



Neutral Zone Offensive Tactics

Written By: Mike Sirant

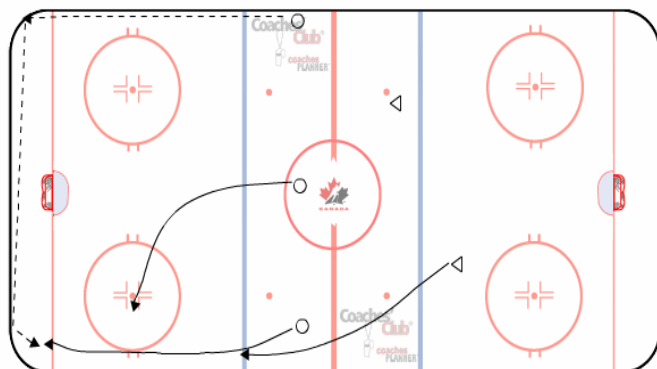
In a previous article featured on the "Coaches Club", I outlined various offensive zone entry plays (e.g. 3 vs. 2, 2 vs. 2), and described the offensive principles necessary to execute them. In this article I will discuss neutral zone offensive tactics when the puck carrier is not able to enter the offensive zone with possession of the puck because of the concentration of opponents defending the blueline. The information presented is based on my experience coaching Canadian university hockey and observations from the 2002 World Under 18 Championship held in Slovakia.

If a team on the offensive attack is prevented from carrying the puck into the offensive zone because of good defensive play by the opposing team in defending their blueline, then the offensive team has three options; to give up the puck by shooting or chipping it into the offensive zone, try to beat the defender one versus one, or to maintain puck possession by having the puck carrier turn back from the blueline.

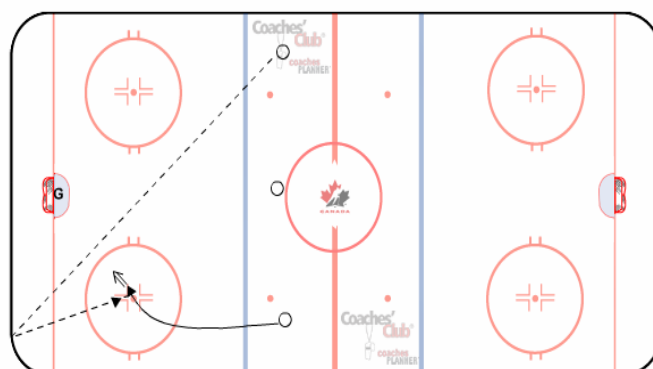
There is a philosophical difference of opinion between hockey nations as to which is the better tactic. Traditionally, European teams refused to shoot the puck into the offensive zone, believing that it did not make sense to give up possession of the puck and then have to work to get it back. The European teams would at times try to beat the defender one versus one, or more frequently, cut off their initial attack by having the puck carrier turn back or skate laterally along the offensive blueline, then look to pass to a teammate coming up ice late with speed. This player coming up ice with speed might have a better opportunity to find a seam to enter the offensive zone while maintaining puck possession.

In North America, we tend to play a lower risk game and discourage players from trying to beat a defender one on one at the offensive blueline. A turnover in this area can give the opposition an opportunity for a quick counter attack. Therefore, our players have a greater tendency to shoot the puck into the offensive zone if unable to carry the puck across the blueline. The shoot-in and chip pass, can be effective tactics if executed properly. Although you are giving up the puck, an effective shoot-in or chip pass can result in regaining possession of the puck in a better offensive position. Based on their play at the World Under 18 Championship, European teams such as Finland, are now showing a willingness to use shoot-ins and aggressive forechecking to recover the puck.

The keys to an effective shoot-in are; shoot the puck in early so your teammates do not have to slow down at the offensive blueline, and using cross dumps or hard rims to shoot the puck into an area where your players will outnumber the opposition, or beat them to the puck.

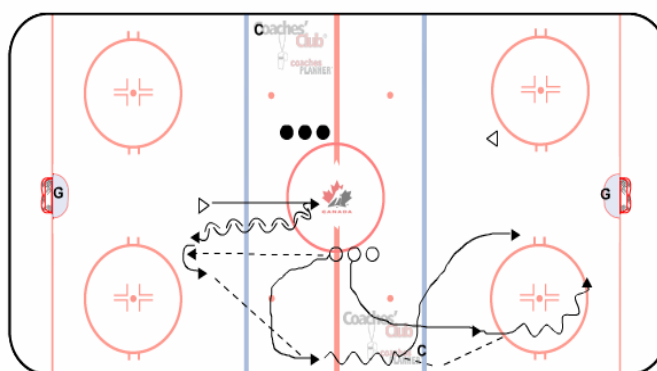


Hard rim



Cross Dump

Another effective tactic to advance the puck into the offensive zone that provides an even greater chance of regaining puck possession is the chip pass. Chipping the puck behind a defender for a teammate to skate into, is an effective way to advance the attack into the offensive zone with speed. Ideally, when chipping the puck at the offensive blueline, the puck should end up around the hash marks. This provides an opportunity for the supporting offensive player to pick up the puck and immediately drive to the net. The following diagram shows an excellent drill to teach the chip pass.



Chip Pass Drill

To start this drill, the defenseman (D1) skates forward to center then skates backward and pivots to get the loose puck spotted by F1. D1 passes to F1 who has moved to be an outlet on the boards. F1 now skates through the neutral zone until they reach the coach providing token checking pressure at the blueline. F1 chips the puck off the boards so the puck lands in the area by the hash marks. F2, who is supporting F1, picks up the puck and drives to the net and shoots, or delays and passes to F1. After making the chip pass, F1 quickly moves around the coach so he/she can re-enter the play and look for a pass or rebound. The drill is run going both ways at the same time.



A key teaching point for making a chip pass at the offensive blueline is to make it early, i.e. before the puck carrier gets too close to the defender at the blueline. This allows the puck carrier more space to move around the defender after chipping the puck, to avoid being blocked from re-entering the play. The second key teaching point when executing a chip pass is to chip the puck high off the boards as opposed to sliding it along the ice and banking it off the bottom dasher board. By chipping it higher off the boards this will ensure that the puck lands in the area of the hashmarks, leaving your teammate who picks up the puck more space to drive to the net.

The shoot-in and chip pass at the offensive blueline are effective tactics to advance the puck into the offensive zone without risking a costly turnover that could result in an outnumbered rush against. However, coaches working with young players should not promote playing low risk hockey by telling their players to shoot the puck into the offensive zone. Young players should be encouraged to handle the puck and try to beat opponents one versus one so they can develop their offensive skills. Once the players are older, then they can be taught how to read the situation to determine whether to carry, pass, chip pass, or shoot the puck into the offensive zone.