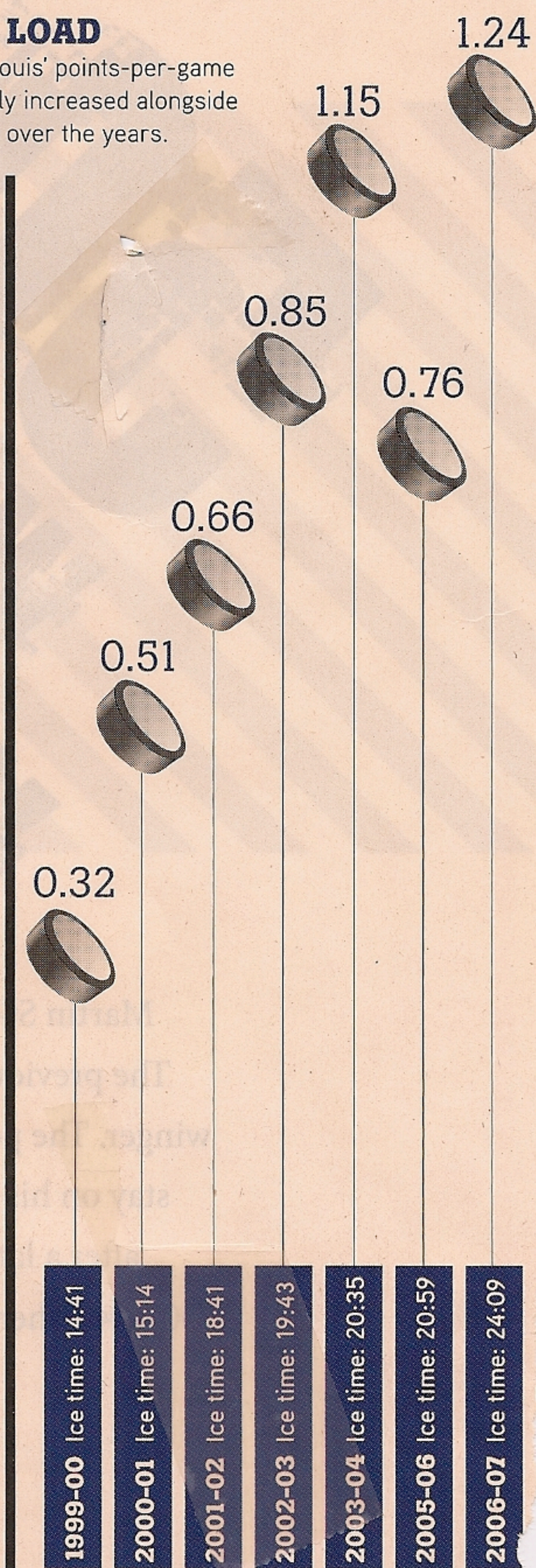




HEAVY LOAD

Martin St-Louis' points-per-game have steadily increased alongside his ice time over the years.



“It was a setback for me,” St-Louis said. “You had to fight through it.”

The native of Laval, Que., landed a knockout punch last season with career bests of 43 goals and 102 points. His 24:09 average time on ice led all NHL forwards and he was part of the league’s most dominant 1-2 punch with linemate and center Vincent Lecavalier.

St-Louis said he expects the same kind of production in 2007-08. But given his uneven ride the past two seasons, he knows there are those waiting for another dip. The difference, St-Louis said, is he now knows how to prepare.

He knows how to block out the non-believers, the pressure of a six-year, \$31.5 million contract that will pay \$6 million next season, and even those with good intentions who give advice but only ended up cluttering the star’s thought process.

In other words, he knows how to be himself.

“I know what I did to feel the way I did last season and I’m in the process right now of rebuilding so I’m ready for training camp,” the 5-foot-8, 185-pound sparkplug said. “What I take from last year, I guess, is the way I prepared and the reward was there for the hard work.”

The hard work for St-Louis began in the

summer of 2006, when for the first time he hired a personal trainer, Ben Prentiss, who has a facility in Greenwich, Conn., where St-Louis lives in the summer.

St-Louis, 32, always has been a workout fiend. There is a great story of his rehab from a 2002 broken leg in which he hopped one-legged up the stairs at the arena of the University of Vermont, where St-Louis played for the Catamounts.

But with Prentiss cracking the whip in exhausting 60-minute workouts that pinpointed strength and speed, St-Louis said he lost weight, but added muscle. He reshaped his upper body and his six-pack turned into an eight-pack.

St-Louis said he hired Prentiss again and said his workout routine is just as vigorous.

“The same setup,” he said. “The same idea.”

But shaping his body was only part of St-Louis’ transformation. He also has trained his mind.

St-Louis is the first to admit he battled in 2005-06 with the pressure of being the returning MVP. Expectations were huge and like nothing he had ever experienced. Adding exponentially to the pressure was the big contract.

In one swoop, St-Louis went from a terrific story of how perseverance can carve

ST-LOUIS MATTERS TO WILLIAM DOWLING

BY DAMIAN CRISTODERO

Martin St-Louis considered the 2006-07 season as a do-over. The previous season had been frustrating for the Lightning right winger. The points never came fast enough. The puck didn't seem to stay on his stick. St-Louis scored 31 goals that season, but only after a late flourish and his 61 points were 31 fewer than in 2003-04, when he was awarded the Hart Trophy as the league's MVP.