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Proper use of edges

By Robby Glantz

In any conversation or lesson about ice hockey skating, you cannot get very far without discussing the use of skate edges. Using edges well is paramount to the success of any skater; and yet, I find that many, many of our students at all levels of play have a problematic lack of understanding for how to get excellent use of the edges. What are edges? Can you really “lose an edge”? How does sharpening affect your edge control? How much weight should you place over an edge? We will do our best to answer these and other related questions.

What Are Edges?

If you have been skating awhile, 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 either in or out, depending on whether it is an inside or outside edge.

If your skate is straight up and down, that is considered standing on the flat of the blade. The flats should only be used for gliding. If you want speed, power and a good grip against the ice when you turn, pivot, quick start, etc.; then you have to use the aforementioned inside and outside edges.

There is a simple test that you can use to see if you are getting onto your edges: Skate as fast as you can (make sure you have on full equipment and you are positioned in the center of the ice) and try to make a tight turn. If you are falling down quite a bit, that is a good indicator that you are starting to use the edges (seriously!). Whereas, if you never fall, chances are you are not getting those ankles rolled enough. In other words, we find that falling down ranks right up there with the greatest teaching aids ever invented. Remember, it is okay to fall down, and, surprisingly, it may mean that you are closer to doing things correctly rather than incorrectly.

Losing An Edge

As we talked about above, falling down is part of the game and something that can be expected to happen quite a bit. However, oftentimes when one of my students falls or slips, I will hear them blame the equipment (i.e. "I lost an edge," or "I need to get these skates sharpened," or "I got a lousy sharpening," etc.). These kind of excuses remind me of an old saying: "A good carpenter never blames his tools." Now, this is not to say that sometimes you will have a bad skate sharpening job, or that sometimes you will fall down for no reason at all. However, what I see for the most part is that players will lose an edge because, quite simply, the body weight is placed over the skate incorrectly.



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Speaking of sharpening, I cannot tell you how many times I am asked about sharpening and the radius on skates, and the only answer that I truly feel comfortable giving is that it is a personal thing. Players should find a hollow and a skate sharpening professional that they feel comfortable with and stick with them religiously. The best examples I can give to explain that there is no right answer to the skate sharpening dilemma is to tell you that every pro player I have ever coached has a different opinion.

For example, when I coached the great Mats Naslund in Sweden, he told me that he only gets his skates sharpened every 3-5 games, and yet we have players with the Los Angeles Kings who get their skates sharpened between every period. It is really a matter of taste.

As for myself, I take my skates out of the box, get them sharpened and that lasts me about a year, and I skate nearly every day (honestly!). If I were still playing, I would probably get them sharpened more, but not much. One of the reasons for this is that like most other players I have always had a weaker side when stopping, and I am able to stop much better on both sides when my skates are not too sharp. Plus, even though the duller skate might take a bit away from my turning and cutting ability, I find that I can easily compensate for this by placing my body weight in the correct spot, so that, essentially, I am not letting the skates 'cheat' for me. I feel that this puts me in control of my skates, rather than the other way around.

Placing Body weight a Key

All this leads me back to the fact that it is where you place your body weight over an edge that holds the key to how that edge will perform for you. And, oftentimes it is the upper part of the body that is creating the most problems, especially in the turns. You will find that if you are able to keep your upper body toward the outside of the turn (i.e. keeping your head cocked slightly to the boards, rather than to the ice, and having your inside shoulder stay above the outside one like you see with a downhill skier), that you will have much more success in leaning your edges, knees and hips extremely low into the turn while still maintaining a strong grip with the ice.

When you begin to use your edges the way they were intended with your body weight positioned correctly over an edge, you are performing the art of counterbalancing. Counterbalancing, in skating terms, means to shift your body weight in the opposite 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 of 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.

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.

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