

Hockey Speed Can Be Summed Up In One Word: Acceleration

The NHL's fastest skater competition is held every season on the day before the All-Star Game. During this event, each individual skater is timed on how fast they can do one lap around the ice.

Although each player who participates is certainly fast, I don't think it determines who the fastest player in the league is. I've never seen a player skate a lap around the ice in a straight line during a game. This reminds me of the NFL scouting combine where they conduct the 40-yard dash. Very rarely do football players run in straight lines.

Hockey is a game of stops, starts and frequent changes of direction. The ability to accelerate, decelerate, then stop and accelerate again as quickly as possible is a huge characteristic in the game's fastest players.

Acceleration, or the ability to accelerate faster than others, is what the game's fastest players are able to do. Very rarely does a player get up to his top-end speed, which is measured in the NHL's fastest skater competition. Coaches such as Boston University Hockey Strength and Conditioning Coach Mike Boyle and Washington Capitals Exercise Physiologist Jack Blatherwick have been promoting the need to develop acceleration for years and I totally agree with them.

So how do you develop acceleration?

First, I think it's important to think about what characteristics the faster players in hockey have in common. From my practical observations, they are all built like a track sprinter or a football running back. Big and strong quads, glutes and hips are characteristics of sprinters in hockey and other sports. When I recall some of the players that I have been fortunate to work with who were some of hockey's best accelerators (Paul Kariya, Andy McDonald, Todd Marchant and Teemu Selanne come to mind), they are all very strong and powerful athletes.

Acceleration is the ability to go from a dead stop to a sprint in as little time as possible. In our off-season program, we will always do drills to help players improve their acceleration ability.

These drills are always done before any strength training or conditioning exercises. The focus of these drills should be on the first 3-5 steps, which should be done as fast as possible. Then the recovery should be as long as necessary for each athlete. Speed work should never be done when an athlete is tired or when they haven't recovered from the previous repetition. Some of the drills that we do with our players include lean-fall and furs, tennis ball drops, and partner chase sprints. All of them emphasize the first 3-5 steps.

I have found these drills also are very easy to implement with a young team that I currently work with. We've simply done them in an empty space in front of the rink.

The point is that hockey players need to be incorporating sprinting exercises into their strength and conditioning program. Implementing short sprints into your program combined with a strength-training program that emphasizes leg strength will go a long way in developing a young hockey player.