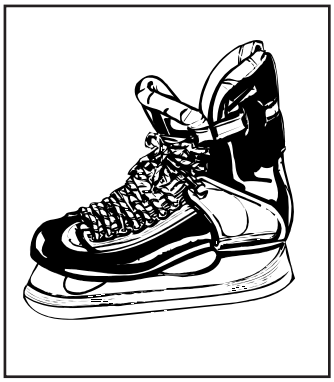

Generating a Powerful Backward Stride

One of the most difficult aspects of skating to master at all levels is the backward stride. Beginning players struggle with maintaining balance while creating enough power to propel themselves backward. More experienced players have a hard time generating enough speed to be able to play defense effectively. Even at the higher levels of hockey, there are many forwards who have a hard time when they get stuck covering for a defenseman and are confronted with a speedy puck carrier bearing down on them.

Developing a powerful backward skating stride takes a lot of hard work and practice. It is very easy to develop bad habits resulting in poor technique, which is very hard to change as a player progresses. The following are some of the points to focus on in developing backward skating technique.

Body Positioning — Upper body should remain upright (back straight), head and chest up, with good knee bend, almost like a player is sitting on a stool. One of the most common problems is that as players move their legs to propel themselves backward, they lean forward with their upper bodies, losing their balance and momentum. As in forward skating, the more knee bend the better, for balance and for generating power in the stride.

Foot Positioning — Feet should be "underneath the body – closer than shoulder width apart" which translates to about a foot to a foot and a half apart. More inexperienced players tend to skate with their feet wider apart for more stability and better balance. This results in a shorter backward stride than they could and should be able to achieve. Feet should be returned completely back underneath the body at the end of a stride.

Stride — The backward stride incorporates the use of the inside edges of the skate blades – so ankles must be bent inward to get on the inside edges of the skates. At the beginning of the stride, the foot must start with toe pointed inward, with good knee bend and weight "loaded up" over the stride leg. The "push" is out to the side, so that the stride leg is fully extended (leg is straight) and then returned back underneath the body – making a "c" cut into the ice.

Glide Leg — The leg that is not being used to stride with, called the "glide leg" should be directly underneath the body (in a straight line down from the shoulder) and should keep the skater moving in a straight line backward. Often as players stride, they tend to turn their whole body slightly. As a result, you see players wiggling their butts like hula dancers and meandering side to side down the ice rather than in a straight line. It is also very important to keep this glide leg bend as close as possible to 90 degrees.

Knee Bend — As just mentioned, the more knee bend, the better the balance and the more power able to be generated. Power comes from the push out to the side. At the mid-point of this push the pushing leg should be completely straightened out while the glide leg should be bent. The more bend in the glide leg, the farther out to the side the pushing leg can push, resulting in more power and more speed.

Ankle Flex — Power is generated, not only from the leg, but also from flexing the ankle during the stride out to the side. As the push is made out to the side, the ankle is flexed with the push coming off of the ball of the foot area (near the toe of the blade) resulting in the "ripping" sound you hear as the blade cuts into the ice on a good powerful stride. A major problem many players have when making this push off the front part of the blade is that they tend to lean forward with their upper body, the heels of their skates come off the ice and they lose their balance forward.

Weight Distribution — Proper weight distribution during the stride is probably the toughest area to get a handle on and ultimately is the most important area. It is important to keep the skates "under the body" to start with upper body upright – weight on the middle part of the skate blades. As the stride begins, the weight is shifted to the striding leg "loaded up" over the knee and foot. As the push is made out to the side, the weight shifts back on to the glide leg – which is in effect "loading up" that leg to stride.

Rhythm — Getting all of the body parts to move together in unison while maintaining balance takes some rhythm. Arm movement needs to be involved with arms moving forward and backward, not side to side. Arm movement works to keep the body in balance while the legs are striding. As players stride with their right leg, their right arm moves forward, as they stride with the left, their left arm moves forward (just like in forward skating). Players should get in the habit of having one hand on their stick, with the stick blade down on the ice in front of them, moving forward and backward.

COMMON ERRORS ..... RESULT

- Not enough knee bend..... Poor balance, short stride
- Weight on toes of skates..... Losing balance forward
- Feet too wide apart ..... Loss of power and speed
- Not flexing ankle ..... Loss of power during stride
- Lack of arm movement ..... Poor rhythm – poor balance
- Poor weight distribution..... Meandering side to side

SKILL BUILDERS

Knee touches — have players touch their knee to the ice at the end of the stride. Helps to improve balance (makes them keep upper body upright or they fall forward) while they are moving.

Foot touches — have players touch their striding foot to their glide foot underneath their body at the end of the stride. Reinforces a complete stride – corrects them from having feet too far apart.