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By Ken Martel

Wayne Gretzky was renowned for his uncanny ability to see the game evolve well ahead of everyone else. This ability to anticipate and make a play that nobody in the building expects is a result of having great awareness. Most people call it hockey sense.

There has always been a debate about whether or not hockey sense can be taught. Some coaches believe you can improve a player's hockey sense by repeatedly placing them in game situations. Others believe that you are just born with.

The current leaning science says that while everyone has his or her personal limits, we can all improve our hockey sense. And in the near future, making improvements in your on-ice play may be as easy as playing a video game.

USA Hockey, working in conjunction with Applied Cognitive Engineering, is currently working on a groundbreaking hockey trainer, the Hockey Intelligym. The BIRD Foundation, which supports joint efforts between U.S. and Israeli companies, provided a development grant to help create the system. The projected timeline to develop the program and get it into the marketplace is two years.

This computer-based software will force players to make quick, difficult decisions in a computer-game environment. To the players it may look like space invaders, but their brains won't know they're not playing hockey.

ACE has a long history in developing cognitive learning technologies for the military, NASA and the aviation industry. They recently brought their expertise into the sports realm by creating the Basketball Intelligym. To date it has enjoyed great success at such basketball powerhouses as Memphis University and the University of Connecticut.

With hockey being the world's fastest team sport, requiring split-second

If you can get an improvement of 5 percent at an elite level, that will certainly help us down the road.



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decision making in a dynamic environment, we have the perfect sport to take advantage of this cutting-edge technology.

While the research show, that not everyone will have Gretzky-like hockey sense, everyone can make improvements, even the Great One himself. Even if each player on a team only improved 5 percent, on a team of 20 players, your team would be exponentially better. The data collected from all of ACE's projects shows a potential for improvements of up to 30 percent.

The Hockey Intelligym requires a certain base set of hockey playing skills be in place in order to take advantage of what the brain sees. If you can't skate, stickhandle, pass and shoot, it doesn't matter if you can read the play better, you won't have the technical skills to take advantage of the situation.

ACE is currently working with USA Hockey coaches and players at the National Team Development Program to develop a program that can be used by hockey players of all ages and skill levels.

"It's something that looks very promising, so we're excited to be one of the test groups in hockey," said Ron Rolston, head coach of the U.S. National Under-18 Team.

"If we can get an improvement of 5 percent at an elite level, that will certainly help us down the road, not only here [at the NTDP] but with the World Juniors and the Olympics."

Ken Martel is a manager in the Youth Hockey Department and has been working closely with Applied Cognitive Engineering to create the Hockey Intelligym for USA Hockey.

illustration - Mike Curti



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