

LAURA STAMM INTERNATIONAL POWER SKATING SYSTEM

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LITTLE OVECHKIN

Or

There are skills ... and there are SKILLS in the heat of battle

by Jack Blatherwick

This tip was written by Jack Blatherwick, renowned expert in the field of hockey training and conditioning. Laura's comments are below.

You've probably seen the YouTube video of Oliver, the 9 year-old boy making a fantastic move to score in a shootout (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUjdCZe9SKI>). I call it "fantastic" because personally, I had a hard time getting my stick to cooperate on anything with the puck. Maybe it was those old wooden sticks that didn't have a curve; or (*sigh*) maybe it wasn't the stick.

As he skates in on the goaltender, Oliver picks up the puck with his stick, spins around and whips the puck in from his backhand side. I've been told, "Oh, it's not that difficult. What's the big deal? Anyone can do that if they practice a few times." Well, I know one old-time writer who can't pick up the puck and keep it married to the stick while spinning 360 degrees ... and if he spun around that fast would be so dizzy he'd fall on his head.

But evaluating the difficulty of the skill is missing the important point. Competition is not determined totally by skills ... or hustle and athleticism, for that matter. Certainly, they contribute, but the winners are those few who have the passion and confidence to try their dream skills in the heat of battle. The NHL is loaded with skillful players who can do just about anything in practice. When tested, they have incredible athleticism. And they really, really, REALLY hustle in games.

But I know one NHL'er who loves to be on stage -- who has no doubt that if he tries his wildest skills in a game, they'll work. He can't shoot better than anyone else in practice, but he gets shots off and scores goals from every conceivable awkward position in games -- even when he's on his knees or sprawled on his back!!! Don't bet against him if his team trails by a goal and he's got the puck late in the game.

A YouTube video shows him on stage in front of hundreds of people. He acts like a rock star, and gets everyone dancing, singing, and having a great time -- and he's never tried it before. He just knew he could.

There are hundreds of players with more skill than Alexander Ovechkin -- in practice that is -- but when it comes to scoring a unique goal in the heat of competition, there's one Ovechkin. Alex has no doubt that if he tries something crazy it will work. This 9 year-old may never get close to playing in the NHL; but if he does, he won't be one of the many who can do anything in practice and not in games.

There's a little Alex Ovechkin hidden within each young player, and coaches play a huge role in determining the fate of that little performer. In a lifetime of super-important win/loss events, kids hear a million comments like, "You can't try that in a big game. Who do you think you are ... Wayne Gretzky? Bobby Orr?"

On TV, practically every color commentator shows his cautious nature in second-guessing a failure of the Bobby Orr type, "No, no, no. Too fancy. Get the puck deep." However, a quick check shows that while most of these cautious second-guessers played in the NHL, they weren't Bobby Orr, Wayne Gretzky, or Alex Ovechkin.

Kids are like clay -- they'll turn out the way we shape them. I work with far too many who have heard way too much, "**No. No. No.**"

Tips for Coaches - by Laura Stamm

Premise: Players are afraid to make mistakes because they are afraid they will get yelled at.

To learn to be creative, youngsters need to have fun! The primary job of coaches is to stimulate an enjoyment of learning, inquisitiveness, creativity, and a love for hockey.

Affection and discipline are not mutually exclusive. Praise, patience, and encouragement are prerequisites for developing creativity.

Reward is more effective than punishment. I recently watched an NHL coach put his arm around the shoulder of a player who had just come off the ice after a poor shift. This coach knew when to lay down the law, but he also knew when to build up his players. I thought to myself, this player will give his heart and soul for this coach because he is treated with respect. *Tough love has its place in hockey, as it does in life.*

Build self-esteem. Encourage players to have respect for teammates, opponents, coaches, referees, and observers. Teach life lessons. Teach sportsmanship and fair play; teach players to win and lose with grace.

Treat players with dignity. Respect begets respect. Coaches should not rule by intimidation.

Mistakes are not high crimes. Youngsters fear looking bad and will refuse to experiment for fear of embarrassment, criticism, or reprimand. Keep reminding kids that mistakes are inevitable; they often are an indication that the player is trying something new. *Praise a good try even when it doesn't work out.*

Inventiveness, creativity, and analytic thinking should be valued and encouraged. Screaming coaches stifle creativity. Wayne Gretzky, Sidney Crosby, Ovechkin, *and Oliver*, are not the products of intimidation but the products of having the freedom to Feel, Act, See, and Think (FAST), *and to make mistakes along the way.*