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At forward with Trevor Linden

By Bob Cunningham

Technique, schmechnique claims Vancouver Canucks' veteran winger Trevor Linden.

The Canucks' captain and one of the game's hardest workers, Linden approaches playing in the National Hockey League using the same principles which got him that far to begin with; keep the game fundamentally simple, work hard at all times and always be where you're supposed to be.

Nothing tricky or flashy. Consistency's the name of Linden's game.

"There's no real secret to playing the (forward) position. It's just a matter of being willing to work hard all of the time," says Linden. "Sometimes you get the puck in certain situations and you have to know what to do with it. Other times you're called upon to play defense, and you have to do your job.

"You have to be able to do what it takes, but that's not always something that can be easily explained."

Start with strong instincts

Linden believes that strong instincts are a good starting point. Still, there's more to playing a forward position successfully than just being where you're supposed to be on the ice.

"I try to focus on the all-around game," says Linden. "You have to be reliable."

Reliable, to the 6' 4", 205-pound winger, means being able to handle any situation that may crop up at either end of the ice. You need the strength to out-duel a defenseman for the puck in the offensive zone, and also the speed to out-skate an opposing forward to the puck in your own end. To Linden, it all comes with the territory. And if there's any one part of the game that you can't do, or that you tend to shy away from, well...

Maybe you should take up basketball.

"A lot is demanded of players, not just forwards but at all positions," Linden explains. "But the forwards, especially the wings, are best off being able to combine size and speed and making smart decisions."

It's everyone's job to prevent goals

Linden says young forwards often believe that their defensive responsibilities go toward simply helping out when needed. Instead, he notes, it's everyone's job to prevent goals all the time.

"You have to go all out at both ends," he says. "A forward has to think about more than just scoring goals."

Still, Linden agrees, a forward needs to know how to put the puck in the net, as well as create situations that can lead to scoring chances. The whole process goes back to Linden's incessant longing to be the ideal all-around player. In fact, he can't understand those that prefer to specialize, those who accept a reputation for one or two aspects of the position rather than the whole.

"You have to be willing to work on your puck-handling in traffic, your shot, and you always, always need to be going to the net," he added. "I can't emphasize how important it is to go the net."

Linden says that the so-called "creative" forwards may generate the most scoring chances, but it's the alert, aggressive forwards who convert them into goals.

"It all goes back to what I said about going to the net," he said. Linden also relies on forechecking, an under-appreciated art that is mandatory for successful attacks.

Disciplined, but aggressive

"It has to be disciplined, but aggressive. It's the best way to create scoring chances," he explains. "You must have guys who are willing to go the distance, end-to-end, and get control of the puck. Waiting for the fancy passes ends up (with scoring chances) being few and far between."

Vancouver has earned a reputation of being solid, if not spectacular, at both ends of the ice. The Canucks come at you in their arena or yours. They don't care how they look when they win, or who gets the winning goal. As long as they win.

And while that basic, team-oriented approach makes Linden an ideal captain, the role of on-ice leader doesn't change his way of playing wing.

Being captain "is not something that I have to work at," Linden claims. "It's important in making sure the guys are where they should be, and that everyone is on the same page as far as what we're doing out there. But I still play my position the same, work just as hard. Being captain kind of just happens. It's not something you really think about once you're out there."

Linden fits in well with Vancouver coach Pat Quinn's no-nonsense style. But even if the Canucks were littered with a host of perennial all-stars, like the Los Angeles Kings or the Pittsburgh Penguins, Linden's live-to-work ethic would still be a needed ingredient.

"There's no sense in getting caught up with things that don't help win hockey games," he said. "That's where I'm coming from. I work hard, do my job. I consider myself reliable and fundamentally pretty sound. Those are what are most important to me.

"And it's worked out okay so far."

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