



AARON LENK PHOTOS

Feel the burn: Parker Phillips of the Amateur Penguins hangs on as the Blade speeds up at Athletic Element.

Key element

Blade Hockey Treadmill helps reshape training for local players

STORY BY BRIAN GRAHAM

Imagine having an opportunity to train like an NHL star at your disposal. That thought is becoming a realization in Pittsburgh these days.

Athletic Element, a state-of-the-art sports performance facility in Bridgeville, houses a piece of equipment and training curriculum that could help revolutionize how Pittsburgh-area hockey players train and improve their skills.

The driving attraction for local hockey talent is the Blade Hockey Treadmill. Manufactured by Woodway, the "Blade" is an 8-foot wide treadmill with a skating surface. It reaches speeds up to 20 mph and can incline to 35 degrees.

The "Blade," which costs in excess of \$100,000, is the first of its kind in the

northeast United States and already has received rave reviews since Athletic Element's grand opening in June.

"When I first went there and I looked at it, I didn't think there was any way I'd be able to get on it," said Ryan Tingle, a junior on the Peters Township hockey team. "I did it and it really raised my confidence. Now, I get off it and can't wait to do it again."

Tingle visited the facility after his father, Rick, the head coach at Peters Township, offered the opportunity to all of his players. The elder Tingle is more than happy with the results thus far and said he's already noticing the improvement in preseason camp.

Cameras are stationed in front of, and on the sides of the "Blade" so that skaters can monitor their progress and pinpoint any flaws with the help of train-

ers.

The "Blade" has created quite the buzz in the Pittsburgh area. It's not, however, the only driving force behind Athletic Element's early success. A team of trainers with strong resumes is attempting to change the way athletes sculpt their bodies.

David Sampson, the facility's managing owner, and Chad Williams, the sports performance director, have gone to great lengths to drive the point across that speed, agility and power are the main ingredients for success on any athletic surface. Old-school weight lifting is out.

"I've gone through great pains to determine how to train an athlete to be more explosive overall," said Williams, who has studied sports performance and movement for 22 years. "Today, kids

are forced to condition year-round and most of them are not ready for it. Most kids begin lifting too early and too heavy."

Williams and Sampson's plan of "re-engineering" is a three- to four-month process in which they say an athlete will notice a quicker first step, less hesitation and better balance. The idea behind the methodology is to enable an athlete to gain explosiveness and increase strength, speed and agility.

Dylan Reese, an Upper St. Clair graduate and Phoenix Coyotes prospect, spent this summer working out at Athletic Element and said he plans to take his experience to the NHL-ranks and recruit other Pittsburgh-area players to change their workout plans next summer.

"I think it's an exceptional facility if you're a hockey player," he said. "I spent the last four or five years away from Pittsburgh training out west, but AE provides a better atmosphere and more of the hockey-specific training I needed."

Reese felt comfortable with the training regimen Williams devised. He said Williams took to heart the recommendations the Coyotes requested and worked to form the perfect workout plan.

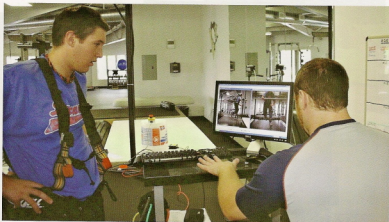
"I think after training at a bunch of places, I'm a pretty good judge of what I need and what is state-of-the-art," he said. "AE, I thought, has a great blend of that and I trust them and can already see the progress in the workouts I've been through."

Professional prospects and high school athletes are not the only ones utilizing Athletic Element's services. The facility trains aspiring athletes as young as 11.

Thirteen-year-old Matt Mendelson of Upper St. Clair is ahead of the curve in his hockey training. Not only is he receiving top-notch knowledge from former Penguin and current Fox Sports Net broadcaster Bob Errey, with the Southpointe Rink Rats, he's learning many valuable training techniques from the staff at Athletic Element.

"The guys have really taught me a lot, and it's definitely going to help me," Mendelson said. "I'll be a lot stronger and my starts will be a lot better. I'll be able to be more explosive to the puck."

Undoubtedly Sampson and Williams' goal is to run a successful business, but the duo's intentions are also to benefit a younger generation of athletes who are injuring themselves at a rapid rate due to ignorance and improper training. Don't be surprised if the skills of a future NHL player are being polished at



After further review: Justin Selap (left) receives some advice from trainer Steve Priete as they look over the video of Selap's workout on the Blade.

Athletic Element soon.

"I really think there's a lot of good players around here just like (Ryan) Malone and (R.J.) Umberger," said Sampson, a former massage therapist for the Penguins in 2005-06. "Those

guys made it big and helped put Pittsburgh on the map. We really just wanted to do something to give some local players a chance to stay home to train without going to Canada or Minnesota and really educate them."

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