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Backing up strong

By Robby Glantz

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A common myth in hockey, which I hear repeated quite often, is that only defensemen need to be strong backward skaters. While it is true that, overall, a defenseman will skate greater distances backward than the forward, it is still vital that the forward make every attempt to master backward skating techniques.

These days, with the game evolving to feature all five players on both offense and defense, forwards are constantly required to make quick change of direction moves, as well as the controlled backward-to-forward moves needed for new forechecking systems. And besides, all you have to do is watch Wayne Gretzky or Jari Kurri and notice how often they are skating backward. It will become clear that the best players are also the best all-around skaters—and that means in both directions.

The following is a checklist to improve your backward skating stride and crossovers.

Backward stride

Here are some key points to concentrate on:

- Bend your knees deeply, so that they are “covering” your toes. Your back should be straight, with your head up and eyes forward.
- Start each push from directly under your body, the most powerful starting point.
- Pivot the heel of the pushing foot up-and-outward so that it is perpendicular to your glide foot (forming an upside down letter “U”).
- Push one foot at a time, using all your weight on each thrust. Be firm.
- The pushing foot drives to the side, to full extension—forming a “C” in the ice—while you glide straight back on the other foot.
- Do not swivel your hips like you are dancing; maintain as direct or straight a line as possible.
- Return each “finished-stride” foot to the middle, under your body, and repeat the exact maneuver with the other foot.

Skating imagery

When skating backward, your body posture and positioning is vital. You should feel like you are sitting on a stool with your rear end almost parallel to the ice—keeping your back straight and your weight centered directly over the middle of your skates. Positioning your upper body and chest too far forward while skating

backward will put too much weight to the front part of the skate and definitely detract from your balance, speed and power.

Backward crossovers

Again, some key points to concentrate on:

- Keep your rear end down, so that it is parallel to the ice, by bending at the knees (with the back, as always) straight.
- You should make one push at a time, using all your body weight centered over each push.
- The outside leg should push a C-cut into the ice, to full extension (see explanation above in Backward Stride).
- The inside leg should pull hard under the body, also to full extension, finishing on the outside edge with a flick of the toe (your legs should form the letter "X").
- You should then step out as wide as you can with that inside leg so that you have the ability to pull that leg under the body again. This will help you gain more speed.

Skating imagery II

I've said it before with forward crossovers, but the same applies here: try to picture this maneuver more as a "*crossunder*" than as a crossover. Both skates should remain on the ice at all times, with that inside leg constantly pulling under the outside leg.

I like to have my students make believe they are playing tug-of-war with their inside leg. In other words, try to pull against as much ice as possible until you have fully stretched the inside leg—in effect, "tugging" against the ice.

And finally, remember to bend your knees so they are about two inches over the toes of your skates. This will allow you to stretch your legs to the maximum, and it will give you much improved balance and control.