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Make It Easy: Puck Control and Placement When Puckhandling

Too often coaches and goaltenders do not fully comprehend the role the goaltender may play in the overall team play and transition. There is only one player that brings about constant turnovers from the opposition, even more than Pavel Datsyuk, and that is the goaltender. Think about it, every time the opposition attempts or is successful directing a shot on goal the opposition is giving up possession. Even when a goaltender is involved in setting and handling dump-ins they are dealing with a turnover from the opposition. It is because the goaltender is involved so heavily in facing intentional turnovers that they must be able to make the game easy for themselves and their teammates through proper in-game puck control and placement when puckhandling.

Whenever a shot is taken the goaltender's first priority should be to control the puck at the body in order to have the option to keep the play going or to slow the game down with a whistle. Playing a dump-in (on net or otherwise) or a rim should carry the same mentality as trying to control shots at the body. Essentially, the first priority for handling a puck should be for control and then a decision can be made. In order to gain control there are some things a goaltender must be ready to do before and during the playing of a dump-in/rim and then it is important that goaltenders understand what to do with the puck once control is achieved.

Preparing to Gain Control:

Controlling dump-ins starts with proper preparation for the high number of transitions and turnovers in an elite level hockey game starts with a high focus on early readiness. Goaltenders looking to give themselves and their team a chance to make things easier must start by establishing initial depth and becoming fully shot ready as the puck is about to cross the red line. Remember, the opposition must gain the redline in order to properly dump in a puck, to begin the forecheck, so it makes sense goalies must be ready early in the attack sequence. Early readiness is a key component of proper game awareness.

Game awareness involves a number of different pattern recognition skills which must be established even when the puck is at the opposite end of the rink. Learning to evaluate how many people are involved in the attack and defense of that attack must be done before the puck even crosses the redline. Game awareness also involves seeing who is going to be driving the net, filling in high in the zone and knowing which hand each player shoots in the offensive attack. Early readiness and proper depth allows the goaltender to deal with the types of situations a goalie can field as described over the next few topics.

Tricks for Gaining Control:

As with anything in goaltending, for proper puck control and placement when puckhandling, everything starts with vision and visual cues. As a goaltender works on puckhandling they need to

understand there is a balance between complete focus on the puck and the ability to “check the mirrors” with well-timed head on a swivel tactics. Once the goaltender is properly set, as the puck is about to cross the redline, they should be taking a quick scan of the ice to know what the attack may be, but they must also get a strong bead on where the puck is and what its trajectory may be. It is key for the goalie to track the puck off the stick to, off and beyond the goalie.

In order to gain control safely and quickly there are a number of different physical tactics that can be used. If the puck is dumped along the ice the goalie can use a paddle down as this will create a seal to the ice that is backed up by the pads and allows for either a quick cover or a quick recovery to the feet for transition. Another, very important kind of control tactic is what we call the “shortstop stop”. The “shortstop stop” is a control method where the goalie, prior to the puck arriving, has gone down on the glove side knee with the blocker leg still vertical, the stick blade is flat on the ice and is backed by the trapper. It is imperative the stick is backed up with a trapper and pad to add protection from the dreaded dump-in bounce. Essentially, it is important that the stick is used for controlling any pucks along the ice, especially if the shot is taken between the blueline and the red line, and backed with other pieces of equipment to deal with funny bounces near the net.

Next, the type of grip a goaltender uses in certain situations can have a direct effect on puck control and transition. On hard dump-ins on or just outside the net play the goaltender must hold their stick in the regular one-handed position at the top of the paddle of the stick. If there is no chance of the puck being sent directly or bouncing towards the net then a two-handed grip is acceptable; especially for quick transition plays. Once again, when all else fails, it is usually better to make the safe stop of the dump-in first, using a regular shot ready grip, and then worry about transitioning to a two-handed grip.

Proper cushioning of the puck with the stick and hands is crucial for dump-in control. If the puck is along the ice the goalie should probably use the shortstop stop with the trapper held behind the stick blade to provide support when cushioning a hard dump along the ice. In order to properly cushion with the stick the goaltender must cradle the puck upon impact by starting with the stick forward and pulling it in to a concave position as the puck approaches. If the shot is high enough that the trapper or blocker is used it is imperative to start with the hands in front of the body to allow the goalie to cushion the impact with the hands in the same manner as with the stick. Strong visual puck tracking off the stick and into the body is very important on long shots. Soft hands is a key idea when controlling dump-ins.

After the goaltender has safely controlled the initial dump-in/long shot they need to scan the ice quickly in order to properly decide on slowing the game down with a whistle or to keep the play going with a set or pass.

Puck Set Strategies:

Once the initial dump-in is controlled the goaltender has a number of set up options to kickstart/direct the breakout. Just by simply understanding how, when and why certain types of setups are used the goaltender can make their job and the jobs of their teammates a lot easier; which is always a good thing.

If a goaltender is handling rims around the boards they will most likely set up the puck behind the net. Setting up behind the net for a teammate involves a few different factors that are completely dependent on pre-game communication with the defensemen or other teammates that are directly involved with breaking out of the zone from behind the net. A goaltender needs to find out what hand their defensemen shoot and where they like to pick up the puck when moving behind the net. Some d-men prefer to pick up the puck on their forehand, backhand, close to the wall, close to the net, a foot from

the boards or in the middle between the net and the end boards. It is extremely important for the goalie to see who is picking up the puck and what direction they are coming from, by executing a quick heads up.

If the team is in need of a start from scratch the goaltender may need to put their team into a position where they can set up the play behind the net. Usually, if a goalie places the puck closer to the net, on either side, will give the defense the hint that they need to take the puck behind the net. If the puck is setup close to the goal, but just above the goal line, the defense is better off to take the puck behind the net and walk out the other side of the net without stopping. By setting the puck up in this way the defenseman should be able to gain speed with the protection of the net to help with a quicker transition. If the puck is moved, by the goalie to a position close to the net, but behind the goal line, it is an indication that the defenseman should stop behind the net to allow for a complete regroup with a stop behind the net. The benefit of a complete regroup is this allows the team an opportunity to slow the play down and ensure the rest of the team is doing the right thing for the situation at hand.

At other times the goaltender may want the play to keep going with a quick-up or wheel to allow for a rush or an even quicker transition than bringing the puck behind the net. If a goaltender wants to indicate the need for a quick-up/wheel in a verbal and physical way they need to set the puck further away from the net. Quick-up sets must always be above the goal line. When a defenseman needs more time to get the wheel going the puck will be set closer to the corner about 3-5 feet above the goalline. For a quicker quick-up the goaltender will need to set the puck up towards the top of the circles. Whenever the goaltender needs to start the play moving up ice quickly, but is not in a position to make a hard direct pass, they will be making soft one-handed passes into the desired areas of the ice depending on what the team needs.

The highest scoring NHL goaltender, in one season, Grant Fuhr, once described the key to his point production as controlling the dump and sending the puck “into the traffic pattern”. A goaltender playing behind a mobile, strong defense may have the opportunity to simply set the puck up into an area 5-10 feet in front of the crease to allow the defensemen to make the transition decisions based on their instincts with input from the goaltender.

Playing straight on dumps:

No matter what type of team a goaltender is playing against they will face a dump-in/long shot that is directly on net. The biggest key to playing a direct dump-in, in a controlled manner, is to be ready. Once again, the goaltender needs to be able to read the play early, gain initial depth and set in a shot ready basic stance to be able to fully control a straight on dump-in.

Since a direct dump-in is usually from between the blue line and the red line the goalie should have enough time to stop the puck for control purposes, not just to make the save and boot it to the corner. Straight on dump-ins need to be played safely using some of the tips previously described. The key is to ensure the goalie is ready to control the puck and the play, not just make a sloppy save, lacking in true control, where the puck may or may not end up on the stick of the goalie's teammate's stick.

Once a goalie has made a safe, controlled stop the goalie is now capable of making a proper read on slowing the play down or keeping the play going. After control is gained the goalie should get their head up for a quick scan of the ice to allow for proper decision making. The steps should be to gain control, make a quick scan, quickly make a decision and execute the decision.

Playing Dumps Just Off the Net:

An area many young goalies are struggling with is when a dump-in is shot just off the net to about 10 feet on either side of the net. These plays are troublesome because many young goalies just let the puck go by the net and allow their own defensemen to get crushed unnecessarily. In order to deal with this off net dump-in we steal another baseball term...ranging.

A baseball player's range, when playing field, is based on a player's ability to cover as much space as possible for defensive purposes. For a goaltender, ranging involves being able to control pucks dumped in within 10 feet on either side of the net. In order to be able to range properly the goalie must have excellent vision skills, readiness habits, game awareness and strong skating/mobility skills.

Since readiness is always an issue with goaltending the goalie must be ready early to allow for a quick read and jump for the off net dump-in. The quick read and jump is necessary in order to stop the puck before it crosses the goalline. Getting to the puck before it crosses the goalline is especially important for any goalies playing in a league that adheres to the NHL style trapezoid, behind the goalline, where the goalie is not allowed to handle the puck. In order to keep the puck moving the goalie must avoid letting the puck cross the goalline and into the no-play zone where the defensemen must get back to get the breakout moving, again.

When a goalie is ranging out for pucks dumped in just off the net it is ideal that the goalie gets out quickly to get as much of their body in front of the dump-in as possible. Since control is the key the shortstop stop is an ideal way to play that dump-in. If the goalie has a dump-in closer to the net or has a good jump they should be able to use a regular goaltender stick grip to make the initial stop (blocker hand at the top of the paddle of the goal stick). If the dump-in is too hard or further from the net the goalie must use an extended paddle down position. Basically, the goaltender must get as close to the puck, on their, feet as possible before making a poke check like extension with the blocker hand transitioning to the knob of the stick. The stick must then be placed in a paddle down position with the paddle sitting in an upright position; perpendicular to the ice. When using the extended paddle down the goalie must make sure the stick is parallel to the goalline in order to ensure the puck is not deflected back towards the open net. The extended paddle down is a great tool for giving a goaltender more reach in order to gain extra range when playing dump-ins. Extended paddle down use just adds to a goalie's ability to control more rebounds.

Playing Rims:

First, a rim is a simple dump-in play where the other team attempts to drill the puck around the end boards while hoping to get to the puck on the opposite side from where the rim initially was shot. The goal is for the goaltender to get behind the net in a way that will let the goaltender and their team to control the puck and stop the momentum of the attacking team.

Not to harp, but...an early read and setup for the oncoming attack must begin the goaltender's rim play sequence. Having an initial depth of at least at the top of the crease is key because the net does not interfere with the transition of the goalie to the end boards for intercepting the rim. Also, when the net does not interfere the goaltender will then be able to stop the rim before the puck can pass the post closest to the side the rim was sent around. Like anything else, early readiness and depth gains allow the goaltender to perform at an optimal level for all aspects of goaltending.

When the goaltender sees the rim is imminent they must watch the release of the puck off the stick. The goaltender must decide if the rim will travel smoothly along the boards and decide if the rim is travelling at a speed where the goalie can make the stop along the boards. Also, it is usually a good idea

that *the goaltender SHOULD NOT leave the net when the puck is rimmed along the glass as this is when a funny bounce is most likely to happen (even in a rink with seamless glass)*. Once the goalie has read the release for the rim they need to watch the puck for the first 15-20 feet of the rim to get the trajectory and then the goalie, while in transit to the end boards, must scan the ice to be aware about what players and options are available. After making a quick scan, while in transit, the goalie must re-gain visual attachment with the puck to ensure the rim is properly stopped and nothing strange has occurred.

One of the challenging aspects of being an elite goaltender is the need to be able to skate like a player and skate like a goaltender, and do both extremely well. When skating to stop a rim the goaltender can use regular player skating skills, goalie specific skating skills or a combination of the two. If using regular player skating the goaltender will kickstart the transition using a crossover start and then regular skating strides to the end boards. If using goalie specific skating a goalie can use several long, powerful t-pushes to get to the end boards. Or, if the goalie is able, they can start with a crossover start and finish the movement with the long, powerful t-pushes. Basically, just get out and stop the rim, then worry about what to do next.

When stopping the rim on the trapper hand side of the rink the goalie is going to be stopping the puck on the forehand side. As described many times it is most important to make the safe stop first, then worry about passing or stickhandling. The safest stop on a rim to the trapper side is to jam the body, using a standing wall, and stick against the boards while holding the stick in a regular basic stance stick grip. It is important the goalie angles the blade of the stick in a way that the puck will deflect towards the end boards, not out in front of the empty net. If the rim is slower and there is a need to transition the puck quickly the goaltender may then employ a two handed stick grip for a quick transition play.

A rim to the blocker side presents a challenge because the blocker, stick and body cannot completely seal along the boards. When moving towards the end boards, on a rim to the blocker side, the goaltender must turn the stick out so as to make the stop/set on the backhand of the goal stick. In order to ensure enough strength to stop the rim the goaltender must turn the stick out and then tuck the stick against the rib cage using the inside of the elbow for leverage. Once the stick is squeezed against the ribs the goaltender must jam the stick against the end boards paying close attention to ensure the blade of the stick does not cause the puck to deflect out in front of the empty net. Also, stopping rims on the blocker side is a challenge because the goaltender must be sure not to turn their back to the play, so the goalie must ensure the body is square to the side boards, not the end boards to provide a better view of the attacking play. Since the body is not effectively able to seal against the end boards with the body, like on the trapper side the goalie must be realistic about not getting too hard on oneself if the puck hops the stick. In the case of the puck hopping the stick the goalie must quickly recover back to the net.

Pre-game communication with teammates, and defensemen especially, is key to understanding the different set options when controlling a rim. The set options start with trying to get to the rim in time to stop the rim from getting directly behind the net. Once the rim is controlled the goalie may have to pull the puck one foot off the boards or leave the puck one foot away from the back of the net. It is important for goaltenders to know which defensemen like to pick up the puck on their forehand or backhand, close to the boards or net and so on. *Goaltenders, don't just stop the puck behind the net without knowing where to put the puck*; make everyone's job easier through proper communication and game knowledge.

Once the rim is stopped and controlled properly the goaltender must make their way back in front of the net to prepare to follow the play. First, when retreating back to the net the goaltender will hopefully be returning on the same side of the net as this means the goalie has stopped the rim from moving behind the net, thus opening up the options for transition. As the goaltender retreats they need to

scan to see if there is a need to delay the attacking players. The goaltender is in a unique position because they cannot be hit so they can come back to the net with a larger sweep, around the corner of the crease rather than the tight to the net, causing the opposing player to have to go around the goaltender to avoid contact. Once the goaltender has “picked” the opposing player the goaltender must get back into position and ready to follow the play as it is moving around and out of the zone. As has been mentioned in previous articles the goaltender must now stay ready until the puck has passed the goalie’s own blue line.

Playing Soft Dumps to Corner:

Again let’s start with six words: early readiness, early readiness, early readiness. This is key to effective puckhandling.

Once the goaltender identifies the soft dump-in towards a corner the goaltender must make a quick jump to get to the puck as quickly as possible, not just wait for the puck to get to the corner. The quick jump is especially important if the goalie plays in a league with the trapezoid rule in place. The quicker the goaltender gets to a dump-in the quicker transition options will open up. The point of the soft dump is for the opposition to gain time for the forecheck while the puck is in the air. A quick jump negates the supposed time gain from the opposition.

A quick scan in transit is key to playing the puck any time the goaltender is trying get involved in the transition. Not only is a quick scan necessary when transitioning the goaltender must be aware that they need to get in the habit of bringing the puck towards the middle of the net while keeping one’s feet moving; much like a defenseman should be expected to keep their feet moving. *By the keeping the feet moving the goaltender is moving closer to the net, in case of a turnover, the goalie is more ready to cover up possible mistakes. Also, by moving with the puck the goaltender keeps all options for transition open.* Would a goalie ever want to play behind a defenseman that stands still with the puck? If not, then why would the goalie stand still to play the puck?

Playing Soft Dumps/Chips High Into the Zone:

Early readiness, quick awareness and an aggressive (decision)jump on the puck are the first keys to playing a soft dump/chip where the puck barely gets into the goaltender’s defensive zone. It is important that the goaltender does not hesitate or wait for the puck to arrive as this could be a disastrous mistake leading to a quick breakaway with a goaltender caught in no man’s land.

Usually when a goaltender decides to play a puck high in the defensive zone they are going to be engaged in a foot race to the puck with a member of the opposition. The goal is for the goaltender to gain possession of the puck and suck the attacking player deeper into the zone while opening up more options. In order to gain puck control the goalie will need to get to the puck, with both hands already on the stick ready to pass or shoot, and then bring the puck back towards the top of the crease. By keeping the feet moving and moving towards the top of the crease the goaltender now opens up many more passing, setup and clearing options. Again, the goaltender must keep their feet moving, much like a defenseman, to be effective.

If there is a race the goaltender must be ready to clear the puck out of the zone with a long transition pass or a shot off the boards/glass. This automatic clear must be done with confidence and boldness, but can save a goaltender several chances, shots or even goals against per season. Although this type of play can be an adventure for coaches and fans it is one of the best signs of a goaltender that is confident in their decision making, game management, skating and stickhandling skills, all of which are strong traits for elite goaltenders.

Conclusion:

It is our hope that goaltenders and coaches use this article to help the goaltender to develop puckhandling skills that can make their own job easier. By understanding how to properly play the puck within the team structure not only will the goalie make their job easier, but they will make everyone else's jobs easier, as well. In the end isn't the key to strong defensive play making the game as simple as possible? If the goaltender is properly integrated into the team game plan the game becomes much easier.