all its varied forms provides an ideal vehicle to expedite this process, for it examines the qualities that have been crucial to the survival of our species over hundreds of thousands of years. Physical and moral courage, self-reliance, skill, speed, power, endurance, self-sacrifice, determination, dedication, perseverance, fairness, loyalty, and the pursuit of excellence have been valued by all societies throughout history. All of these qualities are necessary in sport, and many can be developed through sport.

Sport can also bring hope to young people in places where merely staying alive is an achievement. This is exemplified by the aptly named Fountain of Hope School in Lusaka, the capital of the African state of Zambia. Here, football is used as a carrot to encourage children to attend school and to begin pulling themselves out of the swamp of a life apparently without hope. Since 1981, the Harlem RBI (Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities) camps in New York have combined literacy and baseball programs, involving up to 700 youngsters between the ages of 6 and 18 every summer. Their success is evidenced by the fact that 90 percent of the youngsters who become involved in this program go on to college, compared with a 50 percent drop-out rate from high schools in the same area.

This is a story captured almost incidentally in the brilliant television series *The Wire* where, almost in an aside to the main theme, a former boxer attempts to draw youngsters away from the dangerous streets of Baltimore. It is repeated throughout the world in backstreet gyms where the heavy bag, punch ball, and sparring all play their part in providing potentially life-changing experiences; on the sun-baked grounds of Pakistan and India, where a dozen overlapping and informal cricket games are played simultaneously on a single field; on thousands of dusty pitches in Africa and South America, where anything remotely resembling a soccer ball is treated with reverence; on the battered concrete basketball courts of cities worldwide; on the running tracks of Kenya; in tiny sheds containing only a single table-tennis table, but an enthusiastic coach; and on the fields of Papua New Guinea, where youngsters commit themselves to an annual round of games of every kind. It is a story involving the young people of the entire world and it is a story worthy of serious study, because it reminds us that sport has an immense power to change lives. It need not be merely a vehicle for the casual entertainment of the masses nor the promotion of beer and razor blades, as sometimes seems to be the case with the advertisements that dominate great sporting events such as the Super Bowl in the United States.

While sport can go some way to alleviating the grinding poverty and sense of

hopelessness that persists in many developing countries, it can play another role entirely with the more fortunate youngsters on this planet. Taking up an issue that was of concern to some of the most significant philosophers of the 20th century, Peter Arnold argued that sport can become a vehicle through which the privileged youth of more affluent communities can be tested, both physically and morally. In this way, he believed that the virility and vitality of humankind could be kept alive. In his seminal work *Education, Physical Education and Personality Development*, Arnold observed, 'In the absence of a way of life that will in a natural manner look after the physical and moral needs of society, we must turn instead to the artificed work of the physical educationist. It is to them that we largely entrust Man's supreme inheritance' (1968).

What is interesting here is that while the relationship between regular exercise and a longer, healthier, and more vital life is already generally accepted, studies are confirming that simple changes in lifestyle can positively affect many diseases. Evidence is growing that active children benefit in terms of obesity, lower blood pressure, improved glucose tolerance, plasma lipoprotein profile, and even intelligence. Experts have long agreed that fitness lowers cardiorespiratory risk factors and levels of anxiety and stress, enhances physical capacity, as well as improving self-concept and self-esteem.

Unfortunately, as nations, communities, and schools attempt to deal with this issue, they may be tempted to turn physical education into rigid and rigorous exercise programs. While this may lead to temporary improvements in fitness, it may also lead to a lifelong aversion to physical activity. This is why we believe that the best way to induce youngsters to make a lifelong commitment to a healthy lifestyle is to exploit the tremendous power of sport. Here it is worth considering the ideals of the Olympic movement.

The Olympic creed states with absolute conviction, 'The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered, but to have fought well.' While this philosophy may be far removed from the realities of the modern Olympic Games, it still contains a vital message. This message must override the crass commercialism, rabid nationalism, myriad forms of cheating, and the use of performance-enhancing drugs. It must also be used to counter the more insidious problems that arise from a media-driven over-emphasis on national medal tallies. These range from distortions in funding that often leave little money available for development at the grassroots level to a push for the early specialisation deemed necessary to produce Olympic champions.

Above all, teachers and coaches must do everything in their power to combat the notion that winning is all that matters. Instead, they must apply the Olympic creed in everything they do. With this as a fundamental belief, it is then possible to add other Olympic principles, such as the importance of fair play, courage, self-control, and respect for officials, team-mates, and opponents. If we can convince youngsters of the truth of these ideas, we will have already achieved a great deal.