



For 12 Days In February, women's hockey gets the visibility and recognition it deserves.

To help you celebrate these well-deserved days on the world stage, I have put together Total Female Hockey's 12 most popular articles ever into one package (plus 2 bonus articles).

Please pass this package along to any player, parent or coach who might be interested.

ARTICLES INCLUDED IN THIS PACKAGE:

TOP 12 TOTAL FEMALE HOCKEY ARTICLES:

1. Expect Success
2. The 10,000 Hour Rule in Women's Hockey
3. 7 Skills Every Player Must Improve On (and Why)
4. The Weight Issue in Girls' Hockey
5. Committing Random Acts of Excellence
6. The Worst 4-Letter Word in Girls' Hockey
7. #1 Hockey Pet Peeve
8. Getting Over Getting Cut
9. Olympic Strength In Numbers
10. The Worst Fight In Girls' Hockey
11. Next Top Model or Next Great Player?
12. #1 Injury in Girls' Hockey

BONUS ARTICLES:

1. The Worst Game I Ever Played
2. Why She's On The Team

1. DO YOU EXPECT SUCCESS?

What determines the level of success a hockey player achieves on the ice? It's not the team you play for, the camps you go to or even the coaches you listen to. And it's not how hard you shoot, how fast you skate or even how fit you are. What truly separates good players from the great ones is the mental side of their game. I've talked a lot about confidence and focus in the past, but today I want to talk about something even bigger than that - your expectations.

A great player doesn't wish, hope, want or strive for success. They EXPECT it. They 100% believe in their ability to successfully achieve their goals. This unwavering belief doesn't happen overnight - it is a process. After all, success breeds success. It's the accumulation of small victories over time in practice, in the gym and in games that lead to bigger victories and help you to believe that you can achieve any goal you set your mind to.

When I think back to my final year of high school, I realize that I definitely expected to be the best player every time I hit the ice. Whether I always succeeded in being the best player or not, I expected that I would be and that's what drove my success. I didn't just want to be the best - I expected it.

So what are your expectations for yourself when you hit the ice?

Are you holding yourself to a high enough standard?

Or are you letting yourself off the hook?

Are you stepping outside your comfort zone?

Or are just playing up to your potential?

Are you consistently making the hard choice to be great?

Or are you making the easy choice and just going along with the crowd?

Are you putting yourself in a position to meet your expectations?

Or better yet, are you putting yourself in a position to exceed those expectations?

No matter what your big goal is, you need to start setting higher expectations for yourself and holding yourself accountable to meeting and exceeding your goals. You'll be amazed at what can happen when you believe in your ability to achieve all the success you've dreamed of.

2. THE 10,000 HOUR RULE

To get to the highest level of women's hockey, you have to be willing to commit the time and effort necessary to get there. But just how much time does it really take to become an elite female hockey player? Experts say that in order to achieve mastery in a particular activity, you need to spend 10,000 hours working on it. That's a lot of time, especially when you think about the fact that most girls hockey players are really only on the ice for between 5-7 hours per week during the season and far less than that in the off-season.

Here's how those 10,000 hours might breakdown for an aspiring girls hockey player looking to make it to the highest levels of hockey:

If you spent 10 hours per week training for 50 weeks of the year, you would collect 500 hours of training time per year. At that rate, it would take you 20 years to reach a "mastery" level. Considering most girls hockey players don't start playing until 7 or 8 years old, that might be too late.

If you spent 15 hours per week training for 50 weeks of the year, you would collect 750 hours of training time per year. At that rate, it would only take you 15 years to reach the elite levels. This means that you don't need to start quite as early, but it is still a long time.

If you spent 20 hours per week training for 50 weeks of the year, you would collect 1000 hours of training time per year. At that rate, it would only take you 10 years to reach the elite levels. It would be 10 years of intense hard work, but you could get it done. Since most girls hockey players decide that they want to become elite players around the age of 13 or 14, it is realistic that starting this intensity of training schedule could get you to your goal by the time you were 23 or 24, which is the average age of the women's national team members.

Whether you start when you are 5 or 15, the reality is that it is going to be pretty hard to collect all these hours training only on the ice. The time and energy you spend training off the ice definitely counts too. It is going to be virtually impossible to find 3 hours to train on the ice every day, but finding 90 minutes on the ice and 90 minutes off the ice is pretty realistic. Certainly by the time you get to college hockey, 3 or 4 hours of training on and off the ice every day is the standard.

Becoming the best female hockey player possible takes a lot of time. But if you start building your foundation for elite performance on and off the ice at an early age, you give yourself the time you need to be great.

3. 7 SKILLS EVERY PLAYER MUST IMPROVE & WHY

I recently had the opportunity to watch two of the top-ranked women's college hockey teams in the country, University of Wisconsin and the University of Minnesota-Duluth, face-off against each other in a double-header. As someone who used to play against these teams years ago, it is always amazing to see how the level of speed, skill and strength shown by the players has improved overall. But by far the most impressive thing I noticed while watching these two teams play was the extremely high degree of execution. In fact, when someone made a pass that was slightly less than perfect or missed their responsibility on the back-check, it stuck out like a sore thumb. The truly amazing thing was that both teams were missing a few players who are currently getting ready to play for their respective Olympic teams. I can only imagine how much more impressive the game would have been if those players had been in the line-up as well.

For these two games, I sat way up at the top of the stands with the simple goal of figuring out what these players and teams were doing that really separated them from the level of play I watch on a daily basis, which range from U12 all the way up to U19 and high school hockey.

So I created a list of “The Top 7 Things That Every Player Can Improve On” on my observations during these two games.

4. TALK!: The first thing that struck me is how much the players communicated with each other out on the ice. Most of the time when I watch games the players are virtually silent out on the ice. During these games, the players called for every pass, defensemen communicated with their partners and the goalies helped the defense out on the in-zone. Talking out on the ice only makes everyone's job easier.
2. Stick On The Ice: This is another big one that I am constantly reminding my players about. Not only did these elite players have their stick on the ice right when they knew the pass or shot was coming, they had it there even earlier. The game was moving so fast that many of the passes would have been missed if the players were holding the stick up by their waist - but they were always ready.
3. Follow Shots To The Net: Quite often when I am watching girls' games, players will take a shot and then fade off to the corner or end up below the goal-line afterwards. These women took their shots, crashed the net with speed and stopped right in the crease. They didn't stand around and stare at their shot - they kept their feet moving and went to the net.
4. Feet Always Moving Along Boards: Whether it was a winger opening up on the boards on the breakout or a defensemen battling for the puck along the wall, these elite players always kept their feet moving. Standing still or gliding along the boards really only ever works in the power-play - most of the time you want to keep your feet moving to avoid a check or avoid getting a penalty.

3. 7 SKILLS EVERY PLAYER MUST IMPROVE & WHY

5. Lateral Movement On Attack: I am constantly reinforcing the concept of moving laterally in the neutral zone and offensive zone with my forwards. While being fast in a straight line is important, it's your ability to move laterally with speed and power that will allow you to separate yourself from your check and get more opportunities to score. These players were constantly skating on the diagonal, looking for shorter passes and creating time and space with their lateral movement.
6. Defense Get Feet Moving With Puck: This is another one that I am constantly reminding my defensemen about. The defense in these women's game always had their feet moving up ice when they made a pass. Sometimes it seems like young players over-think their decisions on defense and stop their feet moving before making a pass. This leaves them no opportunity to recover quickly if the pass is off target. And it is always easier to pass to a moving target when you are moving as well.
7. Patience With The Puck: This was the one thing that really separated these elite players from the younger players I watch everyday. When they had the puck on their stick, they never panicked. Even when they were under pressure, they kept their head up and their feet moving and looked for their best option. This is a skill that all players who aspire to get to the next level much cultivate.

By improving in these 7 areas and focusing on executing every skill to the best of your ability, you will take a step closer to becoming an elite player one day too.

4. THE WEIGHT ISSUE IN GIRLS' HOCKEY

I know this topic makes most coaches, parents and players uncomfortable. But weight and body image are such big issues for girls' hockey players, and ones that are often swept under the rug by coaches and parents, and constantly thought about by young female players, that I had to break the silence.

Unlike boys' hockey players who all want to grow up to be 6'2" and 200 lbs, girls' hockey players don't want to or need to muscle-bound, heavy or big to compete at the highest level of our sport. In fact, sometimes being a bigger player in the female game works against you. I remember getting more than a few penalties back in high school and college when much smaller players ran into me and fell over, and I ended up in the box. Back when I played in college and in the elite women's hockey leagues here in Canada, I weighed 165lbs and am just slightly less than that now. I have absolutely no problem telling people how much I weigh now, but it was a much touchier subject back when I was growing up as a young female athlete.

4. THE WEIGHT ISSUE IN GIRLS' HOCKEY

I was always a big kid growing up (a fat kid really) and throughout high school and college, I definitely found myself being consumed by the numbers on the scale. I knew I was never going to be 120lbs, but like most of the girls I knew, I was very concerned about how much I weighed. I wouldn't have been comfortable telling people what I weighed back then. It wasn't that I was embarrassed, it was just that most of my close friends, whether they were hockey players or not, were much smaller than me. To be honest, I just wanted to fit in - and I also wanted to be the best player possible. I knew that I had to train hard off the ice and fuel my body with high-energy food so that I could compete at the highest level possible, but there was always that little voice in the back of my mind saying that I was too big and that I would play better, and look better, if I was smaller.

No one told me that directly, but I watched TV and read magazines and I saw that most of the "cute" girls looked like they were the size of my leg. Girls are constantly seeing images of "super-skinny size zero" celebrities and there are far too many "Next Top Model" and weight loss shows on TV. Research shows that that 55% of 16-year-old girls believe they are too fat, when in reality, only 20% of them are even overweight. These stats and these shows raise a serious red flag about how this "ideal" body image influences girls' hockey players.

Players are always asking me how they can make their legs smaller and get rid of their muscles. And these are some of the top players in their age group, This obviously isn't going to work to their advantage physically, but it is even more damaging psychologically. Despite what girls see in the fashion magazines and on TV, there aren't many women who are 5 foot 9 and weigh 100 pounds. And there definitely aren't any elite female players that fit this "ideal" - the average weight on the National Team is around 150 pounds.

I wish I could sit here and tell you this isn't a problem in girls' hockey. I wish I could tell players that they never worry about their weight again and know that the number on the scale has absolutely nothing to do with their ability as a player or their worth as a person. But I know that my influence is tiny compared to the power of mainstream media. I wish I didn't have to listen to young players talking about how "fat" they are (when they aren't) and worrying so much about how they look in their jeans.

But I also know exactly what it's like to be a 15 year old girl who just wants to fit in and I can't blame girls for this type of behavior. I hope that by talking about this issue with players, parent and coaches in this way, and on a regular basis, that I empower just one or two girls to know that it is OK to be a strong, powerful woman and that training and competing in the sport you love is much more important than your jean size.

5. COMMITTING RANDOM ACTS OF EXCELLENCE

After running workshops for over 500 girls hockey players at six different regional tryouts across Ontario this fall, I came up with a brand-new term for players who SAY they want to get to the next level, but don't DO what it takes to get there.

"Random Acts Of Excellence" is the term I came up with to describe most of the players I meet when I am doing workshops at different tournaments, camps and tryouts. These players are really motivated and excited to do whatever it takes to stand out at the tryout or tournament. They ask me what they should eat, what training they should do, and how they should prepare mentally etc. But as soon as the "big event" is done, they go back to doing whatever it takes to get by. They fall into the pattern of just doing enough to perform well, instead of pushing themselves to be great. And it's committing these random acts of excellence that is ultimately going to keep them from getting to the next level.

You can't just decide that you want to work hard, get focused and do all the little things you need to do off the ice to perform your best when there is a big event coming up. Because excellence is not a "sometimes" thing...it's an "all the time" thing. It's easy to get excited, motivated and determined to work harder, dream bigger and take action when a big opportunity is in front of you. It's A LOT harder to be dedicated, passionate and committed when you are heading off to another weekday practice after a long day of school and a long night of homework ahead.

Great players choose excellence all the time.

They warm-up before every game - and practice.

They train off the ice - when no one else is making them but themselves.

They drink enough water and eat well - without being reminded constantly.

They set goals - and hold themselves accountable to meeting them.

They don't just "turn it up" when there is a big prize on the horizon. They "turn it up" all the time. Because that's what it really takes to realize your dreams on the ice. A constant and CONSISTENT commitment to being your best each and every day.

So if you truly want to become the best player possible, don't just commit random acts of excellence. Make sure you take action each and every day towards your dreams.

6. THE WORST 4-LETTER WORD IN HOCKEY

I'm already seeing a disturbing pattern emerge with many of the girls hockey players I am working with this season - and the regular season hasn't even started yet. Whether during practices, games or off-ice training, every single day I hear players saying the most dangerous four-letter word in girls hockey...CAN'T.

"I can't crossover that way".

"I can't shoot a backhand".

"I can't do push-ups".

To be honest, "can't" is one of the most frustrating words to a coach. It's not that the players can't do the skills at all - they just can't do them as well as they would like to be able to quite yet. As soon as a player uses the word "can't", they are giving themselves permission to underachieve. After all, if they already know they can't do it, why even try?

I always ask my players to think back to when they first starting playing hockey. Back then, they really couldn't do much of anything. But they didn't put themselves down constantly by saying that they couldn't do anything. They kept trying to skate, stop and shoot until they could do it. But now that they have been playing for a while, they expect much more from themselves and get frustrated that they aren't as good as they would like to be and often get stuck in the negative state of mind. Lack of confidence is by far the biggest problem among girls hockey players. And I simply won't allow players to chip away at their confidence by using negative language. Ideally, they wouldn't use the word "can't" at all. But I know, having been a young female hockey player who held myself to a very high standard, that the journey towards positive thinking can be a long one.

That's why I start off small with my players. Every time I hear them use the word "can't", I make them to add a very powerful word to the end of the sentence..."YET".

I can't do push-ups....YET.

I can't shoot a backhand...YET.

I can't do crossovers that way...YET.

It's a small step in the right direction, but it will make a huge difference in the long run. After all, confidence and self-esteem aren't built in a day.

If you are a girls hockey coach or parent, please try this strategy out with your players. Remember - every little bit of positivity helps.

7. #1 HOCKEY PET PEEVE

Anyone who has ever seen the movie “Miracle”, remembers the “Again” skating scene. After a lacklustre game, Coach Herb Brooks lines his team up on the goal-line and has them skate lengths of the ice until the players can barely move. I have to admit - I love the movie, but I hate that scene. That memorable moment glorifies my biggest hockey pet peeve - “bag skating”. The truth is that skating players into the ground isn’t going to cut it if you want to ensure that your players are as energetic and explosive in the second overtime period as they were in the second period. Players are definitely working “hard” when they have to drag themselves off the ice after a skating session, but they should be working “smart” instead.

It is important for players to learn to push themselves when they are already fatigued, but there needs to be a plan. Your on-ice conditioning sessions must be as well planned as your skill sessions if you want your players to perform their best and peak in time for the playoff run. The last 10 minutes of each practice session present a perfect opportunity for coaches to focus on improving the conditioning levels of their players, as long as they adhere to the most fundamental principle of hockey-specific conditioning - interval training.

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”) interspersed with periods of sitting or standing on the bench (“rest”). For example, if a shift is 45 seconds in length, and the player rests for 1 minute and 30 seconds between shifts, the work-to-rest interval is 1:2 - the rest period is twice as long as the work period.

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 when used at the beginning of the season. Proper interval-based conditioning relies on using the appropriate work-to-rest ratios at the appropriate times.

Most minor hockey teams have very little time on the ice prior to playing their first games of the season. As a result, coaches try to “whip” their players into shape by using high-intensity conditioning sessions. By doing too much too soon, players don’t develop a solid base of conditioning and are at risk for injury.

You should start your season-long conditioning program with ‘higher’ ratios (such as 1:3) and work your 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.

8. GETTING OVER GETTING CUT

Every time tryouts for next season finish up, there are some aspiring hockey players with broken hearts out there. I've been cut my fair share of times in my hockey career and I know how much it sucks. But one time in particular hurt more than the rest. Five years ago, I had what I thought was my best hockey season ever. I was playing alongside and competing with the national team players on a daily basis and not surprisingly, every single aspect of my game improved. I was pretty excited when the coach came up to me at a practice late in the year and all but "guaranteed" me a spot on the team for the next season.

I was more than a little bit surprised when the coach called me into the office a few days after the season was done and cut me from the team. I felt like I had been kicked in the stomach and had the wind knocked out of me. I was angry, frustrated and I felt hopeless. And the worst part is that I didn't even get a chance to fight for my spot. Even though I had played so well, and slowly worked my way up the depth chart by dedicating myself completely to become the best player possible, I wasn't even invited back for a tryout. To say that it stung would be a huge understatement. I was devastated. I moved back across the country, continued to work hard and dream big, but it took me a while to get over being cut from the team of my dreams.

When it comes to hockey or life, nothing is ever guaranteed. You may think you are a lock to make the team, and then get the rug pulled out from under you. Or you may just not be good enough to be on the team of your dreams...yet. As a player, it's easy to get frustrated and wonder why you put all that effort in for nothing. As a parent, you are at a loss for how to help your child get through this challenging time.

The truth is, whether you made the team or not, your next question has to be, "What Do I Do Now?" If you didn't make the team you wanted to make, it doesn't mean that you should just coast through the summer and not work hard to be your best. And if you did make the team, you aren't off the hook either. I am sure your coach expects you to come back in September in great shape.

Great hockey players are made away from the rink in the summer. If a player wants to reach the elite level, their dedication to becoming the best athlete possible off the ice in the summer is what will make them the best player possible on the ice in the fall. That doesn't mean that you need to train 4+ hours a day this summer like the national team members, but you do need to move yourself at least one step closer to your hockey dreams every day if you want to achieve them. That might mean taking 100 or 1000 shots a day in your driveway, playing another sport regularly to stay top shape or committing to an off-ice training program for the summer. Whatever it is, keep in mind that reaching your full potential on the ice and realizing all of your hockey dreams never comes easy. And no matter what team you are playing on next season, it's your commitment to becoming the best player possible this summer that will make you unstoppable in September and set the stage for the rest of your hockey career.

9. OLYMPIC STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Last season, I had the opportunity to watch the US Women's National Team play twice while at an event in Minnesota. At each game, the stands were packed with girls who dream of playing at the elite level one day. These young players were amazed by how hard the US women shot the puck. They were all talking about how they needed to work on their shots a lot more. While it's true that most girls don't spend enough time practicing shooting, improving their technique is only part of the solution. The big reason why the US players can fire the puck like they do is that they are just plain STRONG.

I watched them workout one morning and their focus and determination in the weight room was the same as it was out on the ice. They were "all business". After their off-ice training session was done, and the players went off to get ready for their practice, I had a quick peek at their latest fitness testing results that were posted on the wall of the training room. All I can say is WOW - the numbers were impressive.

To give you an idea of how strong these players are:

=> The majority of them can bench press their own body-weight.

=> Some of them can squat 1.5 times their own body-weight.

But the one number I saw that made my jaw-drop was...

=> One of the players can do 29 chin-ups!

The bench press and squat totals may not mean a lot to you, but that chin-up score should really impress you. The chin-up is one of the best body-weight strength training exercises around. But it takes time for young players to be able to do their first chin-up - let alone 29 of them!

The elite players didn't just pick up some weights one day and get this strong by chance. You can't become an elite player, and train as hard as these women do, without having a foundation of strength and stability in place first. You need to start with body-weight strength training like they did and work your way up to this elite level.

I'm not saying that you need to be able to do 29 chin-ups to play at the next level (the average is much closer to 10), but the earlier you can start building your strength off the ice, the better.

10. THE WORST FIGHT IN GIRLS' HOCKEY

Who played worse? Me or you? Why are girls' hockey players even asking themselves this question? I recently heard a story from a parent that was both shocking and familiar. After a recent rash of tough losses, the team came into the dressing and started to have a competition about who played the worst. I was taken by surprise at first, but then when I thought about it, I realized that I have seen this with teams many times before and that I was guilty of the same thing back when I was a young player.

After losing a tough game, most girls will lay the blame squarely on themselves. While this is better than taking no responsibility for the loss and blaming your teammates/coach/ref, it does absolutely nothing to increase your confidence or help the team. You may have played a bad game. You may have had your worst game ever. But why would you want to get in a fight over who was the worst? Why would you want to "be the best" at "being the worst"?

Sometimes it is a case of "fishing for compliments". You may have played a decent game (or even a great game), but you start talking about how badly you played so that your teammates/parents/coaches will tell you how well you played. While this may boost your confidence, telling yourself and others that you played badly (even when you didn't) has major negative effects. If you keep telling yourself and others that you played horribly, you are eventually going to start believing it. But in the majority of cases, the game of "who played worse" usually starts with one player and causes a domino effect.

One player comes in to the room, says she played horribly, and then the rest of the players follow along. It is an interesting and destructive phenomenon, especially when it is one of the stronger players on the team who starts it all off. Think about it - if one of the best players on your team comes into the room after the game and talks about how badly she played, how do you think the weaker players on the team are going to react? A lot of the time, the weaker players will say to themselves, "If she (the strong player) played badly, how bad that does that make me?"

You may have played your worst game ever, but you get ZERO benefit from dwelling on it. I remember the worst game I ever played like it was yesterday, but that doesn't mean that I think about it every time I head out on the ice. Even though I played absolutely horribly that game, it doesn't do me or my teammates any good to relive it again and again. There are going to be times when you lose. And there will be times when you lose badly. Instead of competing with each other over who was the worst, talk about what went right.

One strategy I like to use is having a "buddy" for every game. The players are paired up before the game and they have to pick one thing that their "buddy" does during the game that is really great. Even when you have a really bad game, I guarantee you did something right out there. Instead of fighting, help your teammates out and focus on the positives. It is a really hard thing to do when you lose a tough game or are in a slump, but it's what you need to do to turn your performance around.

11. NEXT TOP MODEL OR NEXT GREAT PLAYER?

Have you noticed how many of the “Next Top Model” reality shows are on TV these days? Girls can barely open a magazine or turn on the television without being bombarded by images of “super-skinny” and “size zero” celebrities. A recent university research study found that 50% of 16-year-old girls believe they are too fat, when in reality, only 25% of them are overweight. These stats and these shows raise a serious red flag about how this “ideal” body image influences girls who want to become the “Next Great Female Hockey Player”.

The powerful influence of pop culture may lead players to question whether they want to stay involved in a sport that is not only traditionally “male”, but also requires them to build physical strength. Girls’ hockey players may start to question whether they can be the best player on the ice and still fit into the “skinny size zero” ideal.

The truth is that girls’ hockey players CAN’T have it both ways. If a girl wants to be the next great player, she has to train like one. When a player says that she doesn’t want to strength train because she is worried about her legs getting big, what she is really saying is that she doesn’t want to play at the elite levels of women’s hockey.

This is a choice that all aspiring girls’ hockey players must make. Strength training is going to build muscle. It’s NOT going to turn you into “Quad-zilla”, but your legs will get bigger and stronger. And the best female hockey players in the world are incredibly strong both on and off the ice. Despite what girls see in the fashion magazines and on TV, there aren’t many women who are 5 foot 9 and weigh 100 pounds. And there definitely aren’t any elite female players that fit this “ideal” - the average weight on the Canadian and United States National Team’s is 150 pounds.

The best female players in the world are NOT “skinny size zeroes”, but they epitomize what the true “ideals” of society should be. They are both strong and feminine. This may not make them the ideal runway models, but it does make them terrific role models.

Girls hockey players can help to redefine the female ideal, but they must first make a choice.

So is it going to be...

Runway Model or Role Model?

“Next Top Model” or “Next Great Player”?

12. #1 INJURY IN GIRLS' HOCKEY

There is an injury epidemic happening right now in girls' hockey and one injury in particular is having the most devastating effects of all

The rate of concussions in the female game is alarmingly high. According to a recent study done in the NCAA, the varsity sport with the highest concussion rate by far is not men's hockey or men's football. It's women's ice hockey.

In fact, female hockey players are two times more likely to suffer a concussion than male hockey players and almost three times more likely than football players.

At the university level, female hockey players are suffering 1 concussion for every 1000 "exposures" to the game - with each practice and game counting as one exposure. On a team of 20 players, that means 1 concussion for every 50 exposures.

Although statistics on younger players are harder to come by, I would guess that their concussion rate would be just as high (and maybe even higher) than with the women. Girls are having more exposures than ever to the sport - they compete on school teams, club teams, travel teams, Olympic development teams and weekend tournament teams. Most girls rep teams are on the ice at least 100 times a season - so that averages out to 2 concussions per season per team.

Pretty amazing for a sport that doesn't allow full body-checking, isn't it?

It's true that these particular stats came from one study and don't necessarily represent a trend across the entire female hockey world. But the concussion stories I hear from girls' hockey parents, players and coaches on a daily basis tell me that these numbers are accurate.

I've heard heart-wrenching stories from parents who have had to help their 13 year-olds cope with the lingering effects of a head injury for over 6 months. I've heard from 16 year-olds who have had to quit hockey after suffering from multiple concussions. One university coach even told me that her team had 12 concussions in just one season!

There is a huge debate going on right now in the world of female hockey about WHY these injuries are happening and IF the research numbers are accurate.

We can debate the statistics and the causes until we are blue in the face. But I'm not personally willing to wait for more girls to suffer serious head injuries to support the numbers before I start taking action. And you shouldn't wait either. Something needs to be done to protect girls from the devastating effects of these injuries.

The concussion problem in girls' hockey needs a solution NOW.

12. #1 INJURY IN GIRLS' HOCKEY

Here are two suggestions on how we can help to prevent concussions in girls hockey players.

1) Girls need to be taught how to take a hit.

In every girls' or women's game I have ever watched or played, there is always at least one instance where I think, "Good thing we don't have full body-checking because that player would have been run-over". There is no doubt that we need to teach girls how to play heads-up hockey, but we also need to teach them how to take a hit properly. If more coaches, teams and associations start showing girls how to protect themselves along the boards and in front of the net, it will go a long way towards preventing concussions, as well as a whole slew of other injuries.

2) Girls have to be better prepared physically.

A lack of proper strength and conditioning is another big reason for the alarmingly high rate of concussions in girls' hockey.

Most girls hockey players stand up "too tall" on the ice, which leaves them in an unbalanced and vulnerable position. They lack the strength and stability in their legs to stay in a low athletic position. Developing great single-leg strength and balance allows players to stay low and protect themselves from both intentional and accidental contact.

By keeping their knees bent, hips back and chest up, players will be in a much better position to protect themselves out on the ice. Once girls can hold a low balanced position on one leg for over 30 seconds, they can challenge themselves by having a partner try to push them off balance in that single-leg position. Developing this ability to fight for their balance will help players to hold their own out on the ice when facing similar physical demands.

The female game is only going to get faster and more physical in the next few years and girls have to be ready to face those demands. Building single-leg strength and balance, as well as teaching girls how to take a hit properly, are two simple and effective ways for girls hockey players to decrease their chances of sustaining concussions and other serious injuries.

It is our responsibility as coaches and parents to ensure that our girls are physically prepared each and every time they step out on the ice. Instead of debating whether or not head injuries are a problem in women's hockey, we all need to be part of the concussion solution.

BONUS ARTICLE: THE WORST GAME I EVER PLAYED

It was almost 4 years ago to the day that I played the worst hockey game of my life. I can remember every painstaking detail. The bad passes, the giveaways at the blue-line, scoring on my own net - it was horrible. They always say that hindsight is 20/20, but looking back on it, I know exactly where it all went wrong.

It was a long road trip. We had a 7 hour bus ride to get to the rink and there was a lot of snow. Never a good thing when you are driving north in Ontario. We knew that we would probably end up pulling into the rink parking lot with only minutes to spare before the warm-up began - and we were right.

We quickly dragged all the equipment off the bus and got dressed as fast as we could. Miraculously, we managed to go from being on the bus to hitting the ice for warm-up in less than 10 minutes flat. Within the first few minutes of warm-up, I knew this wasn't going to be my best game. I was too stiff, too sore and nowhere near ready to give 100% out on the ice.

Let me backtrack a little bit. My worst game ever happened 5 months after I had major back surgery. One of the discs of my back exploded the season before and I was still on the (long) road to recovery. I couldn't bear the thought of not playing the entire season, so I was on the ice just 2 months after my surgery. Not one of my smartest decisions, but I figured if I could walk pain-free, I could play pain-free.

Unfortunately, walking and playing elite women's hockey are entirely different. I had (and continue) to have nerve damage in one of my legs from my injury, so I couldn't even feel the outside edge on my left skate. I couldn't sit on the bench in between shifts because all of the muscles in my back would seize up in seconds. I had to lie flat on my back in the dressing during the intermissions because sitting down meant I might not be able to get back up. I really shouldn't have been playing, but no one was going to stop me from playing the game I loved.

Someone really should have stopped me in that one game. Just put me out of my misery. We had no time to do an off-ice warm-up before hitting the ice, which was the first kiss-of-death for me. I had to do at least a 15 minute warm-up before every ice session to feel even remotely comfortable out on the ice. With no warm-up at all, I knew I was going to be in trouble.

On the first shift of the game, I went to transition from forwards to backwards to defend a 2-on-2 rush and I completely wiped out. It was like there was a sniper up in the stands took me out - I fell for no reason whatsoever. Luckily, my D partner and goalie were able to save the day, but I felt like a complete idiot.

And it only got worse from there.

BONUS ARTICLE: THE WORST GAME I EVER PLAYED

I directly caused 5 more breakaways by either wiping out on routine plays at the blueline or making weak passes in the direction of my D partner. The other team scored on 2 of those mistakes.

The final straw was when I ended up scoring on my own net. Normally, I would have dove across the crease to block the shot, but I knew that would cause excruciating pain. So I reached out with my stick instead and ended up deflecting the puck in my own net.

At first, I was furious. I was used to being able to do all of these moves effortlessly and now I had lost control over my game. I hated playing badly and letting down my teammates. I didn't want to use my surgery as an excuse, so I kept playing through the pain and the embarrassment. My teammates didn't say a single thing to me despite the fact I was single-handedly losing the game - probably for fear that I would completely lose it on them. And they were probably right.

But after 2 periods of this horrible display of hockey skill, it became downright funny. No matter how hard I tried, how much I pushed, how positive I tried to stay, how much my teammates tried to help me out, I couldn't do a single thing right out on the ice. I am sure that no one would have blamed me for just going to the dressing room after the first period and staying there for the rest of the game.

So why am I telling you all this?

Because there are going to be days when you can't do a single thing right out on the ice. You will score on your own net, you'll pass to the other team and you'll fall over for no reason. No matter how hard you try, you just won't be able to put it together.

Maybe you'll be dealing with an injury, had a horrible day at school or had a fight with your friend on the way to the rink. Any one of these could be an excuse to play your worst game ever.

Don't make excuses. Fight and claw your way through it. It says so much about you as a player to be willing to battle hard through your worst game ever instead of giving up. You can't be great all the time. You can't even be good some of the time. But you need to work your hardest no matter what all of the team.

BONUS ARTICLE: WHY SHE'S ON THE TEAM

This past summer, a group of motivated players and I headed out to the park for a workout. This was the first time we'd done a outdoor session as a group and they had no idea what to expect. I had a really tough workout planned, which finished off with sprints up a ski hill. I knew the hill sprints would be the hardest part of the workout, but I had no idea that hill would provide them with such a great lesson.

After we had done 8 hard circuits of speed and strength training, we headed over to the hill. And just as we were walking over, another girl got off her bike and started running up the hill too. When we got a little closer, I realized she was one of the players from the Under-18 provincial team this past season. During one of her rests between sprints, we talked about the upcoming provincial team tryouts, which started two days later, and I asked her how often she came out to train in the park. She said, "I come out and run these hills every weekend", before sprinting up again.

In between our training group's sprints, one of my players asked where she played, and when I said she plays junior, was on the provincial team and was trying out for the team again in two days, they were understandably impressed. While her hockey accomplishments are definitely noteworthy, I'm sure what really impressed them was that she was out there running up the ski hill, by herself (on a holiday) two days before her tryouts started. When I said that she came out to run the hill every weekend, one of the girls said, "That's probably why she's on the provincial team." Exactly.

Training when no one is watching or cheering you on says a lot about a player. It's one of those "little" choices that sets you apart. Sure, the girls I am working with are training as a group and I am there leading them through the workouts, but they have made the choice to get better this summer. And I could tell that the fact they were running the same hill as this "elite" player meant a lot.

But here's the best part of the story. When our training group got together at the gym for our next session last night, that same player was there again, doing her fitness testing for the provincial team. And as she was doing her final running test, and blowing away the competition, one of the girls in my training group said, "That's because she runs that hill every week".

Getting to the elite level is no big mystery. If you want to be great, you have to be willing to do the things that others aren't. Like running up a ski hill, by yourself, on a holiday, two days before tryouts. Those are the kind of "little" choices that make you great.

EXCELLENCE IS A CHOICE AND A DAILY HABIT.