



The park-and-score program has some often painful consequences. ©BBS

Life in the meat grinder

By Bill Ferguson

We've all seen the picture of Bobby Orr, flying through the air after having his skates chopped out from under him by a defenseman, as he scores a Stanley Cup winning goal. It's a good rule to remember that in hockey, as in life, nothing is free.

No one who watched the Flyers win their first Stanley Cup can forget the work of Gary Dornhoffer, whose strategy game in and game out was "to give it up for the team"—subjecting himself to endless abuse from goalies and defensemen—to set up in the crease to screen and deflect shots, and pounce on rebounds. In later years, Tim Kerr filled this role, as he was simply too big and strong to move out once he parked in the crease.

The same goes for Terry O'Reilly in the days of the Big Bad Bruins. And how about modern players like Dino Ciccarelli, Owen Nolan, Wendel Clark and Adam Graves? None of these guys are known for being among the hardest shooters in hockey, yet they all light the lamp regularly, because they have learned where to park and score.

This is an aspect of the game that is not for the faint-hearted. Quite simply, these guys are the toughest of the tough.

Want to try it out? Keep in mind that the park-and-score program is a multiple-parter with some often painful consequences.

Your first job is to screen the goalie, which makes you fair game for both defensemen, who probably won't hesitate to give you a good solid cross check on the numbers, or lower. This is considered a good defensive play, which often doesn't get called. As Cam Neely says, "You know you're doing it right if it hurts right here," in the lower back.

Assuming you survive this first "baptism under fire", your next job is to deflect the puck as the shot comes in. Since a deflected shot is absolutely the most difficult save for a goalie to make, goalies don't particularly like those who assume this tip-in position, and they make them pay. Be prepared for a well placed slash or spear behind the pads, on the ankles, or calves. This also rarely gets called, because just as those who try to score from in tight must learn to overcome these questionable defensive tactics, both goalies and defensemen learn how to get away with them.

So far, a survivor

Okay, you didn't get cleared out by the cross check, nor did you go down when you got slashed on the ankles, so what's next? Now you're in position to screen the goalie, deflect the booming shot from your defenseman, or jump on a rebound if the goalie makes the save. But darn it, what if your blueliner shoots it high? If you didn't get cleared from the slot before the shot came in, the smart defenseman will prop you up right in the way of this shot, letting you "make the save" instead of his goalie. What you are left with after a game, win or lose, score or not, is the most bruised and battered body on your whole team. Why would anybody want to do this job?

Same answer as always: Ya' gotta love it!

Those who learn to survive in front of the net can thrive there. A good example was Phil Esposito, who played on the great Boston teams in the 1970s. His record of 76 goals—almost all of them scored from the slot—stood until Gretzky potted 92, but remember this; Espo scored 76 when 50 was considered next to impossible. When Maurice Richard scored 50 goals and 50 assists back then, many said it would never be duplicated. At the time Espo scored his 76, most teams felt three goals was enough to win hockey games, and two enough to tie. Those kinds of figures would put you on the bottom of the league today.

Of Espo's 76 goals that year, very few traveled more than fifteen feet—a trend that continued throughout his career. With what could best be described as an average slap shot, and foot speed that would rank in the bottom of the league, he set a scoring record that stood for years.

How did he succeed? He simply parked in front of the net, and scored.

But it's not as simple as it sounds, or everyone would score 76 goals.

The key to parking is anticipation. You must anticipate the arrival of the puck in order to deflect it, or to jump on a loose rebound. Obviously, you must have your stick on the ice if you are to beat both defensemen and the goalie to a loose puck, so get in the habit of instinctively having your stick on the ice whenever you go to the net. You must be prepared to finish the play before the puck gets to you, because adjustments after the puck is at your feet will come too late.

Also, you must learn to make an educated guess as to where the puck will go if the goalie doesn't make the clean save, and get to a "hole" in the defensive coverage in that area. Merely standing beside the defenseman will do you no good; you are easy to cover when you're "in his pocket," and you'll have no time to make any play if you are in too close.

It's also a good idea to anticipate when the defenseman will move in to cover you. When you park in front of the net, expect the defenseman to come in with a cross check. Keep track of him out of the corner of your eye, and when he arrives spin away from his pressure. This is a great play to learn if you plan on surviving in the meat grinder, in front of the net, because it makes it extremely tough for the defense to move you out. If every time they move in to cover you, you spin away like a basketball player in the key, not only are you still in position, but he's going to get a little frustrated and will take a few penalties. Additionally, this constant movement in front is very distracting to the goalie, and if he is watching you and the defenseman dancing in front he isn't watching the puck.

Some players—like Wayne Gretzky—become expert at hiding beside the net, or even behind it, where often the defense will forget about them, only to move out in front just as the puck arrives and get a good shot on a rebound or deflection. Other players, those big and tough, like to stand in there and take the beating. Some guys are so big they simply cannot be moved, like Eric Lindros and John LeClair from the Flyers "Legion of Doom" line.

Yet quite often the constant beating and retaliation necessary to camp in front will result in both you and the defenseman going to the box. I prefer a combination of camping, spinning and hiding since I'm never the biggest guy on the ice.

Hey, you!

It can sometimes help to go on the offensive, too.

I like to announce my arrival to the defenseman with a whack from my stick on top of his laces, and a holler of "I'm here!" That usually gets them going. Once he is chasing me around the crease he surely has forgotten his primary responsibility, which is to help his goalie. Another bit of treachery involves tapping the goalies pads just as the puck arrives, so even if the shot doesn't get through to the goalie, he is looking for it, but that doesn't sit well with most defensemen, so I don't recommend it as a standard play.

One thing I do recommend in order to score in front is going high, or picking the top shelf. Most goalies don't have the poise to hold their position when the puck is loose in front. Instinctively, they crouch a little lower as they search for the puck to dive on and cover it up. Knowing this is helpful if you get to the puck first. It requires a little practice, but you should do that anyway.

Esposito's best shot was the snap shot. I hesitate to call his slap shot wimpy—I might run into him someday!—but it was nothing special. Not so his snapper. I once saw him break the glass at Madison Square Garden with his snap shot! That's right, a snap shot. No big wind up, just 10"-12", but a quick release and, boom, there went the glass. More often than that, boom and there went the red light, as many goalies found out. Once parked in front of the net, accuracy and a quick release made up Espo's magic touch.

Keep in mind that a quick release or an ability to go top shelf won't do you a bit of good until you get to the net. So drive, park and, hopefully, score.

Those of you who are new to this grinder style of hockey will do well to remember one tip once you arrive at the net; tripod! This merely means putting a little body weight on your stick—not leaning on it, just supporting yourself ever so slightly. This makes it almost impossible for the defenseman to knock you down. It also reinforces one of the most important keys to crease-sitting; keeping your stick on the ice.

I can remember Terry O'Reilly crawling around the ice like a dog! Never the most fluid skater, it wasn't how often O'Reilly got knocked down, but how quickly he got back up and got back into the play that made him effective.

Let's also remember this side of hockey is not exactly brain surgery. Don't try to get too fancy. Keith Primeau is a good example of "not pretty but effective," and every GM in the league would love to sneak him out of Detroit. Cer-tainly if you have an open man in front, get him the puck. But for the most part, if you are in front of their net with the puck, shoot it!

Good things happen when you shoot the puck with a man in front, even if it's you. Even in the NHL players often delay shooting in hopes of gaining a little better set up which never materializes.

Practice the tips

When you get the chance, practice your tip-ins with your defensemen. This not only gives you the practice of deflecting their shots, it also teaches them which shots are tip-able. The hardest blasts are very tough to get a stick on. Make them work on it until you can consistently deflect their shot on this designed play. I guarantee you this will work like a dream come game time.

I once saw Bill Clement tip in a shot that was fired to his right, and he was to the right side of the net with his back to the shooter, so that shot must have been easily five feet wide of the net. The poor goalie could have been reaching for his water bottle only to realize the shot was off Clement's stick and in. Deflected shots will score when nothing else works.

The last thing I have to say about parking in front is this question you have to ask yourself: How much heart do you have? After you have been flattened by that truck of a defenseman, will you still have the desire to go to the net without the puck...just to receive more of the same? When the goalie is whacking away at the

back of your ankles, are you still going to bust your butt to get there again? When the defenseman puts his stick between your legs and pries you right off the ice by your cup, are you prepared to say "This is for me"?

If you can answer yes to all of these, in exchange for some of the best scoring opportunities in hockey, then go park and score.