

Are You Ready For The Pro's?

(Originally submitted as an article by Greg Siller for Roller Hockey Magazine)

Congratulations, you have just been selected to tryout for your favorite professional team. That's right, *YOU!* All that time spent practicing and improving your skills has finally paid off. This may seem like a normal progression for an excellent hockey player like yourself, but it does not happen as often as potential players would like. So what can you do to improve your chances of getting your coveted tryout?

Two questions that you want to ask yourself are: 1) What should I expect during these tryouts? and 2) What criteria will the coaching staff use to evaluate me?

Tryout Expectations

Tryouts provide many opportunities for both the team and the players. They provide teams with a look at the current pool of talent around a region, state, or country. They also provide players with an opportunity to play with the pinnacle of hockey talent. A goaltender can expect up to 10 goaltenders to tryout for the 3 open positions on the team. A forward or defenseman can expect upwards of 30 forwards and 30 defensemen to tryout for the limited forward and defense positions. There is, *at least*, a 70% rejection rate for anyone trying out for a pro hockey team. Don't give up hope though, because what follows is information that will help to ensure that you are in the 30% that does make it.

During tryouts, you will work with several on-rink evaluators. However, the people that decide whether or not you make the team are the General Manager (GM, also known as the director of player personnel) and the coaches. And these are team personnel that may or may not be on the rink with you during the tryouts. The GM identifies/recruits players to tryout for the team--and also plays the primary role in the selection of the players. The coaches also contribute to selecting the players; while their primary roles are to mold and motivate those selected players into an effective team using winning tactics and strategies.

Once on the playing surface, expect the coach/evaluators to work you hard through the various drills. Their job is to quickly reduce the field of 60+ potential players to a core group of about 24 ice hockey players/20 roller hockey players; which will eventually be reduced to an actual team of between 17-22 ice players/14-17 roller hockey players. Women who have a desire to tryout for a men's professional



hockey team (Kelly Dyer and Manon Rheume to name two) have been limited, in the past, to the

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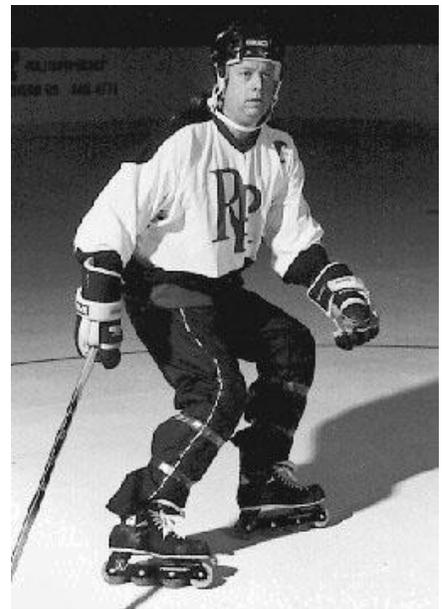
position of goaltender. As women's hockey continues to grow (women's hockey has been the fastest growing segment of both roller and ice hockey in recent years), more women and girls will be given the opportunity to pursue their professional hockey dreams (either as players or coaches) as part of women's professional hockey teams.

If you don't advance past the first cut (or second or third), don't get discouraged. You should always walk away with plenty of information on how to improve your chances the next time you tryout. Don't leave the rink without a detailed explanation of what the coaches/evaluators think of your skills. Ask them for specific feedback on your individual skills, positional skills, team skills, mental game, as well as how you ranked with respect to the others players at your position. With this information, and the experience gained from playing with top hockey players, you will know what is required to be part of the core group the next time tryouts are opened.

Evaluation Criteria

Seven Player Selection Criteria that professional hockey teams use to evaluate players (generally on a scale of 1-to-10 by category) include the following. Also see www.prolearning.com/hockey/coaches_toolbox.htm for more information.

1. *Individual abilities* include skating, stickhandling, passing/receiving, and shooting. Although you do not have to be excellent in each category; being in the good-to-excellent (7-to-10) range in each category is essential. When playing against some of hockey's best players, you will notice that you need to increase your quickness and timing to be able to effectively compete.
2. *Positional skills* encompass the play of forwards, defense, and goaltenders. This is probably the most important of the seven player selection criteria since teams want to choose players who already have a solid understanding of the position they play. Coaches look for experienced talent and will work with players to mold individual/team skills toward an overall team strategy. A team will require that you generally possess excellent (9-to-10) range positional skills. For a forward, this means that either you are a solid playmaker (repeatedly setting up the goal scorers), consistently putting the puck in the net, effective at face-offs in each of the zones, or are a grinding-type player and can forecheck and regain control of the puck in the corners and along the boards. Defensemen need to either have a booming (and accurate) slap shot, are great at reading an opposing attack and can stop that attack, are physically imposing in front of their net efficiently, or are great puck-carriers/playmakers and can initiate smart breakouts. Goaltenders need to be quick, agile, cover their net, play rebounds into low risk areas, handle the puck, communicate well, and make big saves while under pressure.



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3. **Team play** focuses on the play of the entire team in the offensive, neutral, as well as defensive zones. This includes strategies such as breakouts, offensive zone penetration, defensive zone coverage, regrouping, face-offs, and working as an effective power play or penalty killing unit. As with individual abilities, you do not have to be excellent in each category but need to remember that the team comes first and individual play always supports the team. A coach, through the team's tactics and strategies, will work with individual players to organize how they should work successfully as a team.



4. **A solid understanding of the game**, and a player's ability to react appropriately during various situations within a game, is another important player indicator. Understanding the game comes from two things; experience and analysis. Experience means that you have played the game and are familiar with its many facets. Analysis means that you think about the game, about how different parts of the game affect its overall outcome, and about how your play contributes to the effectiveness of your team. This understanding can be seen when a coach runs a team drill or scrimmage and the team executes according to plan (or not). Being able to read a play and anticipate potential outcomes are keys to having an understanding of the game. An example occurs during a breakout drill when the puck carrier initially moves the puck behind his net. The non-puck carriers, or supporting players, should maneuver themselves into locations or trajectories to create options for the team, and should base their movement on the puck carrier, the defenders, teammates, and the open playing surface available. Supporting players should make themselves available to receive a pass, clear an area to allow space for the puck carrier to move, or offer close support to the puck carrier. To be effective in this supporting role, a player must anticipate the puck carrier's intentions, read the defensive pressure being applied on the puck carrier, and adjust his or her position in relation to the puck carrier; giving the puck carrier options to utilize. The puck carrier also needs to read and anticipate a supporting players' and opponent's potential actions. Being rated in the good-to-excellent (7-to-10) range is essential.
5. **Role players** are individual players who are identified by a primary role on the team. Types of role players include the power forward, defensive centerman, penalty kill specialist, pure goal-scorer, enforcer, third/fourth line player, stay-at-home defenseman and puck-carrying defenseman. Being noted as a role player can enable you to make a team that has specific team needs in those areas. These players know their responsibilities, their opponents' strengths and weaknesses, and know when to utilize their particular skills in order to ensure that the appropriate outcome is accomplished.

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6. **Physical play** is a big part of all pro hockey teams. GMs/coaches look for hockey players that have toughness, grit and an edge that can be controlled. Players need to be able to dish out hits as well take them. Physical play usually means riding an opponent along the boards or checking an opponent in front of your net or behind their net. Open-ice checks, like the one in the photo, not only remove the puck from the puck carrier but also add a spark to the game. Being rated in the good-to-excellent range (7-to-10) is essential.



7. **Intangible skills** are the mental attributes that allow players to elevate their physical game and can create a spark that can bring fire and emotion to the team. A player with good physical talents can rise to the next level using intangibles such as determination or intensity while a great physical player can fall by the wayside by not consistently tapping into these intangibles. Intangibles can be observed by physical players when they forecheck an opposing puck carrier during a breakout play and then regain control of the puck, a superb penalty killer who blocks a shot and then moves with the puck on the offensive, a goal early or late in the period, or the goaltender who makes the big save on a breakaway. These intangibles are derived from attributes such as confidence, motivation, determination, mental toughness, discipline, and leadership.



Preparing to tryout for a professional hockey team is something that needs to be considered (and prepared for) months, even years before you decide to actually tryout. If playing in a professional hockey league is something that engages you, work hard to become the best possible player at your position, improve your understanding of the game, and provide yourself with the regional/national/international opportunities to improve your abilities in the **seven player selection criteria**. And when you do make it to the pro level, don't forget to send me a photo your autograph.

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