

TUCKER TIPS

The Importance of Leg Strength in Skating

Often we will hear coaches say “Wow that player can fly on the ice” or an NHL player will often say “I’ll play another season if I still have the legs”. Yes, skating is the most important skill in the game of hockey.

Proper Skating Technique:

The foundation of skating is good balance and edge control. Forward skating is the basis for the majority of all skill development in hockey. Start, stride (full extension), glide, recovery and proper arm swing are the basic components of forward skating. If these basic components are the same for every skater, why can’t everyone skate like Sidney Crosby?

The problem is learning and properly applying these components of forward skating. Technically all strides are basically the same. However, the difference is really the length of the glide i.e. how long a player spends gliding before the next skate takes to the ice. As well, many players move their feet with rapid speed but forget to apply effective force. They have weak leg strength.

While a player needs rapid leg movement to gain speed, he or she must learn to use the skate blade edges, their legs and body weight properly and forcefully.

Once a player masters good forward skating technique, the next progression is to incorporate speed. Speed is power multiplied by quickness. We acquire quickness from our feet and power from our thighs / quads. A player can move his or her feet lightning quick.

However, if he or she does not have a good, strong push on the inside edges there will be no power and therefore no speed.

Leg Strength:

For an elite hockey player, one of the keys to success is recognizing the importance of leg strength in skating and developing these muscles in their off season fitness plan. If a player does – he or she will have more speed / jump in their forward stride! Hockey requires great leg strength to negotiate turns at high speeds, stop instantly and then change direction on a dime. Strength affects all other training components such as speed and balance. Above all, strength influences explosive power for a strong push – off, quick starts and anaerobic endurance for repetitive strides.

For a hockey player, “It is more important to develop mass in the lower body” says Lorne Goldenberg, a respected expert on developing pro players and veteran of several NHL teams. “By lowering the center of gravity, players have the strength to bend their knees more to make tighter turns. A hockey player with a big upper body and no legs will fall over in tight, high speed turns”. Often players will go the gym and develop their upper body - biceps, shoulders and chest etc - to impress but it’s their lower body which needs to be strengthened for skating.

The quads or thighs are the largest leg muscle. Power comes from the quads. However the supporting cast of leg muscles, the calves, the ham strings, the hip abductors (outside part of the leg) and hip adductors (inside part of the legs / groin area) must be strengthened as well. Also, the abs is the foundation for a good core area to support power in the stride.

Having comparable strength in opposing muscle groups – for example, in the hamstrings (back of the upper leg) and in the opposing quadriceps (thigh) reduces the possibility that a quick contraction of a strong muscle will tear a weak opposing muscle.

Two of the best off ice exercises with weights are squats and hockey lunges.

Squats help develop the overall legs muscles, glutes and back.

Hockey lunges help strengthen quadriceps, hamstrings, groin, gluteal muscles, calves, hip abductors, and hip adductors.

When teaching edge control in my power skating programs, I will often have students comment on the sound of my blades cutting the ice. The strength of my legs can often be noticed in my skating. With increased leg strength, a player can feel his or her edges cut the ice and become a better skater.

With improved leg strength, a skater will exhibit more speed and explosive starting power on the ice. With proper / correct technique and improved leg strength a player can progress from being a good skater to a great skater!