

The four basic shots of hockey

By Bob Cunningham



©BBS

Most National Hockey League players use one or more of the four basic shots in hockey—the slapshot, the backhand, the wrist shot and the snap shot—effectively and consistently. But the big names of the game—Gretzky, Lemieux, Hull, Bure—do all of them equally well, which is one of the primary reasons these guys are the superstars of the game.

The subtle differences in shot execution that set apart 50-plus goal scores like Brett Hull from the rest of the NHL crowd can't always be learned. Some guys just have a natural gift. But the basics of shot-making can be explained, and for help doing that we turned to Tim Army, assistant coach with The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim and an astute student of the game.

The most complete players in the game, says Army, “do everything well, and that includes making all the shots.” That means you shouldn't just spend time working on your slapper, you should try and master the wrist shot, the snapper and the backhand as well. Which shot to use will always depend on your on-ice situation, but having them all in your bag of tricks will give you more—and better—shot choices.

With that in mind, we break down each of the four shots, discuss who in the NHL executes them best and why, and pass along a tip or two on how a younger player can advance his own shot into elite status.

The Slapshot

The common belief that the pure power of an effective slapshot is generated by a high arc, or take-back, is misleading.

“I don't know of anyone with a better shot than Brett Hull,” says Army, alluding to Hull's accuracy as well as power. “And he doesn't take the stick (back) beyond the knees. It's just that's he so quick and so strong, the puck is on top of the goaltenders before they can react.”

As in most other athletic instances, forward motion is a key. Observe different NHL scorers as they set up for their shots and you'll see they are generally moving forward. During a St. Louis power play, a teammate will dump the puck back to Hull for a one-timer. But more than just Hull's stick will be moving toward the goal. His entire body will cruise in that direction, helping him develop speed as well as increasing the likelihood that the shot will be on target. “It doesn't help if you're moving in a direction other than where you want the puck to go,” Army said.

In terms of raw power, the NHL's hardest slapshot may belong to Al MacInnis, Hull's new teammate in St. Louis. "He's incredibly strong," says Los Angeles Kings head coach Barry Melrose of MacInnis. "Sometimes it's a situation where standard defenses just don't do the trick against him."

Another with a reputation for an excellent slapper is Ottawa Senators defender Sean Hill, but Army points out that there's one significant difference between Hill's shot and that of Hull or MacInnis. "Sometimes (Hill's) a little slow at getting it off. He'll give the defender time to block it," Army said.

Quickness, then, is as much a part of an effective slapshot as power. "I think getting the shot off quickly is more important than anything else," Army said. "Even if the shot is off line, if it's sent quickly it can confuse a defense. You can get rebounds or better shot opportunities. But if it's blocked at the point, not much good comes out of it."

The mechanics of a slapshot involve keeping your head down, transferring your weight into the shot, and having a good shoulder turn. "A good slap shot doesn't involve wrists and arms. The whole body has to function cohesively."

The Backhand

"I don't think there's any question," says Army. "Wayne Gretzky is the most effective player in the league on the backhand."

That statement alone says a lot about the importance of having a good backhand, and reflects on the advice that Gretzky's idol—Gordie Howe—gave him early on. "Work on the backhand," he told The Great One, "and you'll score a lot of goals."

Other masterful backhand shooters in the NHL include Sergei Fedorov, Pavel Bure, Jaromir Jagr and Doug Gilmour—all of whom rank with the league's best scorers. So if these superstars all use their backhand effectively, why don't more players use the shot?

There are several reasons. First, the equipment has to be right. The trend toward curved sticks made—and continues to make—a controllable, accurate backhand almost impossible to execute. So by curving your stick to enhance the forehand shots, you're making it tough to use the backhand. Second, the backhand is most effective from in-close, and before you can use it, you've got to get there—no easy feat. Finally, and most important for younger players, the backhand is the least practiced of the four basic shots. It rarely overpowers defenders or goaltenders. It doesn't ring loudly off the post or boards. It's not showy or dramatic. So most kids don't bother with it.

But when all is said and done, would you rather be a flashy shooter with 20 goals at season's end, or quietly put up Doug Gilmour's numbers?

Technically and philosophically, the backhand is the complete opposite of the forehand. While the forehand is all about speed and brawn, the backhand utilizes deception and finesse. It's not a shot that will come in at a high rate of speed, but when executed in timely fashion, it can be a potent weapon.

Gretzky's success on the backhand comes from his laser-quick motion. "It's on his stick, and then it's gone, like that," Army says. "And he can put it wherever he wants to."

As for Jagr, he likes the element of surprise the backhand affords him. "I do whatever I believe the goalie thinks I won't do," said Jagr. "And so, many times that means from the back side." Few players in the league are as deft at skating through hostile traffic as is Jagr, and the effective backhand only serves to enhance his already impressive arsenal.

Fedorov may generate more speed off his backhand than anyone else, because he treats it like a forehand. He sometimes picks his stick up thigh-high on the backhand, yet manages not to sacrifice his quick release

and accuracy. It's doubtful anyone else, even Gretzky, has that shot in his bag, but it's a big part of what makes Federov a rising star in the NHL.

"That's what makes him so tough to defend," said Melrose.

How can you develop a good backhand? First off, a solid backhand often goes hand-in-hand with excellent puck handling skills. You need to get the puck on your stick in a position to shoot, and working on your stick-handling will help you do that. Then you need to work on getting a quick release. "Because it's a shot of deception," says Army, "you have to be able to get the puck at the right position on your stick, and let it go immediately."

Technically, the essence of the backhand is in good weight transfer through the shot. "It's a sliding motion," explains Army. "Kind of like a pass, but you follow through harder and the end result is some speed and power."

The Wrist shot

The wrist shot is a controlled, accurate shot that is deceptive in its speed at the moment of release.

"You pull the puck behind and sweep it at the target," says Army, who pointed out that the shot is utilized much more frequently in the youth levels of the sport. "Kids need to learn to drag it. They learn the importance of developing strong hands, wrists and forearms, which are needed to make the shot quicker and more powerful."

The shot is not used as much in today's NHL as it was in the old days because the defenders are too quick for its comparatively deliberate set-up and release. But the wrist shot remains an effective, basic shot for younger players to perfect. And if you watch players like Cam Neely and Federov utilizing a quick wrist shot when breaking in on the wing, you can see that it's often a valuable shot to have even at the pro level. As for accuracy, when the All Stars compete in most accurate shot competition in January, notice it's the wrist shot they employ.

"The wrists are flexed as much as possible at both ends. You're using the wrists to bring the stick through with speed," says Army. The trick, according to Army, is to properly utilize the body when preparing and executing the shot. Start by trying to emphasize almost a full body turn, with your back to the net, before the sweeping motion begins. If you're in traffic, you can use the body as a screen against rushing defensemen. Then transfer your weight through the shot, rolling your wrists "over the top" as you release the puck. Your accuracy comes from following through "at" your target.

"The quicker you can (get the shot off), the better," Army points out. "But the object is to generate a strong, accurate shot that appears to gain speed as it gets closer to the goalie."

The snap shot

The modern, NHL version of the wrist shot is the snap shot. The player most responsible for bringing the snap shot to prominence was probably former Boston Bruins sniper Phil Esposito. Espo would camp out in the high slot, wait for Bobby Orr or Ken Hodge to get the puck in the middle, and then snap the puck home in what was then a revolutionary one-timed wrist shot—the snapper.

The idea is basic: get rid of the puck fast and hard. The wrists are again the main body components. And although the shot can be executed on a skate-in, close-range attempt, the feel of the shot is very much like the traditional one-timer.

Army cites Wendel Clark and Hull as having great snappers, but goes to a pair of hockey's great hands as the all-time best. "One guy that really knew how to snap it was Mike Bossy. He was probably the best in the game. The puck would be on his stick, then off of it in an instant. And the puck just explodes. Mike has extremely strong wrists." Bossy's productivity with the snap shot helped the New York Islanders to four successive Stanley Cups in the late '70's.

"You need to learn this type of shot going into the NHL because you're facing so much better competition," says Army. "The defenseman will break up your shot in no time if you try to drag it through."

The basics of the snap shot are similar to those of the wrister. You use your weight transfer and roll the wrists to generate power, then finish pointing over the top at your target for accuracy. The difference is that with the snap shot you eliminate the wrister's dragging, sweeping motion. The snap shot should be launched quickly, almost as soon as the puck is on your stick. And much as with the slapshot, a clean follow-through is a vital component of the snapper.

"You have to get rid of it quick, but you also have to have something on it," says veteran center Bob Corkum. "You're always trying to fool the goalie but it's more important to make a good, clean shot attempt. Then if (the goalie) makes the save, you go for a rebound or wait for the next scoring chance."

As you can see, the common denominator of the four shots is an emphasis on quickness and completion. Get it, get rid of it, go at the target, and complete the shot before moving on.

And the common denominator for developing good shots? Well, it's just what you'd expect: practice. I

Bob Cunningham is a Southern California-based writer who contributes to several sports publications throughout the U.S. and Canada.