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Coaching defense, with Tim Army

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By Bob Cunningham

At the NHL level, most players enter the league possessing the basic fundamentals of their respective positions. In the case of defensemen, they're generally aggressive, conservative by nature, and knowledgeable of what to do with the puck as different situations present themselves.

From a coaching point of view, the difference between a very good defenseman and a mediocre one can be subtle at the game's top level. But Tim Army, an assistant coach with The Mighty Ducks of Anaheim, is practiced at the art of extracting these subtleties and transforming them into satisfactory performances, or sometimes even assets.

"The most basic things that you look for," says Army, who has spent much of his coaching career on the college recruiting end of things, "are proper positioning in their own zone. Their position in relation to their goalie and the puck. The ability to keep themselves between the two."

Natural for some

Army says the mental aspect comes naturally for some, while others with similar physical skills must be constantly reminded of their priorities.

"It's really about making good, quick decisions," Army said. "You read the situation and maybe you pin your man to the board and stay with him. Young junior players don't really get into that, but it's a necessary thing in the NHL. You take the angle away so that you don't get rolled (and) beaten to the net."

Another part of the mental aspect has to do with the most common medicine for a specific situation not always being the best choice — especially when it's not executed to its completion.

"Like taking a player out, that's not always the best thing to do because he can recover and beat you to the net. Taking him out is usually the right thing to do, but you have to remember he's still your man."

Often that aforementioned decision-making is determined by how long the shift has lasted. For instance, asks Army, when is it not a good idea to slap the puck high off the glass and into the neutral zone?

"If you've been out there for a while, say 35 or 40 seconds, it's a lot easier to play offense in those situations than it is defense. Not all players realize this, but sometimes it's actually better to ice the puck, take a faceoff and get some fresh horses out there. Under those circumstances, players shouldn't be afraid to take a whistle.

"But if you're fresh and the same situation arises, playing it off the glass and looking for an opening might be a good move."

Willingness essential

Army pointed out that another trait he seeks in young defensive talent is a willingness to take extra steps to assure followthrough on fundamentals.

"I look at some young players to see if they have a tendency to try the long, lazy passes that get intercepted and turn into scoring opportunities for the other team," Army said. "Better off with crisp 10-, 12- or 15-foot passes. Keep it simple. Most coaches want to see good, simple passes. It's risky, usually an unnecessary risk, to try the long pass and few defenders have the skating ability and puck-handling ability to skate it out of the zone."

That simple practice, says Army, leads to the next step in turning the momentum of a game in your favor.

"Get the puck to the forwards at the right time. The instinct should be to get it to them right away. Again, utilize a simple pass. It doesn't have to be overly creative."

Knowing when to get the puck away to the forwards can be a tricky proposition when a defenseman is stuck in his own corner, outnumbered by attackers. But the key is not to force a bad pass in an effort to hurry it up ice. Urgency tempered by intelligence is difficult to teach but a must for effective defensive play, especially at the game's higher levels.

Backing-in

common mistake

The most common mistake a young defender makes, according to Army, is the habit of backing-in as an opposing forward rushes with the puck.

"In that instance, the forward doesn't have to make a move. He can just shoot," he says. "That goes to some extent with trust between the forwards and the defensemen. A good defense doesn't give up in their own zone."

Army reaffirmed what has been highly publicized of the Mighty Ducks' first season and their steadfast battle to gain entry into the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

"Coach Wilson has preached these basic defensive fundamentals all year, non-stop," Army explains. "Minimize mistakes."

It's no coincidence that Anaheim ranks among the league leaders in fewest goals allowed, shot attempts and penalty killing. The team management went after players that would execute this basic preventive measure.

"There's no reason that we can't go into every game that we play with a legitimate belief that we can win," Wilson said before the season. "And that starts with good, fundamental defensive play."

"No doubt about it."

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