



Elevating Comfort Zones for All Skills

By Jack Blatherwick

Without coaching, most athletes will compete and train within their comfort zones.

If we told hockey players to go out on the ice and work on shots for 30 minutes, they'd drop a bunch of pucks in a pile, thirty feet out from the net and crank slapshots, taking plenty of time to wind up. If a coach worked with the same player, there would be drills to force the player to shoot from awkward positions, perhaps while skating full speed, perhaps while being hooked by a defender.

In other words, a good coach would encourage the player to improve his/her shot in game-like situations, most of which are not comfortable. It's natural for any player — even when practicing in an empty arena with no one watching — to practice slap shots that really have some velocity. But to practice shooting while skating full-speed means some shots will be weaker. When friends are watching, the tendency to practice comfortably is greater, because no one wants to shoot a weak wrist shot when the world is watching.

Last summer we forced a great player to take practice shots quickly, without taking time to dribble and get set. This meant she had to shoot while off-balance at times. The puck might not have been in perfect position, so her weight transfer couldn't be perfect. Sometimes she had to get up off the ice, receive a pass before feeling comfortable and release the shot immediately. But since this could happen more often than not in a big game, it certainly was worth practicing outside her comfort zone.

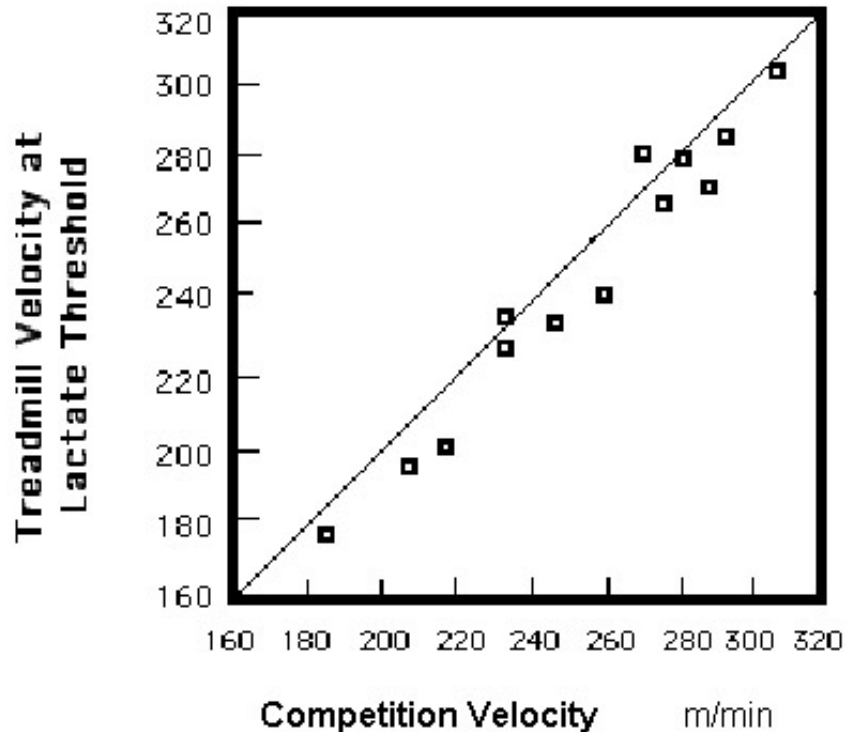
When players practice skating, they rarely choose the most difficult agility drills in which they might fall. They'll probably be conservative on corners, rarely practicing at full speed, because there is too much chance of looking bad. Therefore, from hours of practicing this way, everyone establishes a comfort zone that is below top speed.

Then in the most important competition — perhaps the playoffs to get to the state tournament — when we want to compete at top speed, we suffer two consequences of our comfortable practice habits: skills are not comfortable at high speed and we are unable to sustain the pace for an entire game.

Those of us who never run marathons might wonder why a competitor doesn't use a stopwatch and "simply" cut 10 seconds off each mile. Just 10 seconds? That doesn't seem like a lot, and the final results over 26 miles would be a personal record.

Part of the answer is physiological, as shown on the graph below. The experienced marathoners in this study (Farrell's doctoral thesis, 1978) ran at increasing speeds on a treadmill to find out at which speed each one would reach anaerobic threshold.

This is the point, above which lactic acid builds up in the blood and muscles at a rapid rate. Below this threshold, lactic acid stays at a low concentration for long periods of running — even hours.



In other words, when someone runs at a speed above their anaerobic threshold, lactic acid builds up, causing the muscles to work inefficiently. There is a lot of pain in the legs plus a general feeling of stress, the heart rate starts to climb abnormally, and breathing becomes excessive. Hyperventilation is triggered by the acid buildup.

So, marathoners tend to practice and compete at speeds near or below their anaerobic threshold. There are painful consequences to compete above this “comfort zone.”

Obviously, they should include many shorter intervals above this point in order to bring their times down.

The graph shows that for each marathoner, the speed at which they reached anaerobic threshold on the treadmill is almost exactly the same speed at which they compete.

Hockey players do not often choose to practice or compete outside their “comfort zones” whether that is skating at super-fast speed or shooting in stressful situations. However, the Soviet coaches knew that if they pushed their players each day out of their comfort zones — no matter how much the players hated it — eventually they would be able to compete faster, with a great deal of skill at this pace, and keep it up for an entire game.

Although we cannot graph the physiological comfort zone as neatly for hockey as for a race where athletes compete at a constant speed, the comfort zone in hockey is just as much physical as it is a mental habit. It is only by good coaching that players will improve as much as possible.

Elevating comfort zones is the key to helping players move up to the next level. For some that means becoming the best they can be this season. For others it might mean making their dream team in the future.

Nobody can reach his or her potential by practicing within his or her comfort zone all the time.

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