

Flexibility Training a Must for Speed Skaters

By Susan Ellis

Why stretch? Bottom line – It will improve your performance!!

Let's face it. The speed skating position is not an easy position to hold. There is a lot of strain on the lower body - back, hips, glutes, hams, quads, and calf, as well as upper body – neck, shoulders, traps, lats. And the longer you spend in the position the more strain there is as your muscles start to fatigue.

Eric Flaim, Olympic medallist in both long track and short track attributed making his 4th Olympic Team to his flexibility program. He says that being more flexible allowed him to use his muscles more effectively and with less strain and fatigue, and he felt stronger.

Why flexibility works to improve your performance? Simply put, the longer the range of motion in the muscle and through the joint, the less effort you need to put in to just holding the basic position. It's easier to relax the muscle when it's time to relax (recovery phase), and you can put more force in to pushing when it's time to push. Many people think that skating is all about the powerful push. While having a powerful push is absolutely essential, 75 – 80% of your entire stride phase is spent either recovering or loading your push, and only 20- 25% is spent actually pushing. So you want to make sure you are able to sit in the position with as little tension as possible.

Consider this: If 80% of the time is relaxing and loading, and you are not flexible, you are fighting your ideal skating position right from the get go and wasting perhaps 10%-15% more energy than you should. And if you are fatiguing earlier than you should be your position rises sooner than it should, and when your position rises, you automatically lose extension time during that critical 20% push. And the higher you get the less power from your push. So, why start out at maybe 25% less than what your potential is when just 30' of extra flexibility training a few times a week can allow you to maximize your power!

I'm told I'm normally a fairly encouraging person, but a while ago at a camp I was watching a skater 'trying' to do some basic flexibility. I was appalled at his lack of flexibility and blurted out "That's pathetic!". Oops, my bad! But it did inspire him to get on a good flexibility program that he says has changed his skating dramatically.

Yasmen Mehta, a Pilates instructor and former dancer turned speed skater, has written a book called the 'Speedskater's Guide to Flexibility'. It is available on my web site at <http://www.ellismethod.net/flexibility.html> Cost is \$14.99 USD and all the proceeds go back to her club.

The web pages listed below are also great tools for learning more about the benefits of flexibility and instructions on flexibility training exercises.

Brad Appleton – Everything you need to know about Stretching. Incredibly thorough document on stretching, including why, physiology of stretching, how, what and when.

<http://www.cmcrossroads.com/bradapp/docs/rec/stretching/>

This site shows various stretches with written descriptions:

<http://www.netfit.co.uk/members/netfit.htm>

Tons of stretches complete with pictures, text, and video. A must see!

<http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/stretch.htm>