Six Keys to In-Season Conditioning Success

By Mike Mejia CSCS

The rising popularity of dryland training in youth hockey presents a bit of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it's great that more coaches and players are realizing the numerous benefits that a well-designed dryland program has to offer. Unfortunately though, there still seems to be a lot of confusion as to exactly what said program should entail. This holds especially true when it comes to in-season dryland efforts; as many coaches and players often struggle with how to best implement it.

The following six tips are designed to help you cut through some of the confusion and make sure that your in-season dryland approach is a successful one. It will also hopefully act as springboard to get you planning your off-season and pre-season plans.

1. Your team is actually doing some type of structured in-season dryland program.
Despite the increased awareness about the numerous benefits of in-season dryland training, you might be surprised to learn that many teams still aren't doing any!

Far too often, coaches preach about the importance of training during the off-season, only to practically abandon all fitness efforts once the season begins. Big mistake!

For older kids, it's important to try and maintain some of the strength, speed and power they worked so hard for during the off-season. Whereas for younger kids, in-season training helps establish good work habits and gets them in the right mindset for what they'll experience at the higher levels.

2. You're choosing age/ability appropriate drills for your players.
While it's not as simple as just going by chronological age, there are definitely differences between the way athletes should be training based on their stages of development.

Younger kids like mites and 8U's for instance, can definitely benefit from in-season dryland. If for no other reason than to stop all the hockey focus and get them working on improving global athleticism. Movement exploration with lots of crawling patterns, low level hopping and balancing drills and fitness "games" is the way to go with this group.

Sorry to burst your bubble, but bombarding them with tons of push-ups, sit-ups, "advanced plyometric" drills and "hockey-specific" dryland probably isn't going to turn them into the next Sydney Crosby.

What it will likely do though is turn them off to the sport and make them quit- like the over 70% of other young athletes who are done by age 13! So let's try and take it easy with the use of dryland training as a way of "toughening them up."

Similarly, older kids shouldn't be doing advanced exercises (like say squats and deadlifts) if they lack the mobility/body awareness to execute them with proper form, simply because they need to "get in the weight room." We need to do a better job of assessing an athlete's physical readiness to engage in certain types of training. Keep an eye out for a future article on this topic.

3. You're scheduling your team dryland training at a times that make sense.
Keep in mind that the term dryland program encompasses everything from warm-ups, to workouts, to stretching and everything in between. And one of the best ways to ensure both adherence and success is to make sure the timing of your programming works with your team schedule.

Let's say for instance you have a Monday, (or even Tuesday) practice scheduled on the heels of a brutal tournament weekend, but you want to include some dryland training. Any kind of heavy duty plyometrics, or

intense strength training probably isn't a great idea with bodies that are tired and sore.

That said, a good pre-practice dynamic warm-up, or maybe some stretching and foam rolling after practice can often be just what your athletes need to get their bodies feeling right again. This would also allow you to hold off on any more strenuous training for mid-week, so players have enough time to recover for the next weekend's games.

You also may want to try and do your dryland training after any on-ice skills work, providing your schedule allows for it. Training before practice isn't necessarily wrong, especially if it's your only option, but it can cause fatigue that may negatively impact on ice skills training.

4. You're carefully monitoring training volume and intensity.
The key thing to remember here is that this is an in-season program. In order to make sure that training isn't something that just further wears an athletes' body down, you want to try and get by with what's known as the minimal effective dose.

In other words, what kind of resistance, for how many repetitions is the bare minimum I need to help my athletes maintain strength, speed and power, without overtaxing their bodies. Granted this is a bit of a more advanced topic that applies more to older kids already engaged in a lifting program. I will however delve into this topic in a bit more detail in a future article for those who may be interested.

5. You're implementing strategies to promote recovery.
A training program is only as good as an athlete's ability to adapt to and recover from it. Simply piling a bunch of random exercises onto bodies that are already starting to wear down due to the rigors of the competitive season is just asking for trouble.

Make sure your in-season program includes things like stretching, foam rolling, mobility work and even an emphasis on proper breathing mechanics. Getting athletes to understand and appreciate the role each of these plays in the recovery process is every bit as important as the physical conditioning itself.

6. You're constantly educating your players about the importance of having a year-round conditioning plan.
During your in-season program is the perfect time to reinforce to your players that training is something they should be doing on a year-round basis. Here we deal mainly with what to do in-season, but talking to them about activity during the early off-season, over the summer months and the pre-season is equally important.

And here's a little newsflash for you: especially for the younger kids and especially during the early off-season...that focus should have little to nothing to do with ice hockey!

Kids should play different sports, organized or otherwise. Run, jump, climb, swim, shoot hoops etc. It'll not only allow them to stay active while getting a nice little mental break from the game, but it can also help cut down on a lot of the overuse patterns that often contribute to development of chronic injuries,

I realize I gave you a lot to chew on here, but that's because implementing an effective dryland program isn't easy. Especially when you're dealing with kids of different ages and levels of physical ability.

It's important stuff, though and requires more from us as responsible coaches than just throwing together a bunch of random exercises and calling it a "program.” Or, going the opposite route and sticking our heads in the sand, not having kids do anything and pleading ignorance.

Dryland training for youth hockey is in the process of undergoing a major overhaul. Now's the perfect time to get involved with the exchange of ideas and information that's going to best serve our players, and help take the sport as a whole to the next level.