

## Power play strategies

By James Baxter



Hull: A "go-to" guy. ©BBS

The power play is not a time to relax. It is a time to put the other team away. It is time to hammer 'em.

What else would you expect from the man known around the league as Iron Mike? But beneath Keenan's thin veil of commander-in-chief rhetoric, there is the blazing mind of one of the top students of the game (and now teachers) the NHL has ever known. So it is from Keenan that we draw some power play strategies in this edition of Hall of Fame Lessons.

In Keenan's world, in order to be successful, you need to have good specialty teams. And in particular, you need to have a good power play. Keenan even has it broken down into a mathematical equation.

"Ideally, you want to try to get a five or 10 percent difference between the success rates of your power play and (the failure rates of) your penalty killing," Keenan states in a videotaped lecture available for viewing at the Hockey Hall of Fame. "To do this, you have to find the best players who suit your team for your specialty teams."

With this in mind, is it any wonder that a revolving door has been installed at the dressing rooms of virtually every team that Keenan has coached in his 12-year NHL career? But his high standards and task-master reputation have reaped huge rewards—including a winning percentage of .613, four Stanley Cup appearances and a championship ring with the New York Rangers in 1994. He also coached Team Canada to victory in the 1991 Canada Cup.

### **The only real opportunity**

Like his idol and mentor Scotty Bowman, Keenan, the 46-year-old coach and general manager of the St. Louis Blues, views the power play as the only real opportunity to inflict damage on the opponent during an average hockey game. And so for players on Keenan's teams, when the other team takes a penalty, that's when players need to work overtime. Slacking is not an option.

"The power play is the most advantageous time to take possession and keep possession of the puck," Keenan quotes from the Gospel according to Scotty. "Hockey is a transitional game, from offense to defense, defense to offense, one team to another. Grandiose and intricate plays—designed plays—do not work. It is what you do when the puck changes possession that makes the difference."

Both Bowman and Keenan note that the secret to success in hockey—at regular strength or in specialty-team situations—boils down to “how quickly you can set up (on offense) or defend. How quickly you can turn a single advantage into success.

“The puck can change teams 400 times a game,” Keenan says, adding “and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Except on the power play.

“You have two minutes to get a goal,” says Keenan. “Use the full two minutes.”

### **Control and “go-to” guys**

The logic of Keenan’s first basic tenet is simple: if you can control the puck for two minutes, that means two minutes fewer in the game when the other team has a chance to score. And all of Keenan’s power plays are built around some of the best puck controllers the NHL has ever known—Jeremy Roenick and Chris Chelios, Mark Messier and Brian Leetch, and now Wayne Gretzky and Al MacInnis.

So with the puck on the sticks of his most trusted stickhandlers, Keenan chooses the “go-to” men. In Philadelphia, it was Tim Kerr, whose size and lightning shot made Keenan’s power plays click. In Chicago and New York, it was Steve Larmer and a slew of defensemen with great shots, especially Sergei Zubov. And, with the Blues, it is perhaps the top sniper in the game today, Brett Hull.

“This is the key part of the power play,” Keenan says of the pass from puck handler to shooter. “We look for good passing skills from all players on the power play, and we work on it—touch passing and one-timing situations in particular.”

The other personnel on the power play get there the old-fashioned way, as Smith Barney might say. “They *earn* it.”

“Mike Bossy said it best,” Keenan suggests, noting that the legendary top gun of the four-time Stanley Cup champion New York Islanders used to say that all of his personal success and all of the Islanders success as a team boiled down to one thing—effort.

Keenan says he rarely practices the power play with his teams, “but we are always practicing some element of the power play. The guys who work hardest and show improvement earn the chance to move up to the power play unit.”

Again, Keenan points out, this emphasis on effort is every bit as important as the individual skills that go into puck handling and shooting. Keenan notes that if your team is trying to maintain control of the puck for two minutes, you need to employ the hard workers (one senses he means “grinders”) to chase down the loose pucks and keep the opponent bottled up.

Keenan’s teams, both the coaches and the players, are famous for working overtime on their power play—overtime in the sense of after practice—sometimes in a gymnasium, sometimes in the locker room, sometimes even in a hotel hallway. New ideas are constantly being tested and walked through. And players are encouraged to work things out between themselves.

### **Chemistry, reading and video**

“One of the good things about having (different) players trying out the power play is that it gets the players talking among themselves,” something Keenan believes can only improve chemistry.

Players are expected to study and learn to read defenses. Keenan is not known for being a patient coach to lazy players.

"Players who can't read the defense are bound to give away the puck more often," Keenan states. "You must be able to maintain control of the puck and work under pressure."

"This is the most difficult skill to teach, but we work on it constantly through the season, always with a focus on trying to teach (players) to read the patterns and plays. It is being able to make use of the space the other team leaves open, being able to see and move into open ice."

And, in case one hasn't realized the opposite side of the coin, Keenan is succinct: "The penalty killers are there to take away that open ice and limit their options. (If you have access to video) show your players the ice they have available to them and get them to tell you what they would do in the same situation next time."

Keenan has always made heavy use of video and is considered as one of the NHL's master scouts, dating back to his days with the Peterborough Petes of the Ontario Hockey League. And his message is clear: a little knowledge and planning can go a long way.

"Pre-scout as much as you can," Keenan advises. "Look to see if they use an aggressive forechecker on their penalty kill. Who do they use? Do they use an aggressive or a non-aggressive box in their end? Do they have specialized players or plays?"

"Even if you can't scout the other team, before you have your pre-game talk with your players, walk out onto the ice and check out the size of the rink and the shape of the corners, and then let your players know what to expect."

"Get to know the officials in your league and keep track of how they call games," Keenan says. "Though some would argue (this belief), referees do officiate (according to) the score. Again, let your players know what to expect."

As for the actual flow of the power play, Keenan breaks it down into 10 things that the players should be trying to do at all times..

1) Provide support to the puck handler: "A 1-on-1 situation should be non-existent. You should always be trying to set up a 2-on-1."

2) Work the seams: "These are the areas that divide the box. These are the areas you are trying to contest and, ultimately, break down, resulting in a 2-on-1. The key is to isolate the defenders and force them to move out of position."

3) Prepare the "PSA" (Prime Scoring Area): "Work someone into the slot, but make sure you don't get tied up, as this blocks the best area. However," Keenan hints with a smile, "sometimes you want (your sniper) to get tied up with an opponent, which opens up another point in the box." Keenan suggests making this a called play.

4) Switch positions: In case teams are shadowing you players or playing some form of man-to-man defense, Keenan suggests moving players around, forcing the defenders into foreign positions on the ice. While your players are also out of position, they have the inherent advantage of being on the power play.

5) Avoid long passes: "Always, always, always have the support man close by. Long passes are easily intercepted and a good player will anticipate and step up, forcing you to reset (or worse)."

6) Emphasize the face off: Quite simply, Keenan notes, this is the best way to keep from losing 20 seconds of your power play each time there is a stoppage of play.

7) Get the puck in deep: Again, Keenan notes, this results in your faster, more talented puck controllers matching against the other team's defensemen. It offers the best chance to score and minimizes the risk of a shorthanded goal.

8) Create movement: "This is the only way to disorganize the box," Keenan says. "Make them move." In a Darwinian approach, Keenan instructs his players to seek out the weak, wounded or tired and to try to make that opponent make the mistake.

9) Take charge: Again, the power play is no time to get lazy. Keep the puck and players moving.

10) Finally, influence the goaltender: "Make him move from side to side as much as you can," Keenan says. "Don't let him get comfortable so that he knows he has all of his angles covered. Force him to constantly move side to side and in and out," eventually losing his bearings and positioning.