

Don't let your Warm-Up Burn you out

The warm-up is good for a lot of things. We get a feel for our gear, our edges, the ice, for bounces in an opponent's arena and the size of the ice, how well the nets are anchored, and much more. The warm-up should also be approached different than the game, especially from the goalie's perspective. No stats are kept during warm-up, nobody wins or loses a warm-up. It is a short time slot allocated to get a feel for the game of hockey, before a game of hockey, so it's important we approach the warm-up properly from a physical stand-point, and more importantly a mental standpoint.



We enter the warm-up and the game with 2 different objectives. A game is where the results matter, where the goals we let in and saves we make influences the outcome of the game, which obviously we are trying to win. There is a greater “outcome orientation” associated with the game, which in order to achieve we break down in to components we can control, and focus on the process. The warm-up has no outcome. Nobody is (or should be) counting the save percentage or goals allowed during warm-up and comparing it to anybody else. There is no “Hockey God” watching over us to make sure we make that one last glove save before exiting the warm-up drill so he can grant us good fortune in the outcome of the game. I will go so far as to say there is surprisingly little correlation to the performance in the warm-up and a goaltender's performance in the game, meaning sometimes you can have a good warm-up and a good game, or a bad warm-up and a good game.

Simply put, the warm-up should be heavily focused on the *process* of getting game ready, and executing game-day *routines*. I would like to go in to more detail about exactly what this means, and where the focus should be when you step on the ice for the pre-game warm-up.



The Process

Warming up is a process. We hear in interviews all the time about how important it is to “stick to the process” or “focus on the process”, and for good reason. A process, unlike an outcome, is something within our control and essentially comes down to choices. A goalie should come off the ice after the warm-up knowing that they have stuck to their own warm-up process that works for them, and gets them both physically and mentally ready. Oftentimes this starts even before the gear is strapped on, with many goalies having an off-ice process they follow as well. It is a common scene around the arena to see a player in shorts and running shoes juggling, bouncing racquet-balls or tennis balls off the wall and catching them, or having a partner toss or bounce balls or pucks their way. These players are almost exclusively the goaltenders, catching a bouncing ball in order to stimulate the neural pathways between their hands, eyes, and brain. Now bear with me as I dust off some of my old university textbooks and get a little bit in to neuropsychology. There is an old saying in Psychology and Neuroscience first coined by Donald O. Hebb (of the “Hebbian Synapse” or “Hebbian Learning”), and it goes *neurons that fire*

together wire together. What this means is the more a neural pathway is used, the stronger it becomes. With relation to goaltending and eye-hand coordination, the more the neural pathways are used to track an object in to the hand, the stronger and more robust these pathways become. However, due to the extremely adaptive nature of our brains (for a very interesting read on this, check out *The Brain That Changes Itself* by Dr. Norman Doidge), these neural pathways must be stimulated regularly or else nearby brain regions and other neural pathways will recruit some of these neurons, which will be allocated for use in another function. Similar to the first term “neurons that fire together wire together”, the opposite is also true where “neurons out of sync lose the link”. Because our entire brain is always working (despite the popular but largely erroneous cliché that we only use 10% of our brains), neurons of one established pathway are often recruited for use in a nearby brain region that may be more active in performing some other task throughout the day. By doing something as simple as catching a tennis ball off a wall, we are re-establishing nearby neurons in order to make that neural pathway more robust come game-time when it’s time to make a glove or blocker save. This is what I mean by the *Process* and focusing on those things that *we can control*. By activating our nervous system before the game, we are not participating in some silly superstition that we have to catch “x” number of balls in a row in order to have a good game because that’s what happened last week, we’re simply increasing the likelihood of being able to make that save once game-time rolls around because we have made the *choice* to activate that neural pathway responsible for our eye-hand coordination.



The same is very much true when we get out on to the ice. The exact spot on the ice we stretch at, the exact number of shots we face in the 3-shot drill, or whether we stretch our left or right leg first, are all arbitrary components of the warm-up. This is not to be confused as me suggesting that stretching or facing shots is completely meaningless, considering the above argument that it is important to activate those neural pathways we’ll need for the game. What I’m suggesting is again to focus on the *process* of the warm-up, rather than the *outcome* of the warm-up. Although it seems silly that a goalie would be worried about the number of shots they let in, it is natural for

that to weigh on the mind sometimes. A piece of advice I first heard from my goalie coach growing up (and now mentor, and Professional Sport Psychologist) John Stevenson, is that a situation has meaning only if we give it meaning. That shot that beats us low glove in warm-up is NOT an indication of things to come in the game, but it is all-to-easy to psych ourselves out by *choosing* to let it mean something. Make the *choice* to move on with your warm-up, and *get out of your own way*. After-all, hockey is a game where goals are *supposed* to be scored, and that is especially true in warm-up. Don't use the energy worrying about the couple that get by you in the 3 on 2 drill. Instead, control what you can control which means at that moment making the choice to do the things you have practiced that you know greatly increases your chances of stopping the next one.

Much of the warm-up is about feel, like getting a feel for the ice, the posts, your edges, your butterfly slide, and getting a feel for the puck. But it's also about getting the right *feeling*, that mindset that you are prepared to go in to battle and be a force to be reckoned with. Being prepared leads to being confident and we've all *felt* the difference when we are playing with confidence, and without confidence. When we play without confidence, we tend to make ourselves smaller, play deeper, play back on our heels with hands drifting behind us, our eyes don't track the puck as well, and among other things we are generally performing well below our ability. Nothing in life is ever certain, and it is especially true with hockey and goaltending. Most of what happens out in front of us is totally out of our control, although there are some situations where we can have an *influence* like baiting a player to shoot for a particular location or communicating with our teammates. That being said, whether or not they take the bait or listen to what we are shouting is still very much still out of our control. I say this because there is a certain degree of acceptance that a goalie must have to properly control for the things they can change during a game, and accept those things we cannot change.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

This is an excerpt from a version of Reinhold Niebuhr's *Serenity Prayer*. No matter your religious beliefs or denomination, I truly believe the concept is one of the most important for a goaltender, hockey player, or athlete in general to keep in mind during practice and performance.

Trying to control the *outcome* of a game is a futile exercise, with so much of what happens during a game happening outside of our control. Focusing on the *process* of tracking pucks, setting our feet, taking efficient routes to new angles, breathing, communicating, and all the other *choices* we make when we're playing our best, greatly increases our chances of achieving the desired result. If these aspects are focused on during practice, they start to become less of a choice and more of an automatic process at game-time, which is the frame of mind we ideally want to be performing in. One which requires minimal conscious thought about our specific

movements, so we can focus on reading the play in front of us to anticipate shots. This starts with the warm-up and knowing that we have made the right choices and executed our game-day routine, so when the puck drops to start the first period we *know* we're ready.

The Routine

First and foremost, I want to make a clear distinction between a *routine*, and a *superstition*. A routine with regards to goaltending is a series of steps put in place that are easy to execute, that when executed have a *practical* significance to our preparation, which increases our chances of achieving a desired outcome. The game-day routine for a goalie is a process in itself, and should not be resistant to change. Game-day routines follow a similar trajectory to that of natural selection, in the sense that the routines are usually evolving to some extent, with some components being replaced by others that a goalie feels are more advantageous to their performance.

A superstition is a belief that two completely unrelated events are somehow connected, usually by supernatural means like through a "Hockey God" type of medium. This is wearing the lucky shirt, getting the lucky parking spot at the rink, eating your pre-game Subway at location "x" instead of location "y", etc. Essentially it is moving the locus of control from yourself, to the unrelated objects and events around you. Superstitions are likely to arise when a goaltender is lacking in areas of confidence, preparation, self-efficacy, and control over *their* game. When they do finally get a desired result, they look at the events leading up to it and assume they had something to do with the outcome, which is where a lot of the little quirks come from. As these quirks turn in to a superstition, you have given meaning to a meaningless event which is an extremely inconsistent and unreliable way to prepare for a game. A routine on the other hand is built up from components that have some *practical contribution* to you achieving that feeling that allows you to play your best.

There are as many different pre-game warm-up routines as there are goalies. Off the ice, the game-day routine can start as early as the morning of a game. Getting enough sleep and not over-sleeping is a good place to start. Choosing to eat a healthy breakfast instead of stopping in at Denny's for a plate full of bacon is also a good choice. Every goalie is different, but a very light workout or short activity such as racquetball, a light jog, skipping, or any number of full-body activities is a good place to start. It is important to read your body during this activity, and to not overdo it so early in the day before the main event. This is why NHL morning game-day skates usually last no longer than 45 minutes, and consist of flow drills designed to wake up the senses without burning out the muscles. After the morning activity, a light stretch can be a good idea, while making sure to re-hydrate and replenish your body's nutrients with a healthy meal (I don't

claim to be an expert on sport nutrition nor am I certified, but there are plenty of good resources readily available for reading if you wish to learn about the specifics of what to eat on game day).

Lots of players will take advantage of some spare time in the afternoon to take a quick pre-game nap. Again I don't claim to be an expert on circadian rhythms or sleep, but I see it more as reading your body and giving in to what it needs on game day. In a book by Dr. Michael Lardon titled *Finding Your Zone*, he talks about observing Phil Mickelson catching a cat-nap just before teeing off on the final day at the 2006 PGA Masters Tournament at Augusta. Mickelson knew he was prepared, and rather than frantically trying to get as many practice shots in as possible before teeing off, he read his body and knew what he really needed to do in order to perform was not practice, but take a quick nap. Mickelson ended up holding the lead and winning the tournament. The nap on game-day is more than a ritualistic activity, it actually serves a purpose by providing athletes with some restorative sleep. So again we see another functional, practically significant aspect of the warm-up routine. Keep in mind this sequence of game-day events is just a template laid out to give examples of some of the practical activities you can incorporate in to your warm-up routine. After a nap (which in my experience and research should last no longer than 90 minutes, probably even less) something many players do is have a cold shower, which will wake you up better than any coffee or energy drink. Then it's time to dress, and get over to the arena.

Once at the arena there are a ton of options to include in the warm-up routine. Depending on the level of hockey and specific team there may be time to lounge and have a small snack, team warm-up workout, individual workout, video sessions, equipment maintenance like taping up sticks, the list goes on. The important thing to notice is that each of these activities has some practical significance to preparing for the game. Getting together as a team for a game of sewer-ball (or 2-touch, whatever you choose to call it) activates the feet, coordination, and brings up the energy and compete level in the players. An individual workout on the exercise bike warms up the legs and allows the player some time to be mindful, and think about their role in the upcoming game, and reflect on successful past games. Video sessions are not done just for the sake of doing video sessions, but to study the opposing teams systems to gain a tactical advantage. Taping a stick can sometimes be done compulsively, but again you need a comfortable grip on your stick and a fresh tape job on the blade does have a practical significance as well.

Once on the ice, the specifics of the warm-up aren't as important but taking care of the process is. You can't control where the players shoot, so don't become upset if you haven't faced as many blocker-side shots as you would like since you can't control it. Focus on your tracking, your pre-shot movement, arriving early and setting your feet, reading the release, having a good forward lean, your breathing, your save selection, and whatever other aspects of your game you feel are important to you. Stay loose, stay hydrated, and stay focused. These are all choices, and a good warm-up is about making good choices.

So for your next game, evaluate what you are doing in both the off-ice and on-ice warm-ups. Ask yourself if what you are doing has any practical significance to your physical or mental components of your game. Ask yourself, “Is it really worth beating myself up for that shot I let in during that warm-up drill?” Do yourselves a favor and get out of your own way. **Let yourself feel good in the warm-up, no matter the outcome.** You already have 20 players on the other team playing against you, so you don’t need another one inside your own head.

I hope this helps in some way! For any questions or further discussion, please send me an email at ek.coretexgoaltending@gmail.com