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Protecting the middle

By Fred Pletsch

“Protect The Middle” is a common defensive refrain in sports, and a concept constantly referred to by NHL coaches.

“We call it playing the dots,” says Toronto Maple Leafs assistant coach Mike Kitchen. “It means protecting the inside. On any rush you don’t want your opponent bringing the puck down the middle of the ice so you angle him off toward the boards. Some coaches say, from an offensive standpoint, it’s easier to enter the zone along the boards because you have more options.

“But realistically, if you’re a speed team and you bring it down the middle you have even more options to work with when you cross the blue line. So we try to get our defenseman to move over, take the middle away and put the puck on the boards.

“The chances of scoring from the boards are much slimmer than when the puck is brought down through the slot area.”

Kitchen, who enjoyed an eight-year NHL playing career from 1976 through 1984 with Colorado and New Jersey, is part of a coaching staff, under Pat Burns, that emphasizes team defense.

And one drill he likes to use emphasizes protecting the ice between the faceoff dots while skating backwards. It’s a drill diagrammed by Joe Marsh, head coach of the NCAA Division 1 St. Lawrence Skating Saints.

Indicates strengths, weaknesses

Marsh calls it an “indicator drill,” one used to improve backward skating and a defenseman’s pivoting ability.

“You put half your forwards in one corner behind the goal line, and the other half of your forwards in the opposite corner. The defensemen are grouped between the hash marks and take their place, one at a time, facing the end boards on their knees on the faceoff dot.”

The idea is to let the forward get a bit of a jump on the kneeling defender, who then has to spring to his skates and defend the middle all the way down the ice.

Marsh says current St. Louis Blues defenseman Daniel Laperriere had this drill mastered during his days in Canton, New York. “He is such a tremendous backward skater that often times he wouldn’t even have to pivot and still kept the forward to the outside all the way down the ice.” Laperriere, an NCAA East first team all-American and Hobey Baker award runner-up in 1992, is the son of Montreal Canadiens assistant coach Jacques Laperriere, who won six Stanley Cups in a dozen NHL seasons.

The drill should serve as an indicator as to your defensemen’s strengths and weaknesses in skating and pivoting. And since it can be quite illuminating, Marsh suggests a tip for keeping up their morale.

"We get the kids together first," says Marsh, "and tell them not to worry, because this is a drill you are going to get better at over the course of time. We want you to be challenged so don't be discouraged if you're getting your doors blown off a few times.

"But you will notice that once they start improving they also start gaining the confidence to stay up on the play more when the situation calls for it."

Marsh adds if you have a defenseman who is getting burned just as badly after you've been doing the drill for a month, he likely has a technical flaw in his skating that needs to be corrected.

"This is a real workday drill and (one that's) super for conditioning. Your blueline group is usually fatigued after five minutes or so because you have more forwards than defensemen."

Mike Kitchen and Joe Marsh both agree. Your team will be better if you make a point of getting your defenseman to play the dots and protect the middle of the ice.

Fred Pletsch is a veteran OHL and AHL broadcaster who currently covers the Cornwall Aces for CJFS radio.