



MONTREAL'S SECRET WEAPON

IT'S NOT SOME KID THEY'VE STASHED IN THE MINORS. AND IT'S CERTAINLY NOT SOME FANCY NEW BREAKOUT OR POWER PLAY. NOPE, TURNS OUT IT'S ALL IN THE ANKLES.

For the first five minutes of the first class there's skepticism—that and a bunch of millionaire athletes giggling like their sex-ed. teacher just said “penis.” But then the exercises “become so challenging they can’t keep up,” says Sahra Esmonde-White. From there, it’s “a lot of surprised looks.”

Esmonde-White is the co-founder of Essentrics, an exercise program she describes as a blend of “dynamic Tai Chi, physiotherapy and stretching.” The giggling millionaires are the Montreal Canadiens. And the fact that Esmonde-White regularly finds herself running them through 25 minutes of full-body stretches says something about the Habs organization under Marc Bergevin and its willingness to depart from the previous front office’s traditional approach to training—an open-mind-

edness that’s netting some unexpected results.

Esmonde-White was brought in to work with the team ahead of the 2012–13 season after strength and conditioning coach Pierre Allard “was given the OK to test out what he felt the athletes needed.” Knowing that the lockout-shortened season would be more demanding on players’ bodies, Allard hoped Essentrics could help maintain their range of motion, particularly in the hips and torso, with an eye toward injury prevention. That remains the central focus, says Esmonde-White, and Max Pacioretty has publicly praised the program for loosening up his tight back. But Essentrics has benefits that reach beyond the preventative.

Developed by Esmonde-White’s mother, Miranda, formerly a dancer with the National Ballet of Canada, the program brings—among other things—a dancer’s

approach to training the ankles and shins (an area traditional regimens struggle to address). “Your quads can be at their maximum strength,” says Esmonde-White, “but if your ankles and shins get tired, then your body is tired.” Unlocking and strengthening players’ ankles increases their stamina while also helping deliver power more effectively from the stronger muscles of the thigh, maximizing speed—it also helps in the prevention of high-ankle sprains.

Obviously, working with Esmonde-White won’t turn Douglas Murray into Pavel Bure, and she’s quick to point out that there are many aspects to Montreal’s training beyond Essentrics. But it’s hard not to think that the team’s willingness to try something new has something to do with where the Habs currently find themselves—in the second round.

—EVAN ROSSER