

BEND AND STRETCH...

... and strengthen.

Canadiens players loosen up with specialized workout.

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JOHN MAHONEY / THE GAZETTE

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SPORTS FINAL

Dynamic stretching working for Canadiens

Skepticism fades as joint and core strength improved



BRENDA BRANSWELL

When practice ended Wednesday at the Canadiens' training camp, several players sauntered over to the indoor soccer field where Sahra Esmonde-White and two other trainers were waiting for them.

For the next 20 minutes, she led them through a series of stretches, including lunges to stretch and strengthen their core and work on rotation in their hip joints.

A few stretches required players to extend a leg and rest their foot on a bench, the same idea as using a barre, but don't confuse their routine with ballet.

It's a dynamic stretching program that targets many muscles in rotational movement rather than just holding a stretch position for 15 seconds and working one muscle group. It also works on strength.

"Some of what we do can look Tai Chi-ish because it's very flowing and it's very full body movement, but it's dynamic," said Esmonde-White, president of Essentrics, which is also the name of the fitness program.

The Canadiens began using Essentrics last January during training camp. The players had done yoga, where you maintain a position for a long period of time, but Pierre Allard, the team's strength and conditioning coach, said he wanted something more dynamic.

What he likes about Esmonde-White's technique is that everything is done while moving.



Sahra Esmonde-White leads Canadiens players through a stretching routine Wednesday. The program targets many muscles in rotational movement.

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"I think that it's a lot more oriented toward sports because players must be able to control their muscles while moving," Allard said.

He told players to be patient at the start and wait a few sessions to see how they felt.

"And that's what was the most important. It wasn't what they did, but how they felt," Allard said.

He heard from some players almost immediately who said they felt good.

There was some initial skepticism with players joking around, laughing at the movements, said Canadiens forward Max Pacioretty.

"But then after they felt how good you feel after it, it got pretty serious," Pacioretty said. "I found it very useful and I know a lot of guys in the room have felt the same way.

"Sometimes after practice and stuff, you get on the plane and you're not really fully recovered and ready for the travel," said Pacioretty, who noted his back tends to tighten up a bit after a skate.

"I've noticed the biggest difference in my back, in my hips.

"It's more of a fun way

"After they felt how good you feel after it, it got pretty serious. I found it very useful."

CANADIENS FORWARD MAX PACIORETTY

than just sitting there and doing stretching on your own and sitting on the carpet and stretching out your muscles. It's more of an active routine."

The fitness program was developed by Sahra's mother,

Miranda Esmonde-White, a former dancer with the National Ballet of Canada and host of the long-running "Classical Stretch" exercise program that airs on PBS. (Production on the tenth season is underway.)

She founded the Montreal-based company Essentrics and is actively involved in the

and staging fitness holidays, the company signed its first book deal last spring for three books with Random House in Canada and Harper Collins in the United States. Essentrics opened a studio on Stanley St. a few years ago, a move that Sahra Esmonde-White believes was one of the key factors behind the company's growth spurt. In the past two years, they've jumped from four employees to 13.

With the shortened season following the NHL lockout, Allard said he thought it was a good time to bring them in "so that we could prevent injuries, things like that."

"Strength at the full range of motion, that's really important and that's what Sahra's team is doing," he said.

The post-practice sessions are held one to two times

per week, depending on the schedule.

"What we want is to keep it short, keep it very focused, especially on hip and shoulder joints," Allard said.

Esmonde-White said she sees speed, agility and injury prevention as the top benefits for the hockey players from their program.

"They learn so quickly," she said.

"That's what's the amazing thing to teach high-performance athletes is that you watch them change and they change so fast.

"Because they have such good body awareness, you're able to progress faster, and work harder and more efficiently (with them)."

bbranswell@montrealgazette.com

Twitter: bbranswell