

The Importance of Conditioning for Goalies



By: Brad Handley

The goaltender is the most specialized and most difficult position in hockey and as such it requires the biggest commitment to fitness. The physical demands of playing goal require a very specialized conditioning program. A lot of young goalies tell me that they need to get quicker but they have no idea how quickness is developed. They believe that if they do nothing but quickness exercises, they'll get as quick as humanly possible. But quickness is more than the ability to move fast. You need to be in a balanced position when you move so stability is very much involved. For every bit of speed you develop you need to be able to slow down, so you also have to train deceleration. And most importantly, speed is built through power, and power is built through strength. So although a goalie doesn't need to train for strength and power as much as a player does, it's still very important.

Think about a very fast racecar. You can have the best engine in the world, but if the brakes, tires and steering are bad, you won't win many races. Or think about a tall building. The walls and roof can be extremely strong, but if the foundation is weak, the building will fall down. Are you getting the picture? Doing nothing but quickness exercises will make you faster up to a point. But to reach your ultimate quickness you need to develop your overall athleticism, and that in turn will increase your speed more than quickness exercises alone.

In order to accomplish this, you need to build a foundation of athleticism, and that starts with strength. Goalies typically are afraid of weights because they think that they'll get bulky and slow or that it will decrease their flexibility. But it's all in how you use them. There are a lot of different types of weights and even typical dumbbells can be as small as one pound. There are also medicine balls, kettle bells, weighted vests and even resistance bands which aren't weights but do provide a resistance for the body to work against. The key is to use exercises that are sport specific and ones that mimic the way you will be moving on the ice. So there are many different ways to work your body at an intense level without doing typical bench press or arm curl type exercises with big heavy dumbbells.

Lifting weights can definitely make your muscles slower but only if you make slow movements when you lift. Lifting weights will make you stronger, which means you'll be able to move your own body weight easier. Roberto Luongo completed the most chin ups at the Florida Panthers fitness testing a few years back, displaying his strength and ability to move his own body weight. And as a goalie, if you lift weights with faster, more explosive movements, you will teach your muscles to contract as fast as they can, increasing your speed and power on the ice.

Strength and power are very significant and it is important to understand that they make up the foundation of speed. For example, pick up a pencil. Try and lift it up in the air as fast as you possibly can. You moved pretty quick, didn't you? Now pick up

something that weighs 30-40 pounds and try to lift that over your head as fast as you can. I bet you moved much slower that time. Did you suddenly become slow? Did your body's ability to move quickly suddenly disappear? No, of course not, but you might not have the *strength* to move that quickly against a resistance. So now you understand that the basis of quickness is strength and the stronger you are, the quicker you will be able to move. But, you might be thinking that you don't have any resistance in a hockey game, that there are no weights on the ice. But the key is that goaltenders own body is his resistance. Whatever you weigh, that is the resistance you are working against in a game, and the stronger you are, the faster you will be able to move your own body.

So what I recommend to all goalies is to set up a conditioning program that builds a foundation of strength and muscular endurance first, then builds upon that with more emphasis on power and explosiveness, and finally focuses in on speed and quickness. Core strength, flexibility and aerobic endurance should be worked on continually throughout the program. Where a lot of athletes make mistakes in the gym is to do basic weight training exercises. All your exercises must be specific to the movements that you make on the ice. Focus on the legs first and foremost. When training the upper body, work in an upright stance with power cords or resistance tubing, not lying or sitting on benches. If there is no other way to complete an exercise except for lying down, do it on stability ball instead of a bench. Even strength exercises can be done with speed, as long as it is still done with control.

Once a solid foundation of strength and power is built, then you can focus on pure speed and quickness, and you'll now see even better results. The better trained you are as an athlete, the better your on ice performance will be as a goaltender.

Brad has been involved in strength and conditioning for ALL hockey players for the past 12 years. Brad graduated from the University of Alberta in 1997 with a degree in Kinesiology. Brad is currently the Head Trainer/Strength and Conditioning Coach for the Brampton Battalion of the OHL. Over his 12 years Brad has worked with over 40 players currently playing pro hockey, over 100 Major Junior and Div 1 college players and consulted and developed team conditioning programs for 10 different junior hockey teams. Brad is a welcome addition to the ATC staff and we look forward to more educating and informative articles from him in the near future!