



MIND THE NET GOALTENDING

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Physical Tools for Increasing Mental Readiness

One of the biggest issues about the mental game for goalies, especially goalies making the jump into elite hockey, is the idea of focus. Although focus can mean many things MTN will discuss focus as being ready to take on any situation that may come up in a game. Basically, focus can be seen as expecting the unexpected. Too often athletes allow themselves to let their body dictate how they feel mentally as well. The true iron men goalies in the game from Martin Brodeur, Patrick Roy, Ed Belfour to Ryan Miller, Mikka Kiprusoff and Henrik Lundqvist understand that the mind dictates how a goalie feels, not the body. The most mentally tough goalies know that they can control how they physically and mentally feel before and during the game. Since MTN strongly believes in each goalie's ability to control how they feel physically and mentally this article will give goalies some physical tools or triggers for increasing mental readiness. Basically, the physical tools for improving focus. By following some of the suggestions below goalies will improve their consistency by making easier transitions into elite hockey.

There is some very common adjustments young goalies must make as they move up the hockey ladder. The biggest adjustments that come with each and every jump in level of hockey is understanding that their will be more players with good shots, players will release their shots quicker, players become more patient and with that patience the puck does most of the work. Goalies must understand that any bad habits developed at a lower level will most likely be exposed very quickly at the next level.

As a goalie moves up in elite hockey they must understand that teams break out and transition the puck better which can leave the goalie with little, to no time, to prepare depending on the situation. How many times have we seen goalies, right up to the NHL, get scored on where they are obviously surprised by a quick, untimely turnover? This happens all too regularly and even more frequently for rookies at the various levels of elite hockey. These situations are too common where a young goalie gets burned from a quick shot from just inside the blueline upon entry into the zone. Of course, goals scored from just inside the blueline, off the rush, are usually seen as a stoppable shot and can be momentum killers. Realize, goalies, that poor goals on long shots can be avoided, which in turn increases goaltender and team confidence. The following physical tools for mental readiness are great for all goalies, but are especially great for the goalies that play on very strong defensive teams where they may not get many shots and the ones they do get are very good chances. Any goalie can play well when getting a ton of shots against, it takes a special goalie that can play well when playing behind a strong defensive team. Here are the physical tools for increasing focus:

Tracking the Puck When the Play is in the Other End

One of the first steps to staying focused starts when visually tracking the play when it is at the other end. When the puck is in the opposition end the goalie should be standing at the top of their own crease watching the puck closely. By tracking at the top of the crease the goalie is able to set their initial depth early (without having to go back to touch the posts, which is counter productive and unnecessary).

Also, a goalie visually tracking the puck from the top of the crease is in a safer position to handle any long range dump-ins on goal. By being at the top of the crease on a shot from the other end of the rink the goalie has enough depth to ensure that any strange, split second bounces do not end up in the back of the net. Needless to say, dump-in goals against must be avoided at all times.

****If a goalie's team is on the power play they should visually track the puck from outside the top of the crease, as far up as the hash marks. By being outside the top of the crease the goalie is more ready to transition any dump-ins quickly making the powerplay more effective and efficient.****

Get Shot-ready as the Puck is Crossing the Red Line

Too often goalies making a jump in level of hockey have goals scored on them from long range due to a lack of understanding how fast plays can develop and good, hard shots released. Usually, long goals are the sign that a goalie was still preparing for the play (gaining initial depth) as it crossed the blueline. Complications arise because the goalie is too busy readying for the shot that they are not ready for a shot, thus a quick release can surprise the goalie. Even if the goalie does make the save when surprised there is often an uncontrolled rebound reeking havoc.

Rather than getting ready as the puck crosses the defensive blueline goalies need to be shot-ready, in full stance, at initial depth and tracking the play physically as the puck crosses the centre red line. By getting ready this early the goalie is able to scan for open players, what hand they shoot, what speed the play is developing as well as where the goalie's own teammates are situated defensively. This early read and physical readiness will keep the goalie focused and in the game since they are ready for any unexpected plays as well as being ready to anticipate any plays that routinely develop. By physically engaging the body through a full stance and scanning the ice, with the head on a swivel the goalie is more likely to keep the body, especially the legs warm and ready to move instantly.

Staying Ready When the Puck is in the Defensive Zone

Once the puck is in the zone the goalie must keep a sharp eye on the puck, check for open players (when safe to do so) and, at minimum, keep the legs coiled and ready and stick on the ice the entire time the puck is in the zone. Even if there seems to be no direct risk for a shot on goal, especially when the puck is being fought over in the corner or on the side wall, the goalie must stay ready as a turnover from behind the net or off the wall can become dangerous very quickly. By staying physically ready while the puck is in zone the mind is automatically engaged and focused.

****While watching the 2008 and 2009 playoffs one should note that the much maligned Chris Osgood is very good while playing on a very strong defensive team because he is physically coiled and ready, has his head on a swivel and communicates at all times. This readiness to make the timely saves whenever needed makes for a winning goalie on a pressure packed team.****

Stay Ready Until the Puck is Outside the Zone

It is always easier to stay physically ready when there is danger of a play coming towards the goalie, but often goalies will relax once their own teammates recover the puck and initiate the breakout.

Just because a teammate, even if they are very trustworthy, has the puck does not mean the goalie should relax. Goalies should physically track the puck, staying on angle and proper depth, as the puck moves out of the zone so the goalie is not surprised when a turnover occurs. Again, even in the NHL, there are nightly examples of goalies that relax once their team has the puck but are then surprised by a turnover leaving no time to prepare. When goalies are not prepared for a turnover they will make gaining depth and getting ready a priority which leaves them flat footed or too busy preparing and panicking to make the big save. Goalies must remember that their job is to cover the mistakes of their teammates no matter how many or how bad the mistake so they should stay ready until the puck is clearly out of the defensive zone. The goalie that follows the play as it leaves the zone is the goalie that understands that teammates are not always trustworthy which puts the goalie in the position literally and figuratively to make the big save.

Communication must be Continuous

No matter what time it is during the game, no matter what the score or situation is it is of utmost importance that the goalie communicates effectively. Clear, consistent communication is an indicator of a goalie's confidence and readiness. Communication is extremely important for goaltenders at all times but it is even more important in a game that has minimal shots. Effective verbal communication ensures that the goalie is physically and mentally in the game.

Play the Puck as Much as Possible

When playing in a low shot game, especially if there are long periods between scoring chances, there is a risk the goalie is not comfortable enough to handle the inevitable golden scoring chance against. One of the best ways to physically stay ready and to get a feel for the puck is to play the puck as much as possible. Of course, the goalie must play the puck within their own comfort zone by making safe, efficient plays. The key to playing the puck is to just do it; make the decision quickly to play the puck and follow through. Nothing gets the blood rushing more than for a goalie to beat a forechecker to a loose puck; a good old fashioned puck race. Even keeping an active stick by blocking passes in and around the crease is a form of playing the puck that can help a goalie stay focused.

Whenever a goalie claims to lose focus due to feeling a bit off there are many psychological tools a goalie can use to stay focused, but what many goalies don't realize is the importance of having physical routines that trigger focus. It is through a mix between physical readiness and mental readiness that can ensure a goaltender becomes a truly consistent, elite goaltender.