

## ***Developing Agility***

Agility generally refers to two sorts of motor functions. On the one hand, it is integral to the ability to explosively start, decelerate, change direction, and accelerate again quickly while maintaining body control and minimizing loss of speed (Costello and Kreis 1993). Agility, in this respect, is important in sport because movements are often initiated from various body positions. So athletes need to be able to react with strength, explosiveness, and quickness from these different positions in short bursts of 10 yards (9 meters) or less before a change of direction is required. On the other hand, agility refers to the ability to coordinate several sport-specific tasks simultaneously, such as when a player dribbles a basketball around a full-court press while looking for an open teammate to whom he or she can pass the ball (Cissik and Barnes 2004). Studies show that agility in these tasks is the primary determining factor to predict success in a sport (Halberg 2001).

Many athletes and coaches believe that agility is primarily determined by genetics and is therefore difficult to improve to any significant degree. Coaches often become enamored with an athlete who possesses natural physical attributes—physical size, strength, vertical and horizontal power, ideal body composition, and so on—that are associated with successful performance. However, these attributes alone will not guarantee success in sports that require agility.

Unfortunately, because of the focus placed on physical attributes, off-season programs often revolve around strength training and conditioning. Agility and speed development at sport-specific speeds is neglected or is emphasized only during small blocks of time during the preseason. In reality, agility involves important neural adaptations that can be developed only over time with many repetitions (Halberg 2001). It takes athletes weeks and months to see improvements in speed and agility. Thus, agility training should be regarded as an integral component of the annual training program. The motor abilities and sport-specific movements that must take place at high speeds during competition have little time to be improved if they are not addressed throughout the off-season. For there is a direct correlation between increased agility and the development of athletic timing, rhythm, and movement (Costello and Kreis 1993).

Considerable research regarding the physical conditioning of athletes has led to a number of changes to how they are taught, coached, and trained. Among these changes is a newfound focus on how agility training is planned and implemented, which has led to the evolution of faster, stronger, and better-conditioned athletes (Costello and Kreis 1993). The key to improving agility is to minimize the loss of speed when shifting the body's center of gravity. Drills that require rapid changes of forward, backward, vertical, and lateral direction help you increase agility and coordination by training the body to make these shifts more quickly and efficiently (Brittenham 1996; Plisk 2000). The following discussion provides a fuller explanation of how agility training yields these benefits:

- **Neuromuscular adaptation.** Agility training may be the most effective way to address the neuromuscular demands that must be met to effectively perform sport-specific skills, since it often most closely resembles actual sporting activity (Cissik and Barnes 2004). It most closely resembles the intensity, duration, and recovery time found in competition. Including agility training in an annual training cycle is therefore critical to translating overall work on strength and conditioning into gains in the athletic arena.