

Theoretical and Practical Underpinnings of Play Practice

As suggested in the previous chapter, the original roots of Play Practice were both pragmatic and intuitive, arising from the process of reflection amidst the complex, chaotic world of professional practice where ideas and innovation emerged in response to student needs. What is now apparent is that this approach has always had sound, if retrospective, theoretical foundations grounded in multi-discipline perspectives, some of which have emerged and connected in recent times. The scope of the diverse theoretical support for Play Practice as a model of professional practice has been described by Piltz (2003). Of significance, is the connection to the perspective of learning as a complex, dynamic process which draws on information from motor learning in dynamical systems theory and ecological psychology (Abernethy 1986; Clark 1995; Davids, Button and Bennett 2008; Bernstein 1967, as cited in Chow *et al* 2007) and from educational theory on complexity (Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler 2008). This work supports the importance of connecting with learners' experience and using the processes of simplification and shaping to facilitate learning. It also highlights the complexity of factors which influence learning and suggest learning emerges through a dynamic process of self-organization and adaption within a contextual setting. Central to this process is the interaction between the constraints associated with the performer, environment, and task that provide the opportunity for individual transformation as a part of a group of collective learners (Newell 1986 as cited in Chow *et al* 2007). In addition, theory relating to expertise and decision making, informs the learning process for beginners and highlights the significance of 'opportunity' for developing a broad base of players. The concept of learner engagement and the array of strategies for enhancing learning settings are linked with motivation and self-determination theory, play, neuroscience and related perspectives on teaching and learning.

This chapter explores the key theoretical underpinnings for Play Practice as a model for professional practice and identifies examples of professional practice that are supportive of this approach.

Given that the title and theme of this work is *Play Practice*, it would seem appropriate to begin by considering what play brings to the human experience. Brown (2009) suggests that play

energizes and enlivens human life, it stimulates creativity, generates new possibilities, and kindles optimistic thinking. Learning through play promotes transformation, adaptability, the development of empathy and the capability to navigate social complexity. Brown (2009, p.1) states ‘Of all animal species, humans are the biggest players of all. We are built to play and built through play. When we play, we are engaged in the purest expression of our humanity, the truest expression of our individuality. Is it any wonder that often the times we feel most alive, those that make up our best memories, are moments of play.’

It is clear that play contributes to human development. The National Institute for Play (2009) suggests that play is a significant factor in promoting better educative, work, personal and relationship environments. In addition, they suggest that infusing play into education contributes to improved student engagement and optimized learning.

The value of play is encompassed in both the philosophy and methods of Play Practice which focus on active engagement of participants in meaningful learning experiences to generate feelings of enjoyment. This is achieved by designing learning situations that harness the power of play to motivate and enthuse participants. Games are shaped to produce challenges that stimulate players’ interest and promote positive and purposeful involvement. Challenges are employed to engage learners’ interest, promote task mastery, increase personal competence and build intrinsic motivation. Teachers and coaches using Play Practice constantly apply the processes of shaping, focusing and enhancing the play to enact play-based learning and instil a spirit of playfulness to their professional practice.

Engagement and Motivation

Ryan, Williams, Patrick, and Deci (2009) suggest that intrinsic motivation can be developed through the embodied enjoyment of movement, which can be facilitated through designing experiences that enable personal competence and confidence to flourish. Through Play Practice, teachers and coaches are able to initiate and sustain these feelings as they focus on promoting autonomy, fair play and resilience as the foundation for a positive, inclusive and success-orientated learning climate. Play Practice adopts a learner-centred focus and works on building connections with students. In addition, the model is based on student engagement, success and

enjoyment as the foundation for building intrinsic motivation and continued participation. The significance of developing intrinsic motivation through strategies such as challenge, achievement, game play and competence is recognized as a significant basis for learning (Chandler, 1996; Frederick & Ryan, 1995; Pink 2009; Stork, 2001). The affective domain has been identified as a significant area for investigation in games education because of the implications for children's motivation to participate in lifelong physical activity (Holt, Streat, Bengoechea & Garcia, 2002; Holt, Bengoechea, Streat, & Williams, 2004).

Studies relating self-determination theory to physical activity, motivation and wellness also provide support for the Play Practice model. Ryan and colleagues (2009) indicates intrinsic motivation is significant in developing lifelong activity habits, and this is facilitated when the psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness are fulfilled. Similarly, Glasser (1998) suggests that the psychological needs for power, love and belonging, fun, and freedom are significant drivers of human behaviour. When these needs are fulfilled, people are more motivated, productive and happy. Conversely, individual motivation, productivity and happiness are challenged when needs are unfulfilled. Research suggests that interest and engagement in physical activity are fostered by developing and demonstrating competence, by allowing choice and autonomy, by promoting connection and relationship and by maximising enjoyment while minimizing anxiety (Ryan et al., 2009; Siedentop, 2009). Siedentop (2009) draws on Bandura's (1994) concept of self-efficacy to highlight the significance of perceived self-efficacy as a key factor in participation and enjoyment in and of physical activity. People's belief in their capability to move and perform develops over time and as participants experience success and enjoyment in activities. To sustain motivation, students participating in physical education classes need to gain sufficient skill to develop their competence and confidence as well as have the opportunity to work positively with peers and experience fun (Siedentop 2009).

Brain-Based Learning

Consideration of the importance of student engagement in learning has significantly influenced 21st-century perspectives on learning and teaching. Contemporary neuroscience research investigating how the brain operates in learning contexts has informed brain-based educational practice (Jensen, 1998). Teaching strategies involving novelty, variety, choice and context are

beneficial for engaging learners, generating interest and establishing positive learning states. Game play, drama and the use of strategies such as celebration, rituals, personal reflection and performance are suggested as tools to engage the appropriate emotions in the learning context (Fogarty, 1997; Hannaford, 1995; Jensen, 1998).

The origins and evolution of Play Practice reflect the importance of finding practical strategies to engaging a diversity of learners into participation in sport. Many of the key principles associated with these early strategies were associated with challenge, individual achievement, acknowledgement and opportunity. These experiences allowed individuals to fulfil their psychological needs for relationship, competence/power, autonomy/freedom, and fun and promoted the benefits of increased productivity, involvement and well-being for participants (Ryan et al. 2009). The process of *enhancing the play*, is central to positioning Play Practice as a ‘pedagogy for engagement’ because it purposefully orientates learning experiences to engage and induce positive learning states. A diverse array of authentic motivational strategies, including ‘action fantasy games’, are outlined in Play Practice as a guide for professional practice. These strategies have emerged from experience in working with a diversity of learners and they are aligned with the principles of brain-based educational practice.

Positive Psychology: Flow

Further support for the Play Practice model can be drawn from the contemporary field of positive psychology. Early work by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) on enjoyment and flow experiences suggests that novel, playful environments in which challenges are aligned to the performers’ abilities generate a state of enjoyment, or flow, that provides a powerful internal motivator for human behaviour. This perspective is supported by Kretchmar (2005), who refers to experiences of delight to describe the joyful state generated when players move with this sense of flow. Both authors differentiate fun from enjoyment and align enjoyment with competence, fulfilment and achievement as the basis of intrinsic motivation. Play Practice advocates games and challenges that are shaped to match task and player ability. In so doing, and by applying the principles of alignment and differentiation, all participants are provided with opportunities to experience success and flow that sustain purposeful and engaged participation in physical activity.

Positive psychology investigates the enabling conditions that permit humans to flourish by investigating positive emotion, engagement and meaning and individual signature strengths to enhance well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Programs and experiences that develop individual capabilities including optimistic thinking, resilience, courage, flow, compassion and meaningful engagement are valued in education because of their contribution to psychological health and well-being (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). The Play Practice model is representative of this with its foundations of joyful participation, engagement, individual challenge, achievement and meaningful connection. Resilience and fair play also form the platform of skilful play, and this emphasis enables students to build signature strengths as they experience success and failure, cope with making mistakes, develop the courage to take risks and demonstrate increasing levels of personal and social responsibility. Play Practice also enables participants to find meaning and connection in small-sided teams and peer-supported activities. Peer support and team collaboration nurture a helping attitude and the development of individual capacities of compassion, empathy and tolerance. This is further developed as individuals adopt roles in coaching, managing, officiating, and arbitrating and take on responsibility for managing their own behaviours and dealing with more complex group interactions.

Principles of Quality Teaching and Learning

The Play Practice model is learner centred and advocates the use of an array of teaching methods selected according to an assessment of the nature of the activity, the experience of the students, the context and the specific student learning outcomes. Educators are encouraged to identify student needs and capabilities as well as the situational context as a basis for establishing connections with participants and to determine a starting point on which new experiences can be scaffolded. Participants are encouraged to construct meaning and reflect on their learning as they engage in relevant shaped games and challenges. Strategies for engagement are consciously planned through the process of enhancing the play, which concurrently generates positive emotional states, learner commitment, improvement, success, confidence and competence. These principles are consistent with contemporary information about quality teaching and learning and apply aspects of social constructivist and experiential perspectives on learning. The learner is viewed as central and active in the learning process scaffolding their knowledge, understanding,

skills and dispositions and influenced by the social context. Play Practice also ensures that the key learning principles of maximum individual participation and alignment are explicit prerequisites in the design of all Play Practice learning experiences. This ensures that participants have adequate opportunity to engage in the learning setting and that the learning task is relevant, contextual and inclusive. Learning is further enhanced by the provision of feedback from a variety of sources, including self, peers, the instructor, the task itself, video and shared reflection. The principles for quality teaching and learning have been incorporated into Play Practice through the Ps of perfect pedagogy, a working model of instruction discussed in chapter 9. This framework evolved from a composite of ideas gleaned from coaching courses and personal experiences as a professional teacher and coach, developed at a time when there was a dearth of instructional models in the literature. Research confirms the value of this model as an instructional tool for novice educators to develop their confidence, competence and the reflective capabilities required for implementing quality practice (Piltz, 2004).

Developing Skill Performance in Sport

Research studies examining the nature of skilled performance have concluded that expert games players appear to have high-level perceptual and situational awareness compared to novices (Abernethy, 1990; Abernethy, Farrow, & Berry, 2003; Baker, Cote, & Abernethy, 2003a; Ross, 2006; Phillips, Klein, & Sieck, 2004). This means that they can scan the playing environment and read the play more effectively than novices. In part this is because they know what to look for and so can recognise cues that beginners are never aware of. Linked to this is the ability to see patterns of play and to instantly decide what is typical or abnormal about a situation. In addition, experts demonstrate the ability to intuitively know where they are on a court or a pitch and to predict where both teammates and opponents should be at that instant. They are capable of sensing critical phases in a match and are able to make the adjustments necessary to change the flow of the game. Experienced players have a deeper understanding of what they can and cannot do in a particular situation. They are better able than novices to play to their strengths and cover their weaknesses and subsequently make fewer unforced errors. Expert players generate a clear mental picture of good performance, which enables them to bring their own performance into line with this model and allows them to use mental imagery to prepare themselves for a performance and subsequently to analyse that performance. Experienced players also have the

ability to select from and employ a range of techniques to achieve a successful outcome. In summary, expert players have a greater knowledge of the game; are able to read, interpret and react to time-critical situations more effectively than novices; make better decisions concerning what needs to be done; and then execute the required actions to a higher standard.

One of the greatest strengths of Play Practice as it evolved was that it was based on a clear understanding of the complex nature of skilled performance in sport. This was in part because of the influence of the talented individuals who conducted advanced-level coaching courses in football, cricket, table tennis and track and field in England during the 1950s and 1960s. It was also a function of personal experience playing, teaching and coaching a range of sports and activities. As a result, Play Practice began to incorporate the concepts of skilled performance very early on in its evolution. Particular attention was given to the key implications for teaching novices through the processes of intelligent shaping and focusing the play to create success-orientated environments and to develop all relevant aspects of skilful play. In the Play Practice approach, attention is directed to clarifying and defining key terms associated with skilled performance and presenting them in a way that practitioners can easily understand and apply. The current model of skilful play with its platform based on fair play and resilience serves as a key tool for educators in analysing the complexities of sports and teaching for the development of all components of skilled play.

It is interesting to note that some of the ideas mooted in the original book have since become hot topics in other professional areas. The concept of games sense, translated into the generalised notion of situational awareness, along with the idea that intuition is the essence of past experience, has become a central plank in training programs in fire and emergency services worldwide and more recently in the work of other sport educators.

Developing Expertise: Deliberate Play and Deliberate Practice

Research on the development of expert decision-making skills in team games is aligned with the principles of Play Practice. Recommendations include playing multiple sports to ensure experiences in a broad range of decision-making situations, because decision making does appear to transfer between sports. In addition, flexible rules and novel solutions are

recommended, as well as ensuring that all youngsters are given a chance to adopt key roles (Abernethy, Farrow, & Berry, 2003; Abernethy, Baker, & Cote, 2005; Baker, Cote, & Abernethy, 2003a).

Abernethy and colleagues (2003) stress incorporating strategies for engagement in Play Practice by varying the environment as much as possible to maintain interest across the thousands of hours of deliberate practice necessary for attaining high performance levels. This reaffirms what experienced coaches in many sports have been doing for many years. Interestingly, the players in this study accepted the fact that as they became more professional in their training, the training became more boring and less enjoyable.

In addition to deliberate practice, studies suggest that deliberate play undertaken in the sampling years (ages 6-13) before specialisation is a significant experience in building expertise. Deliberate play activities are typified by the neighbourhood pick-up games where participation is less formalised and play is small-sided, intrinsically motivated and developed by the playing group (Berry, Abernethy, & Cote, 2008). Of particular significance is the support from research for the Play Practice principles of small-sided game play, engagement, shaping and focusing the play and the process of enhancement to ensure purposeful involvement at all levels of participation.

Motor Learning: Dynamic Systems and Complexity Theory

The principles and practices of Play Practice are closely aligned to contemporary dynamic systems theory and the constraints-led perspective of motor learning (Davids, Button, & Bennett, 2007; Bernstein, 1967, as cited in Chow, Davids, Button, Shuttleworth, Renshaw, & Araujo 2007; Clark, 1995; Abernethy, 1986). This theory highlights the complexity of factors that affect motor learning and contends that movement patterns emerge through a dynamic process of self-organization where the learner constructs movement patterns through an internal adaptive process. Central to this is the dynamic interaction between constraints associated with the performer, environment, and task that provide the challenge for individual growth as a part of a group of collective learners (Newell, 1986, as cited in Chow et al., 2007).

Key precepts in Play Practice illustrate the complexity of learning and reflect how constraint consideration and manipulation are central to the teaching process. First, learner needs and capabilities are identified as dimensions in the Play Practice model. As learner needs are appraised, consideration is directed to participant assumptions, including the preference for players to play the game rather than just practice technique and the desire to be competent and not embarrassed whilst playing. In addition, consideration of the social dimension of participating with friends, the desire for even and fair competition, and the importance of receiving acknowledgement from significant others are also brought to the fore. Further, Play Practice acknowledges the conditions that promote learning: enhancing learner desire, creating tasks that are challenging but attainable, providing ample opportunities to participate in pertinent game-like activities and participation in a positive, supportive learning environment. Finally, Play Practice highlights how important it is for educators to understand the nature of the activity and to recognise the social and cultural context of the collective learning environment.

Task constraints refer to the rules, equipment and number of players in an activity that can be manipulated to provide challenging learning environments that facilitate the emergence of movement behaviours and decision-making skill. This process promotes learning in relevant contexts by connecting key information–movement couplings. Scaling down or simplifying relevant tasks is recommended for enhancing information acquisition because this gives beginners more time to process the information and to act. In addition, to become more skilful, participants must become more attuned to relevant cues in specific play environments and be allowed time to self-organise and adapt in the co-dependent setting (Davids, Button and Bennett 2007; Chow et al., 2007).

Play Practice advocates the notion of teaching through the game using the process of shaping the play and game simplification in order to create the appropriate learning environment for facilitating learning all aspects of skilful play. In addition, Play Practice uses the notion of teaching in the game through the process of focusing the play. Focusing the play occurs as the teacher or coach draws attention to key points of emphasis in a learning task. This can be facilitated in a variety of ways, including the freeze replay method where game play can be stopped at an opportune time to review and reflect on what is happening. This method is often

enacted through guided player questioning associated with tactical positioning, decision making or other aspects of game sense. This is important in assisting learners in identifying key information and movement actions in mini-games and for facilitating progression in learning to more complex game contexts.

In Play Practice the processes of shaping and focusing the play enable learners to engage in environments that present context and specific conditions for learning to emerge. By differentiating the shape of the game to accommodate the diversity of learners, suitable challenges can be maintained and progressed accordingly. This reflects a link between the Play Practice model and learning of complexity theory. This is further supported by the work of Hopper (2009), who uses the concept of game as teacher to illustrate the principle of teaching through the game using the process of shaping. Hopper and Sanford (2010) draw on complexity theory and highlight the way in which learning emerges through player adaption in structured games. Slade (2003, 2009) illustrates how learners experience transformation as they engage in manipulated game environments in developing progressions for novices in field hockey and other tactical game challenges.

The concept of game simplification and the significance of maintaining information movement connections support the ideas of Ross (2006), who suggests that to develop skilled performers in sport, practice must be closely related to the real activity. This is defined by Play Practice as the concept of alignment, which represents a principle of this approach. The significance of this concept was brought to the attention of the author at the Loughborough Summer School of 1959 where Alan Wade, then coaching director of the English Football Association, made it clear that any practice must relate to the game and that the connection between practice and the real game was regarded as one of the critical factors in effective coaching.

Support From the Work of Other Professionals

Support for Play Practice has emerged in the work of other sport educators, especially in the ideas and methods of professional coaches. The views of the latter are particularly important because in their world, any theory is only as good as the effective practice it leads to and the

success that flows from it. To that end the following examples are from teachers and coaches whose ideas and methods, consciously or not, reflect the principles of Play Practice.

The first example is provided by Dennis Slade (2003) of the Massey University in New Zealand, whose methods and approach to introducing field hockey are aligned with what Play Practice employs to introduce lacrosse. Another example is provided by the ideas of Dr. Paul Balsom, who when working for the Scandinavian Soccer Federation, devised a Play Practice solution for the development of the specific endurance qualities needed by elite soccer players. His objective was to develop training modalities that replicated the actual endurance requirements of football and, as with Play Practice, he wanted to move away from traditional and outdated methods of endurance training. He believed that in soccer, specific endurance could be defined as the capacity to perform repeated bouts of short-duration, high-intensity exercise, interspersed with periods of lower-intensity exercise and rest, over prolonged periods. He used a Play Practice approach (i.e., small-sided conditioned games shaped so as to develop the specific endurance required to play the game at the elite level). In his booklet *Precision Football*, he wrote that small-sided games create specific endurance training while improving technical, tactical and mental skills. And by replacing pure running (i.e., using no ball) with controlled small-sided games, the players' motivation can improve greatly.

Balsom (1999) also listed numerous options for coaches who choose not to follow normal football rules during small-sided games. These options keep players motivated and challenged in meeting various objectives during training.

These are the factors to be controlled in the small-sided games:

- Number of players*
- Duration of work and rest intervals
- Size and shape of the playing area
- Rules of the game
- Availability of balls

This reflects the concept of shaping play. However, he also made two other critical statements that link his ideas to Play Practice. The first, clearly define the aim of the training, can surely be seen as focussing the play; the second, keep the small-sided games competitive, suggests the notion of enhancing play.

Although his primary focus was the improvement of specific endurance, Balsom (1999) found that each player in 3v3 limited-time games shaped by specific rules had up to 100 touches of the ball and the game could also be used to develop tactical awareness. He suggests that such games could be made especially demanding if the focus was placed on player-to-player marking!

An example of this small sided conditioning games is described below.

The number of players in each team could be

4 (active) + 2 (passive), or

6 (active) + 2 (passive). Goalkeepers and full-sized goals should be used.

Two-minute work periods should be used. At the end of each 2-minute period two of the previously active players switch places with two passive players, and the game is restarted within 5 seconds. In this way each player works either 4 or 6 minutes (as an active player depending on the number of players, i.e., 4v4 or 6v6) and then rests (as a passive player) for 2 minutes.

Balsom suggests that such games could be made especially demanding if the focus is placed on player-to-player marking. Whilst Balsom has never used the term *Play Practice* to define or describe his methods, it is clear that they are based on similar principles.

There has been a long tradition of small-sided games in Australian hockey. Rick Charlesworth used what he termed *designer games* as he prepared the Australian women's team to win the Olympic gold medal in 1996. These small-sided games reflect situational game contexts and are directed to achieving specific outcomes for players' fitness, decision making and technical application (Charlesworth 1994). The Australian men's hockey team as it prepared to win the world championship in India in March 2010 also used this approach. A team player described the game play as physically and technically demanding and focused on small-sided games (3v3 to 6v6). Coaches kept the movement going, which aided in the players' conditioning for game

play. It is evident in many sports over the past decade that small-sided games where rules, size of field, playing numbers, scoring systems and time limits are manipulated to construct specific learning environments are becoming common in several elite-level sports such as rugby, Australian rules football and basketball. Another example described in Lynn Kidman's book *Athlete-Centered Coaching: Developing Inspired and Inspiring People* (2006). Wayne Smith, an assistant coach with the New Zealand rugby team, comments that manipulating several factors (e.g., rules, size of field, time limit, scoring system) will create game-like situations for the players. He also allows players a framework for designing their own drills. He keeps the practices fresh and varied to motivate and engage players. He presents the drills not so much as drills but as mini-games in order to build tactical awareness and team unity. The process that Smith describes is applying the principle of shaping play in order to achieve specific outcomes. However, it is worth remembering that since he was working with international players, he could take their technical ability for granted.

The late Rinus Michel of Holland, widely recognised as one of the all-time great soccer coaches, unknowingly provided support for the notion of Play Practice when he emphasised the importance of what he termed *street games*. In his book *Team Building: The Road to Success*, Michel (2001) argued that in the past, street games had played a vital role in the development of soccer players in all countries where the game has flourished. In part this was because street games filled the lives of many youngsters who would play informally for up to 25 hours a week, and so unintentionally and unconsciously developed the elements of skilled play that would enable them to progress to the highest levels.

Michel (2001) suggests street soccer is the most natural type of education because it is played daily in a competitive format in small groups. Seldom do players practice isolated technical or tactical drills. In game play, players learn from mistakes without thinking of the technical, tactical, mental or physical qualities they also develop.

However, Michel suggests that while street games still predominate in many less economically developed countries, especially in Africa, it is becoming less and less possible for children in Western societies to play in the streets. Not only are there other distractions for young people in

developed nations, but many of the spaces that had traditionally been used for such games have been eliminated. In addition, parents are increasingly reluctant to allow children to play freely out of their sight for long periods.

Michel laments that as the development of young players becomes more formalised and as adults increasingly become involved in organising junior sports, training in clubs becomes regimented and focussed on isolated activities like coordination training, running laps, sprint running, technical work for running and dribbling. All of these aspects, he says, are a waste of time and fail to inspire or motivate because there's nothing appealing to soccer enthusiasts.

Michel (2001) suggests that this is a particular problem with untrained volunteer coaches, often parents who choose activities that keep the children busy. But in the soccer learning process, these activities are not very effective. The activity leaders would fare better if they held a short scrimmage game instead of telling the players to dribble around cones for the same amount of time.

This last statement is highly significant because, as suggested, many teachers and coaches impede rather than encourage the development of their players by using completely inappropriate practices. Indeed, if any area of research needs attention, it is the quality of instruction at the junior level, even in a country like Australia, which in theory at least has well-developed structures of both coach education and junior sport.

Michel's solution is to use the scrimmage format most of the time in training, just as in street soccer. This format develops technical, tactical, physical, and mental qualities. The exercises in training must contain elements from the real game so that players can develop game sense. Ball skills are developed but only as a means for solving problems in a game.

Further support for the importance of informal play and pick-up games comes from *Just Let the Kids Play* by Bigelow, Moroney, and Hall (2001). Among many examples it provides of the need to refocus our attention on informal play is a quote from Wayne Gretzky, one of the all-time great ice hockey players: 'One thing we have lost is that the Jean Beliveaus, the Bobby Orrs and the Gordy Howes had creativity and imagination. That creativity was basically founded on the

fact that they would go onto ponds and skate for six, seven, eight hours a day, choose up sides and have two nets and no goalies . . . We need to get back to the basics of just having fun' (p. 282).

Another fascinating example of the impact of pick-up games on a sport is in basketball. In the National Basketball Association, ostensibly the highest level of play, tactics are increasingly driven by the mores of the pick-up game. In fact, it sometimes seems that sheer athleticism rather than good team-work is the key factor to success at the highest level. So while the winner of the three-point shooting competition is highly regarded, the winner of the NBA slam-dunk competition becomes an instant legend. Nothing sums this up better than a February 19, 2007, sports article in the *London Times*. Here, discussing the impact of Steve Nash, three-time MVP in the NBA, Ian Whittell writes, 'In recent years, selfish individual play seemed to be taking over the NBA, powered by physically dominant players who eschewed the principle of the team game. Nash has turned basketball logic on its head, his dazzling passing skills and energetic run and gun style epitomising a sea change in tactics and philosophy.' Whittell goes on to describe the change in focus for youngsters who following this role model are more likely to be working on improving their passing.

All of these comments confirm the critical impact that pick-up games can have on the development of skilled play. In doing so, they support the concept of Play Practice. Finally, it is interesting to note that the principles of play practice have been employed by David Eldridge, the head volleyball coach at Heathfield High School (perennial Australian high school champions) and by Chris Deptula, who has franchised the Play Practice approach to teaching tennis throughout South Australia.

One final example of the application of the principles of Play Practice comes from an unusual source, the South Australian Metropolitan Fire Service. In his article 'Implications of Decision Making Theory for Emergency Services and Its Application Within the Metropolitan Fire Service' David Launder (2008) suggests that traditional training in fire services paralleled old-fashioned approaches to teaching games, with a focus on technical proficiency. Hose-and-ladder drills are examples of training exercises that are often performed outside of any environmental

context. More often than not, a hapless trainee receives extensive instruction in dragging the hose, raising the ladder or using a particular tool; far rarer is there any situational training that provides a framework of why or where the technique should be applied. When challenged, the training officer will tell the fire fighter where and when to point the hose. If Klein and colleagues (2004) are correct, this philosophy has potentially dangerous implications for the development of future officers. Launder (2008) suggests that strategies that address the need to develop personnel who are technically proficient, skilful and capable of accurately reading a rapidly changing environment can be borrowed from the sport education field where similar environmental constraints exist including low time, high technical demand, high stress operations.

In conclusion, the most powerful words were those of Rinus Michel (2001) as he suggests that inexperienced educators when faced with uncertainty about what to do should play small sided games. To that truism one could simply add that, as they grow in confidence, teachers and coaches should try to shape, focus and enhance these simple games to ensure that their students improve those elements of performance that will most rapidly enable them to play with ever-increasing enjoyment and skill.