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Before season, NHL players put in plenty of work

by Fluto Shinzawa

Ben Prentiss has been training hockey players for 14 years. The strength and conditioning coach has yet to meet the player who arrives at his Darien, Conn., facility fresh and fit after an NHL season.

“Not one guy comes to me at the beginning of the summer raring to go, fired up, looking like a machine,” Prentiss said. “That never happens. No chance.”

In the NHL, there is no player like **Atlas**. The league’s stoutest strongmen crack under the weight of training camp, the regular season, and playoffs. The men who lift the Stanley Cup mash the gas from September until June. It is no wonder that by the end, they are grinding their gears.

To survive the pounding, it is required for players to first heal, then rebuild, their battered bodies each summer. It may seem like an exercise for **Sisyphus**, assembling a construction that will crumble over a season’s wear. What is built up, the NHL season tears down.

Such is the life.

At this moment, players under the Prentiss Hockey Performance banner are packing on the muscle they’ll need to survive another season. Clients fill out the spectrum: graybeard and lead dog **Martin St. Louis**, in-their-prime players such as **Max Pacioretty** and **Matt Moulson**, an NHLer off to Switzerland in former Boston College captain **Ryan Shannon**, and up-and-comers like Bruins prospect **Torey Krug**.

They’re absorbing constant shocks and stresses. If they’re not working hard enough, their bodies adapt to the workouts. Prentiss wants nothing to do with adaptation or comfort.

They are currently engaged in Phase 3 of Prentiss’s four-phase program. In this four-week segment, muscle is boss.

To illustrate the work involved in the strength phase, Prentiss used St. Louis as an example. Before taking an errant puck to the face during a morning skate on Dec. 8, 2011, St. Louis had appeared in 499 consecutive games. From 2002-11,

St. Louis played 82 games in seven of eight seasons. The preventative measures St. Louis takes in the summer keep him ticking during the season.

“He rolls his eyes when I say this, but I tell him, ‘My job is to roll you out when you’re 45,’” Prentiss said. “I have to keep him fresh.”

The 37-year-old started with sumo deadlifts: four 300-pound reps. With no rest, St. Louis progressed to 10 walking lunges with 65-pound dumbbells tucked in each fist. To conclude the set, St. Louis dragged backward, for 50 yards, a sled stuffed with 14 45-pound plates. After a three-minute rest, St. Louis performed the three-exercise circuit again.

In total, St. Louis performs four sets. After that, a 50-second shift against the Eastern Conference’s big boys sounds like a vacation.

“The whole workout probably only takes 45 minutes,” Prentiss said. “But he’ll tell you it’s the hardest thing he ever does.”

The players have already passed through two phases. Prentiss calls Phase 1 the structural balance segment. The players, beaten down after the season, must be put back together. If some muscles need more work than others, Prentiss targets those areas. In Phase 1, the players also go through a body fat test. Prentiss can determine where and why players are storing fat on their bodies. Once Prentiss gains this information, he can devise individual nutrition programs.

“They blow it out a week or two before. They know what’s coming,” Prentiss said with a laugh. “They come in at 15 percent body fat. But they leave at 8 percent. They’re putting on lean muscle mass and losing body fat.”

In Phase 2, the hypertrophy stage, Prentiss jacks up the volume of weights the players lift. More reps. More sets. Less rest in between.

Once the strength segment concludes, Phase 4 focuses on power. There’s plyometrics to build explosive speed, the kind required for a quick burst toward the front of the net. The workouts are shorter, but the intensity increases. At night, the players will skate.

Through it all, the players are eating healthy. No postgame wings like they might have in Buffalo. Forget about the candy bars and chips they sneak during charter flights. They’re chowing on kale salad, bison burgers, and almonds.

The aim of all this work is to dial in the players to peak when they return to camp in mid-September — specifically, for the team-mandated fitness testing. In theory,

when it comes time for the sprints, pullups, or whatever feats each club expects of its charges, they're in full flight.

Trouble is, nobody's sure when those tests will take place. If the season doesn't start on time, Prentiss will have to adjust his clients' workouts. Some might stay in Connecticut to work out and skate. Others might return to their in-season cities.

"We're gearing everything for a certain date," Prentiss said. "If we don't know what that date is, we're sort of in a holding pattern with training. We'll taper that back and pull back the skating. We'll be ready, but we don't know when it will happen. If there's a lockout, some might go play overseas. Some might go back to where they play and skate with the boys there. We'll be ready when something happens, but there's a certain air of uncertainty. We're hoping for the best. We're training like we're going to start on time."