

DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

By JORDAN HICKEY

The Truths And Half- Truths Surrounding Some Of Hockey's Old Wives Tales

Hockey's history is a colorful mish-mash of myths, lore and legends. There are aspects of the sport, seldom questioned, that have stood the test of time and been woven into the gospel of the game. But as widely held as some of them might be, and as nice as they might sound in theory, there are more than a few misconceptions that have been mistakenly assumed to be fact.

USA Hockey Magazine spoke to some of the foremost hockey minds in an attempt to dispel a few of them:

CHOCOLATE MILK DOES A BODY GOOD

Everyone knows that everything goes better with chocolate. Raisins. Ice cream. Crickets. What people might not know, however, is that chocolate milk is great for recovery after strenuous physical activities, such as practices or games.

According to nutrition expert Dave Ellis, the reason it's so effective is "it's got enough protein. And if you've been burning a lot of carbohydrate energy in the form of glycogen ... it's going to have more carbs because of the chocolate flavoring. [Chocolate milk gives your body] exactly what a beat-up muscle is looking for."

REFS SWALLOW THE WHISTLE IN CLOSE GAMES

It would take a lot of water to actually get a whistle down your gullet, but fortunately for officials everywhere, this isn't one to be taken literally. The basic tenet of this myth is that refs in a tight game tend to get emotionally invested and "swallow the whistle" so as not to influence the outcome of the game.

BJ Ringrose, USA Hockey's coordinator of the Officiating Education Program, says of the myth:

"Certainly no one wants a game decided by a penalty call. However, players are still



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expected to play within the rules at all points of the game. So, to hesitate as an official and not make that call, even within the last 30 seconds of the game, is to do a disservice to the game itself in regards to safety and fairness as well. We always encourage our officials to call it from start to finish in the same way within the rules.”

GAMES ARE BETTER FOR DEVELOPING SKILLS

Back in 2002, USA Hockey conducted the most extensive puck-possession study ever done. During the Salt Lake City Olympics, USA Hockey coaches and volunteers charted every minute of every game of the men's hockey tournament.

They followed it up by charting Peewee, Bantam and Midget games during the 2002 USA Hockey National Championships.

Their findings proved that even the best players in the world averaged 18 minutes of ice time and had the puck on their stick for an average of 67 seconds over the course of a 60-minute game. At the youth level, it was even less.

The report went on to say that it can be safely understood “that games are not the environment to develop skills in our youth players. In practice, players will get a lot more ice time, will carry a puck a lot longer than one minute, can give and receive a lot more passes, and will take a lot more shots.”



AN ISSUE OF BLACK OR WHITE

Alongside the divisive issues of our time — the likes of Republicans v. Democrats, paper v. plastic and Coke v. Pepsi — is one that is truly a black and white issue: The best color of tape to use on a stick.

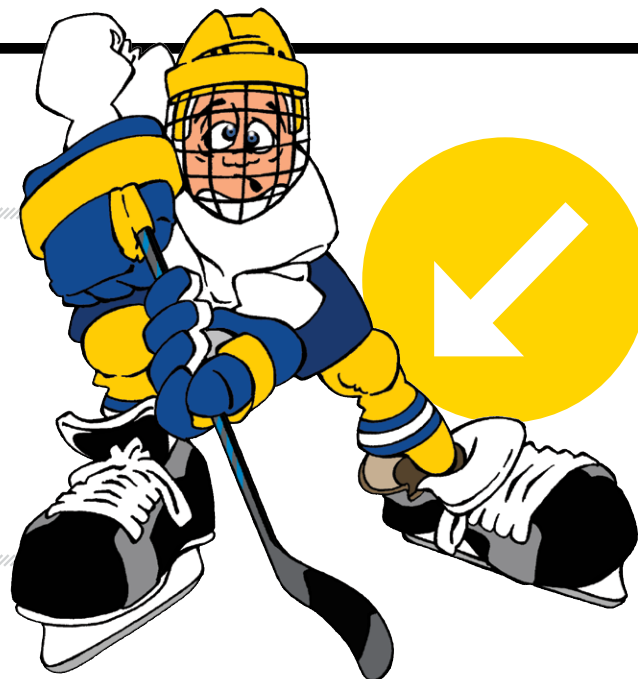
“The traditional view was that black tape was preferred because goalies couldn't see pucks as easily on the sticks,” says Michael Benoit of Total Hockey.

“My sense is that's a dated theory ... Maybe at the very highest level, a goalie can focus on the position of a puck on a stick blade, but the reality is that that's a long way down. You have to be very sophisticated to get to that level of skill.”

Without the benefit of an optometrist's expertise, it's hard to say how the human eye reacts to one color or another. It's more likely that it comes down to a matter of personal preference.

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HELMETS PREVENT CONCUSSIONS

Arguably no issue in sports today is bigger or more discussed than the subject of concussions — or the steps that can be taken to diagnose or prevent them.

And even though there are some really awesome helmets out on the market, no helmet is going to prevent a concussion.

According to USA Hockey's Chief Medical Officer Dr. Michael Stuart, "Regardless of the helmet design or brand name, the brain moves within the skull when a player is hit in the head or anywhere else on the body. A quality hockey helmet, if worn properly, will protect the player from injuries such as lacerations and skull fractures when their head strikes the ice or is hit with a stick or puck.

"Equipment companies are working on improved designs and materials, which will hopefully enhance the protective effect.

"Concussion prevention efforts should focus on the education of players, parents, coaches and officials; enforcement of existing rules and behavioral change.

"Players need to be taught body control skills, on-ice awareness, and proper techniques for receiving and delivering legal body contact."

HOME, SWEET HOME ICE ADVANTAGE

So how much of a difference does home cooking have on a hockey team? According to *The New York Times*' "Slap Shot" blog, not as much as it used to.

"In 1968, the first season of NHL expansion, home teams won 28 of 40 playoff series,

or 70 percent. That number dipped to 60 percent over the next two dozen years.

"Oddly, 1993 was the last year that the home team's winning percentage topped .600."

Fast-forward to the late 1990s and home teams were 41-41 in 1998, 42-44 in 1999 and 43-43 in 2001.

So what changed? According to the *Times*' bloggers, it was at least in part because teams were no longer playing in those funky barns, like the old Boston Garden, with its ice size of 83 by 191, or the Montreal Forum, where the position of the benches and penalty boxes gave the home team a distinct advantage.

Still, home-ice advantage seems to count when it counts. Of the 16 occasions in which the Stanley Cup finals have gone the distance, only four times has the road team won that decisive game — Toronto in 1945, Montreal in 1971, Pittsburgh in 2009 and Boston last season.



HE'LL GROW INTO IT

Two facts of life for any hockey parent are that kids grow like weeds, and it's not cheap to outfit them season after season in hockey gear. But however tempting as it might be to buy big and let kids grow into their gear in order to stave off another visit to the pro shop, there are reasons why it's important to buy equipment, particularly skates, that fits properly.

"In a rigid frame like a skate, you really want your heel to be locked down to the bottom of the skate," says Benoit. "The more heel lift you have in your skates, the more power you use when you push off. And if your heels lift out of the skate, you basically lose power."

Benoit adds that it's important that every piece of gear is properly fitted for maximum protection.

LEFT IS RIGHT, OR VICE VERSA

As the old adage goes, the right hand doesn't always know what the left is doing. And even though odds are that whoever penned that didn't have hockey in mind, in recent years it's become all the more applicable as theories about the dominant hand are posited and developed and rebuffed.

Although there's science to back either theory that the placement of the hand on the top of the stick allows for better control and dexterity, whereas having it lower provides additional power, ultimately, it comes down to what a player is most comfortable with.

When his two young sons began play-

ing, Kevin McLaughlin, USA Hockey's senior director of Hockey Development, bought straight-bladed sticks and let his kids play and figure it out for themselves. "I am a big proponent of playing by feel," he said. "Let [the kids] play and let them figure it out for themselves."

TAPING STICK - HEEL TO TOE

Once a pattern has been established, it can be awfully difficult to imagine doing it any other way. If you learned to read from left to right, it's tough to imagine reading right to left. If you always eat pasta before a game, it's tough to imagine breaking from that and eating a fish sandwich. The truth of the matter is that we're creatures of habit, even when it comes to taping our sticks — heel to toe

or vice versa. But whether one way is better than the other?

"What I would consider the common myth is taping from heel to toe — and the logic is, I suppose, is that the ridges of the tape increase the rotation of the puck because when you pass a puck, it rolls from the heel of the blade to the tip of the blade," says Benoit.

"Presumably it increases the rotational speed of the puck. Which increases the stability of a pass, certainly. ... But practically speaking, does that one-hundredth of an edge going one way or another really make of a difference? In that, I'd argue probably not. Again, I imagine it's really just personal preference. I doubt that it makes a dime's worth of difference." ★



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