

30 tips to improve your game

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By Hockey Player Staff

Whether you've been playing hockey since you were a tot or you're a newcomer to the game, you're always looking for ways to improve. You don't learn everything in practice (especially at today's ice prices). In fact, you probably pick up more in the locker room before and after practice than you do on the ice!

Following are 30 tips that we've collected from a variety of sources. Some of them are tried and true tips from hockey folklore. Others are garnered from coaches and trainers who are on the leading edge of the game. Either way, we're sure you'll find something that will fit in with your game plan.

Wax Your Stick Blade. Waxing the stick blade is now a popular method used to preserve tape. A player simply applies the wax to both sides of the stick blade on the outside of the tape. This process seals the tape, keeping the water out and allowing the tape to last longer. Another benefit to waxing your blade is the "softness" it provides when handling the puck. It may not seem like much, but a player with good hands can feel the subtle cushioning the wax provides. Some call it a gimmick, but don't knock it until you've given it a try.

Socks & Coins. If you use a regular athletic garter belt to hold up your hockey socks, you've no doubt experienced the garter popping off at times. You can solve this age-old problem with a penny (or other small coin). Just substitute the coin for the button on the garter tab. Slip the penny into the sock in the area that you want attached. Pull the coin and sock through the metal garter hanger and *voila!* The coin will anchor on the other side of the hanger, securing the sock to the garter strap better than ever.

Lungers Lose. A beginner should know that a stick handler can easily get by if you rush, or lunge, straight at him. Stick checking will be successful if you poke check or use a hook check when a player tries to move by you. Defensemen especially should be either stationary or maintaining speed while backing in as the attacker approaches. At the moment your opponent commits to either side, you can stride forward in that direction to check him. Never make the mistake of lunging. When you lunge—you lose.

Return Your Leg. To improve quickness and overall speed when skating, concentrate on returning your leg under your body after pushing off. In other words, when you stride and fully extend your leg, the speed at which you return that leg underneath (to become the pushing leg) will determine your speed and skating power.

Flex and Lace. When lacing up your skates, try lacing them with your ankle flexed and your knee out over the toe of your boot. By lacing them in this fashion, you'll prevent what is known as "lace-bite." This is a common problem caused by making a boot too tight on a regular basis, which can eventually bruise your upper instep area.



The Right Lie. The lie of the stick is an important consideration that should not be overlooked. In most cases, forwards use 5, 6 or 7 lie sticks. These permit a player to manipulate the puck more readily when stick handling. Centers, in particular, find a 6 or 7 effective when stick handling in close to the opposition. The higher the number, or lie, the closer a player can control the puck to his body. The lower the lie, the further away the puck is in front of you. Defensemen often use a number 4 or 5 lie because it allows them to poke check, or reach out, further in defense of an opponent seeking to go around him. If you

have any doubts as to which lie to select when choosing a stick, you can safely use a lie 5 until you build up more confidence in your stick handling and shooting abilities. With some experience, you can make a better choice of sticks. If you are a stand-up skater, you should use a higher lie (7). If you skate with your body pitched forward, a lower lie might be best.

Target Practice. Practice shooting at home, preferably using an object 3-to-4 times heavier than a puck, to improve your shooting skills. This also develops strong wrist muscles for quick, hard shots. And use some type of a smaller target to shoot at—not just a wide open net. Keep in mind that more than 60% of all goals are scored from 10 to 25 feet out in front of the net. Your shooting gallery should be set up accordingly.

Blockhead Bull's Eye. An excellent way to develop a hard shot is to cut a block of wood 12" square. Paint a bull's eye on the block. Place the block on a line, perhaps the blueline. Then stand about six feet back and shoot at the target. The farther back you drive the block, the harder your shot becomes. Practice both forehand and backhand shots.

Fore! Don't use a tennis ball or roller ball when practicing (for the ice) at home on a rough surface. Try a golf ball instead. A golf ball on the ground better simulates the weight and liveliness of a hockey puck on the ice.

Look Ma...One Hand! It's better to have one hand on the stick, with the stick on the ice, than it is to have two hands on the stick with the blade in the air. When back-checking, you can skate faster if you hold your stick in one hand, allowing more freedom in the arms to assist in skating and balance. You can use longer strides because you're concentrating on speed to get back into the defensive mode. In the meantime, your stick is on the ice, in case a wayward pass comes your way.

In the Corners. When covering a player with the puck along your end boards, hold your stick with the top hand, extended out to that side. Trap your man between your stick and your body at the boards while trying to deflect the puck with your skates.

Keep in Touch. In front of the net, always maintain physical contact with the man you are covering, keeping your blade as near to his as possible. Don't lose sight of the puck. If it is passed back to the point, then drive your man out of the goalie's view. Don't try to block high shots from far out. Give the goalie a clear view to play the shot. Otherwise, you'll be hearing "You're screening me! You're screening me!" like a broken record.

Get Rolling. Roller skating is back. With ice time being so hard to come by, almost everyone has taken to in-line skating and roller hockey. The striding action on wheels is very similar to ice skating and provides an excellent means of off-ice training—without having to leave your neighborhood! More and more roller hockey leagues are springing up, and people are realizing that the enjoyment of hockey can be had on wheels as easily as on blades. And the economics of skating on a surface that needs no refrigeration certainly adds to the appeal. In-lines are not just a fad—they're bad, and here to stay—so get rolling!

To Be or Not To Be. Not all hockey players are speed demons on skates. Some players are physically built so that speed is not their biggest asset. These players should develop other talents such as shooting, checking or stick handling. Don't waste too much time trying to be that which is physically impossible. As they say, "Play your own game."

Keeping 'Em Up. There's nothing worse than having a suspender strap slipping down your arm while your trying to handle the puck. You can keep them from falling down by adding a snap to each strap—just like your helmet chin strap—going across from the left to the right suspender. Tape or string works, too.

Talk Out There. Quite often young teams with talent seem to be missing an ingredient for success, often referred to as "chemistry." Teams develop this chemistry by talking to each other on the ice; calling for the puck, shouting "All clear!" or "Man on!" Develop a code word for communicating such as team color when calling for a pass, i.e. "Right side blue!"

Don't Stop Skating. Rarely will you see a pro hockey player standing still on the ice. Sure, the goalie is an exception, and occasionally a defenseman will stop up on the blue line. But a cardinal rule that coaches apply is the "moving feet keep a player moving" philosophy. Quite simply, coasters are made to keep

glasses off coffee tables, not to play hockey. When your feet stop moving, you obviously lose momentum. So it's very important to concentrate on constantly being on the move.

Keep Them Outside. Good defense means keeping the other guy out of the slot. So when you're in the defensive end, always force your opponent to the outside. This will cut down his shooting angle and limit his ability to make a good pass. Remember, you rarely get beat if the other guy goes wide—but give him the slot and he can make you look bad.

Get Board. The reason hockey is played in a rink with boards around it is to keep the puck in play. Players need to realize that the boards are a tool that can be used to help their game. For example, when traveling up the ice, one-on-one, a bounce pass to yourself off the boards to the neutral zone can be very effective. Simply fake towards the boards, make the pass to the boards, then go to the inside, around your opponent, picking up your pass and heading for the net. Breakaway!

Protect Your Investment. In areas where the air outside the rink is considerably warmer than inside, blade-rusting problem is a common problem. To combat this, you should completely wipe off the blades after skating and put them into a cloth (terry cloth) skate guard, or blade jacket. This will not only protect the blade from dings, but it will also absorb the moisture that condenses on the metal due to the rapid temperature change. Rubberized guards are good for walking in, but they trap in the water, which promotes the rusting process.

Plan Ahead. Make a habit of planning your next play in advance, and thinking ahead whenever possible. For example: you're a right winger breaking out of the zone. You know that your center mate is cutting diagonally out of the zone as the puck is reaching you along the boards. So in advance of actually making the pass to the center, you've decided to make the play. This is one reason why NHL pros seem to play at such a blistering pace. They are always anticipating, and thinking ahead.

Get Wind. Stamina or "wind" is one of your most important assets on the ice. And because the rest of your body needs oxygen to perform properly, cardiovascular training should always be at the top of your list. Taking a long ride on your bike improves your lung capacity and leg power. Try some uphill terrain, too. It can prepare your legs for those high-torque situations like digging the puck out of the corner. Running is still the least expensive and easiest way to build stamina. But try to avoid jogging on polluted or smoggy days—it can deprive your body of precious oxygen and do more harm than good.

Sticky Faceoffs. The object of the faceoff is to pull the puck back to your teammates and gain control of the offense. It sounds simple enough. The only problem is your opponent is trying to accomplish the same thing. Try this: when the referee drops the puck, place your stick blade on the ice, behind your opponent's stick. As he tries to draw the puck back, you will interfere with the movement of his stick. When he moves to take another swipe at the puck, his stick will come off the ice. This will give you a chance to move the puck to a nearby teammate.

Watch the Line. Has this ever happened to your team? You're attacking and changing on the fly when your left wing jumps over the boards and lands inside the blueline, throwing the play offside. It's important that forwards be aware of the blueline when making line changes. Jump over the boards outside of the zone. Otherwise, you could kill a good scoring opportunity, and your reputation with the coach.

Pitch Off-Speed. When you've got the puck in front of the opposition's net and there's a crowd around, your first instinct is to wrist it past the goalie on the short side. Did you realize the goalie may be thinking the same thing? Next time, try a softer shot and move the puck along the ice. An off-speed shot can disrupt the goalie's timing and slip past him for a goal.

Perfect Your Balance. Balance doesn't mean going out there and standing on one leg—we'll leave that to figure skaters. Balance for a hockey player is more of a philosophy than a skill. You know how you adopt a certain fluidity as the season progresses? You stop faster; your backward movement is smoother; skating becomes easier? That's balance. A good way to improve your balance is to skate without a stick. Do wind sprints, trace figure-eights in the faceoff circles, even kick the puck around on the ice. The Soviets practice this by playing soccer on the ice. Your stick can often be a crutch. So lose it from time to time.

Cock the Gun. When taking a wrist shot, don't forget to cock the gun. In other words, a wrist shot will have much more power if you pull the puck behind your body and bring your arms and stick across your body, shifting your weight (much like a baseball swing) from your back foot to the front. Too often, players lose power in the wrist shot by shooting off the wrong foot and not pulling the puck back to obtain that power—"cocking the gun."

Pass on the Go. No matter how fast you are, the puck always moves up the ice faster than you can skate. So you should always try to pass the puck while you're moving. That way you'll catch up with the play quicker and add to your team's offensive strength. Also, if you pass the puck while standing still, you make it easier for the opponent to anticipate the direction of the puck.

Don't Hesitate. When the puck is free, every nanosecond counts— especially in the defensive zone. You should train yourself to react instinctively to the puck. If you stop to think about it, you're already too late. A good way to improve your instincts is to keep your feet moving at all times. A wise man once said, "You can waste a lot of precious time standing still."

Pump Up. Since most adult recreational leagues are non-check, you may not think upper body strength is important. But in reality, quite the opposite is true. Puck control in recreational leagues is won in the corners and along the boards. That's where the physical part of the game can elude the referee's watchful eye. You need to stand your ground and hold on to the puck. Good upper body conditioning can be achieved through a conscientious Nautilus-type program. Free weights tend to bulk you up, and that can reduce your flexibility and resiliency. If you don't belong to a gym, try military style push-ups or pull-ups. I