



MIND THE NET GOALTENDING

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More Than Pre-game Music: Developing Elite In-game Mental Skills

“Many aspiring hockey players today have well developed physical skills. Far fewer have comparatively well-developed mental skills, and that makes mental skills one of the key factors influencing which players make it to high levels.”

Mark Moore – *Making it in Hockey*

A scout is at a tryout or evaluation camp and the goaltender they are watching looks perfect in the drills. Good varied footwork, strong rebound control, nice recoveries, balanced stance, strong stick use and all the other physical skills that should make them an easy choice to make the team. Now comes time to evaluate them in game action and they look lost, behind the play, actually slow. Other goalies with less physical skill sets are out performing them! What is happening? Can poor mental skills be hindering the technical goalie and great mental skills be assisting those that have nowhere near the physical skill set of the first goalie?

The goalie that has not mastered the mental tactics for the position, can and will, limit their advancement up the hockey ladder.

Mental skills require THINKING (see: “The Psychology of Goaltending”). However, when playing the game, thinking can not and should not delay a goalie’s physical reactions. In other words, the goalie should not be trying to think about every little detail in their game like they do in practices.

Most coaches, even at elite levels, do not spend enough time on developing mental skills and because of this, these skills are more underdeveloped compared to physical skills. Mental skills are more complex than physical skills. They involve using physical skills; sometimes more than one at a time. Physical skills are weapons that goalies use as part of the tactics for playing the position and game.

Understanding Game Tactics are Mental Skills

It is easier to do the job if one understands what everyone else is trying to do. Both the goalie’s own team and those of the opposition.

Steps to build strong mental skills:

1. Understand the concepts behind the tactics.
2. Know the right tactic for each situation.
3. Master the execution of the skill intended.

Mental skills for goaltenders actually involves the following:

Vision: Vision dictates where to go. How to get there and what must be done when arriving. Keep the forward view as much as possible. Strong vision skills will assist goalies in pretty much all facets of the game. Vision and visual recognition of patterns and tactics is trained through brain-eyes-brain interactions which explains why vision skills are mental skills.

Reading and Reacting: Again, vision assists the goaltender to not only read the play, but react to it as well. Using head on a swivel. Knowing who is free and who can get a possible pass. What hand the open player shoots with. There are many variables that the goaltender must read and react to and the proper response all starts with proper vision habits.

Positional Play: Understanding the shooter's view vs. the puck view and understanding puck trajectory all come into play. Positional play is not only knowing where to go when selecting depth and angle, but also how the goaltender moves into position. The goaltender will have to make a decision as to whether to get into the new position on their feet or on their knees and why.

Communication: Not only what the goaltender communicates to their teammates but what their teammates relate to the goaltender is extremely important. This can be puck placements on sets or how to play odd man situations. There can be a limitless number of things to communicate and this should be an ongoing, on and off ice exchange. This communication should be between all facets of the team (coaching staff, goaltenders, forwards and defense).

Pattern Recognition: The game of hockey is all about patterns. Recognizing these patterns can help the goaltender understand how teams incorporate these patterns and can aid the goaltender in selecting a tactic to combat various situations. Video analysis with coaching staff and other teammates (or simply by watching or playing a lot of hockey) can help a goaltender to develop their pattern recognition skills.

Anticipation: The goaltender that uses their vision and can recognize patterns can now anticipate plays. All of a sudden the goaltender comes out of nowhere to make a big save. That is because they used their "Spidey Sense" (e.g. anticipation) to read the play before it happened and explode into the proper position where they can be set with quiet hands and feet waiting for the shot.

Puck Possession/Retention: The other team has the puck and the goalie's team is trying to get it back. The goaltender that has a strong positional approach must look at the shot as the other team giving up puck possession. The goaltender that just bats the puck aimlessly to the corner is possibly giving that puck possession right back. Goalies must learn to eat up the puck, control the tempo and help their team out.

Support: Goaltenders must understand when to support teammates through strong tactical play during the game. The goaltender that can protect their defenseman by placing the puck for a quick-up is supporting the team transition to offence. Goalies must pay attention to how they play and interact with teammates (emotionally) on and off the ice. Does this support have a positive or negative effect to not only goaltender success, but that of the team as well?

Maneuvering into Transition, Dump-ins and Puck Placement: Being able to use regular player skills, not just goaltending position specific movements, for team transition is important. Understand phrases that your team uses to assist them (“Wheel!” “Man on!” etc.). Recognizing if a certain defenseman is right or left handed on a set can help them get the puck out of the goalie’s zone faster and safer. Goalies must ask their teammates if they want it tight to the net, how far away from the boards, etc. Proper manoeuvring starts with proper communication, then proper execution.

Headmanning the Puck/Give and Go’s: Not all long dump-ins require the goaltender to automatically head man the puck up ice. Sometimes just waiting and setting it up may allow the goalie’s team to complete a line change. Sometimes, the first defenseman back is calling for the goalie to give them the puck, but the defenceman have an unknown forechecker attacking from behind. Do not leave it for them, get it up ice to a back checker. Goalies should use their forward view to know when to head man the puck up ice, set it or just play the puck to a neutral safe area. A big rebound can be an effective way to get the puck up ice. The shot comes and the goalie can kick the rebound past the forecheckers to a backchecking teammate who transitions up ice. This can be a real useful tool to the alert goaltender.

Getting the Puck to Safe Areas: As hard as goaltenders try, not everything can be controlled at the body. In these times getting the puck to a safe area is important. Normally, a high/elevated rebound is better than a flat on ice one. Getting the puck over the glass for a stoppage or a big rebound to a team mate can all be used to the goaltender’s advantage. Be aware of these times and situations.

Gap Control: Goalies have probably heard the coach yell at the d-man to close the gap on the puck carrier. Gap control works the same way with the goaltender and the puck. The closer the goalie is to the puck the harder it should be to find open spaces into the net. It is never a bad idea to bring something closer to the puck, particularly in desperate situations.

Team Play: The goaltender that understands team tactics can be a powerful weapon!

Game/Team tactics can involve some of the following:

Initiating Offense Tactics ::

- Attacking
- Simple breakout
- Reverse breakout
- Stretch breakout
- Regroups
- Straight up breakout
- Criss cross breakout
- Attacking
- Individual rushes
- Multi player rushes
- Out numbered rushes
- Simple 2 on 1
- Pick and roll 2 on 1
- Centre trail 3 on 1
- Puck carrier curl 3 on 2
- Playing Down low
- Cycling
- Triangle plays
- Point plays

Defensive positioning and methods

- Gap Control
- Back checkers
taking the shortest
route to their own
net
- Playing the body
- Intercepting passes
- Opponents
forechecking,
hustling
- Puck pressure
- Angling
- Holding the lines
- Step up
- Stand up.
Evacuating the
puck far way from
your net
- Getting the puck
out
- Defensive dump
downs
- Puck possession
- Loose puck races
- Puck battles
- Getting into
d-side position
- Defense to offence
transition
- Offence to defense
transition

Team Systems examples

- 2-1-2 forecheck
- Neutral zone trap forecheck
- Back side cover
- Face off alignments and responsibilities

Defending

- 1 on 1's
- Multi player rushes
- Out numbered rushes
- Team defense zone systems
- Defending down low
- Clearing the front of the net
- Puck lane

Recap Notes:

Mental skills are tactics for how to not only play the game, but for goaltending as well. This is called having HOCKEY SENSE.

Advanced mental skills are key to success at high levels and will help set players apart. There are more situations in the game than can be discussed in one article. However, goaltenders be diligent on their approach to the mental side of the game! **Physical Skills are a necessity however it will be MENTAL SKILLS that get vault a goaltender over the top.**

Adapted and referenced from *Making it in Hockey* – by Mark Moore.