

"IMPROVEMENTS IN SKATING ADVANCE CAREERS"
– **Ken Campbell THE HOCKEY NEWS (AUGUST 2005)**

Shortly after arriving at his first prospect camp with the New York Islanders in 1993, Bryan McCabe came to a stunning realization. **"If you can't skate, you can't play,"** McCabe said. **"Especially for a defenseman. Maybe it's all right if you're a skilled guy who plays forward and you can do things on the power play, but for a defenseman, you're dead if you can't skate."**

McCabe was only 18 at the time, but he was absolutely right and it probably saved his career. Players can be tough enough, skilled enough and ooze all sorts of character, but those who can't keep up with the other nine skaters on the ice often find themselves putting together pretty darn good careers in the minors.

It was then that McCabe, who had dropped to the second round of the draft largely because of his skating deficiencies, set about to improve his foot speed and quickness. Twelve years later, McCabe will never win the fastest skater competition at the all-star game, but he may one day play in an all-star game **because of the commitment he made to make himself a better skater.**

McCabe, who was named a second-team all-star in 2003-04, is one of a number of junior players who came out of junior hockey with a reputation for bad wheels and have worked at their skating so hard that it's no longer an issue at the NHL level. The patron saint for these players is none other than Luc Robitaille, who was seen as a very talented plodder when he left the Hull Olympics in 1986 and forged what will undoubtedly be a Hall of Fame career.

Zdeno Chara, one of the most dominating forces in the game today, had difficulty getting around the ice when he played for the Prince George Cougars. Fredrik Modin, who turned in career year en route to a Stanley Cup last season, was one of the few European skaters who came into the league with less-than-stellar skating abilities. Doug Weight had his troubles in the skating department, as did players such as Andrew Brunette, Michael Ryder, Pavel Kubina and even Adam Oates, who developed into one of the most prolific set-up men in the history of the game.

For his part, McCabe took power skating sessions with other Islander prospects when he first broke in and after one minor adjustment to his equipment, he noticed a huge difference. **"I used to tape my ankles like a calf and I was told to stop doing that and to leave the top eyehole of my skates open,"** McCabe said. **"The first time I went out like that I felt like I couldn't even skate, but once you get used to it, it really helps. It gives you all kinds of flexibility and you can use your leg strength and your butt a lot more to give you the power."**

And while speed is a great thing to have, today's NHL has negated much of that characteristic and made the flashy speedsters much less effective than they have been in the past. In the modern-era NHL, **quickness is a much more coveted trait**-the ability to get from the faceoff circle to the corner and from the hashmarks to the net is paramount on both offense and defense. **That makes the first three or four strides so important and players get that from working on their trunk and leg strength.** An added bonus is that it makes players much more difficult to separate from the puck. Just take one look at Sidney Crosby and you'll see the importance of a sturdy trunk.

Toronto Maple Leafs' strength and conditioning coach Matt Nichols said it still surprises and perplexes him that hockey players don't work more on the fundamental aspects of being faster skaters. **"If you have an Olympic track athlete, he or she is constantly going over fundamental techniques every single day in practice,"** Nichols said. **"I've worked at two NFL training camps and these are guys who have been 10 years in the NFL and they're still every single day working on fundamentals like which foot do you step with first? Receivers are running pass routes, exact cuts. In hockey, they just don't seem to do that."**

Nichols agrees that, along with fundamentals, core strength is key to improving skating. **"You can work on improving speed, but to train like a sprinter is really irrelevant**

because you almost never reach top speed in hockey," Nichols said. "So when I test guys, I test them from the goal line to the blue line. That's my bread and butter test because that's where it's won and lost. If I can take my first three steps faster than you can take your first three steps, even if you're faster than me, in a team sport like football, hockey or basketball, if I can get my first two or three steps faster than you can, I'm probably going to win that short race."

For players such as McCabe, the improvements have been immense and the results speak for themselves, but like most things in life, self-improvement in skating is a constant challenge. "It's something I work on every day," McCabe said. "It's a huge part of my training and it will be until the end of my career."