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Winning those one-on-one battles

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By Tony DiRito

For a defenseman, the meaning of the term “one-on-one” is not just limited to a forward breaking down on a defenseman. Typically, this is the picture that most people have in their minds.

However, there are more important types of confrontational situations that a defenseman must face during a game that are far more important and can greatly affect the outcome of a game. Most defensive players have received tips and pointers on how to defend against a typical one-on-one, but in this article I am going to point out the factors that are important for corner play, front-of-the-net positioning and puck management.

Once the puck enters your defensive zone, a defenseman must stay alert for the many one-on-one battles that exist in the zone and focus on advancing the puck either by passing or skating the puck out. In many cases, games are won and lost in the defensive zone. What determines the outcome is which team wins the one-on-one battles that exist all around the ice surface.

First rule

The first rule of play is to never lose sight of your position on the ice. You must be aware of your surroundings at all times and force opposing players away from your net. Always try and keep the upper hand in these one-on-one battles so you can have control of the outcome and force the opposing player to do what you want.

Being able to control one-on-one play in the corners may take being physical or require proper positioning that forces the opposing player away from a good scoring opportunity.

Depending on whether you have forced an on-coming forward into the corner, if the puck was directly dumped in, will affect how you are going to handle the play. If the forward has been forced into the corner, your first line of defense is to cut off as much of the ice surface as possible so you are limiting the space in which the forward has to maneuver.

Once you have angled the forward so you can stop the forward movement, be aware. Don't allow the forward to gain speed and continue behind the net, as this will result in your losing control of the situation and also can cause a scoring opportunity for the opposing team.

If the puck has been dumped into your defensive zone and you are taking chase to the puck, remember to keep your feet moving so you are not caught standing still, which will allow a fore-checker to gain ground on you quicker, forcing you to rush your decision.

If you have time, perhaps due to a line change, you may want to set the puck up and allow your teammates to get into position for a break-out.

However, in most cases, you are usually being pursued by a fore-checker and are forced to react quickly.

Stay calm, don't rush. By rushing, you will be more likely to turn the puck over or make a bad pass. In this short period of time, your mind should be racing through different scenarios and plays that have been

practiced in the past. You have several options that will allow you to move the puck out of your defensive zone.

Do you take the puck and turn it up the ice yourself, pass to your defensive partner and change the direction of play or pass to a winger posted on the boards or a center swinging? Your decision relies first on your coach's plan for a break-out and second on the amount of time you actually have to perform these types of plays.

No matter what option you decide, your goal should remain the same. Safely move the puck up the ice and out of your defensive zone. As you perform break-outs during practice or free time, you should try and incorporate the different types of options I have described because this will allow you to feel comfortable with these and also provide you with the experience needed to perform these skills in all game situations.

Battling in front of the net

"Clear 'em out" is a phrase commonly used in these situations, but how are you actually going to do this without getting a penalty or screening your goalie?

There are no simple solutions to this question but rather several areas you need to focus on so you can perform more effectively.

Before you figure out how to defend this, remember this is a skill and should be treated with the same care given to skating or shooting. The first rule when battling in front of the net is to never, never, turn your back to the play. This will only cause you to lose sight of the puck and the action around you.

You can avoid this by always keeping your feet moving and using balance and strength to keep the forward from spinning around you. Also, knowing where the puck is and anticipating where it is going, allows you to stay a step ahead of the opposing player and obtain better positioning.

The second factor that is important is to allow your goalie to have a clear view of the shooter and keep the opposing player away from your goalie's line of vision. Lifting your opponent's stick off the ice will eliminate the opportunity for a tip-in chance or even a rebound. The third factor is to contain the opposing forward without getting a penalty. Here you will have to rely on your own control so that you won't retaliate or succumb to reckless play.

By keeping your feet moving and your head up, you will be able to stay with the opposing player rather than being forced to use your stick or arms to hold the player back.

Puck

management

I will briefly touch on this topic for now and save the rest for a future article. Puck handling differs for a defenseman, but in this article I will focus on one key issue: good decision making.

When you are in your defensive zone the way you decide on how to move the puck can greatly affect one-on-one battles. For instance, if you make a bad pass and it is intercepted and dumped back into the defensive zone, a one-on-one battle will result.

The more effective you become in moving the puck out of your zone, the greater your chances are for eliminating the one-on-one battles in your zone. Moving the puck to open players or successfully skating the puck out of your zone will eliminate scoring chances for your opponent.

Positioning is a vital part for any player in hockey and especially important for a defenseman. You are responsible for stopping your opponents from getting quality shots on your goaltender, and for being the spark plug for your team's offense.

If you set an objective before each game to try to win the individual one-on-ones that occur in the defensive zone, you will notice an increase in your overall performance as well as your team's performance. These one-on-one battles shape and define how a particular game is going to be played. By winning these battles you are limiting your opponent's chances of scoring, plus allowing your team to gain momentum and control the game.

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