



Figure 1

## **Defense: The puck stops here**

By Rick Trimble and Ken Biedzynski

Some coaches say you can't win without good defense, and as coaches we agree. Defense is where it all starts. In winning the Stanley Cup in 1995, the New Jersey Devils seemed to prove this point with their insurmountable "neutral zone trap." Thus, even if your team is able to tally high scores, but you allow an equal amount of goals against, much of your team's effort will be wasted without a solid defense.

This article addresses basic defensive technique you can use as an individual. (See the accompanying sidebar on page 18 for some basic team systems.)

The first point to playing defense is understanding the concept. The concept is broken down into a few different propositions:

- Defense is for all players not just defensemen.
- Playing defense is more than delivering a heavy body check.
- A player can be very effective defensively even if the player he is covering does not have the puck.
- Consider the goalie as part of your defensive core and include him in your defensive strategy.

### **Odd man rushes**

First we'll discuss individual skills. Perhaps most important defensive skill is being able to defend against an odd man rush. Quite often players make the mistake of thinking that an odd man rush only comes in the form of an end-to-end rush. Not true. Some of the best odd man rushes occur on a 2 on 1 down low near the net.

The best strategy when playing a 2 on 1 (or 3 or 4 on 1 for that matter) is to resist attacking the puck carrier. Leave that person to the goalkeeper. Your job as a defenseman is to guard against the pass to another player who might catch your goaltender moving across the crease. Figure 1 illustrates this mistake. The puck carrier might be able to either stick handle around the defender or be able to pass across to his teammate. Under either of those scenarios the result is undesirable.

In Figure 2, however, the defender makes an important adjustment. The defender is able to cut off a pass to the puck carrier's teammate thus forcing the puck carrier to commit to a shot. The defender is also free to clear a rebound, if any. Also, the defender may be able to, at the very last second, attack the puck carrier and force a poor shot.

### **In front of the net**

Like the odd man rush, sometimes defensemen will let an opposing player get behind them. This is because they are overly focused on the puck or puck carrier. In this situation what is happening where the puck isn't is probably more important than where the puck is. If a pass gets by the defender then the opposing team will have an open man in front of the goal. Again, not a desirable situation. Figure 3 illustrates the "undesirable" situation where a defender allows an opposing player to get behind him. A simple flip pass can effectively remove the defender from the play.



Figure 3

The better play is illustrated in Figure 4 where the defender plays a "far post" defense against the puck. This style allows the defender to keep the play in front of him and more importantly, keep potential scorers in front of him as well.



Figure 4

### **Blocking shots**

A critical defensive technique for all players is the ability to block a shot. Unfortunately, although most players mean well when they attempt to block a shot sometimes the effort actually results in the player (the one attempting the block) taking himself out of the play. Figure 5 illustrates the often utilized slide block technique which is not the best choice. The problem with this technique is once you commit to the slide you are committed and now you must block the shot.

The other problem with this technique is that it is relatively easy to deke around or fake the blocker. If that happens then the other team will have a man advantage behind you. Finally, even if you do block the shot, you are in no position to chase the rebound which may wind up back on the shooter's stick. You are probably more likely to be injured by the puck with the technique as well.



Figure 6 illustrates the more desirable technique. This style is more advantageous because first, even if the shot gets by the player attempting the block you are still in a position to deliver a check if nothing else. Second, if the shot is blocked, often the blocker has the advantage in racing to the loose puck. Third, the player attempting the block is in position for another play, e.g., a quick lead pass or breakout. Finally, if nothing else, this technique may help avoid injury.



Figure 6

### **Defensive zone forechecking**

The last individual skill which is becoming more popular is the "board block and check" which was made popular by Eric Lindros. This technique is illustrated in Figure 7. The idea is to take away as many passing options for the puck carrier while the carrier is in your zone.

Quite often puck carriers in your zone will attempt to move the puck either "up boards" or "down boards" depending on their position. Thus, by checking the carrier and by cutting off the passing lane the checker can effectively force the carrier to the inside and also be



Figure 7

ready to stick check or body check the carrier.

But more importantly, some players instinctively cling to the boards with the puck or they try to pass the puck up or down the boards. By properly executing this checking technique the checker can sometimes gain possession of the puck since the carrier will attempt to slip the puck past the checker along the boards.

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