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Striding forward inline

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By Robby Glantz

Summer training is a vital element in improving on-ice performance. I am a firm believer in the benefits of dry-land activities such as plyometrics (spring-coil exercises), sprints, slideboards, bungee cords and in-line skating. An off-season program incorporating these activities will allow you to strengthen the most important body parts involved in skating, your legs and lower body. Of these activities, in-line skating is perhaps the best method to cross-train for ice hockey. It is now also, of course, a sport unto its own. With that in mind, this column will focus on techniques and drills to improve your forward stride while on in-line skates. These tips and drills, if applied and practiced, will give you a great start towards reaching your potential, and becoming the best in-line skater and hockey player you can be.

Techniques

What's great about in-line skating is that the techniques used are virtually the same as they are on the ice. The following is a checklist of techniques that you should follow (whether skating on in-line or ice hockey skates) in order to improve your skating posture, balance and speed.

l Remember first that all skating is "one foot at a time," with 100% of your body weight centered directly over the pushing foot. One foot pushes while the other glides.

l To achieve the proper skating posture, lower your body so that your knees bend to a 90° angle. Your knee should end up about two inches out over the toe of your skate.

l Keep your back straight, with your chest even with your front knee, and turn your knees outward (in a bowlegged fashion) to form the letter "V" with your skates (heels together). Turning the knees outward will immediately get your skates in the right position to push directly against the inside edge.

l Roll the ankle of your pushing foot inward to an inside edge about halfway (45°) to the ground (or ice). This creates the strong "grip" from which to push.

l Thrust against that inside edge to the side, using 100% of your body weight, until the leg reaches full extension. Then "snap" the toe part of the skate (the forward wheel of an in-line skate) down and out to get a final burst of power and speed.

l Rapidly return the pushing leg to the center ("V") position, keeping the skate very low to the ground (or ice), and repeat with the other leg.

Drills

The best drill for working on the forward stride is descriptively called "Drag the Toe and Touch the Heels," and is something that should be constantly performed both on in-line and ice skates. To execute the drill follow the techniques outlined above, being sure to slow the tempo and exaggerate each maneuver.

The drill requires that you drag the inside part of the front two wheels of the in-line Skate (or toe part of the ice skate), with the foot facing outward, as you return it from its full extension point. Then, click your heels together (while standing on one foot only) to form the “V” position, and go again. Remember to keep your hips facing directly in the line you are traveling by making your pushes more to the side, and not to the back.

This exercise will allow you to “feel” your mistakes more clearly. For example, if you are unable to bring your heels together while on one foot, then you will know that you are having trouble centering all of your weight over every push. And if you are turning your knee downward rather than outward when attempting to drag the toe, then that tells you that you are having a problem finishing the push in the proper manner — and are therefore losing valuable speed and power on each subsequent stride.

Finally, mastering all of the techniques of the forward stride takes a lot of time and practice. Don’t get discouraged if you can’t perfect your stride overnight: no one else ever has. The most important tips to remember are to keep bending your knees lower than what might feel comfortable, or natural, and to put all of your energy into every single push. That alone will get you going faster and give you more confidence, no matter what you’re skating on.