

aerobic activity on each point, anaerobic activity for longer matches, and hand-eye coordination,” Smith says.

“It’s ‘the other’ game where you don’t have the ball ‘in hand,’ but use a stick or racquet as an extension of the arms and hands. The hand-eye coordination is critical, and the game is built, like hockey, for both power and touch. There’s just so much parallel, from being clever to get points to having good hands. There’s even a back-hand shot.”

In fact, Smith thinks two of the premier athletes in the world who play tennis might’ve been pioneers in hockey had their paths been different.

“Too bad someone didn’t give Serena and Venus Williams each a pair of skates, because they’ve got everything you’d need athletically in hockey,” Smith says. “They’re very powerful, graceful and athletic.”

Another good summer program, which can be done as a team, and even run by the coach, is off-ice conditioning, including plyometrics, weight lifting, circuiting training and cardiovascular work such as running, rock climbing or cycling.

“The off-ice work takes them away from the rink and allows the kids to work on leg strength or developing their bodies,” says USA Hockey Manager of Ice and Inline Coaching Dan Brennan. “The coach can still be around the team, but at least it’s in a different environment.”

And after a long, competitive season, it’s that different environment that kids need to recharge their mental and physical batteries, and be relaxed, refreshed and ready to go when tryouts roll around in late August.

“We have a lot of kids who play too much hockey,” Brennan said. “I think if the kids play 10 months of hockey a year, they should have a month or two to do something completely different to recharge their batteries, so when they come back at the end of August they are excited to play again.”

Smith also likes the idea of off-season training for hockey, if done correctly and not being obtrusive upon the younger kids other interests.

“Hockey is supposed to be a joy,” Smith said. “Being away from the ice for a while is a positive thing. You want to put as much fun into the off-season as possible. To have it too structured, too early, I fear might sap the enthusiasm for the game.”

As Brennan points out, many hockey camps have dryland and other recreational activities that allow the players a break from the sport while still hitting the ice on a daily basis.

“It’s an epidemic now — kids are virtually forced in some cases at age 9, 10 or 11 to play year-round,” he says. “By 15 or 16, as other things become important in their lives, those kids are burned out on hockey, and it’s not fun any longer because they are tired of it.”

Brennan recalls his own hockey career, where he played at Colorado College and professionally in Sweden, and how the occasional break fueled his desire for the sport.

“I played nine months a year, and after a break, at the end of August, I couldn’t wait to play hockey again,” he says. “I don’t see that same kind of enthusiasm in the kids who play year round. It becomes a grind. Plus, the other sports really do help a child’s overall athleticism. And I’ve never seen any study that says a kid playing 12 months a year is going to be better than one who doesn’t.”

In addition to physically resting the “hockey muscles” for a spell, the mental benefit, Brennan believes, is even greater.

“A lot of it is to get the mind set properly, and then the body will follow — it’s not the other way around,” he says. “If you are mentally burned out, it doesn’t matter if you have the strength, because you won’t have the desire.”

“It’s a wonderful game, don’t get me wrong, but kids need to have some time to just hang out and play with their buddies.”

Bob Schaller is a freelance writer in Colorado Springs.

There are eye-to-foot sports, such as soccer and others, that are important for developing the kids. In the summer, kids can play soccer, or even do gymnastics.

SATELLITE TRAINING PROGRAM PUTS SUMMER HOCKEY IN DIFFERENT ORBIT

Summertime and the living is supposed to be easy ... for youth hockey players who have spent the year inside a rink.

While many skill development advocates promote hockey players getting active in other sports to build different skills and recharging their young batteries, rink and arena owners still have ice to sell. Many players may take the summer off, but there's no offseason from rising energy bills.

Still, there are ways to give that ultra-competitive Triple A mentality a rest with some stress-free and fun summer programs that work on individual skills.

Mike MacMillan, coach-in-chief for the Minnkota District, runs such an off-season player development program in Buffalo, Minn.

The Minnesota hockey season ends in March, and after the players have had a few weeks off, they can play in a four-on-four league, which combines A, B and C level players, so that kids can play with friends. There's also an "overspeed" skating program for Bantams and high school players, and a power-skating course for younger players, from Mites to Peewees.

"That's a good time to have something like this because the kids still have their skating legs," MacMillan says.

After that, everyone is encouraged to play another sport or just spend time with family and friends.

"The kids really just need a break from hockey at some point," says MacMillan, who also coaches the Buffalo High School hockey team.

Starting in July, another multi-phased, age level program runs for six weeks, which includes three days a week of skill training on ice, and 45-minute dryland activity that might include plyometrics and stickhandling.

These sessions run three times a week in the evening to stay out of the way of the other sports and family time. Sunday night is an "open-ice" session where kids play "pond hockey."

This year-round series of events is called STP, or Satellite Training Program.

"What STP does is allow kids to train and do things in their community instead of going to camp," MacMillan says. "And by doing the skill work almost quarterly, in season and off-season, they have the chance to absorb it more.

"You could cram for a test and probably do all right the next day, but in a few months, that information is gone. This way the fundamentals are constantly worked on, and why doing it in quarterly phases really seems to work for the kids."

The program also has a fall hockey camp starting at the end of September, allowing the kids to make progress so that they can give a true indication of their ability by the time tryouts begin.

— Bob Schaller

