

“TRAINING” FOR MITES & SQUIRTS

Skating improvement at a young age is all about getting comfortable with a deeper knee bend.

By John Russo, Let's Play Hockey Columnist

Jumping drills and games help young players learn a deeper knee bend for skating.



A couple of years ago, Jack Blatherwick wrote a column entitled “Start fun strength training with first-year Mites.”

I have been working with my Mite/Squirt grandkids (boys and girls) for the last few years. Jack’s article spurred me to take a very close look at this area.

As Jack stressed, skating improvement at this age is all about getting comfortable with a deeper knee bend – to be a good skater. When I was running Russo Hockey Training Programs 15 years ago, most of our activities were designed to deepen the knee bend and get quicker, more agile and faster – for

post-pubescent youngsters. We did everything “on the curve” (few straight ahead) except for the first few start strides. Of course with post-pubescent youngsters, we could build muscles (in the hamstrings and quadriceps) and that would allow a deeper knee bend.

For pre-pubescent (immature) youngsters, it’s still worthwhile to do a lot of deep knee work to get them *comfortable* with the bend and “in the habit.” Many kids don’t deep bend their knees because it *isn’t comfortable* for them. This is especially true for those that are tall and have long legs. It takes the tall kids a lot longer and much more work to be good skaters. Once they get it, though, they truly do have a great advantage. Look at Nick Bjustad (Florida Panthers). At 6-6, he has very long legs, but has worked hard over many years to get that great deep stride that just eats up the gaps between him and opposing players. I’ve always said (since he was in high school) that he “closes” on opponents so fast, they have a hard time adjusting.

One of the best devices for youngsters’ immature and mature is the old “Heiden Stride Board.” Jack has showed one in his previous columns, and I’ve discussed them before. I first built one of these back over 25 years ago for use on the Russo Hockey Training Programs. I had seen one when I was in Madison, Wis., in the 1970s at Eric’s grandfather’s home. He was my college coach at the University of Wisconsin in the 1960s. I think Heiden’s grandfather, Art Thomson, actually invented the slide board for Eric. He was

Heiden's trainer for his competitive days. The board is basically a 4x8 piece of plywood with a smooth surface (can be purchased as "plyform") used for concrete forms or plastic bath wall sheets available at lumber yards. Sliding back and forth on a polished surface (with smooth wool socks on) provides the skating motion and knee bend very much like skating.

Other off-ice activities for youngsters include the following:

- Jumping over things or from one thing to another in a pattern, but it must be natural, i.e., not launching from a height. Anything that makes youngsters have to bend their knees deeper to jump is good. Just use imagination to come up with a "course" – using boxes, for example.
- Jumping contests – trying to jump as high or as far as possible and "beat the previous record." I "invented" a modified hopscotch course to be done with one foot, two feet, backwards, for speed, for height, etc.
- Table tennis – a great "reactions" game that improves quickness.
- Knee bends (without weights) to the "sitting on a chair" position only – to get used to deeper knee bends. Also, wall sit contests. Kids can actually have fun with those.
- Throwing a ball off a wall and retrieving it, or hitting a tennis ball off a wall with a racquetball racquet.
- Running down a fairly gentle (10-15 degrees max) slope to help youngsters have their legs experience what going faster feels like.
- Running up a slope to cause a deeper knee bend.
- Doing multiple fast starts that only extend out 4-5 strides to practice maximum takeoff acceleration.
- Doing any number of stickhandling (and shooting) games. Through cones, dekes, "playing catch," learning to flip the puck – anything to improve the hands. Control and curling the stick are critical to nearly all stick skills.

On-ice "training" for immature youngsters is something that can only take up a third or half of the on-ice time block for most young players. Fun shinny or other games or "puck drills" need to take up the rest. Some of the on-ice activities that I use include:

- Racing 2-3 at a time around one of the circles (two times around), forward, then backward. This is pure speed and competition. I generally would start every season or team practice with this.
- Racing, three at a time, around the center circle with sticks turned around; full legal contact. It's a bump-and-grind race. Creates competition, fun and balance. The race is from the blue line, around the

center circle, ending up on the same blue line on the other side (1-3/4 revolutions of the circle). I always end every team practice with this drill. Players love it and go off laughing and happy.

- Jumping over the ice separation barriers; one, two or three wide (depending upon size/skills of players). This creates knee bend and a good challenge to help players feel good about their skating stability and balance.
- Doing “superman” dive contests to see how far players can glide when they dive. This makes them go fast for a short sprint to get maximum “glide.”
- Half to three-fourths length ice sprints to get a good look at skating form and to build good habits. Not only stride (which is important), but also starting properly and with intensity as well as proper arm movement. The start should be “fast feet,” then lengthen out after a few strides. The knees need to be bent as far as possible and the posture not too bent over. Players vary on how much they bend at the waist, but generally a (more) upright posture is better. However, among the great players, Wayne Gretzky (the Great One) bent over quite a bit, while Bobby Orr and Gordie Howe were much more erect.

It is important that the skating stride and posture be watched carefully. Bad habits can kill speed. It is also important to use one hand on the stick when trying to maximize speed. It allows full arm motion. When close to the puck or competing for the puck, it becomes two hands. Some coaches teach “two hands on the stick” at all times, but I don’t believe that is best. Players need to know when to have two hands and when one hand. Even going up the ice with the puck, the best “posture” is one hand, pushing the puck on the forehand or backhand. These two puck carrying options need to be practiced as part of the skating training activity.

There are many aspects to skating – with the puck, without the puck, straight away, on the curve, short, long, backwards, cross-overs, multi mohawks, stops and goes, etc.

Skating training is really a pretty complicated thing – with many levels. When I train young 6-10 year olds, I try to work at (almost) all of the above aspects. It is good to introduce the difficult skills pretty early on, but on a limited basis – then increase them over months or years. I have an advantage at this time as I have more than one grandchild (that I am working with) at several different skill levels

- Skating in the offensive zone with the puck, on the curve and shooting. It is good to put cones at locations from the top of circle in, then have players come around the cones at full intensity and shoot on the move. For the beginners, it is a pretty simple drill, on the forehand. Then as skating and stick skills increase, the drill can be more complex, i.e., on the backhand, picking up the puck with feet to start, etc.

- Skating (weaving) through 5-6 cones (no puck) spread just far enough apart to be a challenge to make it at full speed. The cones will then be closer together as skill improves.
- Skating (weaving) through 5-6 cones with a puck. The cones set far enough apart to allow crossovers between. Then a good shot at the end.
- Using any dot (and starting at the boards), practice quick cuts with no cross-over at the end (no puck). Then with a cross-over at the end. Always fast starts. Then the same with a puck. Start the drill not straight at the boards from the dot, but wider by 10-15 feet.
- Using any dot (and starting at the boards), practice going out forward and coming back backwards (no puck) – with and without crossovers. Fast starts, again not straight out from the dots.
- Using any dot, do the same going out backwards and coming back forward.
- Set up 3-4 cones in a line from halfway between the blue and red lines to the top of circle. Have players stickhandle at each cone then go to the net and shoot (hard). The “stickhandle” can be a large variety of moves (starting with the single fake for the 6-7 year olds):
 - Single deke each way (deke, back and escape)
 - Double deke each way (deke, one way, deke other way; go back to original side; escape)
 - 360 degrees around the cone – each way
 - Drag fake

Two critical comments about this (and other) drills. First, the shot at the end must be hard, and for the more advanced, aimed at a designated part of the net.

Second, the dekes can be taught at a very young age. It is just a matter of speed and getting the proper form. It does take *skating skills*, however, to be able to do dekes of any substantial difficulty.

As I have said many times, first comes foot skills so the player can concentrate on hands, then hand skills so the player can concentrate on the game (strategy, positions, etc.). So, work on the feet first and often, feeding in enough stick/puck work to keep the young player interested and excited.

When “training” young players like the ones I work with, it is a matter of first finding (or building) that



Weaving around sticks/pucks is just one drill that can be used to improve skating.

love of hockey so they will work at it. They also have to be interested in being good to very good. Once the “training” starts and they have success, it will be easier for them to want to do more. The key is that it also has to have some fun in it. When I am with my grandkids, I want them (and me) to laugh and have a good time. It is easy for me because it is my best time of the day – being with them. Plus, I love being on the ice anyway.

These concepts can be used with Mite and Squirt teams as well. There may need to be some game skills (position, etc.) in practices as well, of course. But I encourage coaches to try to stick to the basics (on ice), especially the first half of the season.

In the winter, the outdoor ice is available for small groups to work on skills. It generally takes an interested parent or coach to get the “training” going. Outside, a big dose of shinny should be included (actually should be $\frac{3}{4}$ + of the ice time) – without adult involvement.

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