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Overloading the power play

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By Fred Pletsch

Even though you can't go much beyond the basics with kids, Clarkson University coach Mark Morris says that in youth hockey, just as in the NCAA and NHL, personnel and execution are critical factors in the success of the power play.

The first pass on the power play is the most important in allowing the attacking team to gain position and set up inside the offensive zone.

"The key for any good breakout is to create a little bit of width and depth," says Morris, now in his seventh year with the Golden Knights. "You've got to make sure you've got the width of the ice covered with attacking players, and you also want to create some depth from your own goal line to the far blueline. (That way) you've got men ahead of the puck carrier, but not too far away, and anytime you're coming out of your zone you want to make that first pass a hard, short one — preferably to a guy in motion."

How you proceed across the offensive blueline will depend on the defense encountered.

"If they're going to stand up on the blueline, then you want to dump it in — either around the boards or into the opposite corner," advises the 1991 ECAC Coach of the Year. The players without the puck must be in full flight when it's surrendered, and you should shoot to an area where your teammates can get to it first.

"If the other team tends to let you carry the puck into their zone, you want to make sure your puck carrier is driving hard and wide (in order) to make that defenseman respect your speed and try to get him to turn, which opens up a lane on the inside," explains Morris.

How To Overload

The most basic power play formations in college hockey are variations of what is called the "overload system" and are easily adaptable to youth hockey. Here's how it works:

"You want to have a guy somewhere down below the goal line, to one side of or behind the net," chalk-talks Morris. "Then, preferably, you have a winger on the hash marks near the boards, a defenseman at the blueline near the boards, and the other defenseman directly in front of the net (but back at the blueline). The fifth player is a weak-side player, and is either in front of the net or off on top of the far circle."

This "overload formation" creates manpower superiority on the strong side while leaving the threat of a trigger-man on the far side.

Energetic puck movement is an integral part of a smoothly functioning power play. Morris says a short, crisp pass with a lot on it is like electricity jumping from one player to another. "You can really feel the confidence and surehandedness when somebody gives you one with something on it. You want to beat people with good, short, solid passes and stay away from those high-risk attempts that wind up as dump-outs back into your zone where you have to start all over again."

Once in formation, says Morris, “the guy below the goal line has the option of playing catch with the forward on the boards. He can step out from behind the net if that option is open, or he can rotate with the man on the boards — who would enter the defensive box and then continue the cycle (by going) below the goal line while the first guy is on the opposite side of that elliptical shape you’re trying to create.”

Use Your Best

You want these two players to be your best puck handlers, since their role is to create motion while maintaining possession. Morris says the player behind the goal line has several other options, too. “He can step out and look for the weak-side forward coming down to the goal mouth for a tap-in pass, or he can feed a defenseman who is trying to sneak in the back door.”

Clarkson also likes to work in a high rotation from the overload formation. “You send the (middle) defenseman down through the slot and have the trigger-man come back and fill his spot,” says Morris. “That’s the high rotation. You can usually collapse the defenders’ box by sending somebody down the middle. Then you send the puck immediately to his replacement up high. If you can feed him, and you’ve already collapsed the box and caused a defender to turn away, then you’ve got an opening down the middle to move in and exploit — possibly with a shot from a high percentage scoring area.”

The Clarkson Golden Knights devote a minimum of two hours of practice time every week to their power play. They tinker with countless variations of different systems, depending on the success they’re having and the opponent they’re preparing for. But because of limited ice time in youth hockey, Morris suggests a basic system with learning-progression components.

“Teach them one basic system, such as the overload, and once they can do it in their sleep you can experiment with new twists.”

A successful power play is an intimidating weapon at every level of hockey, and even youth hockey teams should be able to overload the scoreboard with power play goals. |

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