



SHANE BOWLER

The Defensive Specialist

Players in today's game of hockey are becoming more specialized with each season.

No matter what level of hockey you or your child is playing, chances are that the player has been given or requested a specific role from the coach. Players are usually designated as a scoring forward, a defensive forward, a power forward, or a special teams specialist, etc.

A player being labeled an "all around" player is very rare. Most of the top picks in any draft usually excel in a specific part of the game, either offence or defense. A young player may attain a career in hockey by becoming a specialist in a specific part of the game. For players hoping to pursue a hockey career on the defensive side of the puck there are six elements of the game a player must understand and execute to be wanted by elite teams at higher levels. The concerns for players hoping to be known for their defensive skills are face-offs, angling, blocking shots, defensive positioning, properly making line changes, and clock management. Players who choose to be defensive minded and want to excel in these skills and areas are usually "team first" guys who do the little things that are most important in helping the team win games.

Not only defensive players, but everyone on the team should improve their skills in taking face-offs. Defense often starts on face-offs when possession of the puck is determined. With encroachment rules and time constraints, centre-men are being ejected from the face-off circle more often than in the past. In many minor games, it is common to see a defenseman step into the circle to take important draws in the defensive zone. This is why all players must learn to take face-offs.

The most important concern for someone taking a face-off in their own zone is to make certain that the face-off is not lost. The player does not have to win the draw necessarily, as long as the puck is not lost. A tie on a defensive zone face-off is not a bad thing. Ideally, if you cannot win the draw clearly in your own zone, you hope to tie up the other centre-man and have your wingers



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and defensemen congest the shooting lanes while out numbering the other team with puck supporters to gain control of the puck.

Key elements in winning face-offs are quick hand speed and upper body strength, but probably the most important skill is being able to read opposing centre-men and their team alignments. Opposing teams and their centre men usually map out or set up in an alignment as to where they want the puck to be drawn or directed. As a defending centre-man reading and understanding the attacking alignment will greatly increase the number of face-offs won not only in the defending zone but all over the ice.

Defensive minded players should also be aware of the concept of angling opposing players. Angling is crucial in both team forechecking and defensive coverage. By angling, I mean using one's speed, body positioning and stick placement to put the other team's puck controller in an undesired position and take away both passing and shooting lanes. Through angling you can take away an attacking player's time and space, put them in an awkward position such as their backhand or put them in an impossible position to score with a low percentage scoring angle. Players who understand this concept prevent a lot of goals being scored and usu-

ally receive a lot of playing time.

Another skill needed to become a strong defensive specialist is the capability and desire to block shots. On most good teams the only players to be on the ice during crucial moments of the game are players who are willing to block shots. With the quality of the mandatory equipment kids are wearing, blocking shots is becoming more and more common. Even with top notch protective gear, there still is proper technique that should be taught and used in blocking shots. When players understand that with proper technique the chances of injury are reduced, their confidence level to block shots will increase, and so will an added skill in the development of their defensive game.

Another skill which is crucial to becoming a defensive specialist and probably the most important is the ability to understand and practice proper defensive zone positioning. Coaches and teams have many different systems and names for coverage in the defensive zone, but for the most part, all systems give a defending player one attacking player to cover as their defensive responsibility while always being supported by teammates. Staying between your assigned attacking player and your net always allows you to maintain good defensive position.

Coupled with smart positioning, this is also where angling opposing players is a beneficial skill for a defending player as well. Players who understand defensive zone positioning allow the play to come to them. These players don't chase the puck around the zone but rather wait patiently and understand where the puck is going while accomplishing their defensive responsibilities. Players who are always in proper defensive zone positioning are usually on the ice in the final crucial moments of the game trying to save the win for their team.

Proper line changes, when executed effectively can only be beneficial, in terms of controlling the offensive attack, but when line changes are done improperly, the team will continually be put in a defensive position and in out numbered situations all game. Players who know when to make line changes, make things easier for the team. The golden rule of line changes is "a back-checker never makes a line change as the puck is going into your defensive zone". You don't want to go off and give the opposing team a brief power play in your zone. By going off when the puck is in your defensive zone, you have changed the situation from

5 on 5 to a 5 on 4. Ideally you want to make a line change as your team is on offence, therefore the puck is nowhere near your net and you haven't put your team in a defending position.

Another aspect to proper line changes is to make sure that the whole five man unit on the ice does not come off at the same time and leave the team vulnerable.

Staggering the time when players come off the ice makes certain the goalie is never alone in an unwanted situation. Usually, the winger furthest away from the bench is the last to change. By doing this, the furthest lane to the defending goal is never left unprotected. Proper line changes may not win you many games but done improperly they will definitely contribute to the lose column.

A great defensive skill which can be used all over the ice at any time of the game while defending a lead, is the skill of clock management or knowing how to "kill the clock". A great way to run off the clock is by "ragging the puck". Getting the puck deep into the opposing zone and making the loosing team battle to recover it, in the furthest part of the rink away from your defending net, allows critical seconds to run

down on the clock helping your team to secure the lead.

Good defensive players are always aware of the time on the clock. These players know when it is the last minute or seconds of the period or the game, and are aware of when penalties and power-plays are ending. This skill is one of the many mental skills rather than physical skills great hockey players possess.

There are many players who want to be a defensive specialist; the guy the coach wants out on the ice when the team needs to secure a win. For those players these six skills and concepts should be understood and practiced. Players who strive to be competent at the little things that matter in winning games are always thinking of the team first. These players are leaders and are often team captains. As a coach you want players like this on your team and also need them if you want to win.

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