



**BEST HOCKEY SEASON EVER**

By Kim McCullough MSc, YCS

 **The 6 Secrets of In-Season Success** 

**Six Keys To Having Your Best Hockey Season Ever**

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Elite hockey performance is much more than being able to skate, shoot and score. There are six other critical pieces of the peak performance puzzle that you must fit into your hockey training program to guarantee that you have your best season ever.

In order to take your game to the next level this season, you have to address these 6 key aspects of player development.

## **Secret #1: The Mental Game**

Elite players and coaches agree that 80% of performance is mental and 20% is physical. To ensure that players are 100% mentally prepared for every game and your team can perform their best, you need to have three key mental performance strategies in place.

## **Secret #2: Game-Winning Nutrition**

There are certain foods that will fuel peak performance and others that will destroy it. Coaches, parents and players must learn how to make the best nutrition choices possible, whether they are at home, at the rink or at the drive-thru, if they want their perform at the highest level possible.

### **Secret #3: Off-Ice Warm-Ups**

Many players and teams are starting to get the message about the importance of off-ice warm-ups, but most of them are going about it all wrong. To ensure that you consistently come flying out of the gate in the first period, you must do an off-ice warm-up that mimics the same movements and intensity you use on the ice.

### **Secret #4: On-Ice Conditioning**

To ensure that players are as energetic and explosive in the 2nd overtime as they were in the 2nd period, teams must have a progressive on-ice hockey conditioning plan in place. "Bag skating" at the end of practice isn't going to cut it - your on-ice conditioning program must be as well as planned as your skill sessions if you want players to dominate overtime and peak in time for the playoff run.

### **Secret #5: Off-Ice Training**

Most players and teams stop their off-ice training once the season starts to focus on their on-ice skills - and that is a big mistake. If you want to be better in February than you were in September and leave the competition in your dust, you must use off-ice training to get stronger, faster and fitter throughout the regular season.

### **Secret #6: Off-Ice Recovery**

Far too many players will suffer from injuries and burn-out this season - and the worst part is that most of these problems can be prevented. Having a proper three step off-ice recovery routine in place will ensure that players avoid injury and burn-out and are able to feel and play their best day after day.

**Now let's look at each of these 6 secrets in more detail  
and get you started on your best hockey season ever.**

## Secret #1: The Mental Game

### 3 Mental Strategies That Will Take Your On-Ice Performance To The Next Level

Hockey experts agree that 80% of hockey performance is mental and 20% is physical, and yet we often focus most of our effort on building the physical side of the game, instead of taking the time to develop the mental side of the game.

To ensure that you and your players are 100% prepared for every game and the team can perform its best, you need to have 3 key mental performance strategies in place.

#### Focus

Hockey players must learn to focus only on the things that are under their own control. While it is impossible to control the actions of everyone else in the rink, players always have complete control over their thoughts and actions. Learning how to focus on their own performance, while maintaining a positive attitude and tireless work ethic, will help players take their game to the next level.

#### Confidence

In order for players to be confident, they have to believe in their ability to perform on the ice and contribute positively to the team. Players and coaches to work together to identify the athlete's strengths, define their role on the team and set realistic expectations for performance. But, most importantly, players must realize that they are largely responsible for their own confidence. When we constantly look to others to boost our confidence, we become reliant on them instead on ourselves. By helping players take control of their own confidence, we empower them to be their best both on and off the ice.

#### Composure

It is great to be focused and confident going into the game - but how do you react when things go wrong? Hockey is a game of mistakes and it is those teams and players who recover quickly that are going to excel. Players have to develop the ability to be able to recognize that they made the mistake, regroup quickly and refocus on the task at hand. The ability to regain your composure quickly is what separates the "great" teams and players from the "good" ones.

Having strategies in place to develop **focus, confidence and composure** will take your players' mental game to the next level and help you to have your best season ever.

## Secret #2: Game-Winning Nutrition

### 3 Game-Winning Nutrition Tips That Will Boost Your Hockey Performance

Think of hockey players as high-performance race cars and food as the fuel that drives their performance. Far too often, players run out of gas during a game after having lunch at a fast-food restaurant or forgetting to eat breakfast. This would be like putting the wrong fuel in your tank or trying to drive on empty. In order for players to perform their best, they need to take in premium fuel. Here are 3 game-winning nutrition tips:

#### Pre-Game Tip: Prepare

Players should never step on the ice feeling hungry. They need to time their pre-game meal so that most of the food is broken down by the body by the time they hit the ice. If the game is 3 hours away, they can have a larger meal where 3/4 of the meal is carbohydrates (ie.pasta, vegetables, fruit etc.) and 1/4 of the meal is protein (ie. chicken, eggs, beans etc.). The closer they get to game time, the smaller and “lighter” the meal should be, meaning that they want to have less fat and protein and a focus on carbohydrates. If players have an early morning practice or game, at least grab a piece of fruit or granola bar so that they have some fuel in the tank before they hit the ice.

#### In-Game Tip: Hydrate

Proper hydration is the most important nutritional strategy an player can use. If they are thirsty, it is already too late! The thirst sensation kicks in after they have lost 1 to 2 liters of water. This means that they are dehydrated and their performance can decrease by up to 20%. The solution? Always have players carry a water bottle with them and encourage them to sip from it all day long - not just when they are at the rink.

#### Post-Game Tip: Recover

Immediately after a player steps off the ice, they have a 30 minute “window” where their body is at a heightened state to recover and they need to start rehydrating and refueling immediately. One of the best recovery drinks a player can have is 1% chocolate milk. It has the simple sugars needed to start replenishing energy stores and the protein needed to start repairing tired muscles. By drinking chocolate milk (as well as lots of water), players will be well on their way to recovering from their on-ice session and getting ready for the next one.

In order for players to perform their best day in and day out, they need to make sure that they are consistently taking in the best fuel possible through proper nutrition.

## Secret #3: Off-Ice Warm-Up

### How Off-Ice Warm-Ups Will Dramatically Increase On-Ice Performance

While most players do some kind of off-ice warm-up, many of them are not getting the maximum benefit out of their pre-ice routine. Most start the warm-up with a few minutes of jogging and then finish with some quick stretches. And that just isn't enough to get ready to perform your best.

To ensure that players come flying out of the gate in the first period, they must complete an off-ice warm-up that progresses through 3 different stages and mimics the same movements and intensity that players must use on the ice.

#### General Warm-up

The first stage involves jogging for a few minutes - which most players are already doing. While jogging is an important part of the warm-up because it increases blood flow and gets muscles loosened up, it doesn't address a player's hockey-specific needs.

#### Dynamic Warm-up

After performing the general warm-up jog, players must perform exercises and drills that mimic the movements they use on the ice. The movements used in this part of the warm-up are commonly referred to as dynamic stretches, or stretching while moving. By performing simple movement patterns, such as side-shuffling and forward lunging, players will increase the readiness of their hockey-specific muscles which will leave them much better prepared to hit the ice.

#### Specific Warm-up

This final stage of the off-ice warm-up is extremely important - and often neglected. Although players will have 'warmed-up' the muscles and movements involved in playing the game through the previous two stages, they still need to address a critical need prior to stepping onto the ice. Hockey is unpredictable - players are always "reading and reacting" to a game that changes constantly. By participating in short high-intensity games and drills, such as variations of tag, players get their minds and muscles used to the unpredictability of the game.

Properly progressing through these three stages of the off-ice warm-up will ensure that players are physically and mentally prepared perform their best on the ice.

## Secret #4: On-Ice Conditioning

### How Using The Last 10 Minutes of Practice Properly Leads To Playoff Success

You may not know the term “bag skating” - but I am sure you have seen it before. With a few minutes left in practice, coaches have their players skate widths, lengths, circles or laps until they can barely move.

The truth is that “bag skating” isn’t going to cut it if you want to ensure that your players are ready to dominate overtime and peak in time for the playoffs. It is important for players to learn to push themselves when they are tired, but there needs to be a plan.

The last 10 minutes of practice are the perfect time for coaches to focus on improving players’ fitness, as long as they adhere to the most fundamental principle of hockey-specific conditioning.

## Interval Training: The Key To Hockey-Specific Conditioning

Interval training is the key to developing game-winning conditioning and understanding the concept of the work-to-rest ratio is critical to developing a proper program.

The game of hockey is characterized by high-intensity efforts (“work”) mixed with periods of sitting or standing on the bench (“rest”). If a shift is 45 seconds long, and a player rests for 1 minute and 30 seconds between shifts, their work-to-rest interval is 1:2 - the rest period is twice as long as the work period. Interval-based conditioning relies on using the right work-to-rest ratios at the right times.

To design a proper conditioning program for hockey, coaches must use work-to-rest intervals that mimic the ratios commonly seen in the game. The problem with traditional “bag skating” is that this type of conditioning workout rarely resembles the work-to-rest ratios players encounter on the ice. Two groups of players typically alternate ‘working’ and ‘resting’ until the coach stops the drill - which means that the work-to-rest interval is 1:1. These rest intervals are too short - especially at the beginning of the season.

Teams should start their season-long conditioning program with the ‘higher’ ratios (such as 1:3) and work their way back to the ‘lower’ ratios (1:1) as the season progresses. This ‘top-down’ approach allows players to develop their conditioning in a safe and effective way and helps the team to peak in time for crucial late-season games.

## Secret #5: Off-Ice Training

### How Off-Ice Training Will Set You Apart From Your Competition This Season

In general, hockey players are doing a better job of arriving at training camp in shape and coaches are doing a good job of getting their team physically ready to compete once the puck drops on the first game.

But what are you doing to be better once the games start?

It is great to be the most prepared team on the ice in September, but how do you make sure that you are miles ahead of your competition in December? Developing your skills, strategies and fitness on the ice will only take you so far. Every team you play against will be making a similar commitment to on-ice improvement. To get to, and stay at, the top of the standings, your team must continue to get stronger, fitter and faster off the ice as the season continues.

By making a commitment to off-ice training in the in-season, you will continue to get better while everyone else is running out of steam. If you can find 30 minutes twice a week to make your team faster and stronger off the ice starting in September, you will leave the opposition in your dust come playoff time.

Now, you may be thinking to yourself, “I have no idea how to run an off-ice training session with my team. This is great in theory, but how is it going to work in practice?”

If you can run an effective on-ice practice, you can run an effective off-ice session.

There are four qualities your team and players need to develop throughout the season to guarantee that they are ahead of the competition come playoff time: strength, power, speed and agility.

For example, one partner-based drill that will help your players develop game-breaking agility is Calf Tag. Have players partner up and stand an arms length apart. Both players are trying to tag each other on their lower leg while protecting themselves from being tagged. Each tag is worth one point and the first player to 5 points wins the game. The great thing about incorporating this type of exercise into your team training program this season is that they don't require any expensive equipment and you can do the drill anywhere. And most importantly, your players will get faster and have fun.

## Secret #6: Off-Ice Recovery

### 3 Recovery Keys That Will Allow Players To Play Their Best All Season Long

Off-ice recovery has a significant effect on on-ice performance, but most hockey players neglect it completely. The first 30 minutes after you get off the ice are critical to starting the recovery process which will prevent injuries and burn-out and allow player to feel and play their best.

The 3 keys to proper recovery that players must address are:

#### Cool-Down

While many players do dynamic warm-ups before hitting the ice, very few do a cool-down afterwards. For the majority of young hockey players, the cool-down involves taking off your equipment, and jumping into the car for the ride home. A player's body needs to "come-down" after the ice in the same way that they need to "ramp up" for each session. When players don't perform a cool-down after a tough practice or game, their muscles will feel heavy and tired. By performing 5 minutes of easy jogging immediately after getting off the ice, players will reduce muscle stiffness and soreness.

#### Stretching

Players don't need to stretch every muscle in their body in order to recover properly. Spending 10 minutes doing a few critical stretches after their cool-down jog is all they need. Players should focus on stretching their "hockey-specific" muscles - hip flexors, quadriceps, glutes and groin - for 1 minute each. This will help players reduce muscle soreness and prevent future injury.

#### Nutrition

Post-activity nutrition and hydration are just as important as completing the cool-down and stretching routines, and are also generally ignored by players. Immediately after getting off the ice, a player's body is in a heightened state to rebuild its energy stores and they need to get food and fluids in them quickly. Whether it is in the form of chocolate milk and a bottle of water, or a sports drink with yogurt and a banana, the key is to re-fuel and re-hydrate fast.

Taking advantage of the "recovery window" after each on-ice session can be the difference between having a mediocre year and having your best season ever.

There is nothing worse than finishing the season feeling like you have under-achieved and not being able to figure out why. Quite often it is the lack of attention to these 6 key areas of player development that mean the difference between finishing at the top of the standings and starting summer vacation early.



Put these 6 secrets together into your performance puzzle, along with your on-ice skill development plan, and you will be well on your way to your best hockey season ever.

Your player development coach,

## Kim

**Kim McCullough, YCS, M.Sc.**, is a highly-sought after expert in the development of young hockey players. In addition to training and coaching players at all levels of hockey, from novice to the NHL, Kim has also played at the highest level of women's hockey in the world for the last decade.

Kim's website and blog give the coaches and parents of aspiring young players access to the most up-to-date programs, articles and advice on how to help their players take their game to the next level of performance.

To learn more about how you can help your players have their best season ever, visit: [www.besthockeyseasonever.com](http://www.besthockeyseasonever.com)