

Explosive Starts For Gaining the Advantage

Goals can be scored and hockey games can be won or lost in fractions of a second. Players who start out the fastest are often the ones who get to the puck first and get the advantage. All players must develop the ability to accelerate quickly and explosively from a complete stop and must be able to shift instantly from low to high gear.

The start on skates is comparable to a sprint runner taking off from the starting blocks. To get going quickly and explosively runners lean forward strongly and take the first few steps on the balls of their feet and you as a hockey player need to do the same thing and use the toe of your blade (the front 2-3 inches) to get a running stride.

These strides are choppy because the skates do not glide, but they are very rapid, but contrary to their appearance they are not short. These strides are accompanied by a forward lean along with extremely powerful and complete leg drive.

When should you start on your toes? Toe starts are the escape valve and anytime a player needs to get away quickly they should start on their toes. This is useful when you are trying to go from slow to fast, when racing for the puck, when trying to separate for a break away and when chasing/back checking an opponent. If you start on your full blade you will tend to glide on the initial strides and most likely not get anywhere quickly. This will make your leg speed slower and you may feel that you are stuck in the mud.

When working on toe starts, follow the same process as in all other skating maneuvers-first learn to execute them correctly; then correctly and powerfully; then correctly, powerfully, and quickly. Then do thousands of them, in all kinds of situations! When a coach blows the whistle to GO, always take the first few accelerating steps on the toes, regardless of whether you need to start from a complete stop or whether you need to accelerate from slow to fast. You may fall and mess up in the process of mastering toe starts; however, you will eventually master them, and they will become an automatic response.

Three components are necessary for achieving explosive acceleration on the ice:

- 1. Quickness-quick feet, or rapid leg turnover.** To achieve quickness, a skater runs the first few strides on the toes (fronts of the inside edges) of the skates. The skates play touch and go with the ice-they do not glide. If the entire blade length contacts the ice, the skate is forced to glide. Gliding takes time and delays the next stride.
- 2. Power.** Power is derived from the force exerted by the legs and body weight driving directly against the gripping edge. Full leg drive and total leg recovery are as imperative when starting as when striding. Nothing can propel the skater forward unless the legs drive fully in the opposite direction.
- 3. Distance-outward motion.** To achieve distance, a skater must project the body weight outward in the desired direction of travel. The distance covered in the starting strides depends largely on the forward angle of the upper body (a strong forward angle of the upper body produces greater distance). Because the skating (contact) foot must take the ice under the center of gravity (midsection), the farther forward the upper body is projected, the farther forward the foot must reach in order to step down under the center of gravity and maintain balance. In other words, while the skater runs the first few strides, the body weight is thrown outward. This is similar to what a sprinter does when taking off from the starting block.

Three basic starts are used in hockey skating: forward (front), crossover (side), and backward. As in every aspect of skating, the ingredients for explosive starts include:

- proper use of edges to provide grip into the ice,
- proper distribution of body weight,
- optimum leg drive, and
- rapid leg motion.