



SHANE BOWLER

Go Play in the Traffic!

"What's the player's short game like?" This is a question being asked by scouts and coaches in arenas everywhere, not wondering about a hockey player's golf game, but rather how a player executes in traffic. By traffic, I mean when a player with the puck is being pressured physically by one or several defenders.

Hockey is played on a large surface, but for the most part, the actual game happens in little pockets throughout areas of the ice with all of the players from both teams within 30 meters apart. Players who learn how to execute skills and create good habits while playing in physical traffic will definitely be an asset to any hockey team, at any level.

There are parts of the game that forwards and defensemen can both develop that will enable each to execute effectively in traffic.

For forwards, most of the busy traffic is found deep in the offensive zone. Having quick hands and feet will add to a player's success. Forwards must learn to execute short passes, tape to tape, in the corners and around the net. If a player can't make that short pass efficiently, the play becomes a turnover because of the proximity of all the defenders. Another important attribute of a successful player is to have quick feet. Having quick feet is very important in traffic for the basic reason that this skill allows a player to get away from traffic and create time and space; crucial in the attacking game. Quick feet can dominate three situations in traffic in the offensive zone. The first situation can be seen at a face off in the offensive zone. If you have quick feet and can win a "foot-race" to the net, against the opposing defender, you will help your team by possibly drawing a penalty from the defender chasing you, as well as creating a scoring chance. A second situation involving the importance of quick feet can be seen in the "give and go" play. After making a short tape to tape pass, the player who can explode into open ice can make himself available to receive the puck back. Getting open and



away from your defender will increase scoring chances, and will also potentially draw penalties against out of position or pursuing defenders. A final situation where quick feet can be important in traffic occurs when a defender is pinned against the boards and then released. If a skilled forward, through body positioning and quick feet, can get to the net before the defender an odd man situation will have been created. Exploding to the net can force the opposing team to take untimely penalties and will also increase scoring chances.

When it comes to scoring in traffic a shooter must also have a quick release. With goalies being as good as they are and with all players taught to block shots, a shooter must be able to get the puck on the net and hit the corners quickly if you ever want to score consistently. We spoke about developing shooting skills in the last issue. A quick release is a shooting skill that can be developed through consistent practice.

Defensemen also have to play effectively in traffic in both the defensive and offensive zones on the ice. In the past, defenders could obstruct the fore-checkers to allow their defensemen time to make an outlet pass. Today with the enforcement of obstruction penalties, this practice no longer exists. This allows the fore-checker to pursue the puck and a defenseman at top speed. To be effective, the defenseman must be able to make the first outlet pass while being pressured. A defenseman can build a career around making that good first outlet pass while taking the hit to make the play.

An effective defenseman must also know how to close the gap on attacking forwards. When a defenseman closes the gap, he is essentially creating traffic. Traffic can work to the advantage of the defending team because it puts more obstacles between the puck and the defending net. A defenseman must take away all the time and space by closing the gap and clogging up the zone around the puck.

When it comes to shooting on the opposing team's net, a defenseman has to know how to "play in traffic" in the offensive zone. Usually a defenseman has nine bodies between himself and the net as he prepares to shoot. Therefore it is crucial that he gets the puck to the net as quickly as possible. It doesn't matter how hard the shot is as long as it gets to the net. Big wind-ups for slap-shots are not necessary, quick wrist shots are effective in traffic.

Players who can beat defenders to the net, and make short passes, can close the gap, take hits to make plays, as well as execute other situations in traffic, are valuable assets to any hockey team. Players who learn that playing in traffic is a skill and work hard to develop and improve their skill level will be the players who succeed and possibly get the chance to play at the next level.

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