

## How to Win Faceoffs

By Bill Ferguson

In talking about faceoffs, let's start with this: hockey is a team game, and during faceoffs, as in so many other aspects of the game, if one man doesn't do his job, disaster will surely follow. And you thought we were only going to talk about centers?

True, the most important job in the faceoff is that of the center, but how well the other players do their jobs will greatly determine the success you have in this special teams area of the game. Even though most amateur teams don't have "special teams" dedicated to faceoffs, it should still be considered as such. Why? Because rarely do you have as good an opportunity to execute set plays. And rarely can one man's execution, or lack of it, have such an impact on the outcome of the game.



In the 1994 playoffs, Mark Messier, Craig MacTavish and Doug Gilmour each did well on the draw, but Peter Zezel probably outperformed them all. Zezel, a former pro soccer player, would often tie up his man's stick, step into him and kick the puck back to his winger. This is the type of play the creative center must learn to master if he is going to consistently control the faceoff. And whether it's in blocking out the opposing center, or outdeuling him for the puck, there is nothing that will help the successful center like arm strength. So all you centers, drop down and give me 20!

As for the draw itself, the best way to win it is to "cheat." Anticipate. Start early. Learn a linesman's rhythm. Guess. The best centermen are the ones who most often guess right.

Smart teams often send out two centermen in a must-win situation, so that the first can be very aggressive in taking the draw. If he wins the faceoff, great. But if he gets tossed out—with or without the opposing center—all he's done is "waste" a draw. The second centerman then steps in, either facing a non-center or perhaps with an official who might not be as picky on the second or third drop as he was on the first.

The idea here is not just to see how many rules you can break and get away with. But the truth is that if you constantly take faceoffs "by the book," with your stick on the ice, outside the dot, with both feet completely square, you won't win many.

### Where is the draw?

What to do during a faceoff depends where on the ice it is taken. In the defensive zone, the most important thing to do is prevent the opposition from getting clean possession of the puck. In the offensive zone, you strive to get the puck yourself, and put it somewhere where you can generate a scoring chance.

Since defense comes first in hockey, we'll begin with a faceoff in the defensive zone. The center is your quarterback on the ice, and it's his job to position players based on what he's hoping to do with the puck. He also has the most difficult job, because he needs to both control the faceoff and neutralize the other center—regardless of whether he wins or loses the draw. Many centers, if they lose a draw, want to chase the puck to the point, but that is exactly the wrong thing to do.

If the puck goes to the point and the center follows, then all the point-man needs to do is get a shot on net. The other center, left unattended in front, will end up with an easy chance at a deflection or rebound. The center must stay with his man—win, lose or draw. The only time the center does not want to tie up his man is when his team is shorthanded and he loses the draw, in which case he must break free to cover the point.

Now for the wingers. In the defensive zone, the winger's primary job is to neutralize his "opposite number." If

he can then get the puck back to his defensemen, he should. And if not, he must get out and cover the point.

If your "defensive assignment" drops back to the high slot or the top of the circle in order to be set for a shot, then he usually gets picked up by the other winger on your team. You must then concentrate on getting right out to the point. It is imperative that the wingers take direction from the center, and have a clear understanding of who has whom.

### **Be three places at once**

There are minor differences between a left wing's job and a right wing's job, depending, of course, on which side of the ice the defensive faceoff is held. But just assume that it's the winger's job to be three places at once: neutralizing your man, working the puck back to your defense and covering the point. Impossible? Sometimes. But it does become easier when you do certain things.

First, get a good jump. Picture the baseball player looking to steal: he's full of anticipation. Watch the referee's hand—not the puck—to get the best possible jump. The play starts as soon as he releases the puck, not when it hits the ice. If you wait until the puck has dropped you'll never win possession. The moment the ref opens his hand you should make your first step—a crossover with your opposite foot. Why the opposite foot, the one further away from the dot? Because you'll be a half a stride closer to your destination than if you made your first step with the closer foot. Plenty of players never think about this kind of thing, but you should. A little bit of an edge is all you need to look great.

As for the defensemen, one should stay back on the goal line to move the puck if your center wins it. It's a good idea in a must-win defensive faceoff for this back defenseman to shade slightly toward the net, in case the other center breaks through. Your team should have a standing set play for when your center wins a defensive faceoff: the opposite wing breaks to the far boards at the top of the circle for a break-out pass. This spreads out the other team and opens up some passing lanes for your break-out. All your defenseman has to do is fire the puck hard-around behind the net, and off you go.

The other defenseman will cover the offensive winger closest to the net. His job is to block that winger out of the play, or get a stick on the puck if a shot comes through. Obviously, interfering with a man who doesn't have the puck is illegal, so you have to be discreet. If he's a big, strong forward, line up facing him directly, creating as wide an obstacle as possible. This way he not only has to get by you, he also has to get by your stick. Try bumping your man as soon as play starts to slow him up a bit—odds are you won't get called for it. There is nothing in the rules that says you can't stand your ground.

What's most important here, as it is for each player in a faceoff, is for the defenseman not to quit on his man. It does no good to control your man, only to let him go just as a shot comes through. Cover your man until your team gains possession, or until the zone is cleared.

### **Who's going to shoot?**

Taking an offensive draw, the first thing to decide is who's going to take the shot—who are you trying to set up? If you have someone on D with a cannon, you probably want it to be him. But since the other team may know your tendencies, you might want to consider some alternatives.

As for the wingers, their job on an offensive draw is to give your team time to get a shot on net. One wing should step into the defensive winger who's going out to cover your defenseman on the point. The other wing should work on the second defenseman—the one who's away from the slot—as well as his opposite winger. Once you've gained clear possession, crash the net.

Just as on D, you want to execute a set play off the offensive draw. It's up to your coach to diagram it, and everyone on the ice to execute it without fail. One such play is simply drawing the puck back to your best shooting rearguard while everyone else ties up their men. Another is for the center, just prior to the drop, to move his winger back to the top of the circle. Then the center can either pull it back (as everyone is expecting) or push the puck forward to a winger charging in from the other side.

Since the play always starts with action at a standstill, there are no excuses for making mistakes in set plays off faceoffs. Everyone should know where to go at all times, and if a player screws up it's due solely to a lack of concentration—and that player won't find himself on the ice for many more critical faceoffs.

Always remember that while a center has the job of actually taking the faceoff, it's up to the whole team to successfully convert his work into puck possession. If you can do that, you'll come out on top two ways: by increasing the number of scoring chances for you, and reducing the number of scoring chances against you.