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Backward skating techniques

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By Robby Glantz

One hockey myth 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 centers and wingers, it is still vital that the forward make every attempt to master backward skating techniques for several important reasons.

First, the game has changed so much that forwards are required to make quick changes in direction as well as controlled backward-to-forward moves needed for new forechecking systems. Secondly, simply watch Joe Sakic or Steve Yzerman and notice how often they are skating backward and it becomes clear that the best players are also great all-around skaters. Following is a checklist and some drills to improve your backward skating stride and crossovers.

Backward stride

Key Points: Bend your knees deeply so they are covering your toes. Your back should be straight, your head up and eyes forward. Start each push from directly under your body. Pivot the heel of the pushing foot up and outward so that it is perpendicular to your glide foot (forming an upside down letter "L"). Push one foot at a time using all your weight on each thrust. The pushing foot drives to the side, to full extension, forming a "half-moon" in the ice while the other foot glides straight back. Do not swivel your hips like you are dancing, maintain as direct or straight a line as possible. Then, return the 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 are vital. You should feel like you are sitting on a stool with your butt 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 when going backward will put too much weight to the front part of the skate and definitely take away from your balance, speed and power.

Backward skating drills

Half-moons on a circle: Use one of the face-off circles to push "half-moon" cuts around the circle, using only the outside leg to drive into the ice, while the glide foot remains directly under the body right on the circle.

It is vital that you get 100% body weight on each and every push. While performing this drill make an effort to pick up speed with every push, even if it means falling down. Also, be sure to go both directions so that you are able to build strength in both legs.

Stick on the head: Skate backwards in a straight line while a partner skates forward in front of you with his or her stick half an inch above your head, tapping you only if you yo-yo up and down.

Staying low is the key to improving your backward skating stride. In fact, as mentioned before, you should be so low that it should feel like you are sitting on a stool. Also, your partner should tap you on the helmet when you look down because when your eyes look towards the ice, it takes away from your balance by forcing you to bend more at the back rather than at the knees.

Drag a partner: This more advanced drill is performed with a partner; you skate backward holding the stick blade of your partner who is doing the snow-plow forward (a stick length away from you), giving you more and more resistance as you get better at the drill.

This exercise will do a lot for the strength in your legs. As you will find out, it is very difficult to pull someone while skating backwards. To do so, again it starts with the knee-bend, the lower you sit the more power you will generate on each push. Also, be sure to pivot the heel of your pushing foot up and out, so that you are able to grip the ice better with the inside edge. Once again, make every attempt not to swivel your hips, instead, be sure to keep the hips going in the direction you are traveling.

Robby Glantz, power skating coach for the Los Angeles Kings, Swedish champions Malmö, and the German National Teams, conducts skating programs throughout North America and Europe