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Foot speed and quickness for defensemen

By Tony DiRito

So many defensemen are expected to step-up or take the body on opposing forwards, but very rarely are these defensemen taught what exactly is involved in accomplishing these tasks. For a defenseman, the first and foremost skill that should be taught is foot speed and quickness. This terminology is applied to every position in hockey, but for a defenseman there are certain areas that are position specific, and need to be taught and mastered if you are planning to elevate your game to new levels.

Can I suggest that the next time you watch a professional game that you pay particular attention to the defense, especially their feet. This may seem like an odd assignment, but upon further review you will notice that a defenseman's feet never stop moving. They are constantly positioning themselves to prevent a scoring opportunity, or to create one for their teammates. I have decided to break down the areas needed to improve overall foot speed and quickness, which will allow any defenseman to implement these techniques and hopefully improve in his or her position.

Speed and quickness

This may seem like an odd place to start, but if we are trying to build speed and quickness, we must first be able to determine exactly what each skill means and secondly how they differ. Players should possess both skills if they wish to be successful, but they must remember that one can have speed without quickness or vice versa. These two concepts are unique because they can fit together to form a complete skating package, or they can exist separately.

Speed as it relates to hockey is the ability to go fast for longer distances, such as goal line to goal line. Speed usually can be seen when a player races down the ice to chase the puck to prevent an icing or during a full ice race between two players. Historically, players who are considered to have speed are usually bigger players who have strong, powerful legs, that take a while to obtain maximum speed, but when they achieve top speed they are very difficult to stop.

Quickness, on the other hand, is a short burst of speed that allows a player to gain an advantage over an opponent for short distances, such as blue line to blue line. It is this quickness that allows players to pull past another opponent during head-to-head competition. It is players who possess quickness that are often referred to as players who have quick feet or good acceleration.

These two skills are vital for a defenseman, especially in the defensive zone because you are expected to read and react to opposing players breaking down on you. In order to do this effectively you must possess both speed and quickness.

Lateral movement

This is perhaps one of the most important skills that a defenseman must have if one hopes to be successful. In ice hockey, as we all know, the tempo and pace of the game is always changing, which results in the constant movement of the puck from the offensive, neutral and defensive zones. A defenseman needs to perform lateral movements in order to constantly stay in front of on-coming forwards, and also to be able to react to the puck. In order to improve lateral movement there are certain areas that need to be stressed.

By performing quick feet drills such as the T-circle drill, one can develop agility and enhance the quickness needed to react to the constant change of direction that defensemen are often up against. Remember while doing this drill to keep your head up and your body positioned so that your weight is evenly distributed and

your knees are bent. Do not rush this drill, the first few times should be performed at half speed to ensure that proper technique is being used, then progress into full speed.

Agility

One question that I am often asked is: Can agility be taught? My answer is the same always the same...Yes! Agility is a skill that involves performing tedious drills that can be boring as compared to simulating game situations. It is necessary to improve your overall body coordination and to learn your boundaries as a skater. Once you can identify these boundaries, you can work on them, which will allow you to become a better defenseman and overall player.

Proper agility stems from proper body positioning and weight distribution. In order for these to take place remember to bend at the knees and to keep your back straight so you can react quickly and are not caught off balance. By keeping your weight balanced you will be able to react quickly to all situations and constantly keep yourself in position.

Transition

This is a term that is important for all players, but especially defensemen. Being able to quickly shift from forwards skating to backwards skating can determine whether or not you can stop an opponent breaking down on you. Knowing when to change direction is just as important as knowing how to change direction quickly. Foot speed is the key to good transition; you must focus on stopping and being able to quickly move your feet so that you can reach top speed while going the opposite direction. Crossovers are a vital part to good transition because they enable you to change direction quickly and also to gain the edge that you need on an opponent breaking down on you.

Game situations

I have already discussed how to increase your overall foot speed and quickness, now I believe that it is necessary to explain how these skills are used in a game situations and why they are so important. In the defensive zone, it is important for a defenseman to be constantly maneuvering to ensure that the offensive player is taken out of scoring position. A defenseman must always be in the "right spot"—and as we all know this "right spot" is always changing; therefore, a defenseman must be quick enough to react to every situation.

It is the defenseman's responsibility to be able to move the puck out of the defensive zone either by passing to an open forward or skating the puck out of the zone. These two skills require that a defenseman be able to skate well and also be able to handle the puck at top speeds. In order for a defenseman to skate the puck out of their zone, it requires good acceleration and quickness to be able to avoid on-coming fore-checkers. A defenseman must be able to change direction and speed very quickly to constantly adapt to the changing direction and tempo of the game. (See Breakout Drill in Figure 2)

There are many aspects that go into playing defense, but in order to perform the more complicated aspects of the position it is very important to have an understanding as to the skating mechanics that are involved. In order to improve your skills try performing the drills that I have provided for you regularly and also with and without pucks to constantly challenge yourself. Each skill learned must be used as a building block so that you can piece together and try to build yourself into a better hockey player. I

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