

It's All in the Wrists

As soon as players are taught to hold their stick properly, they should be taught to utilize their wrists ... Every time you do a stickhandling drill with players under the age of ten, make sure that you remind them to position their hands properly on the stick, and to use their wrists.

Why is it that some players just seem to stickhandle the puck a little better, pass it with a little more zip and a lot better accuracy, catch every pass in any position, and shoot it that much harder with a much quicker release? In most instances, it has a lot to do with their wrists and how they use them. Some players have very minimal, or no wrist action, while others utilize their wrists to their fullest when working with the puck.

At every age and at every level of play, every player can improve in this area and coaches need to be sure that they watch their players closely and make sure they are getting the most out of their wrists. As players get into their early teens, they should be working on developing their wrist and forearm strength to improve passing and shooting.

Start early and remind them often

As soon as players are taught to hold their stick properly, they should be taught to utilize their wrists. Show them how their wrists move, and what the wrist movement does to the stick blade. If they are dribbling the puck in front of their skates with their wrists only (not reaching with their arms), the blade of the stick will be cupped, or closed over the puck on both sides of it, allowing for better puck control. If they are not flexing their wrists to move their stick blade, and are just using their arms, the stick blade will be always perpendicular to the ice, and puck control will be diminished. Every time you do a stickhandling drill with players under the age of ten, make sure that you remind them to position their hands properly on the stick, and to use their wrists.

Proper grip and proper hand positioning

To use the wrists most effectively, a player needs to make sure that they are gripping the stick properly, with hands about the width of their hips apart (as a rule of thumb), with the top hand at the very end of the stick shaft. Players need to be able to get their hands away from their bodies to take advantage of using their wrists. If their hands are in tight to their bodies, they will have difficulty. As they improve their skating ability and balance, they will become better at getting their hands away from their body. They also need to make sure they have a "strong stick" so that the stick blade controls the puck not the other way around.

Stickhandling and puck control

When stickhandling the puck at top speed, many players lose it off of the heel of their stick, or it starts to bounce or roll on them. Puck control is greatly enhanced by the wrists and "rolling" or "flexing" the wrists to handle the puck actually moves the stick blade in a manner that the heel of the blade moves more side to side than the toe of the blade does. As the puck is handled toward the heel, this side to side action, with the blade of the stick "closed" over the puck on both sides causes the heel of the stick blade to actually "grip" the puck as it moves forward. No wrist action, no grip, and the puck is often lost off of the heel. When skating straight ahead with the puck,

the side to side movement should be minimal, and with the wrists only, as moving the puck too much side to side and reaching with the arms only serves to slow a player down, and should only be used when trying to get around a defender.

Soft hands for catching passes

Players are taught to "cup" or "cradle" the pass when receiving it, both on the backhand and forehand. That's just another way of utilizing the wrists. When receiving a pass, a player should make an effort to receive it toward the heel of the stick blade, and as he receives it, he needs to actually "catch" it by flexing the wrists so that the blade of the stick is cupped over the puck, as it moves backward a few inches. Not coincidentally, that "flexed" or "cocked wrist" position is the starting position to make a pass or shoot the puck from.

Making firm, accurate passes

The quicker the puck moves the better, so it only makes sense that the harder, and more accurate the passes are, the better. To make passes that are under control and on target, the puck needs to be started toward the heel of the stick and released with a spinning action on the puck. This spinning action helps to keep the puck on the ice for a good, flat pass that a teammate can catch. To be able to get the spinning action, a player needs to use the wrists, starting in the "cocked" position with the blade "cupped" over the puck (on the heel). To release the puck, the wrists need to be quickly "flexed" to allow the stick blade to in effect, open up, then close again, as it moves forward, creating what some people refer to as a "snap". No wrist movement, no blade action. With a quick "snap", or wrist flex, the puck is on the stick very briefly and is flung off of the blade.

Shooting with velocity

Because their arms are strong enough, players can shoot the puck without using their wrists, but they can't shoot it as hard, or as accurately as they can when they do use their wrists. The same principles apply to shooting as are used in passing. Proper hand positioning, starting the puck on the heel of the stick with the blade (and wrists) in a "cocked" position, cupped over the puck, hands away from the body, strong stick, with the wrist action forcing the puck to spin from heel to be released toward the toe of the blade.

Keeping it down and getting it up

Wrists are also important in whether a pass or shot is on the ice, or gets up in the air. By finishing with the wrists "cocked" and the blade of the stick "closed", and releasing the puck at the right time, the puck will stay down on the ice, or close to the ice. By not finishing with the blade of the stick closed, keeping it "open", and releasing the puck a little sooner, the blade of the stick actually comes "underneath" the puck (similar to a chip shot in golf) and forces the puck up in the air. This technique is important in "saucer" passes and in getting the puck up off of the ice, shooting it high.