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Counterbalancing and edge control

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By Robby Glantz

Any discussion of ice or inline skating, and what the mechanics are for achieving more speed and power, should begin with an explanation of how to get the maximum grip from your edges, as well as proper body angle and posture.

Let's begin with body positioning. Always begin by bending the knees so low that they are two inches out over the front of your skates. This will assure that you are beginning with the proper 90° angle. Lowering your body at the knees while keeping the back straight will give you the stability and balance you need over your skates. Make sure that your thighs are burning more than normal, this means that you are coming out of your "Comfort Zone" and starting to use the correct muscles needed to give you power and speed on the ice.

Get on those edges!

If you have been skating a while, you are probably aware that a strong grip against the ice is necessary for speed, balance and power. You get this grip on the ice by using the edges of your blade and by rolling your ankles halfway to the ice (45°), either in or out depending on whether it is an inside or outside edge.

In the Forward Stride, for example, you start each push on one foot, firmly planted on an inside edge, rolled halfway to the ice (sounds simple, right?). And the ability to maintain that grip against the ice for a long enough period of time is one of the vital elements in the quest for more speed. At the same time, you must use 100% body weight on every push (how to actually get all your weight centered over the edge is explained below in the section on Counterbalancing).

Another example is in the Tight Turn made so famous by Wayne Gretzky. Here, you have both edges on the ice—outer foot on an inside edge and inner foot on an outside edge—rolled halfway, with the knees bent deeply. Your gliding foot is always your direction foot. In other words, if you land on the flat of the blade (straight up) you will glide straight and, logically, if you land your glide foot on an edge (preferably at 45°) then you will turn. The more extreme the edge, the more dynamic your turn. (Hint: If you are having trouble with the Tight Turn, it might be that your inside foot, outside edge is landing too flat—which takes you in a straight direction).

The art of Counterbalancing

As we discussed above, it is vital that you work on being able to roll your ankles to the extreme angle of 45°, while on one foot or two, in order to grip the ice for a power push, sharp turn, crossover, etc. Unfortunately, however, it is not that easy to get the edges on the proper angle. And then, once you do finally begin to achieve the correct edge position, you will notice one thing happening frequently: you fall down...a lot!

Believe it or not, when attempting to improve your skating, falling down is an extremely beneficial tool. It shows you exactly where you have gone too far and where you have lost control. Thus, it is very important

that as you begin to use your edges the way they were intended, that you learn the art of what I call Counterbalancing.

Counterbalancing, in skating terms, means to shift your body weight in the opposite the direction of your edge. For instance, in the Forward Stride, you roll your edge inward halfway to the ice. Therefore, you must counter this action by leaning your body weight in the opposite direction (still keeping your shoulders level and parallel to the ice).

If you lean your body weight in the same direction as your edge and the angle of the edge becomes too extreme, it will almost always slip out from under you and cause you to lose power or fall down. In the turns, it becomes even more important that you shift your body weight outside, again counteracting your edges which are angling in the opposite direction—much as a motorcyclist shifts his weight to the outside in a sharp turn so the bike does not slide out from under him.

Mastering the art of edge control and counterbalancing are certainly not easy tasks. It takes continuous trial and error, and years of practice. However, keep working on it and try not to get frustrated if you find yourself falling down quite a bit or making mistakes. Instead, use that frustration as a springboard for improvement.

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