



Figure 1 (top)
Figure 2 (bottom)

Playing defense in the neutral zone (part 2 of 3)

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Last month, I covered techniques for playing defense in your offensive zone (forechecking). This month, I am presenting a technique to help your team play defense in the neutral zone (a la the neutral zone trap).

There are two basic styles of neutral zone defense that a team can play; the zone defense and the moving defense. The neutral zone trap is really a combination of the two, starting with the moving defense and ending with the zone defense. The moving (or man-to-man) defense is designed to converge on each player in or near the neutral zone to limit offensive options; the zone defense is designed to cover the offensive team by forcing them into a certain area (sub-zone) within the neutral zone.

Four objectives

Your neutral zone defense should be designed to accomplish four objectives:

- (1) Limit the puck carrier's offensive options by either forcing the non-puck carriers into a covered area or by covering each individual player.
- (2) Pressuring the puck carrier.

(3) Forcing a turnover.

(4) Transitioning your defensive team to offense.

In Figure 1, the defensive team (circled players) is forcing three attackers (XLW, XC, and the puck carrier XLD) to the lower half of the neutral zone. This situation creates a lot of traffic in a relatively small space, reducing most of the offensive options (objective number one described above). The other offensive forward (XRW) is being covered by LD, while LW is acting in a dual role; partially as a floater and partially covering XRD.

As XLD approaches the (right most) blueline, RW moves in on him to force him toward the boards and to force a play (pass the puck, dump it, or try to skate past RW—objective number two described above).

Since most of the attacking players are covered, the defenders are setting up for a turnover (objective number three described above). XLD will most likely pass the puck to XRD. This eliminates the initial attack progression and flow; LW will then converge on XRD to force the play again. Since XLW is being covered, a battle for the puck will most likely occur between RD and XLW, thus increasing the chance for a turnover. Or XLW will try to dump the puck up the middle in a desperate attempt to get it to XRW. 60-75% of the time, the defenders will regain control of the puck and begin a transition to offense (objective number four described above).

Incorporating solid defensive tactics into your neutral zone defensive strategy will give your team the ability to pressure your opponents, force turnovers and create offensive opportunities in the neutral zone.

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