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Coaching good team defense

By Julia Negro

Mark Morris, head hockey coach of the ECAC's Clarkson Golden Knights, believes there are several keys to good team defense. Positional play in the defensive zone is a must, along with keeping a "tight unit," whether playing even-strength or short-handed. Also, forwards should always come back to help out in the defensive zone in a backchecking situation.

Break it up!

To break up the opposition's attack, there are many points for forwards to concentrate on in a backchecking situation.

- If you have your stick on the puck carrier, take the man!
- Establish your backchecking "lane" immediately.
- Go to, and cover a player without the puck. Do not let him receive a pass or get into position to receive a pass.
- Cover your man until the attack is broken up, or the check is traded off to a defenseman. In trading off, communication is a must!
- Stay in your lane if the man leaves your lane and cuts in front of the defense.
- Stay with your man if he leaves the lane and cuts behind the defense.
- Let the defensemen take the puck carrier unless your man receives the pass.

Morris suggests this technique to teach your team how to play good defense: think of the players forming a box in the defensive zone. Two defensemen on the bottom corners, two forwards on the top corners. The first forward back would support the area of the puck. The second forward would cover the slot area, the strong-side point, and any trailing attackers who are a scoring threat. The last forward back will cover the slot area and the weak-side point. The forwards and weak-side defenseman are also responsible for holding up the forecheckers. "The more you can get your players to visualize their responsibility areas, the better your team will perform defensively," says Morris, the 1991/92 ECAC Coach of the Year.

Pick up sticks

In playing defense, it is essential that the unit on the ice is always in control of their men, and pressures from the inside out. The defensemen should always favor the center of the ice, especially the slot area, and approach scrambles for the puck from the defensive side. Morris adds that a coach should constantly remind his players to lift the opposition's stick at opportune times to prevent tip-ins and rebounds.

Players must become proficient in taking the man in order to be successful. When taking the man, concentrate on your opponent and isolate him. Once you decide to take this player, you must stay with him. Finish what you started, and complete the check.

Another key to playing solid defense is to allow the defenders to play the puck carrier and to leave the back-checking forwards with the responsibility of picking up any additional attackers. When the puck is at the point, players should move out to the point and take an inside-out route to go through the man, leading with your stick and following through with your body—always finishing the check.

Morris further suggests doing drills around the net to improve a team's defensive skills. A drill that he often uses is three-on-two play from the top of the circles down. "We have our players that are getting ready to go stand along the top of the circles to keep the puck alive and in the zone. After practicing the three-on-two situations, we change it to three-on-three. The first forward back in the zone becomes familiar with backing up the defenders in the corners and around the net."

Morris goes on to explain, "We'll take one line at a time and have them defend against the next three or four consecutive line rushes. For each rush, we'll rotate the first forward back so they are facing three different situations from three different rushes. Positioning is everything here, and the players should be staying low with their stick on the ice anticipating an errant pass or stopping a shot."

It's a race

A coach should teach the youth player to take their opponent out long enough so that he doesn't beat you back to the front of the net. This style of defensive play, notes Morris, keeps players in control of the people they are responsible for checking.

Last, but far from least, communication is particularly important in the defensive zone and around the net. Goaltenders have to act as the defensemen's eyes and make them aware of whom they need to pick up. Goaltenders also help relieve the pressure in the defensive zone whenever possible by clearing the puck to the corner or dumping it out of the zone. And Morris urges the youth coach to remember that the whole team, even the offensive stars, must be proficient in defensive play for the squad to be successful.

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