

Improve Your Agility Ability: Change of Direction Training for Basketball Players©

By

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Agility can be defined simply as the ability to change direction efficiently. This “agility ability” is very important to basketball players because it’s not often that they run in a straight line during the course of a game. Basketball players must perform a series of stops, starts, side-shuffles, backpedals and other changes of direction during the course of a game or practice session. As a matter of fact, one research study showed that the most prevalent movement pattern in basketball is not straight-ahead running, but side-shuffling. A player must be agile to make these movements, and to transition from them into a full-out sprint! Basketball is a game of speed – getting from one point to the next fast - and quick movements and changes of direction. Efficient agility movement means being able to change directions to get to the ball, or away from your opponent *under control!* Basketball players have to make these types of movements from a variety of positions – some very awkward. This type of movement requires balance, coordination, quickness, speed, reflexes, and strength.

There are many ways that a player can improve her agility – for example, by using hurdles, cones, or perhaps the most common tool - an agility ladder. Each of these tools has a place in your agility training program. We’ll take a brief look at how each of them can be used to help improve basketball agility.

Hurdles offer a player the opportunity to not only work on agility, but also power off the ground as well. A combination two-legged or one-legged hop over a series of hurdles placed in a straight line (about 3-feet between each), is a simple yet effective way to begin work on agility, power, and proper landing technique (e.g. soft landing with triple flexion – bend at the ankles, knees and hips, more on this in a later article). Forward hopping, or side hopping are just two examples of how hurdles can be effectively used in your training session.

Cones can be used in a variety of ways to improve agility. For example, you can weave in and out between hurdles set-up in a straight-line with space (2-3 feet) between each hurdle. Your weave pattern can be a simple forward run-through, or a side shuffle. These weave patterns can be combined with finishing sprints, side-shuffles, or backpedals for the more advanced athletes and training techniques. Cones come in a variety of heights, and can be used as a jumping barrier (similar to hurdles) as well.

Agility ladders come in a variety of lengths, but a common length is 15 feet. While the agility ladder is a fairly simple apparatus, it is also one that requires some skill and familiarity before a player performs some of the more advanced foot movement patterns – such as those discussed below. It’s best to get used to the ladder by performing some

simpler exercises, slowly and under control, while working with an experienced trainer. Beginning exercises such as a simple *run-through* by placing one foot per rung; a more challenging *run-through* where you place two feet per rung with short choppy steps, and a *bunny hop* where you simply hop through each rung with two feet (a basic *plyometric exercise* – more on plyometrics in a later article), are all good ways to familiarize yourself with the agility ladder. Run-through exercises should be performed with nice high knees, and once the basic motions are obtained, as quickly as possible while still maintaining control of the body. Repeating these beginning ladder exercises slowly and in a controlled manner, will help prepare you for the exercises listed below. Once you're comfortable with it, the ladder can be a fun individual, partner, or team exercise!

Here are three simple yet effective ladder drills that I like to use to help improve agility for the players that I train. A certified and experienced trainer with experience using this apparatus should help with your agility ladder work until you have gained experience and confidence with it.

In-In Out-Out

This is a good drill for developing both lateral movement, and agility. You start by standing on the side of the ladder and facing the rungs. Start by stepping into the first rung with your left foot (“in”), followed quickly by your right foot (“in”) – for this brief period, both feet will actually be in the first rung. As soon as you get your second foot into the first rung, then step out with your first foot (left) diagonally so that now it is outside of rung two (“out”), and then quickly step out with the right foot (“out”). Both feet are now outside of rung two. Next quickly step into rung two with your left foot, and follow the same pattern for rung one all the way down the ladder.

Hop Scotch

I like this particular exercise because in my opinion, it mimics the type of movement necessary when a player has to come under control and quickly change directions. To perform this exercise, face the ladder (looking down the ladder length-wise). You start by hopping into the first ladder rung with both feet, and then, jumping both feet laterally outside of the first rung (similar to a split step) one foot on each side of rung #1. Then, while moving forward, hop with both feet into rung #2, then out with both feet outside of that rung, and so on all the way down the ladder and back.

Skiing

This is a good forward and lateral combination movement drill that you begin by facing forward, looking down the length of the ladder. Start by jumping into rung #1 with your left foot while your right foot lands outside of this rung #1. Then you will transfer your weight and jump into rung #2 landing with your right foot into that rung, and your left foot outside of it. You will continue this pattern all the way down the ladder.

Using the agility ladder will not only improve your agility, but also challenge your cardiovascular system in a fun way, so start slowly!

As always, an athlete should consult with her physician before undertaking this type of exercise. Do not try these exercises on your own without first getting qualified and experienced instruction from a certified trainer.

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