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## Living on the wing

By Sam Laskaris

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Though it's also a business in the upper echelons of the sport, hockey at any level continues to be just a game. And like most other games, there's a wide array of opinions on technique and strategy. Each position has its own do's and don'ts, of course. Sure, hockey is hockey. But playing center is nothing like playing defense, and playing the wing is a little world unto itself.

This article will focus on that winger's world, as seen through the eyes of some professional ice and roller hockey players. And following their advice is bound to improve the fortunes of all of those—at any level of the game—who play on the wing.

### Positional play

Since the playing surface covers a large area, sticking to some basic guidelines is important. But that can be tough for a winger to do; even the pros need some reminding occasionally.

"Don't get caught out of position," warns Winnipeg Jets left winger Darrin Shannon. "Always be sure to stay on your wing, because that's where your teammates will be looking for you. If you are out of position in the NHL, your opponents are always good enough to make you pay for it."

Shannon, who is heading into his seventh pro season, believes perpetual motion is another key for wingers.

"At all levels of hockey, make sure to keep your feet moving all the time," he says. "Don't stand around and watch. Start and stop quickly, keep your feet moving, and you will be sure to improve your game."

Though the old expression says "Talk is cheap," Shannon's former teammate Russ Romaniuk, also a left winger, gives it much more value than that.

"When playing on the wing, always make sure to communicate with your defensemen," Romaniuk says. "This will insure that you always know what to expect from your teammates in any situation."

Romaniuk, the former University of North Dakota star who's gearing up for his first year as a Philadelphia Flyer after five seasons in the Jets organization, has another tip for wingers when they're in control of the puck.

### Heads up!

"When stickhandling, always make sure to keep your head up," he says. "By looking to see where your teammates and opponents are, you will be able to make the right decision (pass or shoot) and avoid being hit by defenders."

Though wingers are frequently instructed to stay on their side, Hartford Whalers left winger Paul Ranheim believes being versatile is a vital asset to have, especially in the big leagues.

"If you want to be creative you have to exchange your lanes," says Ranheim, a former University of Wisconsin standout whose creativity earned him an IHL-leading 68 goals with Salt Lake City in 1989.

"You have to be able to criss-cross. That's important in the NHL. Look at me; I play left wing but have a right shot. I prefer it that way."

As for those who play the sport at lower levels, Ranheim believes they should try to stick to the basics, even though some pros are not good role models in this sense.

"It's important for wingers (at lower levels) to stay in their lanes," added Ranheim, an eight-year pro. "But it's hard to do. Even in the NHL, we find all we want to do is chase the puck."

Ranheim's teammate Geoff Sanderson, a gifted scorer who notched 46 and 41 goals in his last two full seasons, says wingers are expected to do their share of digging for the puck.

"There are a lot of fast-skating, shooting wingers in the league," says Sanderson, a fifth-year pro who fits into that category. "But usually wingers are the bigger or faster players who don't play center. It's their job to go to the corners and do the crashing and banging to get the puck."

### **It's about speed**

Jason Krywulak, a member of the San Diego Barracudas of Roller Hockey International, offers the following tips to wingers on what to do after they get possession of the puck.

"Putting the puck on the net and driving at the net is important," he says. "The biggest key, though, is controlling your speed. It's harder to stop in roller hockey so you have to know when to go hard and when to go slow. You don't want to go flying by the play if there's a rebound in front of the net."

Krywulak, who also plays ice hockey for the University of Calgary, adds the following tip that should help snipers in the roller game.

"Set up for the one-timer on your off-wing because goalies have a hard time moving across in roller hockey," he says. "If you have a good one-timer, you should be able to score all the time."

As for the defensive zone, wingers have a role to play there, too. Buffalo Sabres left winger Matthew Barnaby offers the following advice.

"When you come back, pick up the point man (opposing defenseman)," says Barnaby, a feisty 22-year-old. "A lot of times that doesn't happen in minor hockey. That's where you see the difference between minor hockey and junior hockey up to the pro game."

While attacking, however, Barnaby said the following should be kept in mind.

"Always keep your head up and keep in full stride," he says. "Guys are a lot bigger in the NHL and you have to work hard in the corners to try and give the puck to a teammate in front of the net."

### **Own the puck**

Though passing the puck around tends to break down the opposition's defensive system, John Vecchiarelli, who's added the coaching portfolio to his winger duties with the 1994 RHI champion Buffalo Stampede, believes wingers should try to maintain possession for lengthy periods.

"Hold onto the puck as long as you can because it's hard to get the puck away from the other team," says Vecchiarelli, who also plays ice hockey and split his time last season between the Saginaw Wheels of the Colonial Hockey League and Wedvmark, a pro squad in Germany.

“If you can hold onto the puck as long as you can and get closer to the other team’s net, you’ll obviously have a better chance of scoring.”

As demonstrated above, every winger has his or her own style, and his or her own role to play on a team. Bob Gainey and Guy Lafleur, for example, teammates on the Montreal dynasty of the late 1970s, each approached the game somewhat differently. But by keeping some of these tips in mind, you should be able to add to your game, and improve your play on the wing every time out. |