

## **Training Considerations for the AHL**

### **Sean Skahan**

As the strength and conditioning coach of an NHL organization, one of my responsibilities is to implement our program with our minor league hockey team in Portland, Maine, which plays in the American Hockey League (AHL). Each NHL organization has a minor league team affiliated with them in the AHL. While some teams in the AHL employ strength and conditioning coaches, other teams such as us, will send their NHL strength and conditioning coach to work with them as frequently as possible. With our NHL team located in Anaheim CA, getting there frequently can become a problem. As a result, throughout the course of the season, I usually make 4-5 1-week visits in conjunction with the Anaheim team being on extended road trips.

The AHL is a league where the development of the player into an everyday NHL player is the priority. Usually, the organization will draft a player and then when he decides to turn professional, he will probably start his career with the AHL team. Depending on the skill and development of the player, the time spent in the minors varies on an individual basis. There are always situations where a player may be called up to Anaheim because of an injury or a trade. Therefore it is important to ensure that the player is on board with the training regimen and will know what is expected of him on and off the ice when he makes it to Anaheim. With this emphasis on overall development, the strength and conditioning program is big part of the process.

The AHL on the east coast, unlike the NHL, has a schedule that is similar to NCAA hockey where most of the games are played on the weekend. A typical AHL schedule will have games on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday with the possibility of maybe playing on Wednesday. Since the NHL plays more games during the week and never plays 3 games in consecutive night, program design is different at the separate levels within the organization. Although there are 82 games regular season games like the NHL, it is my opinion that the AHL schedule is beneficial for the development of the player. More time can be spent during the week working on skill development at practice as well as off-ice strength and conditioning.

There are a few bumps in the road when it comes to program design in the AHL. Some obstacles are: 1- Lack of coaching- Unfortunately, I cannot be in Portland most of the season, as my responsibilities in Anaheim are demanding. 2- Facility logistics- Our facility in Portland is smaller and has less equipment than our facility in Anaheim. In fact, most NHL organizations don't have many resources allocated AHL team weight rooms. From my observations, most division-1 hockey weight rooms are superior to AHL and some NHL weight rooms. 3- New players- During the course of the entire year, new players will enter our system via trades, free agency, and called up from other teams to fill roster spots. This can become a problem, especially when a new player with a different training background joins the team in between my scheduled appearances.

When designing the program, I need to design workouts that can be done in our 800-square foot weight room. Usually when I am in Portland, we will designate one of the days to off-ice training only where players will not skate for practice that day. In this situation, I will divide the group into 2 groups and designate 2 different start times. Here we can cover all aspects including warm up, torso activation, strength, conditioning, and stretching. On other days, we may have all the players in at one time, which makes it difficult to get everything covered with limited space. In this situation, we will divide the team into 2 groups where 1 group is conditioning on the stationary bikes, while the other group lifts. Then we will switch when everyone has completed what he was supposed to do.

When designing our in-season lifting program, we stick to a basic template. We lift 2 days per week on both Monday and Wednesday, or Tuesday and Wednesday, depending on if Monday is a total day off for the players. The program is pretty consistent all season long where we will change the exercises through a different rep scheme, plane, or speed throughout the season but keep the same movement and format. On day 1 we will do an Olympic Lift variation pair with stretch, Front Squat tri set with Incline press variation and stretch, and Vertical pull variation tri set with Bent Leg Hamstring Variation, and stretch. On day 2, we will Single Leg push variation tri set with Bench Press, and stretch, Straight-leg Hamstring variation tri set with Inverted Row, and stretch, Prehab-Shoulders and Prehab Hips. On the days that we are not actually lifting, we will spend time on torso activation/strengthening and other injury preventive exercises.

Since I have been working with our AHL team, which was in Cincinnati 4 seasons ago, I've struggled with many ideas and ways to make it all work better. I have found that basic program design principles along with better space utilization and extra coaching with new players when I am present has all made it the best situation possible for us. With the coach's, athletic trainer's, and the player's support, I feel more comfortable knowing that our program is getting done when I may be in Anaheim.

Sean Skahan has been a Strength and Conditioning Coach since 1998. During that time he has worked with several athletes who are now playing in the NHL, NFL, and MLB. Sean received his Bachelor's of Science degree (B.S.) from U-Mass Boston in 1998. After that, he received his Master's in Kinesiology (M.Ed.) from the University of Minnesota in 2000. He became a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist in (C.S.C.S.) in 1999. Check out his blog at <http://www.SeanSkahan.wordpress.com>