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COACHES CORNER—INDIVIDUAL SKILLS

Today I want to go into the individual skills I think are important for EVERYONE to become a better hockey player. **Learning, honing, and perfecting these skills until they are part of your muscle memory is what you should aim for.** Every notice how even if you've practiced a move a few times before playing a game, it doesn't seem to find its way into your game? That's because you haven't worked on it long enough for it to become part of your muscle memory. Ever notice how some players have a great flick every time? How do they do it? It's not that they think about the mechanics of their great flick each time, it's because it's now part of the skills in their muscle memory repertoire. They have practiced it over and over and over until it becomes part of their game.

Okay, some people get some moves quickly. Each one of us has some skill that works for us--the big guy that swings a hammer all day may have a great flick, a gal that has been a swimmer for many years may be able to leave everyone in the dust with her breakaway, an analytical newbie might be able to get the positioning down easily and quickly. That's a great start, but you need lots of skills to become a great hockey player. I hope you are all striving to become great hockey players. It feels fantastic when it all comes together!!

So, where to start?

1---You REALLY must work on your flick, your pass, your **SHOT**. Ever notice that when your shot doesn't make it over that defenders stick, it's SOOOOO much harder to score. Without a flick, you and your team get bogged down, you have to fight hand to hand with that big hairy guy and you use way more energy than you had planned for that drop. Imagine that with a great shot, you can confidently pass over that guy's arm to your teammate coming down just on the other side of his arm and she makes a great flick into the goal or to another teammate on the other side of the pool. With a shot that you can **control**, that has height and distance, that you can flick in almost all directions **consistently**, you not only open up the game, you'll use less energy. I always advocate AGAINST hand to hand combat--it uses too much energy and the game slows down.

Okay, so how can I get a better flick? I'll use these same words over and over again---practice, practice, practice. Grab someone in your club (or at a tournament) that has a good flick. Ask them the method or tricks they use. Ask them to watch your flick and make suggestions. Ask more than one person. Here's another thing to try--try a different stick or 2 or 3! You might be able to make that puck fly with a different stick. Is it wood or plastic? I have both in my bag because each will work better on different bottoms. Do some research, ask lots of questions, and practice. Each time you get into the pool, always warm up

your wrist and then work the shots.

Once you have a basic shot, then give yourself some challenges. As part of my warmup, I like to shoot one puck over a second puck, then pick up the second one and shoot it over the first--leapfrog. Do this all the way down the pool; notice how many you get directly over the other puck, how many over in a row, if you have any listing to one side or another, or if you get better or worse with time. Use this information to make adjustments. You should also get your shot off the ground in any direction with respect to your body position--this'll be harder, but a useful skill.

I'll expect anyone trying out for the National Elite Team to have a quick shot off your curl, a good **shot to the right 45 back** as you're swimming forward and at least **a good slider to the left 45 back** as you swim forward (this assumes you're right handed; adjust for lefties).

2--Many of us have a **CURL**, but it's what you do with it that's important. It's a great defensive tool to keep the puck safe. Then what? Do you just shove it back hoping that someone on your team will get it? Here's what you should focus on. Think of the curl as a change of direction, usually used when moving forward isn't a good option. **Swim out of your curl** in a different direction, thus moving the play across the playing area to someplace more open. This is the option I want you to be aiming for as you start your curl. It's best to have the puck on the front of the stick as you curl, because then you will be able to easily pass it to a teammate ahead of you or one coming up from the back as soon as you decide it's a good time (= **trigger ready**). You've opened up the play and you've made choices about who to pass to. It takes more energy to kick out of your curl, but that's where the fitness comes in. This is called second effort and it's another skill that we'll be looking for in the tryouts.

3--How are your **NAVIGATION SKILLS**? What? These are the little movement skills that get you through traffic, when you don't want to curl and are not yet ready to pass. You can probably think of someone that does just that and you wonder how they can avoid getting hit or lose the puck. Say it with me- practice, practice, practice. So what to practice? Ask that person what the tricks are, try them yourself, perhaps one at a time so you can focus on the details. Once you have the basic movement, try it again with your **head up**, not looking at the puck. If you are looking at the puck, you aren't looking at your opponents who will just steal that puck while you're looking down. Here's an easy way practice these moves: get a light puck or a tuna can, grab your stick, plop yourself down in front of the TV on your belly and **practice those moves on the carpet** while enjoying your favorite show (snorkel optional). Use all sides of your stick, bring the puck down to each hip and see what you can do. Challenge yourself. Then try all those moves in water. Then before the practice (remember that it's called practice for a reason), tell yourself that you're going to DO skill A (pick one you want to perfect) 6 times (or some other number) this practice. It's okay if it

doesn't work the first time or 6--keep trying and learn from your mistakes. If your teammates yell at you for losing the puck or not passing to them, just tell them that you are learning a new move. If you want to tell them to get mad at me because I made you do it, then I'm okay with that. I offer that to my kids all the time when they have to deal with peer pressure- blame me, the mean mom! :)

Okay, here are some moves to try if you haven't already come up with some yourself (this is written for righties, lefties will need to do the opposite):

--**MANEUVER**- Keep the puck on the front of the stick and flex and twist the wrist enough to move the puck to the right and left as you move forward.

--**TIC-TAC**- Push the puck right a few inches and catch it with hook of the stick, slide it back the way it came and catch it with the front of the stick. Repeat and work towards making this movement faster and faster. This move can also be done forward and back or with the stick vertical (playing edge down) and pointing forward, so that the move is from "top" of the stick to the "bottom". It works the wrist differently and comes in handy in some situations.

--**SIDE-TO-SIDE**- With the puck at arms length to the right of your right shoulder, pull the puck under your chest with the hook of the stick. Catch it just beyond your left shoulder with the hook of the stick (palm up). Pull the puck across your chest from there and catch it again beyond your right shoulder in the hook of your stick (palm down). Repeat.

--**FRONT-TO-BACK**- This is the same move as side to side, but from in front of your face to beyond your pelvis and back up. Repeat.

--**the V**- Push the puck forward at an angle, then pull it back towards your chest with the hook, then push it out to the other forward angle, and pull it back again. Repeat often and work on increasing speed.

--**FIGURE 8** - With the puck continuously on the front of the stick, draw a sideways figure 8 under your chest from shoulder to shoulder. There is a lot of wrist adjustment with this one and you might find it more comfortable to do at least some of this pushing with the "top" of your stick (playing edge down).

--**FIGURE 6**- Pull the puck across the space in front of your face with the hook of the stick (from left to right) and bring it down to your right hip, then pull it back up again along the same line, still in the hook of your stick until you get to in front of your left shoulder, turn your stick around the puck so you can start again. Don't lose contact of the puck throughout this drill. Repeat often.

For those trying out for the Worlds USA Team, we will not test these skills separately, but will see how you use at least some of these skills effectively in your play. Rather than being mediocre at all of these, pick a few that work for you and perfect them.

There is lots you can do with these drills. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or open it to discussion within this elist.

In the next Coach's Corner, we'll go into more advanced skills and then into team strategy. No one is good enough to say that they have nothing to work on at this

point. Everyone can improve and/or hone these basics. Remember what it'll take---**practice, practice, practice.**

Note: revisit all the words in red often!!