

Art of Puck Possession

In hockey, the team that demonstrates the greatest control and movement of the puck typically is the most successful. This facet of the game is termed puck possession and can be defined as having control of the puck for as long as possible. With this in mind, the only time that would be acceptable to lose control of the puck, would be after a scoring chance.

- How do you teach young players not to get rid of the puck needlessly?
- How do you teach players to always pass to an open teammate?
- How do you teach a player to get open?

If a coach can find a way to teach these facets of the game effectively, then he will be able to develop hockey players with an ability to take their game to the next level. In order to begin implementing practice plans that address puck possession skills, you need to develop an understanding of three key concepts (regroup, support and flow).

Regroup

Regrouping is simply being able to maintain puck control when forward progression of the puck is impeded or transition from defense to offence when recovering the puck from a turnover.

For example, as a puck carrier, your goal is to get the puck into the offensive zone and create a scoring opportunity. However, if forward progression is impossible because of tight coverage, the puck carrier must adapt. Rather than dump the puck or force a pass and risk creating a turnover, the puck carrier should look to pass the puck sideways, and if that option isn't available, should turn around and pass the puck backward in order to maintain possession of the puck.

A very effective use of this tactic is when you get trapped along the boards in the neutral zone. Rather than shoot the puck up the boards, the puck carrier should execute a sharp turn, and pass to the defenseman. The defenseman should then look to pass the puck to his partner (using the ice) to create a quick up opportunity and gain the zone on the other side. This regroup, when executed properly, will allow a team to gain the offensive zone quickly and create a scoring chance. By demonstrating patience with the puck in the neutral zone (i.e. Moving the puck from side to side or by moving it backwards), you give your teammates the opportunity to generate speed through the neutral zone and allow them to create opportunities against a defense that may get caught standing still.

Two simple rules that coaches should try to implement are:

1. Defenseman should always look to use their partner as a regrouping option. Do not haphazardly dump the puck up the boards or make a difficult cross-ice pass to a forward.

2. Forwards whenever you find yourself with the puck on your stick facing one of your defensemen give them the puck and look to regroup. The ability to regroup on a turnover in the neutral zone should be a part of any successful team's game plan.

[Refer to Drills #1 and #2]

Support

For the regroup rule to be successful, the puck carrier must be supported on all sides (i.e. front, back, left and right) at all times. This rule has the support players (non-carriers) making themselves available as valid passing options both in front and back of the puck carrier. This means that the support player should be open and reasonably close to the puck carrier.

Puck support can then be defined as a team's ability to maintain puck control while moving the puck into a scoring opportunity. Efficient puck support requires both a team and individual mentality. From a team perspective, it requires a collective effort to move the puck into the offensive zone and create a scoring opportunity. But, as an individual, it requires each support player to provide options to the puck carrier. To become an effective support player, you must learn to anticipate the puck carrier's intentions, read the defensive pressure, and adjust your positioning with respect to that of the puck carrier. The ability to read and react by anticipating quickly and making adjustments is of paramount importance because it requires a unified effort (i.e. movement of all players) to generate a great scoring chance.

An effective support player needs to understand two key fundamentals.

1. The ability to get open for a pass and;
2. The ability to create space for the puck carrier.

When a teammate has the puck, there should be two support players (typically one defenseman and one forward) looking to get open for a pass. Support players need to read, not only, the movement of the puck carrier, but also the movement of the defenders and the open playing surface available and then, make the necessary adjustments to maneuver into an open position and create options for the puck carrier (ie. triangulate the attack). As an example, when in tight quarters, a give-and-go play works well, providing the puck carrier an opportunity to quickly get past a defender. A second tactic learned from the Europeans is cycling and it is another great method of puck support that enables a team to maintain control of the puck in the offensive end.

The second method for players to support the puck carrier is to create space so that the puck carrier has room to skate with the puck. This method involves the support players spreading out and away from the puck carrier, creating time and space for that player. By providing the puck carrier with various levels of support (passing, skating, shooting) players can individually contribute for a successful team effort.

[Refer to Drills #3, #4 and #5]

Flow

The final concept is flow. Flow can be defined as,

“The movement of players in the process of interacting and reacting to the movement of the puck.”

The speed in which a team reacts to the movement of the puck defensively (defensive flow) will determine what options are available upon receiving the puck (offensive flow). The way in which a team reacts or responds to defensive flow and pressure will determine how successful their regroup and transition game is. Ideally a team would like to hit the blue line with speed and enter the zone with puck possession and an opportunity to create an offensive attack. For this to happen, the offensive team must be able to move the puck away from pressure. Each player must also keep maneuver into passing lanes to provide the puck carrier with multiple options when it comes to moving the puck. This can be accomplished through quick puck movement, close and quick support, and by all four support players becoming passing options. The ability of a team to create space and options to the weak side (i.e. away from the defensive flow) will correlate to a team's success in its transition game. [Refer to Drill #6]

For teams to be successful in incorporating the above concepts (regroup, support and flow) into their games the players must develop the proper skills set and the coaches must implement appropriate practice plans. As players, what skills are needed?

Skating

Speed does kill! An efficient skater has the ability to: move into a support position quickly; to beat a defender; gain the zone quickly; hustle to a loose puck; accelerate into open space; etc. Players should work on leg and core body strength.

Passing

The ability to pass the puck accurately at the right time to the right player is an important element to playing high tempo hockey: move the puck quickly and away from pressure; know what type of pass to use (sweep, snap, flip, saucer, area, one-touch); the ability to be a good pass receiver (always face the play; communicate; move into a support position quickly; and once you pass the puck, look to be an immediate option for a return pass).

Read-and-react

The development of hockey sense; the ability to read the defensive pressure and react accordingly; the ability to understand time, how to create time and how to use time to create scoring chances. As coaches, how do we teach this?

Coaches must incorporate functional hockey drills into every practice. Drills that involve transition are essential. Small game drills should also be utilized to provide a competitive edge with a little bit of fun.

The following series of drills will help coaches start to develop these elements.

Drill #1: NEUTRAL ZONE CROSS

Drill #2: DOUBLE REGROUP

Drill #3: Multi-Cycle

Drill #4: 99 ROLLOUT

Drill #5: 14 UP AND BACK

Drill #6: TRANSITION DRILL