



Gartner: Putting the power in skating. ©BBS

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10 tips to better skating

By Kyle Melinn

As the story goes, NHL defenseman Paul Coffey used a unique approach to help speed up his skating: he wore a skate up to three sizes too small for his foot. Sure, it hurt. That was the point. He once joked to a reporter that he wanted to fool his foot into thinking that the faster it helped him skate, the faster the game would end and the faster he could strip off the painful vice.

Coffey may be known as one of the NHL's best skaters, but power skating coaches don't recommend pain as a proper path to improvement. People who've made a living instructing beginners and experts alike in hockey's most basic element give less restricting tips on to improve one's power skating.

1. Find a skate that fits.

Give those dusty old skates laying at the bottom of your closet to Goodwill, or a local hockey organization. Does your foot swim inside the bottom of your boot? Those are candidates for donation, too. Audrey Bakewell, a professional instructor in the United States, Canada and Europe since 1976, says finding a boot that fits the foot correctly is the most important step in improving one's skating.

The best way to test a prospective skate is pull out its sole and compare it to the bottom of your foot. If the edge of the soul is one-quarter of an inch to one-half an inch longer than the biggest toe, the skate passes the first "Bakewell" test.

Since most of a skater's balance and acceleration comes from the heel, it's important to keep that part of the foot strapped comfortably to the bottom of the sole. "If you have a skate that's too big, you'll be tripping over your feet," Bakewell says. "You spend too much of your time adjusting to your skate instead of having it work with you. If it's too short, the natural tendency is that your toes will get cramped and curl under the foot." The problem there is that toes stuffed underneath the ball of the foot lift up the heel, throwing off a skater's balance.

Spending less than a half an hour picking out a new pair of skates is probably not long enough. Bakewell says anybody serious about hockey or power skating in general should try on several pairs of skates until one finds the brand and size that feels right on the foot. "Don't pick a skate because Wayne Gretzky or Paul Coffey wears it," she cautions. "Pick the tool that works for you. Never just say, 'this will do.'"

2. Skate out of your Comfort Zone.

Having fun in hockey is important. That's why most people play it, after all. But in order to improve one's power skating, players need to learn to get out of the comfortable routine they're accustomed to, says Shawn Killian, Director of Skills Development and Training for Planet Hockey. Too often, players let body momentum determine the outcome on the ice instead of the player telling the body what to do. By conforming to the "same-old, same-old," skaters will never advance themselves to the next level. Players must train themselves to create thrust, control body movements, and be aware of what's going on when on skates. Killian says that once these boundaries are established the game becomes even more fun.

3. Bend those knees.

It all starts at the knees. There may not be anything Robby Glantz from Robby Glantz International Power Skating stresses more than this. He recommends that skaters keep a 90° knee bend, enough so the knees stick out over the tip of the skate about two inches. "The more you bend one knee, the more you can stretch and push off with the other one," Glantz says. When a skater keeps the knees bent over the toes, the center of gravity remains at the belly button. Bakewell and Glantz both agree that this improves balance.

4. Push it.

A common problem Glantz sees in professional hockey players is that they don't follow through with their push. Unlike speedy skaters, such as Paul Coffey or Toronto's Mike Gartner, many players tend to lift their feet off the ice too soon. Skaters should try to completely finish each push in order to get the most out of each stride. "Some people just try to walk on the ice," Glantz says. "Get the most behind each push by fully extending that push leg."

5. Back straight, head still.

No slouchers allowed. Paul Vincent, of the Paul Vincent Dynamic Skating School in Boston, says skaters need to set their body in a good athletic foundation before developing too many more skills. That means the back should be straight and the head should be still. "You should have a slight forward lean while keeping your chest slightly out," Vincent says. "No matter what you do from that point, you have to keep that athletic foundation." Glantz reminds skaters that a person's inner balance is in the head. In other words, if players are bouncing their head around, they're not gaining momentum, they're throwing off their balance. The same thing can be said for the back. Players who hunch over their skates have a higher chance of falling forward. They also tend to flip backward from trying to overcompensate for their awkward lean, Glantz says.

6. Use those edges.

It sounds so simple, but it's absolutely critical. "If you can't skate, you can't play the game," Vincent says. So much of hockey is quick stops and sharp turns, and that's why working on using the outside and inside edges of skates is so important. For a little extra burst of acceleration, Glantz says that pushing off from a 45° side ankle bend is a helpful idea. "Don't be afraid to use those ankles," he says. "Tie the skate a little looser at the top and tighter in the middle. You're going to (still) want the top of it to be supporting, but not restricting."

You know the cliché, "Practice makes perfect?" Well, nothing could be more true when doing edgework, Vincent says. Players should set up a cone course and work on both the right and left edges so they can get used to balancing themselves. After balance is achieved, speed can be the next step.

7. Keep one hand on the stick.

Hockey players shoot and pass, of course, with two hands. But during every other phase of the game the player carries the stick with one hand, so it's important to practice power skating with a stick in hand, Glantz says. "It's about balance and getting used to the extra weight when one moves the arms back and forth." Which brings Glantz to another point: "It helps if you move your arms forward and backward instead of swinging them from side to side," he says. "Your momentum needs to go forward. That's where your speed is, and that's where your arms should go, too." In this way, skating is like running. Even some professional hockey players forget about that from time to time.

8. Don't be afraid to fall.

It hurts, but so does skating incorrectly. Like everything else in life, skaters learn from their mistakes, Glantz says. Don't forget to wear full equipment before hitting the ice, though, or the ice will be hitting you—hard. "It's OK to fall down," Glantz says. "Everybody does, even Wayne Gretzky."

9. Don't look down.

If there's one tip Bakewell could give to skaters perfecting the skill of skating backward, it would be to keep the head up. The problem is people's natural tendency is to look down at their skates, as if watching what they're doing will help them along. "When you do that, you mess up your center of balance because you're leaning forward," Bakewell said. "Don't let the hips go back. You have to keep them in line with your skates."

10. Easy does it!

Do it right first, then work on speed. Skaters have a tendency to rush through the mechanics of good skating in order to get faster. Bakewell says the stress resulting from this will cause technique to break down faster than anything else. Most skills are taught in slow motion to "set" the position both physically and mentally, she says in her power skating newsletter *Get the Edge*. "This is why it is so important to establish the correct position," Bakewell says. "It is very easy to cheat or slide through a position when performed quickly." Once a skill or position is mastered, then skaters can work more on speed.

All the power skating coaches agree that these 10 tips are useless unless players find the time to work on them—over and over. Because practice makes—well, you know the old cliché.