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Defensive Zone Coverage

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By Gianni Raimondo

Players need to accept defensive responsibilities as a crucial part of the game and understand the importance of keeping things simple and basic in your own zone. If you make a mistake in your own end, the opposition will get a direct scoring chance. Some key elements of Defensive Zone Coverage (DZC) is proper positioning on the ice, hard work, communication with your teammates, and keeping things basic.

There are several systems that teams use for their DZC, but the end result is the same; to get back possession of the puck and go from defense to offense. There is not one system that is better than the other; it is just based on what the coaching staff is comfortable with and the strength of the players.

At an early age, all players must work with some form of Zone Defense, so they get familiar with their basic positioning on the ice. As players get older, they will probably get familiar with more advanced systems, such as man to man, or Box plus One.

I will be discussing a system which is called "The Combination". The name originates from the fact that this system is a combination of zone defense and man to man coverage.

Combination DZC

The "Combination DZC" is a system that many PRO and Junior teams use. Although some teams might call it different names, this system is basically a combination of Man to Man coverage with a Zone Defense.

This system includes both conservative and aggressive elements, which make it very useful for teams to be successful. The conservative aspect is that each of the 5 players is responsible for one of the five areas in the defensive zone (Zone Defense), whereas the aggressive aspect comes from the fact that players are given the freedom to leave their area and help out a teammate in another area (when you are out numbered in a certain area of the zone). Players are encouraged to pressure the puck and be pro-active in the defensive zone, not re-active.

Responsibilities:

D1

- move in and challenge the puck carrier
- pressure/contain/stall your man
- keep your eyes up on his chest
- stay between your man and the net (defensive side positioning)
- keep a tight gap if possible

D2

- protect the front of the net area
- control opponents stick, play tough, keep defensive side positioning (referees allow more physical play when battling in front of the net, be aggressive)
- if your man moves away from net area (high slot), you need to stay in his shooting lane, and take a few strides in his direction
- if puck changes corner, or area, you have to read your defensive partner, you can either wait for your partner to come protect the net area and then you go and pressure the puck carrier (release), or you can stay in front of the net and let your partner go and pressure the puck carrier in the opposite corner. Either way there always needs to be a defenseman in front of the net (Communication with your partner is very important).

F1

- the first forward into the defensive zone (not necessarily the center) plays down low supporting D1 battling for the puck

- always stay in between your man and the net
- do not over commit where one pass can beat two players (yourself and D1)
- if defenseman gets beat, play the 2 on 1 and stall play as much as possible
- if puck changes corner, you need to follow the puck to opposite corner and continue supporting defenseman (stay down low)

F2

- the second forward back into the zone should cover the weak side slot area, secure middle of the rink
- keep your head on a swivel, know where puck and your point man is at all times
- your main responsibility is to protect the front of the net (slot area), and your second responsibility is the weak side point man (although this can vary depending on coaches philosophy)
- make sure weak side point man does not sneak around you and rush to the net
- Be ready to block shots

F3

- the third forward back into the zone should cover the strong side point.
- keep your head on a swivel; you are responsible for strong side point man, make sure he does not beat you to the net by going around you
- stay in between your man and the net, staying away from the boards to take away the lane to the net
- be ready to sag down low if necessary if a teammate gets beat and your team is outnumbered in the slot area
- you are responsible for defending the high cycle, staying with your point man
- Be ready to block shots

Overall Key Points to DZC:

- ALWAYS protect the net area
 - Always stay in between your opponent and the net (defensive side positioning)
 - Never give up a second scoring opportunity
 - Team work is key
 - If back checking forwards are not sure where to go – ALWAYS go down to the slot area and figure it out from there.
 - When blocking a shot you must get directly in front of the shooter.
 - When the puck is along the boards the first defender takes the body and the second get the puck
 - For F2 & F3, always be ready to SAG to the net/slot area if a teammate down low gets beat
 - Some teams (coaches) switch F2 & F3 responsibilities (example they have F2 cover the strong side point).
- Either way, forwards need to understand the importance of having all 5 players back in the defensive zone as quickly as possible
- Some coaches want their weak side defenseman (in front of the net) to play man on man with the player in the slot area and follow him wherever he goes (man on man)

Defense at the Posts – when opposing player is behind your net with the puck

- Defense at the Posts (DAP) is making sure to cut off the opposition at the goal line, by preventing the offensive player from attacking the net from below the goal line.
- If opposition is set up in back of the net, have both defenseman protecting one post each, facing the puck carrier behind the net.
- F1 should be in the low slot area, ready to protect one of the posts that are left vacant by a defenseman that has attacked the puck carrier.
- F2 & F3 should sag down in the high slot, with a head on a swivel making sure they are aware of their point men.
- Always try to make attacking player come out behind the net on his backhand.

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