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Be a better defensive skater

By Robby Glantz

It was not that long ago that the biggest, slowest players were the ones that ended up in goal or on defense—but, boy have times changed. Nowadays, defensemen have to be the best all-around skaters. Whenever, I work with professional teams, I spend most of my time with the defense.

This happens for a couple of different reasons: First is that we have so many more techniques to cover, because they need to be adept at not only the forward maneuvers, but conversely, all backward, lateral and change of direction maneuvers as well. Second is that every defenseman, including students of mine like Rob Blake of the Kings and Robert Svehla of the Panthers, know what it is like to be burned, therefore, the D are always my most amenable students. And finally, every coach I have ever worked along side of demands that their defenseman are mobile, agile and strong over their skates.

In this month's column I explore some common mistakes that defensemen make along with some skating tips and techniques for correcting these problems and adding to your game.

Bend at the knees

The problem of bending at the waist or standing too straight, rather than bending the proper way at the knees, is of course, a universal problem and applies to all positions. But this is especially true for defensemen, who can get into the most trouble by bending at the waist or by not bending at all. Defensemen should really concentrate on "sitting" with their butt down, almost if they are squatting on a stool, this position will greatly improve all aspects of skating, because the center of gravity lowers and the muscles will be firing much more giving greater control and balance. You will also not believe how much your backward stops will improve just by getting your rear-end parallel to the ice!

The general rule of thumb for knee bends is that the knee should be about two inches in front of the toe your skate. And, if you are bending at the waist, for example (you will notice this happening a lot in the latter part of the game when you are more fatigued), it is very obvious that your knees are nowhere near being out over the skate toes. Also, bending at the waist, as well as standing too tall, is the easiest way to have poor balance while skating.

One hand on the stick

This is another major problem I see at all levels: defensemen constantly holding the stick with two hands. This, of course, is fine when waiting for a pass, shooting, or making a pass. But, other than that, defensemen should almost always have one hand on their stick.

There are several reasons for this. One is that you will find that your balance is much better with only one hand on the stick, because with two hands, your stick has a tendency to go side to side and that is exactly where your balance will be (side-to-side) rather than centered directly over the skates.

Secondly, defensemen need to free up their arms so they can get the most out of the length of their stick. For instance, NHL defensemen, such as Blake, constantly have only that top hand on the stick to utilize and master the art of poke-checking.

I asked Ottawa Senators defenseman Steve Duchesne about why he prefers one hand and he had some other interesting observations: "I like to use my stick a lot in tight situations to take the puck from the forward or intercept a pass, but also, freeing one hand from the stick, I find, really helps my balance and my speed because I can extend both my legs and arms when I am skating."

Over-use of the crossover

The most common concern that pro coaches voice to me is that their D get caught much too often crossing over in one direction while the opponent is going in the other direction. Defensemen often fall in love with the crossover because they feel like they are moving faster, but in fact, most of the time they are simply taking their speed from side-to-side. I would like to add, however, that I do believe in using the crossover to gain momentum and to accelerate, but once a defenseman gets up to speed they should then use the "half-moon cut" in the ice, pushing one foot at a time. This will force the forward to make the first move rather than allowing the forward to read off the defenseman.

Another place that I see the crossover used too often is when the defenseman transitions from backward to forward to try to cut off the opponent from beating them to the outside. The problem with using the crossover move to angle the forward is that the first move that the defenseman has to make technically is *away* from the opponent, before regrouping to go the correct way. Plus, there is again that chance of getting the feet tangled up while the forward cuts back on the defenseman. I again want to be clear, however, and say that this is not an all or nothing proposition, it is certainly okay to use the crossover at certain times. But, I must say that I do prefer what I call the "arrow-tip turn." The feet return under the body forming an "arrow-tip" or "V" position, with one foot driving against the ice, as the hips open up allowing the defenseman to take the proper 45° angle to cut off the forward. With this transition, you do not 'drift' one direction before going the other as mentioned above with the crossover.

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