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Column Editor

summary

Athletes have several strategies for changing directions. This article will focus on running curves and cutting. Both have benefits that must be balanced against their drawbacks. Both skills must be approached in a progressive manner to ensure that athletes master the skills and can perform them safely.

Introduction

Athletes have several strategies for changing directions. Two strategies that the author uses involve running curves and cutting. In some sports, running curves may be a sport-specific movement pattern (such as running the bases in softball or baseball). This strategy has the benefit of being easier to learn and less abrupt, but it can also be a slow strategy. A second strategy is to make an abrupt change of direction, called a cut. This has the benefit of being faster, but it is also more complex. Due to the additional complexity and speed,

Strategies for Teaching Changes in Direction

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it has the potential to be a more dangerous skill. This article is going to briefly cover each strategy and present several drills to help athletes learn these skills.

Running Curves

With running curves, the most obvious danger of performing this skill incorrectly is that the athlete will not be able to arrive someplace quickly. If the athlete cannot make the turn tightly, if he/she has to slow down too much to make the turn, or if the athlete is unable to accelerate out of the turn then the athlete's ability to arrive someplace quickly is impaired. A second danger of performing this skill incorrectly is that the athlete may take the turn quickly and then lose balance and this will cost even more time. Finally, performing this skill incorrectly can get someone hurt through a fall or misstep.

When running curves, several things should be emphasized. First, the athlete needs to lower his/her center of gravity while going through the turn. This is done by pushing the hips back and flexing the knees. Second, the athlete should drop the inside shoulder and extend the arm towards the ground while turning (1). Third, as the athlete leaves the turn, the athlete should focus on

taking the first step explosively and lifting the knees while running.

This sounds simple to do, but to do it at speed and safely can be challenging for athletes. Figures 1 and 2 show 2 drills that can be used to teach this skill to athletes. Figure 1 should be viewed as the beginning drill. For this drill, set up 3 cones as shown. For beginners, start with the cones approximately 5 yd apart. The athlete will begin at the first cone. On command, the athlete should execute an explosive first step and accelerate to the second cone. The athlete will run around the second cone, accelerate out of the turn, and run towards the third cone which represents the finish line. Note that in this illustration, the athlete is running to the left. The cones should also be set up so that the athlete must practice running to the right. This drill can be made more difficult by putting the cones further apart, this will mean the athlete is able to reach a greater velocity by the time he/she hits the second cone.

Figure 2 is a more difficult variation of the first drill. The athlete still accelerates to the second cone, runs around the second cone, and runs to the third cone. This time he/she runs around the third

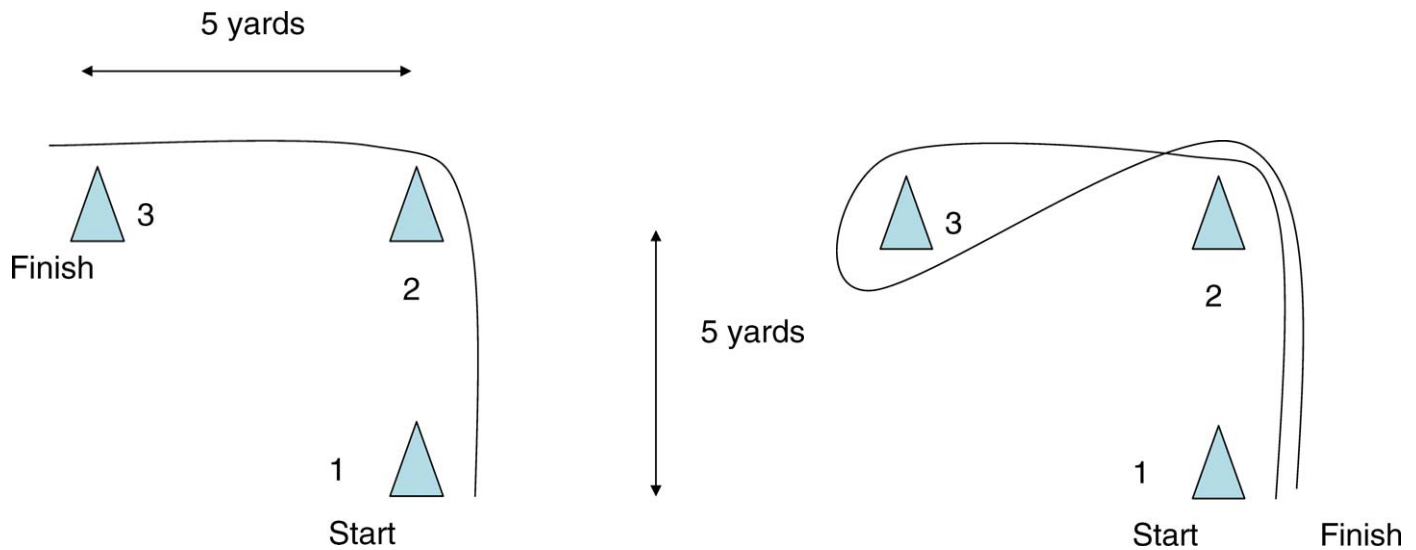


Figure 1. Running curve, beginning drill.

Figure 2. Running curve, progression.

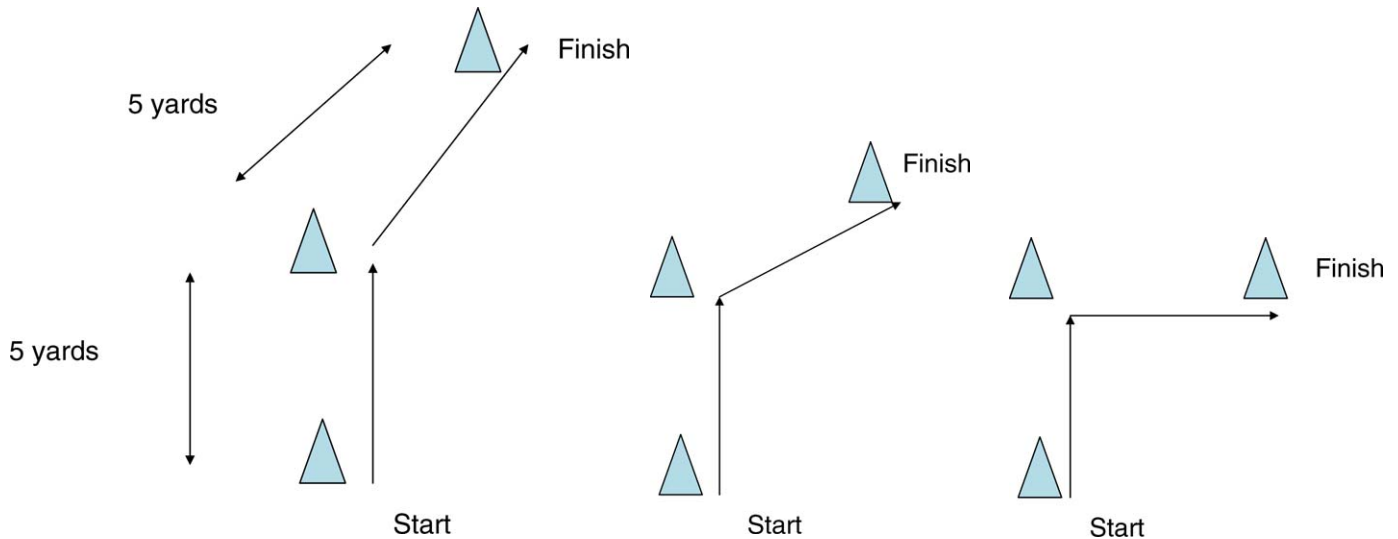


Figure 3. Cutting, beginning drill.

Figure 4. Cutting, intermediate drill.

Figure 3. Cutting, advanced drill.

cone, accelerates back to the second cone, runs around the second cone, and then accelerates to the first cone and the finish line. Again, this drill should also be done in the other direction. This variation should also be done at shorter distances initially, and those distances can be increased as the athlete becomes more proficient. Athletes should not progress to this variation until they are able to perform the first drill consistently with the desired techniques, at speed, while maintaining their balance.

Cutting

At times, athletes don't have the leisure of rounding a curve to change directions. In many situations, a sharper change of direction must be executed. To execute this sharp cut, the athlete will be running in the original direction. When the change of direction must take place, the athlete will plant the outside foot (e.g., if the athlete is going to run to his/her right, then the left foot becomes the outside foot). This is done by landing on the ball of the outside foot and dropping the hips so

that the shoulder, knee, and ankle are aligned. The athlete will push off the outside foot to push into the new direction. As the athlete is pushing with the outside foot, the inside foot will step into the new direction. At this point, the athlete will move the back foot forward explosively and accelerate into the new direction.

This is a faster movement than the turns described above, but it is also a more complex one. Loss of balance can occur if this is done incorrectly. This results from 2

common problems. First, the athlete may not have their shoulder/knee/ankle aligned when planting. Second, the athlete may plant with the wrong foot and trip over his/her feet when executing the cut.

Another danger of executing this incorrectly is injury, primarily caused by planting the inside foot. Planting the inside foot can cause twisting at the knee and ankle, and this could set the athlete up for an injury.

Because this is a complex skill, there are progressions to help teach it. Figures 3–5 show progressions for teaching this skill. Figure 3 shows the first progression for teaching cutting. Set up 3 cones. For beginners, the cones should be 5 yd apart, with the third cone set up at an approximately 135° angle from the second. The athlete should begin at the first cone, start explosively, and accelerate to the second cone. At the second cone, the athlete will execute the cut and accelerate into the new direction, running to the third cone which represents the finish. Note that athletes should execute this drill running both to the right (as illustrated) and to the left. To make this drill more difficult, the cones can be placed further apart, which means that the athlete will be running at a greater velocity when he/she reaches the second cone.

Figure 4 shows a more difficult variation. The third cone is set up at an approximately 110–115° angle from the second cone. Again, the athlete should practice this drill to the right and to the left. Figure 5 shows a variation with the third cone being at a 90° angle from the second. Note that the drills in figures 4 and 5 should only be attempted after the athlete is proficient with the first variation. This means that the athlete can consistently execute the desired technique, in both directions, at speed. ♦

Reference

1. CISSIK, J.M., AND M. BARNES. *Sport Speed and Agility Training*. Monterey, CA: Coaches Choice. 2004. pp.113.

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