



## An Interview with Mark Switaj: Chicago Stallions Power Skating Coach

January 28, 2017

*It's not very often that we see coach Mark Switaj off the ice. He's a power skating machine, spending four straight hours on the ice every Thursday at Saddle & Cycle. However, in early January we found him sitting at the Winter Casino with Hockey Director Mick Pyznarski, and Coaches Rick Block and Keith Tracy. We took that opportunity to learn more about the man who makes our program have such strong skaters. Needless to say, speaking with Mark was enlightening (and a little awe-inspiring).*

*Mark, one of four hockey playing brothers who grew up in Ohio, was the team captain at Boston College where he was the recipient of the Walter Brown Award, an award given annually to New England's best American-born D1 college hockey player. Sound impressive? It should. He shares that award with Hockey Hall of Famers Joe Mullen, Brian Leetch and Chris Drury.*

*Mark has been teaching coaches around the country how to bring power skating in to their program for decades. He has coached at every level of minor hockey and has instructed at programs close to home like the Mission and 200x85. Every Thursday he spends four hours bringing the best out of our skaters.*

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**Q:** Based on the banter back and forth between you and Mick, it seems like you two have known each other a long time. How did you first meet? *(Mark had just been giving Mick a hard time for not bringing a hot chocolate to him out on the ice in between power skates.)*

**Mark:** When I first came to Chicago, I wanted to sign my son up for hockey and was introduced to Kevin Mann (current director of 200X85, founder of the Mission and one-time Hockey Director of Saddle Hockey). Kevin in turn introduced me to Mick.

I came to coach power skating at the Stallions because Mick has been a long-time believer of power skating, and I wanted to help this organization. I have been on four hockey program boards over the years. I go to an organization because of a hockey director. I make sure the hockey director has the right values in place. One unique thing about Mick is that he is one of the few directors who has always put kids first in the organization, not the politics, and that's important to me.

**Q:** Why is power skating so important in the development of a hockey player?

**Mark:** It's my belief that you have to be a good skater to play and enjoy the game. Skating is everything. If you can't become a good skater, then you won't be able to enjoy the game as much as you should.

The power skating concept actually came from the Russians who started to play in the U.S. They brought techniques we weren't previously using. Actually, power skating has a lot of figure skating drills. Figure skaters have some of the strongest legs. Once I did half of a work out with some figure skaters. It was so hard I actually got sick.

**Q:** How did you become a power skating coach?

**Mark:** Funny enough, I did not learn power skating until my sophomore year of college. Everyone I played with said I had natural ability; they were impressed with the way I used my edges.

I think that's in part because when I was younger my dad built an outdoor 30x50 rink in our backyard. My brothers and I would go out there every day for fun and skate, unknowingly improving our skating and edges. That's why I say if you can get your kids out to do a little pond hockey, do it.

One of my brothers coached Division 1 at West Point, but then eventually decided to open a hockey school in Cleveland focused on skills and power skating (*This same brother was the head coach for Kent State's men's hockey team and is the current Coach-in-Chief for USA Hockey's MidAm*). I helped him with his hockey school until moving to Chicago. It was there I also began teaching other coaches how to incorporate power skating into their programs.

**Q:** Does a hockey player ever "grow out" of power skating?

**Mark:** No. Every NHL team has a power skating instructor. From Mites to the pros the drills for power skating are the same. The Stallions are doing the same drills as professional hockey players, they're just more complicated at the collegiate and pro level.

I have over 20 hours of drills I use for my coaching sessions with the Stallions, but a lot of what I reinforce is repetition. I have another 4-5 hours of drills for more advanced players as well.

**Mick:** He even has the "Switaj Bomber" – his own drill that he came up with. (*Does anyone else find the idea of that frightening?*)

**Q:** What's the philosophy behind having power skating once a week as opposed to every other week or twice a week?

**Mark:** Power skating should actually be a part of every practice. In fact, I talk with Mick every week after power skating, usually on my drive home, about the practices. I can tell, by what I see on the ice, what teams are incorporating power skating.

**Q:** The statistics for how many youth hockey players make it to college, let alone the NHL, can be a little depressing. What advice do you have for our hockey players who want to make it to that level?

**Mark:** I always tell people to dream big. The challenge is to break that dream down into smaller steps; first you have to make a Mite team, then a Squirt team, and a Bantam team and so on. Let's not forget this is all while working on your education at the same time.

**Q:** You're relentless on the ice. You make the Energizer Bunny look lazy. What do you say to yourself when you need to dig deep instead of taking your foot off the pedal?

**Mark:** When you get tired, remember that feeling is you building muscles. You might not be able to go full out anymore, but you can still have a goal of passing the person in front of you.

**Mick:** That's right. Challenge yourself. Some weeks might be harder than others, and on those weeks the goal might be to not finish last for every drill. Never allow yourself to become complacent. Also, It's our job as coaches to switch things up and get our players out of their comfort zones on the ice.

On that topic, we asked some kids in the program what they would ask if they were interviewing you. They want to know:

**Q:** Do you ever get tired?

**Mick:** Not that he's going to show it.

**Mark:** When kids work hard, they bring the best out of their coach. When they work hard, I get energized. Where I get tired is if it feels like I'm babysitting on the ice.

**Q:** If we got to be your power skate for one practice, how long would it take before we could wear you out?

**Mark:** Ha. Well, if I had to do drills with the team that go up and down the ice, I'd probably tire out first. However, if I was doing drills that build up leg muscles, they'd never be able to tire me out. (Bold words coach, bold words)

**Q:** The Saddle & Cycle rink is obviously not regulation size. How does that impact your ability to offer a power skating session?

**Mark:** I LOVE IT. It is not the size of the rink that makes a practice or power skate effective. I can run an effective practice from the goal line in. This size rink is perfect for anything you want to do with a team. It's really up to the coaches to get the kids working hard goal line to goal line, which every coach should be able to do.

**Q:** There's a great [article](#) about you and your brother that was in the Boston College and Boston Globe newspapers about your college career. You played on the same team as your brother on college?

**Mark:** Wow, where did you find this? I haven't seen this in forever. This is great. Did you know Billy and I were the first brother combo to play together at Boston College? That picture was taken right after practice one day.

*Interesting fact: Mark and all three of his brothers are listed in the Athletic Hall of Fame at Saint Edward High School in Cleveland.*

**Q:** What are you doing when you're not coaching power skates at Saddle & Cycle?

**Mark:** Well, with all my kids grown and out of the house, I'm likely doing one of my 4 loves: hockey, golf, fishing or hunting. Or working out. Or skiing. Or snowshoeing. On Saturday mornings in the winter, I go down to our pond and skate. Sometimes our dog will join me and chase the puck around, and sometimes neighbors will come over and we'll play a game of pond hockey. (*Translation: the man does not do a lot of sitting*).

**Mick:** Don't let him fool you. He likes his junk food too.

**Mark:** I do. I do like junk food (*he says as he sips on his hot chocolate*).