

**THE POWER OF SKATING:** Hockey players can improve their skills by learning the techniques of power skating. Sandy Velenosi is an advocate of the method, saying his dream job would be to some day work for NHL teams.



PHOTOS BY GARY YOKOYAMA, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Head instructor Sandy Velenosi takes a group of six- to eight-year-olds through some speed drills at Chedoke Twin Pad Arena. Sandy runs the power skating school that his mother, Marilyn, started.

# Power skating the Velenosi way

By STEWART BROWN  
The Hamilton Spectator

Record-breaking heat pounds the roof of his workplace this summer's day but it is cool, almost jacket temperature, down where Sandy Velenosi works. On the ice. Of course, he doesn't stand still. He skates across it like the wind.

He's there on this over-heated August day, on the ice of the Chedoke Twin Pad Arena, teaching would-be Gretzkys to move with power and balance and grace.

It's been that way since Sandy made a serious career decision seven years ago.

Velenosi Power Skating — the Hamilton hockey-skating school developed by his mother, Marilyn — was unable to expand beyond a weekly Sunday session.

For the previous two years, Marilyn had battled pigmented villonodular synovitis, a rare disease in her left knee that had raised the possibility of amputation. Instead, after several surgeries and radiation treatments, Marilyn had a total knee replacement. But the procedure left her with a knee that did not bend, which meant she had to give up her beloved skating. As well, she had to quit her day job in Brampton because the new knee made the commute too difficult, though driving is no problem today.

Enter Sandy, who'd grown up mastering his mother's power-skating program, to the extent that skating, along with puck control, was one of his special skills as a hockey player at Barton and Bishop Ryan high schools and in rep hockey in Hamilton, Burlington and Stoney Creek.

But Sandy was small — 5-foot-7 and 150 pounds — and though he'd enjoyed a summer as a professional roller hockey player in California, he realized that chances of a pro career on ice were unlikely.

"Seeing my mom going through what she went through and having to give up skating was a big eye-opener for me," Sandy says.

So he agreed to step in as the chief instructor. Today, using local arenas, Velenosi Power Skating offers two 14-week spring/summer and fall/winter sessions at seven skill levels, plus camps during Christmas holidays and March break. About one-in-10 students are girls. And Sandy, on his own, is much in demand to run power-skating clinics for hockey associations, leagues and individual teams, both boys and girls, in Hamilton, Burlington, Carlisle, Dundas, Flamborough and Stoney Creek.

Earlier this August, Sandy was in Raleigh, North Carolina at a minor



hockey school run by Carolina Hurricanes of the National Hockey League. For four days, he taught power skating to 120 youngsters from six to 14 — helped by pro Hurricane players Glen Wesley, Bates Battaglia, Jeff Daniels and Steve Halco as demonstrators.

Back in Hamilton, Velenosi Power Skating is very much a family-and-friends affair. That, in fact, is how it got started. Marilyn, a competitive figure-skater-turned-teacher, was asked to help a godson improve his skating for hockey. Friends' kids were added to the class and soon figure skating lessons were dropped in favour of teaching power skating to young hockey players.

That's the key description. The Velenosi way of skating is geared to playing hockey. These aren't learn-to-skate classes.

"We don't take beginner skaters. We take beginner hockey players, as young as four or five if they are good skaters, up to 16," says Marilyn, who runs the school with Sandy.

Power skating should be defined. When the Velenosis use the term, they're talking about: "skill breakdown, balance, edge control (when to skate on the inside or outside edges of the skate blades), agility, speed, quick starts and stops, endurance, aggressiveness and confidence.

"Until each skill is mastered, the power will not come," Sandy says.

And, like most skills, practice is the surest way to success. "Repetition," he recommends. "The more you do it, the better you'll get.

"It's just like being a baby. I explain it to the kids all the time. You start crawling, then you start walking. How many times do you fall down before you walk? Probably a couple of hundred times.

"It's the same with power skating. I'd rather see kids fall and be the last ones done but do it slow and controlled and right than see kids race down the ice and do it wrong."

The Velenosi precepts are basically the ones Marilyn has taught from the start.

"I always feel you have to do a skill breakdown — focusing on each step of a skill — to be the best skater," she says.

"The advantage is that not only can



Sandy Velenosi, left, took control when his mother, Marilyn, could no longer be on-ice to give lessons.

Sandy do the skills, he can do the skills with a stick and a puck."

A session runs about \$20, which represents a fair investment by parents. Accordingly, the Velenosis keep their on-ice classes active, with a variety of short, concentrated exercises.

Says Marilyn: "You don't want to waste time at all. You also don't want to teach just one skill and keep at it until they get it. You teach everything to keep their interest up."

Says Sandy: "The more kids stand around, the less they learn. You have to have kids focused when they're on the ice. You correct them while they're moving. You just don't have them sit there for five minutes in a corner. That's just wasting parents' money. We're only out there for 50 minutes on the ice. You want to give them every second."

A recent session with beginners aged five to nine — all dressed in helmets and facemasks, full pads and gloves — exemplified both the intensity and the variety of a Velenosi workout.

For starters, Sandy himself cuts a dashing figure with frosted hair, earrings, a black whistle hanging from his neck, a red-white-and-black jersey proclaiming "Skate The Velenosi Way" and long red-and-yellow roller-hockey pants. As well, he moves like the wind to illustrate his skating exercises. Just watching him swivel and swerve makes your ankles ache.

Big smile. "How's everybody today?" Sandy asks. "Ready to work hard?"

"Yeah!" the kids answer.

They hop to it with Sandy and three athletic assistants keeping watchful eyes, correcting on-the-spot when mistakes are noticed. There are skate-arounds. Clockwise and counter-clockwise circles, pushing with the left skate, then reversing direction, pushing with the right. Backwards circles, pushing with the left skate, then the right. End-to-end.

"Right, left, right, left." Coasting on alternate legs. Wide-stride backwards skating in circles.

"Hustle, hustle, hustle." Lots of cross-overs — one skate over the other as you skate in circles. Then, stops and starts.

Steve Ryan, head coach of the 8- and 9-year-old major novice AAA Stoney Creek Icebreakers, is among parents watching their youngsters on the ice.

"I think the Velenosi program — from strictly skating skill and edge control — is the premier skating school in the area," he says. "My boy is five and the improvement in 10 weeks is just unbelievable."

It's true that the Velenosis have numbered potential professional players among their classes. Adam Mair, the Toronto Maple Leaf forward traded to Los Angeles Kings this year, started skating with the Velenosis when he was three years old.

A number of promising junior players in the Ontario Hockey League got their game legs through the Hamilton power-skating school. One of them is Stoney Creek's Mark Popovic, the St. Mike's defenceman drafted by Anaheim Mighty Ducks in July's National Hockey League entry draft. Others include Peterborough Petes' captain, Brian McGrattan, drafted by Los Angeles, and Andrew Ianiero of Kingston Frontenacs, drafted by Ottawa Senators.

Sandy Velenosi says lots of parents have NHL dreams for their youngsters. And that can produce unfair pressure on their children. In contrast, he says he doesn't apply that kind of pressure.

"When I'm out there, they realize there's more to hockey than just scoring and winning, winning, winning. There's a lot more to it. Don't just think NHL. One out of a million will make the NHL."

Adds mother Marilyn: "When we talk to the kids, we emphasize that education is number one. Get your education because then you always have something to fall back on."

Marilynn, besides co-ordinating the power-skating business, still attends many of the Velenosi sessions as a sidelines observer.

"I love teaching hockey players," she says. "It just broke my heart not to be able to skate anymore. But I can still look at any skater, any age, and see exactly what's wrong.

"Most hockey players, if they've never taken power skating, skate with their legs wide apart, on the inside edges of their skates. We try to get the skates under them. If we can get the kids when they are young, they're so much easier to develop than older children with bad habits."

In fact, Velenosi Power Skating has

always had a strong family influence. Father San, a planner at Dofasco, helps out. The support staff includes family friend Carl French, and his children: Janna and Ryan, along with Cory Kaczmarek, Zack Blaskiw and Christie Smethurst.

On occasion, Leesa Velenosi, Sandy's 26-year-old sister, has assisted, though her principal interest remains teaching figure skating at the Burlington Skating Centre. In the early days of Hamilton Bulldogs of the American Hockey League, she worked with Sandy to improve the skating of Bulldog players such as Georges Laraque, Jeff Daw, Sean Brown and Eric Landry.

The fact is that skating remains the basis of good hockey playing.

"The only reason I never got injured playing hockey — and I was always one of the smaller players on the team — was that I had the balance and the body control and skated on the proper edge," Sandy suggests.

Does he see bad skating habits in the NHL?

"Absolutely. The thing is, you get a lot of the older guys who say 'This is my style' and they're not going to change. But you also get a lot of rookies asking for tips because they want to get better. And you get bigger, slower guys who don't want to be slower."

Most NHL teams will open their training camps in September for the 2001-02 season. Some of them — the ones with coaches who believe in the value of power skating (not all do) — will use power skating instructors early in the training program.

That would be Sandy Velenosi's dream job — to work for NHL teams.

"I would love to have my own training facility where I could go or they could come to me."

Meantime, there are the kids.

"Each day is different," he says. "Each day when I'm out there, I learn something new. When I'm on the ice, I forget about everything else. I can focus on seeing that these kids improve.

"Every day I get a hug from kids. I'll get little cards and letters and pictures and I know that they made the team they tried out for or the house league they wanted to play in.

"It makes you happy to know that they're happy and confident. It puts a smile on your face."