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A cookbook for better skating

By Robby Glantz

As many of you who read this column regularly know, I constantly stress the need to make checklists and routines to follow in order to improve your skating. Therefore, I have decided to put an overall skating checklist together for you—the common themes for better skating that work no matter what maneuver you are performing—of the most important things to remember for better overall skating. Let's just call it "Robby's Skating Cookbook," if you will, and I will even include the technique. Check out the following recipes:

Meat and potatoes dishes

Bend at the Knees. This is the number one most important skill needed for better skating. The lower you bend your knees, while keeping your back straight, the better everything becomes. For example, you will be able to stretch your pushing leg more for better extension on the forward and backward strides, your balance will improve, as will your power and control on your skates, etc. A good rule of thumb that I use for how low to bend, is that with knee pads on, the knees should be about two inches out over the toes of the skates.

Don't be a back-bender. Converse-ly, be aware that in your effort to bend more, you may be doing it the wrong way, by bending at the waist. This mistake will create a whole new set of bad habits. By leaning too far forward or bending at the waist, and not at the knees, your upper body is throwing off your balance and pulling you forward. This will create problems, such as not being able to center your body weight over the pushing foot, getting knocked over too easily and kicking your feet too high at the end of the forward stride. In fact, try to keep your hands above your knees, which should help you keep your back straight and your head up.

Get all your body weight on each push and over your edges. No matter what the stride you are doing, make every attempt to get your body weight centered over that stride, so that you are able to get 100% of that weight to thrust against the ice. The more downward pressure you apply over the skate, the faster you will go and your power over your edges will improve dramatically.

Full extension and full return. Whenever you make a stride, whether it be the forward or backward stride, crossunder, quick start, etc., you must learn to fully extend your pushing leg, but not only that, once you fully extend it, you must then return it back under your body. This way the next stride begins directly under your body, which is your center of gravity, so that you are able to get 100% body weight on that push.

The appetizers

One hand vs. two hands on the stick. I don't believe there should be a debate on this issue, because both are necessary. Obviously, when you shoot, pass or catch a pass, or when you are waiting in front of the net for a rebound, etc., you must have a strong grip with two hands on the stick, with the stick on the ice. However, when you are trying to get to top speed (with or without the puck), when breaking out of the zone, or in open ice, when skating backwards, etc., then you should try to maintain one hand on the stick, so that you are able to extend your arms, and thus you will find that your legs extend more. As well, your balance will also improve.

Keep the head still? Keeping your head still and up while skating seems obvious, but, in fact, it is one of the most common mistakes that we see at all levels. By moving the head from side to side when skating, you are also taking your speed from side to side. Plus, your balance begins in the head, where your equilibrium is, and therefore, by moving the head it makes it much harder to focus and to keep good balance. However, this again is not an all or nothing proposition, because of course, it is okay, for example to move the head when trying to fake out an opponent or the goaltender.

The desert

Comments on lacing and sharpening. Some of the common questions that I receive, revolve around the skate: "How tight to lace?" or "How much or often should I sharpen?" And I always answer these questions the same way, I say, "It's a personal decision—whatever feels the best." However, with that said, I will at least espouse a couple of opinions for you.

First, when tying your skates, in my opinion, the lower 2-3 eyelets of the skate should be snug but not cutting off circulation; then the middle part of the skate should be the tightest, and finally, the last two eyelets at the top of the skate (around the ankle) not that tight at all. In fact, I do not even use the top eyelet on my skate, and you certainly do not want to put tape around the tops of your skates.

There are a couple of reasons for this, not the least of which is by having your ankles looser and more flexible, you can easily bend them giving you greater use and power over your edges. Plus, one of the best ways to strengthen your ankle muscles, is to actually be forced to use them.

As for skate sharpening, this is a personal issue as well. But I will tell you that I sometimes go a year without ever sharpening my skates, because I feel that how you apply your body weight over the skates is of far greater importance. However, if I were still playing, I probably would get them sharpened more often. But certainly *not too sharp*, because I do not like using the sharp edge as a crutch, and I feel that it can take away from your stopping ability. When they are too sharp the trailing skate will often chatter rather than sliding on top of the ice.

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