



THE ART OF PUCK CONTROL

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Introduction

Watching hockey games today sometimes makes me wonder whatever happened to the art of *puck control*. I see far too many players getting the puck out of their zone by shooting it off the glass, or dumping it in the offensive zone from the neutral zone. The problem is that when you don't know where the puck is going, or whom it's going to, you have a one out of two chance of giving it to your opponent.

I define puck control as having possession of the puck for as long as possible. In a perfect world, you lose the puck only after a scoring chance. So how do you teach young hockey players to not get rid of the puck needlessly? How do you teach them to always pass the puck to an open teammate? How do you teach a player to get open?

I use a set of simple rules, or individual tactics, which make both the carrier and non-carrier read and react to situations during a game. These rules are:

- Regroup rule
- Support rule
- Offensive overload rule
- Swapping rule
- 'Sweet spot' rule

Regroup Rule

I compare this rule to hitting a roadblock. When you want to get to your destination with your car and you hit a roadblock due to construction, you turn around and take another route. The concept is the same in hockey. As a puck carrier, you want to get the puck in the offensive zone slot area to create a scoring chance. However, if forward progression is impossible because of tight coverage, the carrier must look sideways to pass, and failing that, turn around and pass the puck back in order to maintain control.

A very effective use of this tactic is when you get trapped on the boards in the neutral zone. Have the forward execute a sharp turn in the neutral zone, pass to the defenseman who goes 'D to D', and then quick up the other side for an offensive zone entry. When executed properly, you will gain the offensive zone quickly and generate a scoring chance.

The technical skills required for this tactic are sharp turns, dribbling the puck and making/receiving passes while in motion.

Support Rule

If the regroup rule is to be successful, the puck carrier must always be supported on all sides, i.e. front and back. This rule has the non-carriers making themselves available as a valid passing option both in front and back of the carrier. A valid passing option means that the non-carrier is open and at a reasonable distance from the carrier, especially for young players who don't have the strength for cross-ice passes.

The technical skills required for this tactic are skating in order to get open, dribbling the puck and making/receiving passes.



Offensive Overload Rule

When your team has control of the puck, the defenseman has the option of creating an odd-man rush situation in the offensive zone by joining the rush and driving to the net. This tactic is used oftentimes when the defenseman comes in through the 'back door', the weak side in the offensive zone, into the slot area for a quick shot on net. However, make sure that your defenseman understands that he/she must get in and out quickly. Failure to accomplish this may result in an odd-man rush should you lose possession of the puck. You can also have the defence join the rush in the neutral if, and only if, you have full control of the puck.

The technical skills required for this tactic are skating, making/receiving passes and shooting.

Swapping Rule

The idea behind puck control is to make forward progression into the opponent's slot area. This rule stipulates that the puck carrier can skate to any free area if he is not pressured. For example a defenseman can rush the puck if he has the free space. When this occurs, a forward must replace him on defence in order to maintain the team's system, i.e. a 2-1-2 structure. Another example is a winger crossing over to the centre lane where he has open space, and the centre man picking his opponent, and then replacing him on the wing.

So this rule simply states that non-carriers must swap positions with the carriers in order to maintain the offensive system you are using.

The technical skills required for this tactic are dribbling, skating and picking.

'Sweet Spot' Rule

This rule states that as soon as the puck carrier enters the offensive zone slot area, he is to take a shot on net. Most goals are scored from the slot, so we want to get as many shots as possible from this area. Make sure players shoot low whenever a defensive player is in front of him/her. These screen shots give the goaltenders the most trouble. Also ensure that you have a player in front of the goaltender to screen, deflect or take a rebound.

The technical skills required for this tactic are dribbling, skating and shooting.

Conclusion

These rules are easy to teach and are understood quickly by players at all levels and ages. You can easily include these individual tactics into your drills. I've also taken the time to identify the technical skills required to successfully execute these tactics. I cannot stress the fact that you must invest time in every practice to develop/refine these technical skills, regardless of the age level you are coaching. Remember, hockey is a skills game!

Happy coaching!