

How to Sharpen Your Skills Off the Ice

Between COVID-related shutdowns and the off-season, we spend months away from the rink. While we may not be able to practice with our teammates, that doesn't mean you shouldn't keep up your skills when we're apart.

While fitness is a contributing factor to being a good hockey player, you can focus on specific drills that will pay off once you get back on the ice. Remember, NHL superstar Sidney Crosby is famous for [firing pucks in his basement](#), missing the net and dinging his family's clothes dryer thousands of times. That appliance now lives in the Nova Scotia Hockey Hall of Fame in Halifax.

It just goes to show that it takes dedication to succeed and there's no excuse to sit back just because you don't have a practice scheduled.

Set your schedule

Good habits turn regular players into great ones. The more you practice your skills, the more natural they will become when you go to use them in game situations. Start by making training a regular part of your day.

Set aside time when it best suits your energy levels. Some people love to get their workouts and training in early in the day before they get distracted by other people's plans or sink into the couch for hours on end.

Whatever works for you, put a reminder where it will pop up until you get into a routine. Or create an accountability buddy, such as a parent, sibling, or teammate, to keep you on top of your training and poke you if you slack off.

Work on your shot

Now that you're committed to improving, **start by trying to shoot 100 pucks a day** and focus on different skills while doing so. You will be building up the strength in the muscles that you need to shoot harder once you're back with your teammates. You'll also generate muscle memory that will allow your brain to go on autopilot during games while you focus on where to pass and how to dodge defenders.

Begin with working on your **accuracy**. Set up mental or actual targets within a net or against a durable surface. You can either create a pattern to rotate between them all or work on your top-shelf shots first. Start with your weakest area first while your energy is still fresh. Once you've nailed a few, or need a break, go onto your easier shots to build your confidence back up.

Next, work on improving your **speed**. Use your legs to really power that puck forward and repeat what works. Move your hands higher or lower on your stick to tinker with what works best. Even if you cannot time your shots, you'll feel which ones are flying and which ones need more speed.

And finally, have fun. Try **different shots** like your backhand or batting airborne pucks into the net. (It looks so cool when the pros do it!).

Don't give up or be too hard on yourself. If you stick with it, excuse the pun, you will improve!

Speed up your stickhandling

If you don't have a large flat area to practice at home, head to an outdoor rink, cement pad in a park or a parking lot that is safe and sitting empty. Set up obstacles to work around, using pylons, sticks or even extra pucks. A variety of sizes will help you adapt your moves to each situation.

Begin by dribbling from your forehand to your backhand as quickly as you can. This will build up your hand-eye coordination to a new level. Start slowly with small movements, then increase your reach. Keep your top hand firm to control your blade while your bottom hand stays loose to move your stick around your body.

Next, move the puck or ball around your body. Don't spin. Use your skill to tuck it behind you then pull it in front. Draw inspiration from your favourite player's dynamite moves that you've watched in replays. From here, focus on manipulating the puck or ball in specific patterns, such as side to side, front to side and back to front. Once you've perfected one, move on to another motion.

Keep your head down until you feel you can do each one naturally, then bring your eyes up and see how long you can control it. If it gets away on you, start over until it clicks. This will be invaluable when you are able to see where your teammates are and work around obstacles during a game all the while knowing the puck is still on your stick.

As you progress, change the pace of your movement from slow to fast, then throw in some dekes to keep it interesting. Practice moving different body parts to deceive your perceived opponents. (This also works if you're practicing with a small group of teammates or family members.) Look one way then go another, sending fake signals with your eyes and head. Next, lead with your shoulders one way before opting to go in another direction. Your hips and legs can also change course. Mix it up to become unpredictable and unbeatable.

Drills like this, even for 15 minutes each day, train your brain even more than you would believe.

To up your game even more, try these variations:

- Move your upper and lower body independently for the ultimate deke. Add some jumps over a stick to really challenge yourself.
- Use your stick with one hand. This not only extends your reach but also develops skills in your non-dominant hand. This may come in handy if you are injured or one arm gets pinned against the boards in a game.
- Change up your gear to use a wooden stick or a weighted puck. This will also make you stronger and enhance your skills once you return to your usual gear.

Keep playing other sports

In the offseason, maintain your fitness level with other sports that build up cardiovascular endurance and eye-hand coordination. This can include tennis, lacrosse, ball hockey, squash or soccer.

Whatever you choose, make sure you have fun. Training can challenge you, but it doesn't have to be a grind. When running drills, put on some heart-pumping music and bring in friends who can challenge you but keep things fun.

Keep track of your progress so you can celebrate how far you've come. And stay open to learning new drills to stay inspired. You'll be back on the ice in no time, better than ever!