

Hockey Balance Training

By Peter Twist, MPE BPE CSCS

In hockey, players are typically supported by one leg 80% of the time, and have to successfully navigate endless changes in play. As an interactive, interdependent sport, players adjust their positioning and tactical attempt based on both their opponents' and teammates' activity. Changing directions, mechanics, skill focus and positioning is a continual sequence of events. Moreover, players are readily knocked off balance by opponents' efforts and incidental game contact. Dynamic balance is the common bond to performance, and is an important foundation that other training builds from.

Hockey players' most important feats of strength and balance will be required in unstable, unpredictable environments such as withstanding a check while driving to the net, or cycling in the corner and protecting the puck under tight check.

Balance is highly trainable. Your body contains receptors, sensors and mini brains to compute each body segment's position in space. Each joint and muscle reads its position in space relative to the rest of the body and works cooperatively with other muscles in the kinetic chain to produce sport movements and skill execution. Balance and proprioception have much to do with sensory capabilities and neuromuscular control. As such, you have to be out of balance to train and improve balance. Knowing you are only as strong as your weakest link, incorporating balance into strength training and movement drills helps transfer training to the dynamic ice environment.

Balance exercises have value during many parts of the player's workout schedule. As a dynamic warm up, it stimulates the nervous system to prepare the mind and body to control complex multi-joint movements, fire muscles for powerful lifts and explosive quickness. During the 'meat' of the workout, I also integrate balance into many parts of the program. Strength training is performed in unstable conditions to link the entire body together and strengthen the body athletically.

I also prescribe balance into supersets. I may have a physically mature player perform a set of power squats (multi-joint strength), then immediately complete a set of unloaded jump squats (explosiveness under partial fatigue + strength endurance) and last (with zero rest) a set of vertical jumps on a Bosu Balance Trainer (an unstable but safe surface). On the third set in the exercise sequence, the goal is a stable landing under fatigue thereby building up the negative phase (stopping phase) of movement in an imbalanced state, which also helps prevent on-ice injury. Players are cued to "stick" their landing in a deep position before powering off another vertical rep. Bosu Balance Trainers, Extreme Balance Boards, medicine balls, partner exercises, combination exercises, and high speed agility-drills all add balance to the training equation. These help build the body as an integrated unit and linked system, resulting in greater movement skills and speed center power.

It is important to note that balance training helps more than just elite athletes in their prime. Of course adult recreational players and youth need to train for balance – as they tend to benefit even more. For adults, since more of their lifestyle is sedentary activities are often repetitive

linear pursuits like cycling and jogging. Their body's readiness for shifts in balance is diminished thus setting them up for injury. Since balance skills are lost more from disuse than aging, training will also help adults retain skills that are critical in real-life situations. Rapidly shifting one's body to regain balance after slipping on ice is perfect example, whether in shoes in the arena parking lot or inside the rink spinning off a defender.

Many of these people reflect back to their youth and remember playing several sports and spending their spare time in spontaneous play and pick up games. Today, many youngsters specialize in just one or two sports and spend their remaining time on sedentary activities - television, video games and computers. Compounding this trend are the fast food chains and other unhealthy quick fix choices heavily marketed to youth. The result is a generation of kids and less physically active. The key to unlocking their interest in activity is to give them the confidence to participate. This will lead a child to more positive pursuits and a healthy future. Balance should be part of the foundation for all youth. The ability to control the body and regain control delivers the enhanced performance and confidence needed to ensure the children's continued enjoyment and participation in hockey and other activities.

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