

**"SKATING COACHES HAVE DIFFERENT IDEAS, BUT FIND COMMON GROUND." – By  
Matt Carlson THE HOCKEY NEWS (AUGUST 2005)**

Once considered an oddity or even an embarrassment, skating instruction has become commonplace at all levels of hockey from novice to the NHL.

But there's no common approach to helping hockey players improve their footwork. The theories, ideas, and angles on how to make players skate better are as varied as the number of instructors.

Laura Stamn, initially a figure skating instructor, gained notoriety for helping rugged New York Islanders forward Bob Nystrom improve his less-than-graceful skating starting in 1973. Since then, players seeking to gain an edge-and improve command of their edges-have turned to skating specialists from around the world.

Today, many of these teachers eschew the name "power skating instructor" in favor of "skating coach" since they address all aspects of hockey bladework. Increasingly, they examine the players as an entire biomechanical package from head-to-toe. They also concur that hockey players and coaches at all levels should spend more time addressing and analyzing skating since it's hockey's foundational "sport within a sport."

**"Skating must be incorporated into every practice, not just for punishment or conditioning,"** said Marianne Watkins, a Pittsburgh-based skating coach who has worked with junior teams, NHL club development camps and hockey schools. **"The biggest improvement you can make to your game is through skating.** There's no excuse for us as coaches to say we don't know how to teach skating or we don't have enough time."

Instruction should start early, even if it doesn't make sense to be too technical with 8 year olds. Skating instruction should never be presented as punishment or in a way that steals from the fun of playing hockey itself. As players get older and aspire to reach higher competition levels, instructors can hone in on more difficult concepts.

"It takes a lot more energy to change a bad habit than to learn it right in the first place," said Wendy Marco, a skating coach based in Loudoun County, Virginia who has worked with the AHL Portland Pirates. "Even if players reach the NHL, they might be making mistakes. But there's still a mindset with some NHL people that if a player couldn't skate, they wouldn't be there in the first place."

Regardless of when players start, the acceptance of skating instruction at all levels is paying off, even if elite-level skaters still have imperfections, Stamn believes.

"The quality of skating has gotten a lot better," said Stamn, who has worked with several NHL teams and now operates skating programs across North America. "It's partly due to good technique training. It's partly due to overall off-ice training, including plyometrics, balance and flexibility."

**Skating instructors generally agree that even if some players are called "natural skaters," skating is not a natural activity for human physiology. Hockey's demands make it even more extreme.**

**"Hockey is a game of such complexity, and skating by itself is such an unnatural, dynamic motion that it takes a lifetime to master,"** said Steve Serdachny, an Edmonton-based coach who has worked with the Oilers, other NHL players and European teams. "Then there's learning to skate and shoot, handle the puck, take checks and drive wide. The dynamics of hockey are a science and a lot of times they're not addressed right," he added. "Hockey is not a straight-line game. It's a game of explosive speed and acceleration. I don't think any player is too good for skating instruction; it's not an insult."

*For most skaters who seek skating instruction, improved "first step" or short range explosive quickness is at the top of their wish lists. In second place is better ability to transition or change directions.*

*Some instructors focus on traditional skating techniques, such as push-offs angles, use of edges, footspeed and building leg strength. They might blend visual analysis and video with on-ice resistance training. Others look to overall body balance, core strength and posture.*

*While skating coaches say proper support is critical, they warn skates shouldn't be overly stiff. That super-reinforced model for an NHLer may be too restrictive and hurt the skating of a younger player.*