An age for strength and power training

Owen Nolan of the San Jose Sharks is a red-light flashing testament to the power of strength training in hockey.

The Belfast, Northern Ireland-born winger who launches rockets from the right side, rediscovered his scoring touch during the 1994-95 season with the Quebec Nordiques after re-dedicating himself at the gymnasium the previous summer.

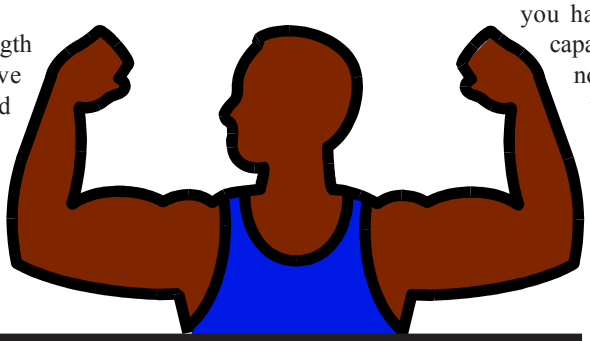
The sniper was first introduced to the benefits of strength training as a junior player at a gym in Cornwall, Ontario after the Nordiques made him the No. 1 overall selection in the 1990 NHL draft.

Bill Kennedy, who owns Maximum Fitness in Cornwall and a kinesiology degree from the University of Windsor, is often asked about what age young hockey players can undertake a strength training program.

"There are misconceptions about strength training that some parents need to have cleared up," says Kennedy, who was shocked by Nolan's poor fitness and strength level when the NHL club appointed him to supervise their then 18-year-old prodigy.

The first misconception is that weight training will stunt a teen athlete's growth.

"A person is basically overloading muscles when they are strength training so you're doing the same thing if you are doing wind sprints on the ice or a set of leg presses in the gym," states Kennedy. "This overload causes the muscles to grow larger in order to handle the stress placed on them."



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The long bones of adolescents, for example leg femurs, are not fully formed and contain growth plates that allow the bone to grow larger and increase height. "Studies show that hormones cause that bone to close off prematurely," explains Kennedy. "Excessive use of anabolic steroids could very realistically cause that bone to mature before its time and you would actually wind up with a much shorter athlete, and I think that's where the misconception started. Hormones are also stimulated from a vigorous strength training program, but in minute amounts, and the effects on stunting the growth of an individual is very minimal and is greatly exaggerated."

Fear of injury is another concern that parents must overcome before allowing their teenager to start lifting.

"There is a lot of potential there for injuries to soft tissues, ligaments, tendons and bones," acknowledges Kennedy. "But the individual must be made aware of this potential for harm so they can approach their training program in a mature manner, under qualified instruction and supervision. If a person is doing what they're supposed to be doing in the weight room, the chance of injuring themselves is relatively low compared to a competitive game."

Maturity is the determining factor when assessing a hockey player's readiness for strength training.

"Fifteen is probably a good general benchmark for when an athlete could start a program and derive benefits from it," Kennedy believes. "There must be a guided approach with instruction from a qualified person before any program is started. And it should be monitored closely."

There have been instances where athletes as young as twelve have benefited immensely from a strength training program. "What you have to consider is if the teenager is capable of handling that type of training, not only physically but emotionally as well. Are they mature enough to have the dedication to go into a gym and actually do their strength training as opposed to horsing around and running the risk of injuring themselves?"

Beginners are going to see the improvement in strength by working out once a week, but three times weekly is ideal, according to Kennedy. "That schedule allows a day off between sessions for muscle tissue to repair itself and grow."

Many hockey players will bulk up in the summer but slowly see their strength gain eroded over the course of the following competitive season. "Teenagers don't have a lot of time to spend in the gym during a season if they're practicing three or four times a week and playing a couple of games," admits Kennedy. "It's what we call a maintenance program. Getting to the gym once or twice a week for 45 minutes to an hour is more than adequate to maintain your strength or minimize the rate you're going to lose it through inactivity."

Hockey's explosion of popularity in the 1990's means a multitude of opportunities from the collegiate and major junior levels right through to Europe, the minor pro levels, and the NHL. Serious players realize that, more than just playing the sport, they have to get into the gym and actually get stronger in order to be competitive.

Not everyone is blessed with the natural talent of Owen Nolan, but strength training, introduced at the proper age and monitored closely, can make players more powerful and complete.