

"If only he could get there..."



Improving Quickness to Improve Your Game

An Overview

Many times you have probably heard a coach, scout or parent lament, "if only he was a bit quicker on his skates!" We've all seen the type of player who appears to possess a great deal of skill, yet simply cannot "get there."

What to do?

Well, the player could consider other sports such as darts or lawn bowling where quickness is not as important a factor (no offense intended, but somehow I think the thrill of participating across these alternate sports might not match the excitement felt by hockey purists). No, the player is going to have to address his shortcoming and put in place a systematic program which will affect quickness in order to move his game up the hockey ladder.

How important is quickness? Consider the numbers for a moment if you will. At elite levels of hockey, and starting from a stationary position, players can skate the entire length of the ice surface in less than eight seconds. What we are talking about here is speed ... flat out speed, as opposed to quickness, but bear with me. It means that for every second spent in motion, players will travel a distance of approximately 20-25 feet (that's why darts can't measure up). Let's break that down a little further. These numbers tell me that for every one tenth of a second, a player will propel himself 2 to 3 feet, a truly impressive feat.

Now, let's go back to the concept of quickness, as opposed to all out speed. During the course of a game, players will inevitably have to make quick turns and pivots as a means of escaping and faking, often at high speed. If a player can affect his quickness during these transitional times by even one tenth of one second, we could be looking at saving one or two feet of ice. Hey, that's all she wrote, that's the game, it's over ... because if a player can consistently beat an opponent off a start or out of a turn by one or two feet, he becomes a real weapon. For example, if you reduce the time it normally takes to cover your forecheck assignment or increase the speed with which you get back into proper defensive coverage, your game would change dramatically. Coaches would beat a path to your door!

All right, so now you're saying, "Fine, I know this is a potentially important aspect of hockey, but what are some of the "how to" activities which will affect my players' foot speed and quickness?" You intuitively might be thinking, "You can't turn a Clydesdale into an Arabian thoroughbred." Unfortunately, you are quite correct, remembering, of course, that there is still a need for Clydesdales as well ... just ask Harold Snepts.

However, players CAN affect positive improvement in quickness through intelligent drilling and training, and in the process

enhance their chances for success. What follows are some practical suggestions for coaches and players to consider when attempting to increase quickness. Note that players might initially feel that the task is too daunting, and the ground which they have to make up is too substantial. And yet, if presented properly, a player might be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Ask him, "Do you think that you could improve your quickness by the amount of time it takes to blink your eyes? Could you improve by that much each month?" Put in this short term frame of reference, players can see that improvement isn't impossible, rather very achievable in an incremental way.

What follows are some general considerations and specific activities to consider in conjunction with off-ice activities to improve on quickness. Remember to include on-ice drilling to work on improving quickness as well. In combination, and over time, your efforts both in season and during the off season will help your players to become quicker skaters and more dynamic players.

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General Considerations

First and foremost, remember that Rome wasn't built in a day, so don't get discouraged if the results you want aren't apparent overnight. Like any part of sport mastery and skills acquisition, increasing quickness takes effort and time. The comments which follow should be read and understood in order to maximize the effects of any off-ice workout.

1. **Make sure your players are well rested** for all activities designed to enhance foot speed and quickness! They should not be fatigued when trying to improve quickness, as they are working specific energy systems which must be fully "charged" and ready to explode.
2. When possible, **off-ice drills should simulate a skating motion** by crouching and getting good knee bend and leg extension. It might look funny, but it will be affecting appropriate muscle groups and memory mapping for when you hit the ice. Consider securing information with regard to plyometric activities to assist in your development.
3. **Think quick!** Players should try to make their feet move faster by concentrating on what they are doing. This might sound like an unusual request, but the mind can play a powerful role throughout the process. Don't just have them do the drill, have them think about what they are trying to accomplish and concentrate on light legs and quick movements.
4. Work on **quick foot recovery** under their shoulders (whether on skates or in running shoes) and try to keep their feet as close to the ground or ice as possible. Ever watch a great running back in football? They seem to instinctively know to keep their feet as

close to the ground as humanly possible when affecting a change of direction, both for quickness and balance. After all, it's tough to push off air as opposed to pavement, grass or ice, and air is all they will grab if their feet are too high. Many skating instructors refer to this as "heel kick," where the skate heel is consistently too far off the playing surface. Remember, we're talking about tenths of a second here, so every little bit helps!

5. **Pair players with partners for your sessions.** They can challenge, compete and laugh at each other all at the same time.

In Conclusion

Let me finish by noting a couple of factors that players should not discount in their quest for greater quickness. First, all of us are born with certain physiologic predispositions. Included in this are things such as muscle composition, with some of us having more fast versus slow twitch muscle fibers in specific areas of our bodies. Can this affect our quickness and speed? You better believe it! So for those "fast twitch" players out there, all I can say is "they chose their parents well." But don't be disheartened if your players are among the predominantly slow twitch group ... there is still a place for them in our sport, and, they can still work to improve their quickness.

This leads to the second point, and that involves "reading." I once had a teammate who's critics maintained would never make it in junior, let alone the pros. Why? Too slow, everyone said. Well, this player learned to compensate for his lack of break-away speed by mastering the concept of "read and react" (or perhaps more appropriately, read and PROACT). His angling and positioning as a defenseman were outstanding. In effect, what Brad Marsh accomplished was to increase his quickness by becoming proactive, rather than reactive to situations on the ice. And he enjoyed a substantial and productive NHL career in spite of those naysayers because he found a way to "get there."

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