



Age Specific Training Programs

Jack Blatherwick

Every athlete has different needs in a training program, and coaches do not need a formal background in physiology to point young hockey players in the right direction. To illustrate the vast difference due to age alone, let's look at the needs of two hockey players at the opposite ends of their careers.

A couple years ago, I had the privilege of working with Peter Stasny near the end of his brilliant career in the National Hockey League. At 38 years old, Peter wanted the off-season training program to help maintain his athleticism for a couple more years. At the other end of the age spectrum, consider a bantam that wants to take giant steps forward in preparation for the high school team next fall and hockey beyond that.

To make the varsity, most bantams will have to first become quicker skaters, so the off-season training should emphasize skating, jumping, sprinting, and leg power. This is just a start. He'll have to shoot harder and get shots off while moving quicker, play the body and maintain balance against stronger competition, pass and receive at top speed, handle the puck in traffic, and play defense against bigger, faster, stronger players. Off-season training should include all of the above: shooting, stickhandling and workouts for speed, strength, and balance.

Peter Stasny, on the other hand, worked hard on athleticism and skills each year of his young hockey life, because his development in Czechoslovakia included year-round training. Now, at 38 years old, he has no need to improve; his goal is to maintain. Furthermore, the NHL season takes an incredible toll on the body of a 38 year-old hockey player. Besides the physical beating and fatigue of long games in hot arenas, the travel schedule is extremely tough, even on the youngest players.

So, when the playoffs finally end in May or June, professionals need to recover. Their training program includes a lot of long, slow aerobic distances, much of it on bicycles to eliminate the jarring effect of jogging. Weight training for an older pro should be fairly light to maintain strength of joints and muscles without adding stress. The established pro should probably hang the skates in a closet for most

of the off-season, and there should be only a couple weeks of dryland intervals prior to training camp to prevent groin injuries and maintain leg power.

Intense intervals would be too stressful; there'd be little off-season recovery; and a 38 year-old NHL star is not going to improve quickness, agility, or skating no matter what his training intervals look like. He's just trying to maintain the status quo. On the other hand, if you're a bantam or high school player who dreams of state tournaments, then perhaps college, and maybe even pro hockey, you can't waste time on a maintenance program. If you stand still, others are going to pass you up - - others on your team, others from across town, from another state, or another country.

Now, here is the difference between your program and Peter Stasny's: to gain speed and quickness from jumping, skating, sprinting, or lifting, the intervals must be intense. There has to be enough stimulus to create change in your physiological makeup. Then, if the stimulus is followed by good nutrition and a day of recovery, there will be muscular development.

Intensity is the key factor in developing athleticism, whereas intensity should probably be reduced in the maintenance/recovery program for an older pro. For that matter, intensity doesn't play a role in the aerobic conditioning programs that are so popular among the joggers we see every day. They have a different agenda and different advice.

Remember, advice on training comes from many sources, and often neglects the importance of age-specificity. The bottom line for young players is improvement of skills and athleticism, and this requires quality and intensity. Neither one is important in the maintenance program for adults.

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Coach Blatherwick is a true hockey expert. He holds a Ph.D in Sports Physiology, is level 4 advanced certified with USA Hockey and has worked in hockey circles for the better part of 25 years. Early in his career Coach Blatherwick spent significant time in the former Soviet Union where he learned the game of hockey from elite coaches and players. Upon return to the United States his focus was on teaching youth hockey and improving the skating skills of all the players he coached.

Coach Blatherwick has held coaching positions with the USA National Hockey Team and the Division I NCAA University of Minnesota. Jack helped write the current USA Hockey coaching manual (authoring the section on "Raising the comfort zone through Overspeed Training"). This knowledge lead to one of the best books ever published on the topic of hockey (Over-speed - Skill Training for Hockey). While that book is out of print he has recently produced a DVD on skating skills and invaluable hockey techniques

