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Outnumbered, but not outplayed!

By Brian Engblom

The most difficult job a defenseman faces in any game is handling outnumbered attacks. When faced with a 3-on-2 or 2-on-1 situation, the defender must learn to read the play and make the appropriate defensive decision. This ability to read and react can only be learned through experience, but here are some things to remember.

Know your partner and yourself

Verbal communication is very important, but you shouldn't rely on it too much. There are so many things happening so fast that it's impossible to tell your partner everything you are thinking. Therefore, your knowledge of his tendencies will often be the deciding factor as to who will initiate the play. Get to know your partner, but just as important, be realistic about your own abilities. Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses, and developing your game around them, is critical.

It's also important to be decisive, and not worry about being wrong. When you do make the wrong decision, however, go to your partner and tell him you did—and thank him if he bailed you out on the play. The same goes for your goaltender. This will create the bond between you, your partner, and your goaltender which will make all of you better players. Finally, get to know the opposition as well as possible. Who are their best playmakers? Who are their best shooters? Exchange this “scouting” information with your teammates. Forewarned, as the saying goes, is forearmed.

The first thing to do when facing an outnumbered attack with your partner is try and recognize the abilities of the attacking players. Do you know who they are and what they do best? If so, you'll have some idea of what to expect. Obviously, this knowledge comes mostly with experience.

Force the play outside

Positionally, you and your partner should stay together as much as possible, unless you are sure that one of you can get the puck cleanly or at least turn it over. And you should always force the play to the outside.

Experience will also help you develop a sense of when the puck carrier is in trouble, and when he is, you should attack him instantly. If he's vulnerable, your chances of breaking up the rush are increased. If the play comes in deep, however, a defender should never run into the corner after one man—because that leaves his partner alone against two men in front.

Much as you try to force the play to the outside, you also want to try and force any shot to the outside. Take away the shot from the slot if you can, and let the opposition shoot from the wings. It's the goaltender's job to stop those angle shots. Once a shot is taken, however, prepare to defend against rebounds.

Because you're outnumbered and vulnerable, try not to leave your feet to block a shot unless you know you're not screening your goaltender; you feel 100% sure the puck can't get through you; and you're prepared to react to a fake shot.

Watch two men

You always need to be aware of two men—the winger on your side and the slot man—as does your partner. And don't back in on your goaltender. By the time you've reached the top of the faceoff circles, you should have forced the play to the outside.

Finally, don't be stagnant. Do as much faking and poking around with your stick as possible—without pulling yourself out of position. It makes the attackers nervous!

The principles of defending against a 2-on-1 are basically the same. However, since you're alone, try and protect the middle of the ice—staying between the two attackers as much as possible. You may have to confront the puck carrier if it appears that he has gained good scoring position. Otherwise, protect the middle and prevent the pass. But don't over commit and try to do everything yourself. Relax. Remember, since your goaltender is behind you, it's really a 2-on-2!

Quickness, fast thinking and execution are your greatest assets when facing an outnumbered attack. The ability to relax under pressure is very important. If you get too "uptight" you'll end up making more mistakes. If you can relax, think clearly and react quickly, you will be right more often than not. But remember: highly skilled players can beat the odds. If the attackers make a few pinpoint passes and a great shot, they might score no matter what you do. Just try not to dwell on it.