

Sore or Injured? Knowing the Difference Can Save Your Season

As a hockey player, being sore is part of the game.

Hard practices, strength training, tournaments, long travel days and the physical demands of hockey can leave players feeling stiff, tired and achy. Some soreness is completely normal—and learning to manage it is an important part of becoming a better athlete.

But there is an important difference between **being sore and being injured**.

The problem is that athletes don't always recognize that difference. A player may assume that pain is simply something they need to "push through," when in reality, their body is giving them a warning that something needs attention.

For coaches, recognizing the difference can help protect a player's health, performance and, ultimately, their season.

What Is Normal Post-Training Soreness?

After a demanding practice, game or workout, muscles can feel tired, tight or sore. This is particularly common when the training load has increased or when an athlete is doing something they aren't accustomed to.

Normal post-training soreness typically:

- Develops gradually rather than appearing suddenly
- Is felt more generally through a muscle or group of muscles
- May be worse the day after training
- Improves as the athlete warms up and moves
- Does not significantly change how the athlete skates or plays
- Gradually improves with recovery

A player who is generally stiff after a hard practice but moves normally once they warm up is experiencing something very different from a player who has sharp pain every time they push off, turn or shoot.

Soreness is usually a response to training. Pain that changes how an athlete moves deserves more attention.

Hockey Comes With Its Own Aches and Pains

Hockey places unique demands on the body.

Repeated skating, acceleration, deceleration, changes of direction, shooting, checking and maintaining a low skating position can create recurring stress on certain areas.

Players may experience:

- Tight hips or hip flexors
- Groin or adductor soreness
- Low-back stiffness
- Knee discomfort
- Shoulder or upper-back tightness
- Wrist or forearm soreness
- General muscle fatigue

Not every ache means an injury. However, **repeated or progressively worsening discomfort shouldn't simply be accepted as "part of hockey."**

If the same problem keeps returning, particularly if it begins affecting skating mechanics, shooting, strength or confidence, it is worth investigating.

Warning Signs of an Actual Injury

There are certain signs that should make a coach—and the athlete—pause.

Pay particular attention when:

Pain is sudden.

The player remembers a specific moment when something happened: a twist, collision, awkward landing, sudden pull or impact.

Pain is sharp or localized.

Rather than general muscle soreness, the player can point to a specific area that hurts.

Pain changes movement.

The player starts limping, avoiding a particular skating stride, protecting an arm or changing how they shoot or turn.

There is swelling or bruising.

These can be signs that more than normal training soreness is occurring.

Strength or function has changed.

The player can't push off normally, grip the stick, raise an arm, squat, jump or perform another movement they normally can.

The pain is getting worse.

An injury that becomes progressively more painful during practice or from one day to the next shouldn't be treated like routine soreness.

Pain isn't improving with recovery.

If rest, sleep and normal recovery aren't making the problem better, it's time to take a closer look.

So, Should the Player Keep Training?

This is where things can become difficult for coaches.

The answer isn't always simply **"play" or "don't play."**

Sometimes the appropriate response is to modify the workload.

For example, an athlete with general muscle soreness may be able to participate normally after an appropriate warm-up.

Another athlete may be able to participate but should reduce certain activities—perhaps limiting contact, reducing shooting volume or modifying conditioning.

And another athlete may need to stop training altogether and be assessed.

The important question isn't simply:

"Can you play?"

A better question is:

"Can you participate without making the problem worse or changing how you move?"

When to Modify Training

Modification can be appropriate when an athlete has mild symptoms but can still move normally and safely.

Depending on the situation, a coach may consider:

- Reducing practice intensity
- Reducing repetitions or skating volume
- Removing contact or high-risk drills temporarily
- Avoiding movements that reproduce pain
- Increasing recovery time
- Monitoring the athlete more closely

The goal isn't to keep an athlete out unnecessarily.

The goal is to **keep them training while respecting what their body is telling them.**

When Should a Player See a Sports Therapist or Medical Professional?

If you're unsure whether something is soreness or injury, that's exactly when an assessment can be valuable.

A sports therapist, athletic therapist, physician or other qualified healthcare professional can help determine what may be contributing to the problem and whether the athlete can safely continue participating.

An assessment is particularly important when:

- Pain is persistent or worsening
- There was a specific injury event
- There is significant swelling or bruising
- The athlete has lost strength or range of motion
- Normal skating or hockey movements are affected
- The same problem keeps returning
- The athlete is compensating or changing their mechanics
- The player simply doesn't feel right

And some situations require **immediate medical attention**, particularly significant head injuries, loss of consciousness, neurological symptoms, severe pain, major deformity, inability to bear weight or other concerning symptoms.

Coaches Don't Need to Diagnose Injuries

One of the most important things for coaches to understand is that **you don't have to diagnose the problem.**

Your role is to recognize when something has changed.

Ask the player:

"When did it start?"

"Did something specific happen?"

"Does it hurt during skating or only afterward?"

"Is it getting better or worse?"

"Are you moving differently because of it?"

Then observe.

Is the player skating differently? Avoiding contact? Favouring one side? Holding their stick differently? Struggling with a movement they normally perform easily?

Those observations can provide valuable information to the healthcare professional assessing the athlete.

Playing Through Soreness Isn't the Same as Playing Through an Injury

Hockey players are competitive. That's one of the reasons they love the game.

They want to practice. They want to compete. They don't want to lose their spot in the lineup or let their teammates down.

But toughness isn't ignoring every warning sign your body gives you.

Playing through normal soreness may be part of training. Playing through an injury without understanding what is happening can make a manageable problem much more difficult.

The objective isn't to keep players off the ice.

It's to keep them **healthy enough to stay on the ice.**

For players, coaches and parents, learning to recognize the difference between soreness and injury is an important part of long-term athlete development.

Sometimes the smartest decision you can make for a player's season is knowing when to push—and when to pause.