TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE SKILLS

It's almost the end of the hockey season - now it's preparation time for the next one. Summer is Hockey School time; the time of year to work on your skills so you will be at your best for the start of next season.

Whether you’re at the mite or pro level, coaches look for skilled players. The better your skills the more likely it is that coaches will play you!

In hockey there are tangible skills and intangible skills. Coaches look for both, so you should try to develop your skills in both areas.

Tangible Skills.

The two most fundamental tangible skills in hockey are skating and puck handling. Almost every other skill can be learned, practiced and improved upon over time. Now as in the past, skating ability (and ultimately, speed) is first in the line of importance. Coaches want players who can start and stop explosively, who can transition quickly from forward to backward and from backward to forward, who can accelerate around circles and corners (crossovers), skate backward, perform tight turns and pivots, move laterally, etc.

* Jack Blatherwick, one of the most knowledgeable people in the field of skating biomechanics and off ice training, says, “Even with all the training devices available in hockey today, skating technique is still the single most important element”.

Following are some of the skills that coaches look for:

1) Skating:
* Forward and backward skating – Mites and squirts – are their skating strides fundamentally correct? PeeWees and older – can they skate powerfully, efficiently, and FAST? Can they skate correctly and fast with the puck as well as without the puck?
* Do players know how to use (and have good control of) the blade edges?
* Do players have good balance?
* Can players use the C-cut push properly?
* Can players accelerate using forward and backward crossovers? (Younger players may not be able to accelerate, but at least they should be able to do forward and backward crossovers. Backward crossovers often set kids apart.
* Can players turn from backward to forward quickly and smoothly?
* Quick Starts: Mites and Squirts probably can’t start on their toes yet. PeeWees and older – can they start explosively and accelerate from a complete stop?
* Can players do hockey stops? Mites and squirts often have trouble stopping to one side. PeeWee’s and older - Can they stop quickly to both sides and start explosively – without and with the puck?
* Are players agile? – Do they have good lateral mobility, can they do tight turns, perform evasive moves, fake, transition quickly?
2) Puck handling:

* Do players know when to use one hand on the stick (with the puck when accelerating in open ice) and when to use two hands (with the puck in tight situations, etc)?
* Mites and Squirts - Puck handling is secondary at this point; it’s easier to work on this during the season and it makes for fun practices.
* Are players creative with their puck handling skills, and do they maintain good control of the puck.
* Do players keep the blade of their stick on the ice at all times?
* Puck Tricks. Some players can perform lots of tricks with the puck – standing still. But can they do this while skating with the puck? Remember – even if you can do all kinds of tricks with the puck, if you can’t get from point A to point B FAST (with the puck), all those tricks don’t really matter!
* The main concern is skating ability.

Intangible Skills.
These are the skills that have nothing to do with skating, puck handling, shooting and scoring. Some intangible skills can be taught – others come from within the gut and are fueled by a passion for the game. These intangibles include attitude, dedication, determination, coach-ability, work ethic, creativity, anticipation, game sense, experimental, curious, aggressive, game sense, respectful (for self, teammates, opponents and officials), team player, toughness, tenacity, competitiveness, discipline.

Coaches look for players who display:
- Urgency: Do players jump for the puck or do they wait for the puck to come to them? Get there fast and compete as if your life depends on it.
- Anticipation: Sometimes called Think Ahead, or Read and React. Can players anticipate what will happen after a specific move or play and act accordingly? This was one of Gretzky’s greatest gifts!
- Hockey Smarts: Do players understand different situations, such as defensive zone coverage, forechecking, and back-checking? Do they play the body? Do they understand risk? Do they know when to pass puck rather than get crushed only to lose the puck anyway?
- Game Sense: Some players are not good practice players but their skills start to show in game situations. Then again, some players have great skills but have no idea how to apply them in game situations. They can learn this if properly taught. Coaches should take a chance with kids like this.
- Team Players: Do players work as a unit or do they act selfishly? Do they pass when that is the best option or do they insist on taking a bad shot. Do they retaliate out of pride and ego to take foolish penalties that put the team in a hole?
- Respectful: Do players respect teammates and opponents? Do they play 100% hard and 100% fair or will they go over the brink to win?
- Catalyst: Do players make things happen? Those who jump up to the play make things happen – those who sit back and wait do just that. Motto: Score goals, prevent goals.
- Work ethic: Are players willing to pay any price to improve:
  * Skills (skating speed, agility, explosiveness, stickhandling, passing, shooting)?
  * Athleticism (quickness, power, strength, coordination, balance, endurance)?
  * Coaches would rather choose players with good work habits and less skill than players with more talent who won’t work to capacity. Not even the greatest players in the NHL succeed without hard work!

What are some things players can do to improve before tryouts?
Enroll in one or more qualified and established power skating programs. Even after one power skating clinic players often demonstrate significant improvement – and the increased confidence – that comes with greater speed.
Improve conditioning: Aerobic and anaerobic conditioning. Bicycling, in-line skating, plyometrics, strength and power training (weight training if you’re over 16), sprinting. Slideboards and skating machines can also help (if taught and practiced properly).
Practice stickhandling and shooting in your driveway/backyard.
Watch hockey (TV, live, videos) as often as possible. Study what the greats do, both in terms of skating and all other aspects of the game.
Learn the priorities of the coach of the team for which you’re trying out. Is the coach offensive or defensive-minded? Does the coach value finesse or toughness? Although you don’t always have a choice, seek a team whose coach’s priorities are similar to yours; that coach will value your assets. Never give up.

Play with passion.
Jack Blatherwick helped Herb Brooks train the 1980 U.S. Olympic Team and then joined Herb’s staff on the New York Rangers. Jack has since worked with several NHL teams in helping train its athletes. Jack is currently employed by the Washington Capitals as team physiologist. He also works with many high level hockey players during the summers to develop their strength and speed for hockey.

To learn how to become a fast, powerful, agile, and effective hockey player, refer to Laura Stamm’s Power Skating, fourth edition. You can also look for an upcoming Laura Stamm Power Skating Clinic in your area.

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Skate Great Hockey!

Laura Stamm
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