



# The Hockey Sense Handbook

25 Insights for Better Positioning, Smarter Decision-Making, and Becoming a Dominant Player

BY BEN LEVESQUE

# **The Hockey Sense Handbook**

First Edition

25 Insights for Better Positioning, Smarter  
Decision-Making and Becoming a  
Dominant Player

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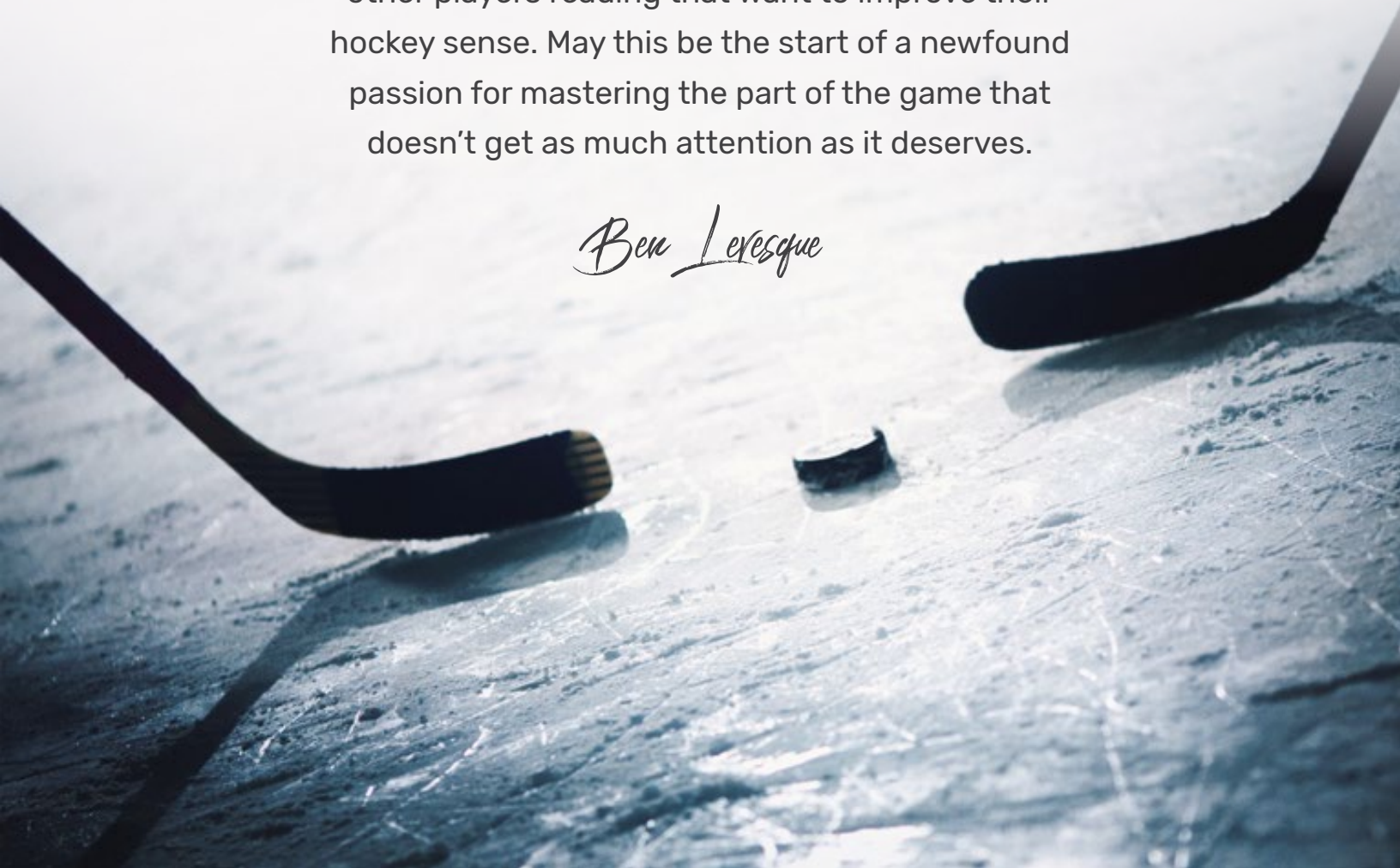


# This book is dedicated to

My parents, Helene and Andre. You allowed me to turn my passion for hockey into something much greater than I ever thought possible.

I'd also like to dedicate this book to you and all the other players reading that want to improve their hockey sense. May this be the start of a newfound passion for mastering the part of the game that doesn't get as much attention as it deserves.

*Ben Levesque*



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Disclaimer

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the page. The player is facing right, with their head slightly turned towards the viewer.

# Introduction

You're probably reading this book because a friend told you about it, or because you stumbled across my blog recently.

Either way, I'm glad you're here :)

I decided to write this book after receiving hundreds of emails from players around the world asking me how they could improve their hockey sense and take their game to the next level.

Rather than answer all of these players individually, I created an in-depth guide and filled it with 25 of my best tips for becoming a smarter player.

Now before we get started, I need to make one thing clear...

This book is a guide.

The purpose of a guide is to do just that—guide you in the right direction. It's up to you to put in the work and test out these tips during your practices and games.

That said, if I can help even just one player improve, the months spent writing this book will be well worth it.

To all my fans, subscribers and followers out there, old and new, thanks for the gift of your support. I wouldn't be able to do what I do without your help and guidance. I only hope this book can repay you for the trust and attention you've given me.

Here's to your continued improvement!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Leresgue". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Creator of [Builtforhockey.com](http://Builtforhockey.com)

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as the background for the text.

# The Two Most Important Words in Hockey

There's one thing I need to make clear before we get started, and that's the concept of time and space.

In hockey, everything revolves around these two magic words.

Anywhere you look on the ice, it's a constant battle for time and space. No matter what game situation you analyze, it can always be broken down to one player trying to gain time and space, while an opposing player tries to take that time and space away.



Put simply, it's a constant battle for time and space between both teams as soon as the puck drops during the opening face-off.

That's hockey in its simplest form, before all the goal scoring and the saucer passes and the bodychecks.

As a hockey player, having more time and space leads to more scoring opportunities, fewer turnovers, and a better performance across the board.

Time and space are rare commodities, and they should be the driving force behind every decision you ever make out on the ice, both with and without the puck.

On your quest to becoming a better hockey player, you have to keep these two important words in your mind at all times.

Most if not all the tips throughout this book will either help you create more time and space for yourself and for teammates, or more effectively take away time and space from your opponents.

Because at the end of the day, you're not scoring any goals without the necessary time or adequate space to make it happen.

Remember this golden rule as you continue on through this book.

Moving forward...

Up next, we dive into 25 actionable insights (I call them plays) for improving your hockey sense and overall success as a hockey player.

I say actionable because I really do mean actionable.

Actionable: Able to be done or acted on; having practical value

I could have filled this book with endless amounts of theory, and it would have been a good book.

But I don't want this to be a good book.

I want this to be a tool that you use to start making changes to your game as soon as your next practice, season game, or even street hockey game.

No matter what level of hockey you play, you owe it to yourself to be the best you can be.

I want this guide to help you get there. Let's start from the top!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #1:

## The R.A.A. Framework for Improving Decision-Making

This is the most important play in the book because everything you do from hereon out relies on this simple framework.

If you implement this framework into your decision-making, both with and without the puck, you'll be a better player all-around, guaranteed.

I came up with this idea after many players asked me for advice on how to approach decision-making, and this is the best way I've found to explain it without confusing the heck out of people.

I like to teach proper decision-making with the **R.A.A. Framework**:

- Read the play
- Ask questions
- Act accordingly

Don't be blinded by its simplicity...it's extremely effective. Let's unpack this a little more so you can fully understand.

## READ THE PLAY

The first R is for read, which essentially means to take in information. This is where every decision starts. You cannot make good decisions if you're badly informed.

The way you gather information on the ice is with your eyes, ears, and even touch.

Scanning the ice with **your eyes** allows you to take note of where the puck is, where your teammates are, and where your defenders are.

These are the three crucial bits of information you need to consider before making any decision whatsoever.

**Your ears** let you hear teammates that call for passes, and also give you a general idea of where they're located on the ice without having to look, saving you precious time.

**Your touch** lets you feel opponents pressed up against you in puck battles, scrums in the corners, and in front of the net—again, without having to look.

Using these three methods to gather information is really all you need to make the right decisions both with and without the puck.

But before you can do that, you have to put the information you gather to good use.

Here's how...

## **ASK QUESTIONS**

One of the most effective ways to predict what's going to happen next in the game of hockey is to literally just **ask yourself questions**.

Talking to yourself isn't a bad thing in hockey. You want to talk to yourself as much as possible and ask yourself what's about to happen in the play over and over again throughout the entire game.

Think of it as internal dialogue with yourself. However silly it sounds, it can get you in the habit of predicting the outcome of the play because



you're actively thinking about how the play is going to develop.

But what exactly do you ask yourself to make this crazy idea work?

Well, being that the three most important variables in hockey are your **opponents**, your **teammates**, and the **puck**, then you have to try to figure out what each of these variables' next move is.

Just like a chess player tries to predict his opponent's next few moves (it is said that chess grandmasters can see the game develop as many as 12 or 14 moves ahead), you have to try to determine the next move in a game of hockey, albeit at a much faster pace.

The best way to do this is to ask yourself questions:

- Where is my teammate/opponent/the puck **now?**
- Where is my teammate/opponent/the puck **most likely headed?**
- How fast is my teammate/opponent/the puck **traveling?**
- Where is the available **time and space?**

In other words, you want to consider the positioning, destination, and speed of these variables, as well as where the free time and space are on the ice.

Once you've asked yourself these kinds of questions, it's time to make a decision.

It's time to act.

## **ACT ACCORDINGLY**

This is where you use your on-ice skills to make something happen. Whether you're skating towards open ice, making a saucer pass to an open player, or picking up the open man in front, this step is all about execution.

It's actually the easiest part because all you have to do...is do!

There isn't much thinking involved at this stage because all the thinking has already happened.

Here, you're relying on the skills you've learned over the years to get you the outcome you desire (Act) based on the information you've taken in (Read) and your intuition on how the play will unfold (Ask).

This is exactly what the pros do. They make plays that seem amazing or unbelievable to an outsider, but in reality, every bit of information has been collected, calculated, and acted upon in a very cerebral-like manner using the R.A.A. framework.

I know this is easier said than done, but this really is the way to think the game.

If you're struggling with your decision-making both with and without the puck, try to implement this framework into your thought process the next time you're out on the ice. It may take a few games to get used to, but I guarantee you'll make smarter decisions.

Remember the three letters of the framework (R.A.A.) and what they

stand for. Then, repeat them in the locker room before each of your games and on the bench before you go out for a shift. With time, you'll start analyzing the play with the framework in mind, and your decision-making will improve across the board.

Don't make the mistake of getting the puck and then reading the play (this is what most amateur players do).

Instead, read the play and ask questions before you get the puck, then act accordingly.

Over time, and with a bit of practice, this thinking process will become second nature and your entire game will improve.

Try this out the next time you're on the ice!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #2:

## Know The Game Status

This is probably the simplest play in the book, but it shouldn't be overlooked.

What I mean by "knowing the game status" is knowing what's going on in the game at all times, starting with the scoreboard.

It's your best friend for determining how to approach your next shift.

As a rule of thumb, you want to look up at the scoreboard before you jump onto the ice, as soon as you get back to the bench, and before lining up for any face-off.

Having a glance at the clock during these three windows of opportunity gives you the information you need to act accordingly.

During power-plays, penalty kills, and in the dying minutes of periods, you'll even want to look at the clock during the play sometimes to make sure your decisions with and without the puck make sense (ex: icing the puck before the penalty timer ends, getting a shot off before the period ends, etc.).

Don't be the guy that misses a scoring chance because he's not aware that there are only 5 seconds left in the period...

Or the guy that doesn't tie up his man on a crucial face-off in a tight game.

These situations can all be avoided simply by looking up at the scoreboard early and often in order to keep a pulse on the game's situation.

And if you want to take it one step further...

Ask yourself how you should be adapting your play based on what the scoreboard tells you. For example, if you're aware that your team is up 2-1, but you have a penalty to kill, it's safe to say you'll want to play safe, kill time, and not take any big risks with the puck.



Even just knowing whether to play passive or aggressive based on what the scoreboard tells you can make a world of difference. Knowing the game status at all times will make you feel sharper, more alert, and ready to make the right decision based on the situation at hand.

A small, simple detail, but one that the best players do much more frequently than amateur players.

Look up at that scoreboard early and often!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as the background for the text.

## PLAY #3:

# How to Not Get Caught Out of Position

Getting caught out of position in hockey is a big no-no. It can lead to bad plays, penalties, odd-man rushes, and goals against.

Then comes being benched, and maybe even healthy scratch (hey...I've seen it happen before).

Luckily, it's not that hard to be at the right place, at least most of the time.

Here are a few tips to help you reduce the amount of time you spend out of position.

## **CUT THE CURLING**

Curling is the act of making wide turns rather than sharp turns or stopping altogether.

Curling might help you keep your speed, but it's extremely bad for everything else.

By curling, you essentially create a ton of room for your attackers to take advantage of. Great attackers know how to use free space to their advantage to gain more time, and by curling, you essentially create a playground of opportunity for them.

Curling opens up passing lanes, creates seems for skaters, and is just all-around dangerous for putting you out of the play and getting caught out of position.

Instead, aim to use stops and starts most of the time. You'll lose a bit of speed, but you'll be a lot quicker to take off in another direction if need be.

This makes getting back into position much easier, and also makes your attacker's job a lot more challenging.

Minimize the curling, and maximize the stops and starts to not only improve your positioning but your game as a whole.

# **STICK YOUR HEAD ON A SWIVEL**

Head on a swivel?

Sounds weird, right?

It's actually one of the better pieces of advice you'll ever get. Too many players "puck-watch" like they have horse blinders on and it's all they can see.

As a hockey player, you have to be aware of what's going on around you at all times (if you haven't noticed, this is a recurring theme in this book).

By imagining your head is on a swivel and able to move freely both to the left and right forces you to scan your surroundings more often.

By doing so, you'll be able to notice opponents trying to sneak into open areas, take off on breakaways, and walk in for back door passes.

In fact, if you aren't taking a quick glance at the players around you every 3-5 seconds, you're probably puck-watching way too much.

Put a little less emphasis on the puck, and pay more attention to the other players on the ice by pretending your head is on a swivel.

If you can burn this concept into your mind and start looking around more often, better positioning will be inevitable!

## **BODY POSITIONING**

I'm going to cut right to the chase: you should NEVER turn your back on the play.

Turning your back on the play is a lot like curling; it gives your opponent a reason to attack you because you're making it easier for them to do so.

No matter your position, always place your body where you can see the puck and the player you're defending.

For example, if you're a winger protecting the front of the net and the opposing team has control of the puck behind your net, you should place yourself in a way that you can see both the puck AND the player you're covering (which is most likely the opposing defenseman at the blue line in this case).

In the example above, you'd position your body so that you're facing the sideboards. This way, to one side you can see the puck, and to the other side, you can see the opposing defenseman.

If you were to simply face the puck carrier behind your net, you'd have no clue what the defenseman behind you was up to. He could easily sneak in for a back-door scoring chance.

Always position your body so that you can see both the puck and your defensive objective.



The same goes if you're a net-front D-man watching both the puck carrier in the corner and another opponent sneaking around back door. If you face the puck-carrier head on, you have no idea what's going on behind you. But if you position yourself so that you have a player at each of your shoulders—that is, one to your left and one to your right—you can keep an eye on both the puck carrier AND the back door player by simply moving your head freely between both targets every so often.

Proper body positioning is key to covering more than one target. Place yourself wisely, and use your head on a swivel to watch what's happening around you.

## **NEED FOR SPEED**

Improving your speed is a simple way to improve your positioning.

If you're faster than the average player, you'll be able to catch up when you're behind the play and make up for positioning mistakes by getting to where you're supposed to be before it's too late.

Hockey sense being equal, a slower player is going to get caught out of position more often than a faster player. It's common sense.

Becoming a faster skater is a little outside the scope of this book, but if you want a free lower body workout proven to improve your skating speed, you can download my Breakaway Speed Guide.

## **MANAGE YOUR ENERGY**

Another easy one, but it's a biggy.

Most mistakes in hockey happen when a player is tired and fatigued. The more tired you are, the more likely you are to make bad puck decisions, take lazy penalties, and get caught out of position.

By managing your energy, you can keep your fatigue level in check and stop any of this from happening.

You can do this by keeping your shifts short, eating a good pre-game meal and drinking enough liquids both before and during the game to make sure you're well hydrated (more to come on hydration in the next chapter).

Keep these things in mind in order to better manage your energy during an entire 60-minute game. And if all else fails, change up before you feel tired. This is the easiest way to stay fresh all game long.

Too many tired shifts can lead to a downward spiral that you won't recover from before the game ends. Don't let your overall performance suffer due to a handful of longer shifts!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

## PLAY #4:

# The Most Effective “Between-Shifts” Routine Ever

Did you know that a “between shifts” routine can give you an edge over opponents?

It's true.

In fact, if you look at any of the pros in the NHL, you'll see that they pretty much all follow the same routine when they get back to the bench, at least in some way shape or form.

A structured routine allows them to come back rested, ready, and with a clear mind to perform.

Amateurs, on the other hand, go about their bench time any old way. No plan to follow, no routine to go through; they just do whatever they feel like in the moment.

This inevitably leads to getting tired faster, losing focus quicker, and even leads to a lack of discipline.

Rather than go about your bench time any old way as the amateurs do, follow the pros and use this between-shifts routine to maximize your time on the bench:

1. Catch your breath the RIGHT way
2. Re-hydrate with water
3. Review your previous shift
4. Talk to your linemates
5. Get ready to go

That's the routine in a nutshell. Let's break it down.

## **CATCH YOUR BREATH THE RIGHT WAY**

The first thing you're going to want to do when you get back to the bench is sit down and catch your breath.

Not talk. Not scream. Not do anything other than catch your breath.

“But Ben, catching your breath happens naturally.”

Not so fast.

Chances are you’ve been breathing the wrong way all along. What’s worse, it may even be hindering your performance!

There are essentially two ways to breath:

- Apical breathing
- Diaphragmatic breathing

**Apical breathing** or chest breathing is when you use your upper chest to breathe. This is NOT how you want to breathe when you get back to the bench.

Why? Because chest breathing requires more muscles and thus is more exhausting. As hockey players, we want to conserve our energy as much as possible so we can last an entire game.

Instead, learn to use **diaphragmatic breathing**, which is just a fancy way of saying to use your diaphragm to breathe. It may be weird at first if you’re not used to it, but it can make all the difference if you learn this technique and use it between shifts instead of the old chest-breathing technique you’re used to.

The reason diaphragm breathing is so effective is because it fills up your lungs completely, which means more oxygen gets distributed to your brain and the rest of your body.



More oxygen means less fatigue, more alertness, and smarter decision-making.

All of this with a simple tweak to the way you breathe between shifts. Awesome, right?

That's not all proper breathing can do for your game. Diaphragm breathing also helps you stay calm and think rationally, rather than let your emotions get the best of you.

Research has shown that there are two pathways to the brain:

"One is for rational or attentional thought, while the other is for emotions. The two pathways are inversely related. So when your emotions start heating up, your ability to think rationally diminishes. The key to retaining control in these situations is to focus on an attentional task that brings down the emotional side and lets you be more objective. Researchers have found that breathing does this best."

Concentrate on breathing "into the belly" rather than with your chest, and you'll maximize your oxygen intake.

Doctors even found that proper breathing in sports can improve performance up to 15%!

This is the FIRST thing you want to focus on when getting back to the bench. Nothing else.

Once you've caught your breath, you're then going to want to...

## REHYDRATE WITH WATER

There's a good chance you're already doing this, but there's an even better chance that you're doing it wrong.

Are you just drinking when you're thirsty? That's the worst thing you can do.

Scientists agree that **thirst is not a reliable indicator of dehydration**, meaning that if you wait until you feel thirsty to drink, it's already too late; you'll only be 25-50% hydrated!

**What does that mean for your performance?** Research shows that losing as little as 2% of your body weight in fluids can cause a significant decrease in performance due to increased fatigue, reduced endurance, and declining motivation.

You'll feel tired and just won't want to battle for the puck as much (you've likely already felt this before). This can obviously kill a good game fairly quickly without you even realizing it.

What's worse, you have no real way of knowing you're dehydrated. You'll just think you're having a bad game and that "today is not your day."

The best thing to do in order to fight dehydration is to drink in between shifts, regardless of whether you're thirsty or not.

Force it down. Take 2-3 large sips of water every time you get back

to the bench after you've caught your breath. This will keep you hydrated the entire game and stop the fatigue and mind-fogginess from kicking in.

This is especially important if you're in playoffs and there's continuous overtime. More often than not, an OT game is decided on a little mistake made due to fatigue.

Don't let this be you. Stay hydrated and stay fresh.

Once you've caught your breath and had your sips of water, then you can...

## REVIEW YOUR PREVIOUS SHIFT

Now that you've taken the time to breathe and rehydrate, you're ready to review your last shift with a level head. Notice how reviewing your shift is third on the list and not first. Many players make the mistake of doing this first!

You'll want to break your shift review process into three parts:

**First,** take about 20 seconds to review what you didn't do so well during your last shift. Quickly go over your shift in your mind and come up with a few things you could have done better.

**Second,** take another 20 seconds to turn those negatives into positives. For example, if you turned the puck over last shift, tell yourself that next shift you'll protect the puck at all costs. If you got

caught out of position, tell yourself that next shift you'll pay closer attention to where you are on the ice. This step is all about turning your negative thoughts into positive actions that you can do instead the next time around.

**Third,** take another 20 seconds to re-focus. That means what's done is done, and now it's time to park your thoughts and prepare for the next shift. Regardless of if you had a good or bad last shift, the next one is the only one that matters now.

This shift review process should only take about a minute. Don't spend your time beating yourself up over that missed scoring chance, that bad pass, or that call the referee made. It's a complete waste of energy.

**Pro tip:** I like to use a keyword to help me focus on what's to come rather than what just happened. As soon as I finish my shift review, I tell myself to "park it". That's my cue to park my thoughts and refocus. Come up with your own keyword and use it to keep your thoughts and emotions in check between shifts.

Once you're done reviewing your shift, then you can...

## TALK TO YOUR LINEMATES

This is probably the first thing you're used to doing when you get back to the bench.

But what happens if you get back to the bench and start talking right away?

You can't catch your breath.

If you can't catch your breath, you're not getting enough oxygen to your brain and muscles. Fatigue will set in, and your performance will get progressively worse and worse after each passing shift.

Don't make this mistake.

Talking to your line-mates is really secondary to the other steps on this list. Talking over plays with your buddies isn't what's going to make or break your performance.

Make sure you tackle your breathing, your hydration, and your shift review before you even think of talking strategy.

If time permits and you've covered the first 3 things, then you can dive into special plays, backdoor passes and whatever else you want to talk about with your linemates.

I know you're used to doing this first, but simply breaking this bad habit will improve your game.

From there, all that's left is to get your body ready.

## GET READY TO GO

Think of a little something you can do before getting on for a shift that lets your mind and body know that it's go time. It can be anything, but build it into your routine so that it becomes a habit.

For me, it was placing my hand on the board. This meant I was ready to jump over the boards and onto the ice at any moment.

Subconsciously, you're telling your body it's GO-time.

So there you have it...the "between-shifts" routine that allows you to come back rested, focused, and ready to perform.

You can modify this routine anyway you like, but just remember to catch your breath, re-hydrate, and review your past shift in your mind before you open your mouth.

That's the key.

Build this bench routine into your game, and you'll be glad you did!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a defensive stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #5:

## The Winger's Recipe for Breakout Success

I learned from a very young age that offensive zone play can get you ice-time, but it's defensive zone play that keeps you on the ice.

As a winger, being effective on the breakout is crucial if you want to be a player your coach and teammates can rely on, especially in big games.

The 4-step execution plan I'm about to share with you is really all you need to know in order to put the odds in your favor and breakout successfully as much as possible.

Before I get into the execution plan, you need to understand how to get yourself ready to initiate a breakout first.

Initially, when the other team has the puck, you're in **defense mode**. You're not even thinking about breaking out.

This means you should be 100% committed to playing defense, not blowing the zone, not cheating up high, and not standing still near the boards.

Whatever your job is in your D-zone (most likely covering the front of the net or covering the opposing D-man), is what you should be doing.

## **SCAN THE ICE**

Only once your team recovers the puck should you be switching your focus to the breakout.

Does your team have the puck? Good. Now it's time to scan the ice and start skating over to your position on the breakout.

If you only remember one thing from this chapter, let it be this: **scan the ice before you get the puck.**



You want to make sure you have all the information you need in order to make the right play once you do get the puck.

**Make sure you take in information such as:**

- How much time do I have?
- How much space do I have?
- Where are my teammates?
- Where is the pressure

These are all things you'll be able to take a mental picture of with just a quick scan of the ice after a bit of practice and experience as a winger. In fact, most times all you'll need is a quick glance over both your left and right shoulders to see what you're dealing with.

Now that you're in position and have a good idea of what's going on around you, you're better equipped to make a good play if the puck does come your way.

From here on out, it's all about evaluating your options.

## **OPTION 1 - SKATE**

Your first option is always to skate.

If you have room to skate, you want to start moving up the ice with the puck. Too many wingers stand still when they receive the puck on

the boards in their own zone. This makes you an easy target.

Your goal is to get the puck as far from your net as possible, and skating up ice is the perfect start. What's more, being immobile makes you an easy target for forecheckers. You want to be moving your feet and getting up ice as soon as possible, even if it's just a few steps before you make a pass.

**Pro tip:** One of the things coaches higher up love to see is a winger that gets the puck and instantly moves his feet up ice. It helps your team transition from defense to offense and forces the defending team to fall back, especially if they have two forecheckers down low.

## OPTION 2 - PASS TO CENTER

Other than skating the puck out yourself, your best bet is to find your centerman and make him a high-percentage pass near the middle of the ice.

I say high-percentage because if your centerman is too high up, it's probably not the best pass to make. If he misses the puck, the opposing team can recover it and essentially walk in from the middle and take a quality shot on net.

Passing to your centerman is a great option if he's well positioned a few feet away, at lesser or equal height than you. This is ideal.

You should also make sure he doesn't have any immediate pressure, as making him a pass, in this case, will most likely result in a turnover.

If you're successful in passing to your centerman, head up the ice alongside him to provide support in case he needs to give it back to you.

And remember...you should have a good idea whether or not you'll be able to pass to your centerman before you get the puck (hint: gather this information when scanning the ice).

## **OPTION 3 - BACK TO D**

If you don't have room to skate up ice and can't use your centerman as support, it's likely because you have pressure from above (the opposing D-man or high forward pinching on you) and from the side (someone is covering your centerman).

In this case, passing the puck back to the defenseman who gave it to you might be a viable option. You have to be careful though—your D-man might have a forechecker close by as he just recently had the puck.

This "back to the D" play won't work all the time, and it should never be your first choice. But when it's open, it's a great last resort for breaking out of the zone. Your D-man can then send the puck over behind the net to his partner to initiate the breakout on the other side of the ice.

## OPTION 4 - EAT & CHIP

So far, you've had enough time to either skate or make a pass in order to initiate a breakout.

But sometimes, you just don't have that luxury. When you play at a higher level or with players that are bigger and faster, chances are you'll have someone right up in your face as soon as you get a pass from your D-man.

That makes it extremely hard to skate up the ice, find your centerman, or make an effective play.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. That's why you have to eat the puck or chip it out!

Eat the puck

Eating the puck simply means protecting it with your body at all costs.

**\*Legal notice: I am not responsible for any damage caused by your attempt at literally eating any pucks. You've been warned!**

Use your skates to jam the puck up against the boards, use your stick to keep the puck as far away as possible from your opponent, or use your body as an obstacle to stop attackers from stealing your puck.

The goal here is simply to wait for your teammates to come and support you. You're essentially creating a battle and waiting for help to then clear the puck out together.

It's not as effective as a direct pass or set breakout play, but it's much better than creating a turnover. If you watch the NHL on TV, you'll see that "eating the puck" happens all the time.

Then, there's the "chips" part of the equation, which really isn't as fun as a bag of Doritos...

### Chip it out

If you're able to get free for even half a second, you're going to want to chip the puck off the glass in order to get it out of the zone.

If you've been paying attention, you know that above all else, your job on the breakout as a winger is to get the puck out by any means possible.

Chipping the puck off the glass is a great way to get out of a sticky situation. It takes practice to get the puck high enough so the defender can't intercept it near the blue line, but with a bit of work, you'll be able to increase your chances of a successful breakout chip.

That pretty much sums up your options on the breakout as a winger. The ultimate goal is always to get the puck out of the zone and gain the next line. Use whatever option you need in order to accomplish that.

And remember...When in doubt, glass and out!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #6:

## Playing “Just In Time” Hockey

The first time I learned about this concept and actually started implementing it into my game, I was blown away by the results.

What I mean by just in time hockey is literally doing things at just the right time. Not too early, not too late, just in time.

Let me explain.

If you're a defenseman, you've probably been told to defend the front of the net by neutralizing your opponent's stick at all costs.

That's good advice...except that it's not!

When you tie up an opponent's stick, it's pretty easy for him to wiggle free. All he has to do is pretend like you've got him neutralized for a few seconds and then surprise you with a bit of power and speed, and he's free again.

As a forward, I LOVE when defensemen try to neutralize my stick right off the bat. That means all I have to do is wait for an opening to present itself, wiggle free and then make a play.

As long as I time it right, I can usually get free just in time to receive a pass and get a good quality shot off.

Before the defender can react to re-neutralize my stick, I've already had time to make a play.

That's what just in time hockey is all about: **doing things at just the right moment so that you're much more effective and successful.**

If you take the same defenseman from the example above but have him keep his stick free (rather than already tied up with his attacker), all he has to do is tie up his opponent's stick just in time, and the play dies.

See the difference?

Too early and the attacker can get free.

Too late and, well, you're too late.

But just in time, you make it extremely hard for your opponent to make a good play.

And this concept isn't only used in front of the net when battling for loose pucks. You can also apply it to getting open in the offensive zone.

If there's a battle happening in the corner and you're the player in front of the net waiting for a pass, don't wait right in the spot where you want an eventual pass...that makes it easy for the defender to slide over and cover you.

Instead, hover around (without straying too far) and draw the defender out of position, and then as soon as you see your linemate win the battle, take 2-3 quick strides to the open ice and call for a pass.

You'll be much more successful at getting open if you do so just in time rather than waiting stationary in a location where you're easily covered by a defender.



I hope you can see how powerful this concept is.

If you look at the pros play, you'll see that they nearly always play just in time. It's rare that they'll tie up a player early or get into position for a pass before they really have to.

On both offense and defense, they do thing just in time. You should do the same!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a blocking stance, positioned in the background. The player is wearing a helmet and holding a hockey stick, with their body angled towards the right side of the frame.

# PLAY #7:

## The Most Effective Way to Block Shots

I hope I don't have to sell you on the importance of blocking shots.

If you've read my blog at all, you know that I'm a huge fan of shot-blocking and how it can improve your worth as a player.

But even though many players buy into the concept of shot-blocking and try to pull it off any opportunity they get, most of them have it all wrong.

Shot-blocking isn't about diving face first towards a shot or sliding with your knee-pads stacked 'a-la Dominik Hasek.'

If this is how you approach shot-blocking, you're probably doing your team more harm than good.

Sliding around the ice may make it seem like you're committed, but there's a better way to block shots...

...and it all starts with not blocking any shots at all!

That's right. The most effective way to block shots has nothing to do with advanced techniques or tricks, and everything to do with proper **body positioning**.

By positioning yourself in your opponent's shooting lane before he even receives a pass, you can **take away his will to shoot** before he even gets the puck.

That's the best way to block shots if you ask me.

Why risk having to slide, get down on one knee or dive to block a shot when all you have to do is position yourself properly in the shooting lane?

Don't get me wrong, there are times when you're a little too slow getting into the shooting lane and your opponent decides to let it rip anyway. In this case, you've got to do whatever it takes to block the shot (even if it means losing some teeth).

But 9 times out of 10, if you're able to position yourself properly in your attacker's shooting lane before he gets the puck, you'll make the decision to shoot seem a lot less appealing.

That's a huge win! And even though it's not flashy (because you don't get to slide and block a big shot), it's efficient (shot-blocking usually takes you out of the play for a second or two).

Think about it...if your attackers never shoot during an entire game because you're always well positioned in shooting lanes, that's like a 100% shot-blocking efficiency rate, without actually having to block any shots.

On the other hand, going down to block a shot can be hit or miss, and if you play against good players, they'll change their shooting angle on you so quickly that the puck will be at the net before you can even react (trust me on this one).

Personally, I would take 0 shots against over a 50% shot blocking efficiency rating any day of the week, and you should too.

Put simply, your goal should be to jam the shooting lane early so that shooting just doesn't seem to be a good option anymore. Think of your shot-blocking skills as a last resort or a second parachute to bail you out of tough situations.

The key to this whole thing, as I mentioned earlier, is proper body positioning.

It takes practice, and it's not something I can show you in a book, but if you just use this one small piece of advice, you'll be way better off:

**When positioning yourself in a player's shooting lane, look at his stick blade as your guide, not his body.**

The stick blade never lies because it's what does the shooting, not the body—that's where many players go wrong.

By lining up with your opponent's stick blade rather than his body, you'll be much more successful at forcing him to make another play because he'll feel like he has less room to shoot.

Even if you feel like you usually line up with your opponent's stick, odds are you subconsciously line up with his body. The next time you jam your opponents shooting lane, make a conscious effort to line up with his stick.

And if all else fails and he decides to shoot anyways, pull out the second parachute—get into shot-block mode and block that puck at all costs!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #8:

## The 3 Deadly Turnover Sins and How to Avoid Them

Nothing kills momentum for your team faster than a bad turnover.

If you want to maximize your ice-time, be out there during crucial moments and be a true asset to your team, you've gotta be aware of what I like to call **The 3 Deadly Turnover Sins.**

And if giving the puck to the other team wasn't bad enough already, coaches absolutely HATE these 3 turnovers above all else.

Eliminate them from your game, and you'll eliminate at least 50% of all your turnovers, if not more.

Starting off with the most important one...

Being too "fancy" near the blue lines

If you had to choose only one of these sins to eliminate from your game, let it be this one. Here's why:

The blue lines are places where the game changes from offense to defense (or vice-versa) very quickly.

For example, imagine you're the forward carrying the puck up the ice towards your opponent's zone.

If you try to deke a defenceman near the opposing blue line and end up turning the puck over, your linemates will likely take a second or two to react and realize that they now have to start backchecking. They'll probably end up somewhere in the offensive zone before they realize you no longer have the puck.

That's one, maybe even two players from your team out of the play for at least a second—if not more.

On the other hand, the defenseman that just stripped the puck off

you has all of his forwards ahead of him because they were trying to catch up to you (they were on a back-check). All he has to do is find the open man and make him a quick pass, resulting in an easy odd-man rush for the other team.

Limiting your turnovers at both blue lines is something you should seriously pay attention to.

It's not so bad losing the puck behind the net or in the corner of the offensive zone. But lose it when trying to dangle the opposing defenseman at either blue line, and your team is in trouble.

When in doubt, chip it in our out. Only attack the defender when you're sure you can gain the blue line easily with full control.

## **MAKING A BLIND SOUTH PASS**

Another way to limit your turnovers is to be aware of the dreaded **blind south pass**.

If you're not sure what a blind south pass is, it's simply a pass to someone behind you (hence the term south) or towards your own net without looking.

In theory, south passes are great for creating scoring chances. They take advantage of open ice and can put one of your teammates in a great position to get a good shot off.



The problem isn't actually making south passes.

The problem is making **BLIND** south passes, and way too many players fall victim to this.

It's one thing to see an open teammate behind you and drop him the puck when the time is right, but it's an entirely different thing to just leave the puck behind you or make a pass back towards your net without looking.

Put simply, you don't want to be making these blind south passes at ANY point during ANY kind of game.

Not only do blind south passes run a high risk of giving the puck back to the other team, they also make things harder on you if a turnover occurs because now you're ahead of the puck rather than above it. This automatically turns things into a back-checking scenario rather than a simple defensive scenario.

**This whole blind south pass thing isn't just for drop passes either. In reality, you have to make sure you look before making any of the following passes:**

- passes up to your defensemen in the offensive zone
- passes to open forwards in the high slot
- passes from behind the net to the low slot
- passes to defensemen in the neutral zone

One of the worst examples from the list above that I see way too often is the blind south pass from behind the net to the front of the net.

I know you've been told to get the puck to the net to create scoring chances, but sometimes just launching the puck there can do more harm than good. If none of your players get the puck, a defender will pick it up, and it's an easy breakout with you stuck below the goal line, and another forward or two of yours stuck in front of the net.

If you want to get the puck to the front of the net, make sure it's a high-percentage play.

## **MISSING THE NET ON A RUSH/PK**

Just like blind south passes run a higher chance of turning the puck over to your opponents, missing the net off a shot can be deadly, especially during man-down situations like penalty kills or even line changes.

I know you've been told to shoot at all costs to create scoring chances (it's wise advice), but missing the net wide on a shot can cause the puck to rim around the boards and give the opposing team the extra second they need to initiate a quick rush.

Again, the issue here is that you're caught skating towards your opponent's net while the puck is now on its way behind you to your own net.

One of the best examples of this in action is on the penalty kill...

Say you're skating the defender wide and create just enough room to gain the offensive zone and get a quick shot off near the top of the face-off circle on the right side.

You let the shot rip, and it goes wide left. It rims up the wall (towards your own net) and is easily picked up by one of the opposing forwards that's currently on the back-check. All he has to do is grab the puck and initiate a quick breakout while you (and potentially even your linemate) are stuck down low in the offensive zone.

The key here is how fast the puck changes directions on a missed shot. You can easily get caught behind the play if the puck rims up the boards fast enough.

If you're going to shoot, make sure you hit the net (especially on the PK). That'll eliminate a lot of turnovers and odd-man rushes.

You'll also have to backcheck less ;)

If you can eliminate these 3 deadly turnover sins from your game, you'll be a much more reliable player for your team.

And the best part is...all it takes is a bit of self-awareness to keep these turnover sins in check!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as the background for the text.

## PLAY #9:

# Cross-Dumping to Improve Puck Possession

Sometimes, no matter how hard you try to read the play as the puck carrier, there just isn't a viable option that presents itself.

If you've been playing hockey for a while, you've likely learned that one of the safest plays to make when you're faced with no options in the neutral zone is to simply dump the puck in.

**To “dump the puck in”:** to throw the puck in the opponent’s zone, usually with the hopes of recovering it before your opponent does.

Yes, dumping the puck in means giving up control, but at least you’re placing the puck 200 feet away from your net rather than causing a turnover at the blue line. In case you weren’t paying attention, that’s one of our deadly turn over sins.

The way you’ve been taught to dump the puck in is broken, and here’s why...

Imagine you’re the puck carrier coming down against a defenseman and you’ve got all kinds of pressure. You see no teammates available for a pass, and the defenseman’s gap is so tight that you won’t be able to skate around him.

In this case, you decide to dump the puck behind the defenseman and try to get there first, taking advantage of the extra second it takes the defenseman to pivot and skate towards the puck.

Sounds good in theory. 50/50, right? There’s one little problem...

Defensemen are taught to slow down the dumper and buy time so that their D-partner (the other defenseman) can skate over and recover the dump.

Most of the time you’re not racing against the defenseman right in

front of you, but the OTHER defenseman that's been waiting for the dump in this whole time. He's ready to turn and go recover the puck as soon as it comes off your stick.

In other words, the defenseman in front of you is just a decoy to slow you down. The other defenseman is the one you need to beat to the puck, and unfortunately, that just won't happen 90% of the time.

To fix this and put the odds in your favor, replace regular dumping with cross-dumping.

**Note:** This tip only works if you know you have a linemate on the other side of the ice (laterally) that isn't standing still at the blue line, but rather picking up speed and getting ready for you to make a play.

To increase your odds of recovering the puck, cross-dump by flipping the puck into the opposite corner of the ice for your teammate to go and get.

This way, all your teammate has to do is continue skating full speed towards the puck in a straight line.

The reason cross-dumping works better than dumping is because the defensive pairing can't work together in order to slow down the forecheck. You're no longer racing for the puck, your teammate is; and he has a clear path with little to no interference.

The cross-dump has a little element of surprise built into it as well. On a normal dump-in, the second defenseman starts to cheat towards your side of the ice because he wants to give himself a head start towards the corner so that he can get there before you.

By **cross-dumping**, you totally catch him off guard. This tips the balance in your linemate's favor and gives him the extra half-second he needs to win his race to the puck.

All you have to do after you cross-dump is head over to support your linemate. Sometimes, your linemate may win the race so decisively that you find yourself open in the slot for a quality scoring chance just as he recovers the puck!

Bottom line: **cross-dump whenever you can**. It's just more effective that way.

It also gives your team a better chance at keeping possession of the puck when compared to a regular dump.

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #10:

## Dealing With O-Zone Pressure

If the last chapter on dumping wasn't for you because you're more of a puck control kind of guy, then this one's for you.

This play is all about how to manage the puck once you've gained the offensive zone but see no passing options.



Maybe your teammates are on a line change, or maybe you just can't see your linemates because the defenders are all up in your face.

Regardless, here are a few different tactics you can use to buy time and gain open space so that when a play does present itself, you still have the puck and can make something happen.

## CHIP / RECOVER / FREEZE

One of my favorite things to do when I gain the offensive zone and have no immediate options is to chip the puck by the defender, skate around to recover it and then protect it with my body or even freeze it up against the boards if I have to.

**Note:** This isn't to be confused with a dump-in. Think of it as placing the puck a few feet behind the defender so that it's just out of reach and he has no choice but to pivot.

Essentially, it's just about buying time. A few seconds is usually all you need so that a linemate can come in and help you.

The **chip/recover/freeze** tactic is super easy to pull off and extremely effective. You don't need fancy stickhandling or blazing speed to make this work.

Just fake like you're taking the middle of the ice and then chip

the puck towards the outside lane. If your fake was good enough, you'll have created just enough separation between you and the defenseman to get to the puck first and then protect it with your body.

If it means jamming the puck up against the boards because you're being pressured by one or more defenders, then so be it. The ultimate goal here is to keep possession of the puck at all costs.

From this position (jammed up in a battle against the wall), you can take a few quick glances to see where your teammates are and then dish it off to them.

And if you've got blazing speed, then maybe you want to use this next tactic instead...

## **SKATE WIDE AND AROUND**

Remember the two most important words in hockey from chapter two, **time and space**?

This is one of the best ways to gain time and space in the offensive zone when you carry the puck over the blue line and have no obvious plays to make.

If you're fast, use the open space near the boards to beat your defenseman wide. He'll try to keep you outside as much as possible, but that's okay.

If you don't have a play, just keep skating wide while protecting your puck and continue on **as deep as you can**. Even go behind the net if you have to in order to create separation.

The more space you create for yourself by using the full width and depth of the ice, the more time you give to your teammates to adapt and get open for a pass. Going around the net also forces the opposing team to shift and reposition themselves, causing openings and scoring opportunities when you come out from behind the net.

Use this one whenever your teammates are lagging behind and when the defender gives you room towards the outside lane near the boards.

## **SLOW IT DOWN**

Sometimes the easiest way to create more time and space when you have no options is to simply stop and slow the play down.

Skilled players love doing this. By slamming on the brakes or tight-turning towards the boards and back up towards your net, you can create a ton of extra time and free space for yourself as the opposing D-men continue to back up and the opposing forwards continue on to cover the front of the net.

This tactic is a little riskier because if you have any kind of back-check pressure close by, you'll get the puck taken away quite easily.

That's why it's super important to take a quick glance to the side and a little off behind you before going this route in order to see that it's in fact doable. The last thing you want to do is curl back into an opposing player just waiting to crush you and steal the puck.

**Tip:** The three tactics mentioned above are your go-to plays for creating more time and space when you have no support when entering the offensive zone. What you DON'T want to do is try to take a shot on net and miss it wide (remember Deadly Sin #3). If you decide to shoot rather than buy time, make sure you hit the net and then follow up for a rebound.

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a battle stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #11:

## How to Really Win All Your Puck Battles

If there's one thing I know well, it's winning puck battles. In fact, most of my success in hockey stems from winning a high percentage of battles for the puck.

Here's what you need to know to become an absolute monster at winning puck battles.

Before you jump the gun and say *“I’m too small/weak to win battles”* or *“there’s no contact in my league,”* hear me out...

It’s not about hitting or out-muscling your opponent (although if you can do this, it definitely helps).

**It’s about positioning yourself in a way that your opponent can no longer get the puck.**

That’s it. That’s the secret.

That’s how you win 9 out of 10 puck battles.

And all you have to do in order to start winning more battles is change your mindset and tweak your technique.

Instead of thinking stick on puck first, think about how you can **position your body between the puck and your opponent** as quickly as possible.

The “stick on puck” concept should come naturally to you anyways. You’ve most likely been doing it your entire hockey career.

Keep doing it, but make a conscious effort to think of placing your body between your opponent and the puck as soon as possible.

Once you gain this advantageous position, you’re in the driver’s seat—your attacker now has to go around you to get the puck back.

You can even bend your knees and spread your legs a little bit to be stronger on the puck and make yourself more of an obstacle. You'll even feel your opponent against your body, so you won't even have to look to see where he is!

Believe me when I say it's going to be extremely hard for your opponent to get the puck back from you unless he regains the advantageous position closer to the puck.

**From this position, you can even do things like:**

- spin off your defender
- stick out your butt to distance your opponent
- bump your opponent away from you by leaning your shoulder into him
- protect the puck with your skates against the boards
- jam the puck up against the boards with your stick

These are all effective puck-battling tactics that will help you keep control of the puck, but at the end of the day, all you really want to do is keep your advantageous position between your opponent and the puck.

This is how puck battles are won.

The top players in the NHL who excel at winning battles and recovering pucks do exactly this: **they eliminate their opponent by getting between them and the puck.**

If you want to win more puck battles, now you know the secret.

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #12:

## How to Be More Successful Attacking 2 on 1

Before I start, I just want to mention that there's no right or wrong way to approach a 2 on 1. If you're highly skilled, you can do just about anything and turn it into a scoring chance.

What I'm going to show you here is just one of the techniques you can use to put the odds in your favor.

Use it or not...that's for you to decide.



First things first, most 2 on 1's fail because the puck carrier decides to play what I like to call The Waiting Game.

Not familiar with it?

On the 2-on-1, when the puck carrier decides to carry the puck in and wait until the last possible second to either pass or make a play, that's called The Waiting Game.

To be completely honest with you, it makes me want to pull my hair out! And the worst part is, it isn't the players' fault...

With all the 2 on 1 highlights from the NHL, it's almost like non-NHLers are conditioned to wait for the pretty play to present itself because that's what they see on TV.

They force the pass when they shouldn't...

They go for the top corner shot when they shouldn't...

All because they want that pretty highlight reel play.

Unfortunately, the reality is the more you wait on a 2 on 1, the longer the opposing D-man and goalie have to react and prepare.

In other words, when you play the waiting game, you make it easy for them because they have all the time in the world to get ready.

And that's not even the worst of it...

The longer you wait, the more you lose out on shooting opportunities.

Every extra inch you wait once you're past the top of the circle diminishes your shooting angle and chance to score.

Before you know it, you're in too close to the net or maybe even off to the side where even my 5-year-old cousin could make a save (I don't have a 5-year-old cousin, but if I did, he would probably save it).

Playing the waiting game on a 2 on 1 is NOT the ideal play. It leads to turnovers, low percentage shots, and potentially even no scoring chance at all.

Aside from all that, a missed opportunity on a 2 on 1 can lead to a big momentum shift in the wrong direction.

So unless you're a pro and have ran 1000s of 2 on 1 situations with a lot of success, there's a much better way to approach a 2-on-1 situation.

The secret to being more effective when attacking 2 on 1 is to **make an early pass.**

By passing early (after the blue line and before the top circle), you're forcing the D-Man and goalie to move right away.

You're dictating the play and forcing your opponents to react rather than the other way around. See the difference?

Before—with the waiting game—all the defenseman had to do was sit back and wait until you slowly but surely eliminated all your available options.

Instead, making an early pass forces the D-man to move. This can open passing seams & skating lanes that simply weren't there before. Heck, the D-Man can even fall from re-positioning himself thanks to your early pass—this would never happen by playing the waiting game.

And the same goes for the goalie. He has to respect your early pass and follow the puck across. This can cause him to mess up his angles and position himself badly in his net, increasing your chances of scoring a goal.

These things play heavily in your favor, and all it takes is an early pass to take the defenders out of their comfort zone.

**After you've forced your opponents to rush and adapt quickly with an early pass, then you can explore different options like:**

- Taking a high-quality shot
- Passing it back to your teammate
- Skating to open ice
- Shooting for a rebound

It'll be that much easier to execute the above options once you've

dictated the play and forced your defenders to react to you and not the other way around.

It really is that simple—just one early pass can make all the difference.

Try it the next time you're the puck carrier on a 2 on 1 opportunity. You'll be amazed at how much easier it becomes!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a defensive stance, facing right, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #13:

## How to Properly Defend Against a 2-on-1 Rush

The question that has flooded my inbox the most over the past two years (at least on behalf of defensemen) is without a doubt how to defend against a 2-on-1.

If this is something you struggle with, then you're going to want to pay attention. The following tips are all you need to become the defenseman everyone hates going up against on a 2-on-1.

## **GOALIE GRABS THE SHOT, YOU GRAB THE PASS**

I'm sure you've heard this general rule of thumb before, but if you haven't, it's a good place to start.

When you're defending a 2-on-1, always start with the idea that it's your job to eliminate the pass option, and it's your goalie's job to prepare for a shot from the puck carrier.

The reason why is because the less your goalie has to move, the easier it is for him to make a save. It's much easier for your goalie to line up with the puck carrier and prepare to make a save then it is to slide across the ice and face a quick one-timer. That doesn't always end well.

Movement leads to openings, and openings lead to goals. We don't want that.

For that reason, you always want to start with the idea that your goalie is responsible for the shot from the puck carrier, and you're responsible for taking away the pass to the open forward.

But even so, that doesn't mean you can just take the open forward out of the play and give the puck carrier an easy shot on net. That's where many defensemen go wrong.

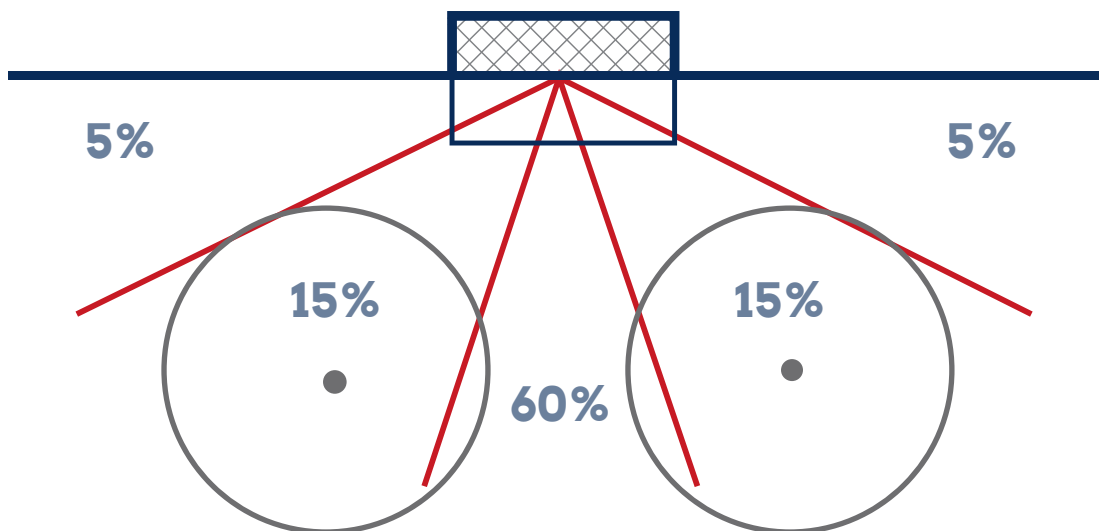
Focusing solely on the open forward allows the puck carrier to drift towards the middle of the ice and instantly double his chances of

scoring because of the improved shot angle (not to mention you're forcing your goalie to move again).

The key to successfully stopping a 2-on-1 is to **eliminate the pass option WHILE protecting the middle of the ice** so that the puck carrier is as far outside as possible.

Why protect the middle of the ice? Because that's where the high-percentage scoring chances happen. It's much harder to score from the outside towards the boards than it is in the slot.

Here's a small diagram that shows you scoring chance percentages and just how important it is to protect the middle of the ice:



*Scoring chance % based on position*

Now that you know your ultimate goal (eliminate the pass, protect the middle), here's how you get the job done...

As your two opponents cross the blue line, **stay in the middle of the ice** between the puck carrier and the open forward so as to make the pass seem impossible.

Keep your stick in the passing lane and make it seem like you're really focused on eliminating the pass option.

The more the puck carrier feels like the right play is for him to shoot, the easier your job will be.

Moving on...

As the forwards continue towards the net and the puck carrier gets to the top of the face-off circle, **slowly start to drift towards him** while still trying to cover the passing lane to the open forward.

Continue to use your stick to make the pass option seem unappealing to the puck carrier as much as possible.

It's important to note that you don't want to completely leave the open forward and attack the puck carrier full on. You simply want to take away a bit of the puck carrier's space and force him more towards the boards.

This way, you're helping out your goalie by reducing the puck carrier's shooting angle AND taking away the pass option as best you can with your body positioning and stick in the passing lane.

And again, just so we're clear, **your priority is still the open forward.**



There's a lot going on during a 2-on-1, so the key is to watch the puck carrier but glance over to the open forward every now and again. This will allow you to adjust both your positioning and speed accordingly to make sure the pass across is not available.

But what if the forwards criss-cross? What if the puck carrier stops or delays so that his teammate can skate hard to the net?

Don't get confused with fancy zig-zags and plays. **Hold your ground and protect the middle of the ice**, and do your best to stay in the passing lane to make the pass seem unappealing.

These are situations where using your stick effectively to cut off passing lanes becomes even more important.

## **THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE MADE WHEN DEFENDING 2-ON-1**

Most defensemen commit too early towards the puck carrier. This oftentimes leads to an easy pass across and an even easier one-time goal.

Contrary to what you might think, patience is crucial when it comes to successfully defending a 2-on-1. The longer the puck carrier waits to make a play and the deeper into the zone he gets, the worse his shooting angle becomes and the more rushed his pass will be (does The Waiting Game sound familiar?).

That's why time is your friend. Keep that puck carrier to the outside and let him skate the puck deep. Don't commit too early. Doing so will only create an opening for the forwards to take advantage of. Instead, take away the pass option and slowly drift towards the puck carrier the closer he gets to the net.

One last thing that's important to mention is that sometimes a shot is inevitable. Don't feel like you've failed if the puck carrier gets a shot off on net. Your job is to **limit the damage** by taking away the pass option and keeping the puck carrier to the outside as much as possible.

That said, if you follow this simple 2-on-1 defensive strategy, you'll be well on your way to being a tough defenseman to beat!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #14:

## What Toe Drags Are Really For

Toe drags are for making the opposing defensemen look absolutely ridiculous and making it onto TSN's *Highlight of the Night*, right?

Toe drags can do those things, but that's not what they're best used for. Rather than using toe drags as a deke to try to get around defenders, you should approach toe drags as a way to **create a shooting lane** for yourself.

By pulling the puck in towards you even just a tiny bit before firing the puck, you can catch any defender or shot-blocker completely off guard and successfully get the puck through to the net.

The reason this works is because of the way defenders line up to block shots: they always line themselves up directly with the puck (or at least they're supposed to).

Changing where the puck is by even just half a foot can mean the difference between a blocked shot and a shot that makes it all the way onto, and *potentially into*, the net.

The trick is to have the puck out a little wider than usual so that your defender lines up in front of it. Then, when it's time to shoot, pull the puck in closer to your skate and let it rip.

### **This lets you take advantage of the small shooting lanes:**

- between the defenseman's legs
- between his stick and skates
- just outside his skates

The **toe drag and shoot combo** is extremely deceptive and makes it hard for a defender to prepare in time for your shot, let alone try to block it.

But that's not the only thing this combo is good for...

It's also a goalie's worst nightmare. By changing the angle of your shot a mere split-second before you let it go, it makes it tough for a goalie to adapt and cover his angles accordingly.

This really works, and the quicker you can pull it off, the more scoring chances you'll create for yourself.

If you watch any pro games, you'll notice that forwards use this combo all the time to create scoring chances in situations where they normally wouldn't have the opportunity to shoot.

To add this to your game, mix it in during practice. The next time you come down on a defenseman, rather than trying to toe drag him to then skate around him, toe drag the puck into a better position so that you can let it rip and catch both the defenseman AND goalie off guard.

You'll be surprised at how effective this tactic is. And plus, I find the small toe drag you do before shooting gives you some extra power and results in a harder shot. Mike Hoffman does this religiously and has one of the most dangerous shots in the NHL.

Give it a shot...*but toe drag first!*

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #15:

## How to Get Out of a Scoring Slump

Ahh, the annoying scoring slump. Every hockey player's worst nightmare!

It sneaks up on you when you least expect it and can turn what seemed like a good start to the season into the worst scoreless streak of your career.

Whether you play hockey competitively or just for fun, the scoring slump is very real, and it can completely destroy your confidence if you don't get back to scoring quickly.

While scoring slumps are at times inevitable, there are a few things you can do to get back on the right track and start scoring some goals.

## **PLAY INSIDE THE PERIMETER**

More often than not, scoring slumps linger on due to players staying along the perimeter in the offensive zone.

Have you ever heard of the term **perimeter player**?

A perimeter player is someone that stays towards the outside near the boards and never tries to attack the middle of the ice because it's harder to do so. Unfortunately, it turns out that most goals are scored from the middle, not from the outside.

**To break a scoring slump, you have to get yourself inside the perimeter with the puck.** You have to attack the net with the puck and be ready for any hits, hooks or slashes that come your way. It's going to hurt, but that's what it takes to score goals.

The next time you're in a scoring slump, ask yourself if you're doing all that you can to take the puck to the dirty, hard-nosed scoring areas near the center of the offensive zone or if you're just staying comfortable on the outside near the boards.

If you don't feel immediate pressure when you have the puck, it's because you're so far outside of the play that *you're not affecting the outcome of the game whatsoever.*

Move away from the boards and attack the net if you want to score!

## **CREATE SHOOTING OPPORTUNITIES AT ALL COSTS**

Consider this: it takes a sniper like Crosby or Ovechkin roughly 7 shots to score a goal.

These guys are the best of the best. Now, an average or below average shooter might require 9-10 shots to score a goal.

That means it can take you anywhere from 7 to 10+ shots to score just ONE goal, depending on your abilities.

That's a lot of shots, and these are shots that have to be taken if you want to break your scoring slump.

Put simply, you have to shoot every chance you get when you're in a scoring slump.

Remember the little shooting percentage diagram I shared back in **PLAY # 13**? If not, scroll back up and have another look.



As a goal scorer, you want to be taking shots from the 15% and 60% zones as much as possible. But when you're in a scoring slump, even shots from the 5% zones are fair game.

In other words, when you're in a scoring slump, focus on getting 7+ shots on net from anywhere in the offensive zone whenever you get a chance. The rest will take care of itself.

## **PUCK-WATCH LESS, GET OPEN MORE**

Contrary to what you may think, you have to puck-watch less and focus more on finding open space if you want to get out of your scoring slump.

In a scoring slump, players put so much added pressure on themselves that they tend to focus only on the puck and nothing else around them. This leads them to miss out on a ton of information that would normally lead to more scoring chances, and ultimately more goals scored.

Instead of puck-watching, focus more on your surroundings. Know where your teammates are so you can support them, know where your opponents are so you can get in between them, and know how the goalie is positioned so when the puck comes out to you you're able to put it in the net.

You may not be puck-watching willingly, either. The added pressure of being in a scoring slump can really affect the way you play and see the ice.

This can be detrimental to your chances of scoring a goal and breaking your slump, so you need to make a conscious effort to relax, stop puck-watching and focus on the **R.A.A. framework** from Play #1 (go ahead and review it now if you've forgotten all about it).

## **MAKE SCORING PART OF YOUR GAME**

In order to break your scoring slump and get back to scoring goals on a regular basis, you have to **make scoring a part of your game again.**

While you may not be able to add it back into your game right away, you can definitely work on scoring during practice.

To make this work, you simply have to approach practice with a scoring mentality.

That means every shot you take on net during practice either ends up frozen by the goaltender or in the back of the net.

If you have to play 5 rebounds to make that happen, then so be it. Do what it takes to put the puck in the net, and be happy afterwards that you just scored a goal.

Do this over and over again, and keep telling yourself that you're a goal scorer through positive reinforcement and self-talk.

It sounds silly, but I guarantee you that it works.

You have to turn scoring into a habit again, and scoring in practice along with positive reinforcement is the best way to do this.

Your mind doesn't know the difference between practice and a real game—scoring is scoring, no matter how it's done.

Rebuild your scoring habit in practice, and you'll learn to score again when it really counts.

## **SWITCH YOUR MENTAL MESSAGING**

**When in scoring slumps, your thoughts tend to put pressure on your actions. You begin to use negative statements like:**

- "I have to score."
- "I can't miss my next shot."
- "I can't believe I missed that one!"

You may not think these little statements are responsible for your scoring slump, but over time, they can be the reason your scoring slump lasts a lot longer than it should.

Just like positive self-talk can help you get out of your scoring slump, **negative self-talk will keep you in it.**

It just has to go.

Here's an example...if I tell you not to think of a white polar bear, what do you think of? Obviously a white polar bear.

It's the same thing when you tell yourself not to miss.

By telling yourself things like "I can't miss my next shot," odds are you're going to miss.

This is the psychological process of **Ironic Process Theory** at work:

"Ironic process theory or the white bear problem refers to the psychological process whereby deliberate attempts to suppress certain thoughts make them more likely to surface."

By using these negatively framed statements and clouding your mind with bad thoughts, you're essentially making them more likely to come true.

Simply reframing a negative statement like "I can't miss my next shot" into something more positive like "the next shot I get is going in" can make a world of difference when trying to break your scoring slump.

It's **negative self-talk** that makes your slump last longer than it should.

Take care of your thoughts, and you'll overcome your slump before you know it.

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #16:

## How to Manage the Puck at the Offensive Blue Line (for defensemen)

The reason so many defensemen are not sure what to do when they get the puck at the blue line is that, given a bit of time, they have as many as 5 options to choose from when making a play.

If your goal is to be an effective and reliable defenseman, then it's important to know what these options are and know when to use each one in order to make the best play possible.

Here are (more or less) the only 5 options you can choose from when getting the puck at the blue line, regardless of how it gets to you.

## #1 SHOOT

If you're an offensive defenseman and you have a good shot, you should be thinking "shoot first" if you feel you have enough time to get a shot off.

This has to be decided before the puck comes to you, so you always need to be aware of opponents in your immediate surrounding.

It's as simple as thinking to yourself whether you're in "loaded" mode (when you have a clear shooting lane) or if you have the "safety" on (when there's nearby pressure). This concept will help you determine whether you can get a shot through to the net or if you're better off making another play.

The next time you're at the offensive blueline waiting for the play to develop, always think to yourself whether you're in **safety mode** or **loaded mode**.

**Shooting isn't the best option (aka safety mode) if:**

- There's a winger up high jamming your shooting lane
- Your teammates are far away from the net
- The goalie has an unobstructed view of the puck
- There are too many players on your side of the ice

You have a teammate that's wide open and has a higher percentage scoring chance

Keep in mind that shooting the puck on net is never a bad play; the scenarios mentioned above are simply times when you might want to consider making another play.

**On the other hand, shooting is definitely a good play (aka loaded mode) when:**

- You have teammates near or on their way to the net
- You have a teammate screening the goalie, making it hard for him to see the puck
- You have a clear shooting lane, and the odds of your shot making it to the net are high
- There is no one in position for a higher percentage scoring chance
- There are a few seconds left in the period or game

I know it sounds like a lot to take in, but with practice, choosing between **safety** and **loaded** mode becomes second nature.

Defensemen with a high hockey IQ go through this process without even thinking about it, and that's what you need to strive for.

Still, one thing's for sure: you have to scan the ice and see what you're up against before you get the puck. It's the only way you'll have enough information to decide whether you're in safety or loaded mode.

If you wait until you get the puck to scan the ice, it's usually too late.

## #2 SHOT-PASS

Your second option is the **shot-pass**, which is essentially a soft shot aimed at a teammate's stick blade so he can easily redirect it on net or stop it and carry out a play from a high-percentage scoring area.

This can be used when you have an open winger that's well positioned on either side of the net or even a little higher in the slot.

This catches both the opposing players and the goalie off-guard if you pull it off effectively. It's not a tactic that works all the time, but if your teammate is skilled at tipping or redirecting pucks from the blue line, you can surprise a lot of goalies this way and rack up quite a few points.



One thing to note is that you should let your teammates know that you'll be looking to try this in game situations.

It's somewhat of a set play if you will. Don't just send your teammate a shot-pass if you've never done it before. Chances are they won't be ready for it and will play it as if you were taking a normal shot.

Test it out in practice and mention before the game that you'll be looking for the option, and you'll reap the rewards.

Of course, there's always the option of making a direct pass to someone around the net, too.

### **#3 TAKE ICE**

Taking more ice is your third option and will suit you if you're a quick, agile skater. This should be used when you have an opponent that's almost up in your face and you can distance yourself from him by patrolling the blue line.

As you do this, you change the game completely. Everyone now reacts to you. The wingers have to shift over, the goalie has to reposition himself, your D partner has to slide across, and your forwards have to move.

By taking the middle of the ice, you open up a lot of different plays, and this option should be used whenever you're given the room to do so. It's also the perfect option for creating a shooting lane out of thin air, allowing you to take a high-quality shot.

When you decide to slide to the middle of the ice, always do so as quickly as possible. The faster you slide, the better chance you have at creating a scoring opportunity. If you're too slow, everyone will have time to adapt.

Get those feet moving and gain an advantageous position towards the middle of the ice.

One small tip that might make a world of difference for you when sliding to the middle of the ice is to **use the room you have available outside the blue line.**

What I mean by that is your **entire body can come outside of the blue line as long as you keep the puck inside.**

This gives you an extra foot or two of separation from the opposing winger and reduces the likelihood of getting poke-checked.

Hockey is a game of time and space, and this little tip gives you both of those things by simply adjusting your positioning ever so slightly.

Try it out the next time you take to the middle of the ice with the puck!

## **#4 OVER**

This is the bread-and-butter option for most defensive pairings. With a good defense partner, you'll use this one a lot. Passing the puck

over to your D-partner lets you stretch out the play, a lot like taking ice but without having to skate.

This again forces the other team to adapt in order to get back into proper shooting lanes.

The key is to glance over at your partner before you get the puck. You'll want to make sure he's open and that he doesn't have any near or immediate pressure on him. Sending the puck over to him when he has a defender in his face is useless, and just puts him in trouble (it might cause a turnover, too).

With time, you'll get more comfortable with the over pass. One good way to make sure your overpass is always accurate is to take note of where your partner plays: is he really inside the blue line or does he play high up with his feet on or even outside of the blue line?

When you see the top defensemen in the NHL firing pucks over to their partners with perfect accuracy, that's two simple things at work:

- Knowing your D-partner and his usual positioning in relation to the blue-line
- Taking a quick glance over before receiving the puck to make sure he's open

One last thing that's important to mention is that **you shouldn't fall into the trap of always passing over to your partner**. A lot of amateur defensemen do this. The other options in this list are all great options, and simply making an over pass every time leads to a

certain level of predictability that can put your partner in trouble. It's a great play, but don't overdo it. You can make things happen on your own sometimes, too!

## #5 RIM DOWN

Last but not least, we have the safety valve: **the rim down**. This is hands down the best option to choose if you have very little time to react.

If there's a winger in your face, the puck is stumbling, or you're just trying to keep the puck in, the rim down is always a great option.

While some see it as a loss of possession because you're essentially giving the puck away, it's not really the case. It's inevitable that the other team will win the puck back at times, but if your forwards are well positioned, it's an option worth considering when you're pressed for time.

Also, it's usually better to rim the puck down than shoot the puck blindly through the middle. These blind shots are easily blocked, and being that you're at a standstill, they often times lead to odd-man rushes.

I put this rim down option last for a reason: the other four are better options given you have the time to make a play. But take that time away, and the rim down becomes your best bet.

Don't be shy to rim the puck down along the boards if it's the difference between keeping the play alive and the puck exiting the zone.

Depending on where your forwards are, you can either aim to have the puck stop in the corner so they can then recover it, or rim it hard so it makes it all the way to the opposite corner and the play changes sides. It all depends on where the open space is and which scenario will give your forwards more time to make a play (there's that time and space again!).

Have a look to determine which rim—short or long—is the better play for your forwards.

That's really all there is to it!

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**To recap, the 5 options you have to choose from when it comes to getting the puck at the blue line in the offensive zone are:**

- Shoot
- Make a shot-pass or a direct pass to an open player near the net
- Take the middle of the ice to force your opponents to move
- Pass the puck over to your D-partner in order to stretch the play
- Rim the puck down when under heavy pressure

Read over these options several times and memorize how and when they should be used in order to maximize your effectiveness on the offensive blue line.

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as the background for the entire page. The player is facing right, with their head slightly turned towards the viewer.

# PLAY #17:

## Why It Pays to Play S.O.F.T. Hockey

If you've been a fan of **Built for Hockey** for a while, you know that I'm a big fan of shortcuts.

Not shortcuts for the sake of doing less work, but shortcuts that are easy to implement and that lead to improved effectiveness as a hockey player.

**Playing S.O.F.T. hockey** has to be one of my favorite shortcuts because it's easy to implement and many players struggle with it.

Here's what playing S.O.F.T. hockey is all about and how you can you can implement it into your game to improve almost overnight.

If you haven't guessed yet, S.O.F.T stands for **skate on first touch**.

Skate on first touch simply means taking a few quick steps towards open ice right after receiving the puck—either from a pass, a loose puck or after winning a battle.

It's a simple concept but it's extremely effective (throw in some [breakaway speed](#), and you're in business), and here's why...

#### **By skating on first touch towards open ice:**

- you create more time & space for yourself, increasing your odds of making the right play significantly
- your opponent has to react quickly, leading to defensive mistakes you can capitalize on
- you make it a lot tougher for your opponent to get the puck back as it's now further away from your defender
- you create the feeling of "they're everywhere!" that can overwhelm the opposing team

And it doesn't matter which position you play. Both forwards and defensemen can benefit from skating on first touch.

What's more, this simple concept gets infinitely more powerful when an entire team buys into it.

Back in Major Junior, we had a pretty fast team. We probably had the fastest team overall, but what made us exceptionally annoying to play against was that we were taught to skate on first touch. Every time the puck came our way, we would head for open ice.

This made us extremely hard to defend and created a ton of openings down low in the offensive zone for us to capitalize on, all because we adopted a skate on first touch mentality.

Here's how you can implement the skate on first touch (S.O.F.T.) concept into your own game and begin to dominate like we did.

## **DEFENSIVE ZONE S.O.F.T.**

In the defensive zone, it's all about creating space in order to quickly transition from defense to offense.

For **defensemen**, this could mean heading up ice after a D to D pass behind the net, or simply heading behind the net after a puck battle is won in the corner in order to give yourself more time & space to make a play.

For **forwards**, it's especially important to skate on first touch on the breakout. By exploding up ice when you receive the puck, you essentially force your opponents to back-check rather than continuing their offensive zone pressure.



Just a few quick steps up ice after receiving the puck can make all the difference.

Don't make the mistake of staying stationary—start skating up the ice as soon as you touch the puck.

## **NEUTRAL ZONE S.O.F.T.**

In the neutral zone, getting the puck either means you've created a turnover, or you're receiving a pass from a teammate during a regroup or rush.

In any case, nothing changes!

For **defensemen**, you'll either be exploding up ice or exploding laterally in order to open up a passing lane to one of your forwards.

For **forwards**, it's all about gaining the blue line. If you receive a clear neutral zone pass in a rush situation, you might want to take open ice towards the middle or even get wider and use the lane along the boards to get into the offensive zone. Even if you have to slow down in order to catch the pass, get your feet going again on first touch.

The better you become at taking off towards open ice as soon as you get the puck, the more chances you'll create for yourself and your team.

Just think to yourself, "if the puck is on my stick, my feet should be moving."

## OFFENSIVE ZONE 'S.O.F.T.'

In the offensive zone, defensemen and forwards can use S.O.F.T. in specific situations.

For **defensemen**, you'll want to skate on first touch when you get the puck up at the blueline. Usually, this means you're sliding across the ice to try to create a shooting lane for yourself or give time to your forward to support you on the boards.

You can also skate on first touch and head down the boards towards the corner if you just received the puck from your D partner and you have a defender close by squeezing you to the outside.

Again, the goal is to give yourself more room to make a play. The faster you move, the more time & space you create because it's extremely hard to defend against.

For **forwards**, offensive zone S.O.F.T. is all about the cycle down low. If you're the type of player that gets the puck from a cycle play and then just waits motionlessly until a linemate gets open, you're doing your team a huge disservice.

As soon as you pick up a rimmed puck from a teammate, you have to explode in a specific direction—either back up the wall or down low towards the back of the net. Heck, you can take the puck right to the net if your first few steps are quick enough!

Skating on first touch is one of the best ways to create scoring

chances for yourself and teammates in the offensive zone. The faster you change directions, move to open space, and create confusion, the harder it'll be for the opposing team to defend you.

Burn this S.O.F.T. concept into your mind until it becomes a habit.

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a neutral zone forecheck stance, positioned in the background. The player is wearing a helmet and holding a hockey stick, with their body angled towards the right side of the frame.

# PLAY #18:

## The Right Way to Apply Pressure in the Neutral Zone

Let's get one thing straight.

Your goal as the first attacker on a neutral zone forecheck is not to get the puck back.

Obviously, if you can strip the puck from a defender that's great, but it's really just an added bonus.

Your real priority as the first man applying pressure is to **steer or influence the play up one side** of the ice so that your teammates can then jump in and stop the opposing team from gaining your zone.

Where many players go wrong is they attack the puck carrier head-on like a freight train without breaks.

That's no bueno (Spanish for 'no good' in case you were wondering).

If that's what you're doing, stop it right now and have your coach or a teammate teach you how to angle the puck carrier.

But aside from angling, there's one more thing you can do to drastically improve the effectiveness of your neutral zone forecheck: staying D-side.

Put simply, **staying D-side** means to staying **ABOVE** the puck no matter what so that you're able to defend, rather than having to chase the puck carrier from below.

To make this easier to understand, here's what most amateur players do during a forechecking situation...

An amateur player will begin to angle the puck carrier, and if the puck carrier ends up beating him to the side he just initiated his angling from (this happens sometimes), he'll slam the brakes or tight turn and continue his pursuit from behind the puck carrier.

You may be thinking that's the right play because he's able to stop quickly and take off after the puck carrier that just beat him.

But it's not the right play.

The right play for the forechecker is never to chase, but rather to stay D-side or above the puck by continuing on his angling trajectory and simply curling back up ice towards his own net (rather than down ice).

This way the forechecker is always above the puck, or always in defense mode rather than back-check mode. He can then simply re-apply pressure on the puck carrier.

And guess what happens if he gets beat by the puck carrier to the inside a second time? The same thing! He simply continues his angling trajectory and then curls back up the ice towards his net to apply pressure on the puck carrier once again.

In other words, when you remember to always stay D-side or above the puck when you're the first forechecker, you never truly get beat! You always have the opportunity to re-apply pressure because you're never chasing from behind, but rather always attacking from above or from the side.

This way, you'll be more reliable defensively for your team, you'll maintain your speed, and you'll create more turnovers.

This is one of the rare occasions where curling is more effective than stops and starts, so take advantage of the easier work while you can!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #19:

## Creating More Time and Space on Offense

By now, you should know that everything in the game of hockey is easier the more time and space you have available.

This play is all about ways to create that extra time and space both for yourself and for teammates.

By the end, you should have a few extra tricks up your sleeve to use when you're feeling added pressure from your opponents.

## STOPS, CURLS & CUTS

**By stopping, curling or cutting, you can easily separate yourself from defenders. Which one you'll use depends strongly on how you read the play, but for the most part:**

- Use stops when you need to delay and gain time—usually when you enter the zone wide and can wait for teammates to get open.
- Use curls when you enter the zone wide and the defenseman starts pressuring you—you can give yourself more space by curling back up the boards rather than simply stopping and being an easy target.
- Use a well-timed cut to the middle when you see the opposing defensemen are spread out, and there's an open lane down the middle

Again, read the play before attempting any of these plays. You don't want to cut to the middle only to put yourself right in the tracks of a backchecking forward. A quick glance back for even half a second before you cut to see who's nearby can save you from turnovers (and concussions).

You can also use these skating techniques just as effectively when you don't have the puck in order to get open for a pass.

## SPEED CHANGES

On offense, changing your speed frequently is almost like a secret weapon.



By varying your speed constantly, you make it very hard for your defender to maintain his gap against you. The more you can keep him on his toes and adjusting his speed, the easier it'll be for you to beat him.

This tactic can also be used without the puck to get to open space. You can just as easily shake a defender trying to cover you by slowing down and then slamming the gas when he least expects it. Time it right, and you might just be left all alone in a high-scoring area.

## **PASSING**

There's no better way to take advantage of time & space than to pass the puck to an open teammate. I'm sure you've heard this saying before: if a teammate is open and ahead of you, give him the puck! It's wise advice.

If you've read the play using the **R.A.A. framework** and feel that your teammate is in a better position than you are (he has more time & space available to him than you do), just pass him the puck.

This puts your teammate in a position to move the play forward and also forces your opponents to move, creating openings and breakdowns in the defense.

## **STICKHANDLING**

When you take a second and think about it, all stickhandling is really used for in the game of hockey is to create more time & space for yourself.

You're simply putting the puck within reach of defenders, only to move it again when they get near in order to take advantage of newly created free space (to the left, to the right, between legs, under the stick, etc.)

That's creating time and space at its finest.

Once you realize that stickhandling is for creating time and space rather than "dangling defenders" with fancy moves, you'll approach stickhandling in a whole new (and way more effective) light.

But hey, if you're the kind of guy that can toe drag a defenseman, pull it off 9 times out of 10, and get to the open space behind the defender, who am I to tell you not to do it?

In that case, keep doing what you're doing. But if not, focus on simple stickhandling moves that will **give you more time and space** rather than mesmerize defenders.

Put the puck within reach, wait for the pokecheck, and then take it away and attack the open ice with speed.

## **FAKES**

There are countless fakes you can use to your advantage to create more time and space.

**Head fakes** one way can make a defender crossover and give you open ice to the other side. Patrick Kane is the ultimate head fake master—watch some of his highlights and mimic what he does.

**Faking a shot** can cause defenders to freeze or even flinch just enough to give you the time needed to pull off a move. Sometimes, they'll even drop to their knees to try to block your fake shot, giving you all the time in the world to skate around them.

**Fake passes** are great when coming down on a 2 on 1. Faking a pass to your teammate can cause both the defenseman and goalie to react if done correctly, leaving you with many options from that point on.

These three are the main fakes in hockey, but don't be shy to be creative and come up with your own fakes to help create more room for yourself.

## **SPIN-OFFS**

**Spin-offs** are great for getting open on offense when you don't have the puck. They're usually used when you're hanging around the net waiting for a pass, and you're being hounded by an opposing defenseman.

Let them push you around and get stuck up on you, and when you see a teammate getting ready to make you a pass, simply spin off your defender and give your teammate a target with your stick (this is also an example of Just In Time hockey).

The goal is to make contact with your defender and make it seem like you're fighting for position, and then simply spin off to the other side when he least expects it. It's a great way to gain important space in the slot and gain the extra half-second of crucial time needed to get a good shot off.

## **BUMP-OFFS**

Similar to spin-offs, bump-offs are when you bump a defender off of you rather than spin away from him.

In other words, you remain close to your defender until the time is right. When you feel the puck may be coming your way, simply shove your defender away from you (try not to get a penalty for elbowing) and ready yourself to receive a pass.

Sometimes it helps to call for a pass before you initiate the bump so that the puck comes just as you free yourself from your defender.

The bump-off can be used in close around the net, in the high slot, or down low when battling for the puck in the corners.

## **THE "DON'T TOUCH MY PUCK!" MOVE**

I'm sure you've heard about the importance of neutralizing your opponent's stick on defense, but what about when you're the puck carrier?

Yep, that's actually a thing, and I like to call it the "***don't touch my puck!***" move (for lack of a better name).

I call it that because as soon as a defender's stick gets close, you let them know (figuratively) to not touch your puck by slashing their stick away.

It's a little counter-intuitive to what you're used to as a hockey player (slashes & poke-checks are usually used on defense only), but it's a great way to gain time and free yourself from defenders.

Great hockey players like Sidney Crosby & Pavel Datsyuk use this move all the time, especially during 1 on 1 battles down low where opposing sticks are always nearby.

In plain English, this is an **offensive slash** that you can use while carrying the puck to keep your defender's stick away.

You can even use it when racing for pucks—just slash your opponent's stick away before arriving at the loose puck.

## **PUCK PROTECTION (LEGS & ARMS)**

Another great way to create time and space for yourself is to **use your body**.

Opponents can't steal what they can't reach, so using your legs and

arms to make your puck unreachable can buy you extra seconds that can make all the difference.

For example, when you're trying to beat a defender wide, **use your inside arm** to distance the defenseman from your puck. The extra foot or so that you gain makes it extremely hard for him to pokecheck your puck away.

This works especially well when you're trying to beat someone towards your backhand side because you can carry the puck with one hand on your stick off to the side while the other arm can be used to distance your defender (it can still work on your forehand side, but it's a little tougher to pull off because you're stuck with only your bottom hand on your stick).

You can also use **a wide stance** to make it hard for defenders to reach around you, essentially using your legs as shields for oncoming poke-checks and slashes.

Sidney Crosby is the perfect example of using your body effectively to protect the puck and gain time. Have you seen how wide he keeps his legs when he's patrolling the offensive zone with the puck?!

## THE BOARD JAM

We covered this one back in Play #11 so I won't go into much detail, but it would be a shame to leave **the board jam** out as a viable way to create more time.

Simply put, when there's no play, try to delay. Jam that puck up against the boards with your skates, stick or body and wait for help. It's as simple as that

## USE THE NET

You know that big red object made of metal & mesh at both ends of the ice? It's not just for putting pucks in.

It's actually the perfect obstacle to place between yourself and an opponent.

This one's a popular one, and you're probably using it already without even knowing it, but using the net to gain extra time and space is a no brainer.

**Defensemen** can use the net as an obstacle when teammates are changing up: it allows puck-carrying D-men to sit behind the net untouched, at least until someone decides to forecheck.

In the offensive zone, **forwards** can use the net as an obstacle to buy time until teammates get open in the slot. If the opposing defenseman decides to apply pressure behind the net, the forward can simply skate away from whichever side the pressure is coming from and attack the net.

**Goalies** can even use the net as an obstacle to beat the first forechecker if he decides to press them behind the net.

In other words, the net is your friend. Don't just fill it with pucks.

**Pro tip:** Not near the net? Teammates or opposing players can be used as obstacles to gain time and space too (this is essentially called a 'pick').

Create time and space for yourself and teammates using these tactics the next time you're out on the ice!



A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a defensive stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #20:

## Eliminating Time and Space from Opponents

Now that you know how to create time and space on offense, it's time to learn how to eliminate it while playing defense.

It really all comes down to your **skating, your positioning, and your stick control.**

Let's look at each of these in detail.

# SKATING

The most obvious way for you to take time and space away from opponents is through skating & movement.

Here are a few skating-based tactics you can use to reduce your attacker's time and space while forcing him to make a bad play.

## THE PINCH

This is one of the go-to time and space removal tactics for defensemen, yet so many D-men do it wrong.

The **pinch** is a high-risk, high-reward play that happens when a defenseman skates down towards an opposing winger on the boards in the offensive zone to stop him from breaking the puck out of his zone.

The key to pinching effectively is to **act before the winger gets the puck** and to **fully commit to the pinch**.

In other words, if the winger has the puck on his stick before you're in motion, it's already too late.

You have to be on your way towards the forward while the puck is on its way to him, and the faster you arrive, the better, which is why you have to commit 100% to the pinch.

Any ounce of hesitation will cause you to slow down, stop moving your feet, and essentially arrive too late to make a play.

This can lead the winger to simply chip the puck past you or even hand it off to his supporting centerman, resulting in an odd-man rush for the other team.

Act before the winger touches the puck and fully commit to the pinch in order to remove time and space from your opponent.

## **THE STEP-UP**

The **step-up** can be used by defensemen (and sometimes forwards) when skating backwards and playing an opponent 1 on 1.

A step-up is when you slam the breaks in order to stop your backwards momentum and take one or two strides towards your attacker in order to surprise him.

If you've maintained the right distance with your attacker throughout the rush, you should be right up in his face before he has time to react (if you play in a league where contact is allowed, you'll love the step up).

The key to pulling off the step-up is to **surprise your attacker** before he has time to react. As soon as you notice his head go down for even just a split second in order to look at the puck, that's when you slam the breaks and step up towards him.

If you time it right, you can easily pokecheck the puck away or even lay him out flat on the ice with a big hit.

**Always line up your stick with the puck, and your body with his body**—even if the puck gets by you, you'll make sure he doesn't.

## **ANGLING**

Many of the time and space removal techniques so far have been primarily for defensemen, but this is one that forwards use all the time.

**Angling** in hockey is exactly what it sounds like—approaching the puck carrier from an angle so as to increasingly reduce his time, space and pass options.

I know the words increasingly reduce sound contradicting, but it's the best way to explain it.

If you skate directly at the puck carrier, he still has pass or skating options to the left and right. He can even try to stickhandle through you if he's feeling confident. In other words, you're easy to beat.

But if you approach him at an angle rather than head on, you make him feel like he can beat you wide with speed. That little ounce of hope is what makes angling effective. By matching the puck carrier's speed and taking back the ice in an angle rather than in a straight line, you can literally force him to the outside and take away the entire middle of the ice.

When done correctly, you can force the puck carrier up whichever

side of the ice you want. The puck carrier will naturally go towards the open space—with angling, you give him the space and then slowly take it away.

**Pro tip:** Whenever you can, try to angle the puck carrier towards his backhand because it's harder to make a play on your backhand than on your forehand. This can increase your chances of causing a turnover.

## **STOPS AND STARTS**

I won't go into much detail on this one because it's pretty straightforward and I've touched on it a little bit already.

In your own zone, use **stops and starts** as much as possible rather than curling. Curling gives more space to your opponents because you're always in motion, leaving behind open ice that can be used to make a play.

There's also the fact that you inevitably turn your back to the play at some point during your curls.

Using stops and starts rather than curling is an easy way to both improve your defensive play and also reduce open space for attackers. The only time it's okay to curl in the defensive zone is if your defensemen have the puck and you're trying to build up speed for a breakout.

## POSITIONING

There are certain ways you can position yourself in order to better reduce your opponent's time and space.

### CONTAIN-PRESSURE-PIN

This one relates to defensive zone play and how to approach the puck carrier. If the player you're covering has the puck, you have three options to choose from:

- Do I contain?
- Do I apply pressure?
- Do I pin against the boards?

The option you choose relies heavily on the information you gather when reading the play, but in general, you'll want to...

### CONTAIN IF THE PUCK CARRIER HAS FULL CONTROL OF THE PUCK:

Here, your job is to slowly eliminate his options. Remember, the puck carrier will try to go where the open space is. You can steer the play by placing your body and/or stick where you don't want him to go, forcing him to go elsewhere. Even though containing is considered a passive play, it's still effective for taking space away from an opponent.

## **APPLY PRESSURE IF IT LOOKS LIKE THE PUCK CARRIER DOESN'T HAVE FULL CONTROL OF THE PUCK:**

If the puck carrier is fumbling the puck, if the puck is loose, or if you're already close enough to apply pressure, then get on him fast before he's ready to make a play.

## **PIN IF THE PLAYER HAS HIS BACK TO YOU AND IS CLOSE TO THE BOARDS:**

This is the ultimate reduction of time and space because an attacker cannot move or make a play if he's stuck up against the boards. Make sure you know what's allowed in your league and play within the rules to eliminate the risk of getting penalties.

Keep in mind that these three options are only for when your opponent has the puck in the lower half of your zone along the boards. Any opponent with the puck near your net (or trying to get there) should get pressured immediately! The same goes for defensemen with the puck up at the blue line—you want to get in their shooting lane as quickly as humanly possible to eliminate the open lane to the net.

## **SHOW SPACE, THEN TAKE IT AWAY**

This one's for D-men defending against a rush.

Sometimes, it pays to position yourself a little more towards the middle of the ice. This does two things:

- It keeps your attacker from trying to beat you through the middle
- It forces him wide to where the open space is

In other words, make it seem like going wide is the only play your attacker has, and then as he starts to take the puck wide, slowly start to slide towards him and close the gap.

You can make the outside lane even more appealing to your attacker by placing your stick a little towards the middle (9 times out of 10, this will force your attacker wide).

This tactic is effective because it's much easier to defend against an attacker wide than it is up the middle.

First, show him the space wide by positioning both your body and stick more towards the middle of the ice. Then, take your attacker's time and space away by slowly drifting towards him and getting your stick blade out towards the puck.

## **CHEAT TO SHOOTING LANES**

One way to eliminate a non-puck carrier's space is to **cheat to his shooting lane.**

You'll see this done a lot in the NHL on a powerplay where the defensive players cheat towards a certain player that scores a lot (think Ovechkin, Crosby, etc.).

The idea is to clog a scorer's shooting lane before he even has the puck so that the puck carrier decides not to pass to him.

It doesn't even have to be on the powerplay—it can be used at any point during a game. Just be aware that the more you cheat towards



an opponent, the more space you leave behind, which can make it easier for another one of your opponents to get open for a pass.

Still, cheating towards an opponent's shooting lane remains a great way to eliminate some of the puck carrier's options.

It's especially useful when:

- **An opposing defenseman has the puck.** You can cheat to his partner's shooting lane to make the D to D pass less appealing. Sometimes, you'll even get lucky and intercept a pass which can lead to a breakaway.
- **An opponent is open back door.** Getting in his shooting lane will eliminate a dangerous scoring threat and important pass option for the puck carrier.
- **Killing a penalty.** Cheating towards a shooting lane in a 4 vs 5 situation can mean the difference between a blocked shot and a goal if done right.

And if all else fails and the puck carrier still makes the pass towards the opponent you decided to cheat on, you'll be perfectly positioned to block his shot!

## STICK CONTROL

Last but not least, another way to remove time and space from opponents is by having great **stick control**.

Great stick control is about using the thing you have in your hands as a multi-purpose tool to get the job done, both on offense and defense, across all three zones of the ice.

I can usually tell a good player from a not-so-good player just by the way he uses his stick after a few minutes of play:

- The amateur player looks like he's carrying something that's slowing him down and hindering him more than anything.
- The good player uses his stick in every possible situation, and it almost looks as if it's an extension of his arm.

And while mastering stick control is an art (some players are just way better at it than others), there are still a few fundamental stick tips you need to know in order to remove time and space from your opponents when defending.

## **OUT TOWARDS THE PUCK**

If there's just one tip you remember about stick control, let it be this one.

When pressuring the puck carrier, you want to keep your stick blade as far out towards the puck as possible.

You do that by extending your top hand arm as much as possible without sacrificing balance.

This gives you an extra few inches of reach that you can use to

reduce the puck carrier's time and space while making him feel like you're a lot closer than you really are.

Sometimes, a few quick strides coupled with a fully extended pokecheck can really surprise a puck carrier and cause a turnover.

You might feel this is a small detail, but you'd be surprised how many players keep their sticks up close and tight to their body on defense, essentially giving their attackers more time and space than necessary.

The truth is your effectiveness as a defender (both as a forward and as a D-man) relies heavily on **proper stick control**, and maximizing your reach by extending your arm to meet the puck carrier's stick is one of the best ways to improve your chances of success.

But there's more to effective stick control than just this...

Just like it's important to keep your stick blade out towards the puck carrier on defense, it's just as important to have an always-involved stick.

Or, as my coaches back in Major Junior called it, **keeping an active stick**.

What this means is that your stick should never really be stationary on defense. In order to remove time and space from your opponent, you want to be moving your stick frequently to cover strategic areas of the ice—think passing lanes, certain open areas of the ice that opponents might try to sneak into, etc.

So when you aren't reaching out with your stick towards the puck carrier, you should be actively using your stick and keeping it involved in the play.

This tip is something you'll use more when containing the puck carrier (think back to the contain-pressure-pin section of this chapter) or playing away from the puck rather than when you're applying direct pressure.

For example, when you're containing the puck carrier, you may start with having your stick blade out in front to take away space, but then move it to cover a passing lane towards the middle of the ice because you know another opponent is waiting there for a pass.

You may even move your stick frequently between these two options—pressuring the puck carrier and blocking the pass option—until you cause a turnover or the puck changes position.

There's no right or wrong way to do this, but as you move about the defensive zone and adapt your positioning to the play, think of what open space you're leaving behind and where your opponents might be—these are the areas you want to defend with your active stick.

By just keeping your stick active and more involved in the play, you can become a much more effective and hard-to-play-against defender.

Move that stick around!

## **THE DECEIVING POKECHECK**

Many players know about the pokecheck and how it's one of the most efficient stick plays to make on defense, but just as many players struggle to use it effectively.

### **Want to know the secret?**

**You have to deceive your opponent and surprise him in order for it to work.**

To do that, all you have to do is keep your stick in a little closer to your body (this is the only time you'll hear me tell you to do this) and then reach out as far as possible when you feel you have the opportunity to reach the puck.

In other words, pull your stick back to "shorten your reach" so to speak.

The reason this works is because the puck carrier bases how much time and space he has on how far the closest defender's body and stick is.

Doing this makes him feel like he has a ton of room to play with.

Just as he's about to approach you to make a move, you can surprise him by "making your stick longer." That is, by reaching out and revealing your true reach.

If done correctly, he won't have the time or space required to make a

move and evade your pokecheck.

Try this the next time you're on the defensive side of a 1 on 1 battle.

It really works!

## **THE STICK LIFT**

Last but not least, there's the **stick lift**.

Lifting your opponent's stick is always considered good stick control because it essentially takes him out of the play.

However, there's one caveat...

Lifting your opponent's stick also takes YOUR stick out of play for a short while.

For that reason, you don't want to lift your opponent's stick unnecessarily.

While it might feel like you're doing a good job defending your man, all you're really doing is taking yourself out of the play.

Instead, keep your stick on the ice and only lift your opponent's stick when the time is right (ie: when a pass is on its way or a loose puck is nearby).

This way, you're ready to react to any situation because your stick is readily available rather than tangled up in the air with another player's stick. Think back to **just in time** hockey!

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a stick, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #21:

## Using Communication to Create More Scoring Chances

The power of communication in hockey is greatly underestimated, especially in the amateur ranks.

Don't get me wrong, many defensemen and goalies have set communication cues like "leave it" or "play it" which make racing back for pucks a whole lot easier. But in general, communication isn't used as much as it should be out on the ice.

Take forwards for example. While they may call for passes amongst each other on breakouts and in the neutral zone, they rarely talk much once they pass the blue line and skate into the offensive zone.

Maybe it's because players don't want to draw attention to themselves when they're trying to get open, or maybe it's just what I've noticed playing with hundreds of different players across many different skill levels over the years.

Regardless, I've noticed things tend to get a little quieter once you hit the offensive zone, and I feel it should be the total opposite.

Here's a quick story to illustrate my point...

Back in Major Junior, I was always the power forward on my line and usually played with a skilled goal scorer.

My job was simple: jump on loose pucks, win my battles, and get the puck out to the slot as quickly as possible so my linemates could get quality scoring chances.

One thing that helped me out tremendously was when my linemates would **communicate with me**.

When you're battling versus one or two opponents in the corner, it's very hard to know what's going on away from the puck. You don't necessarily have the time to look away and see what the other players on the ice are doing because your immediate goal is to gain puck control.



To make matters worse, you're usually always facing the boards, so your field of vision is slim to none.

In order to get more scoring chances, **I insisted that my linemates call for a pass as soon as I recovered the puck.**

Even though I was facing the boards, had my eyes glued on the puck, and had two opponents trying to strip the puck away from me, **hearing my linemates call for a pass gave me a very good idea of where they were on the ice.**

I couldn't see them, but I knew if they were to my left, my right, behind the net, or hovering around the slot.

This allowed me to quickly turn and face the general direction in which the sound came from and get a pass off to my linemate much quicker than if they hadn't called for a pass.

I know this may sound a little far-fetched, but trust me when I say that this small detail made a world of difference.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again—hockey is a game of half-seconds. The extra half-second I gained from knowing which general direction my linemate would be in allowed me to make quicker, more accurate passes, resulting in many quality scoring chances and oftentimes one-time goals.

I urge you to talk to your linemates and have them communicate with you in the offensive zone, especially in battles and scenarios where

you can't afford to look around and take in information with your eyes.

Your ears can be just as useful if you let your linemates know that you value communication.

Even if it's just a loud yell. As long as it's distinct and you know it's them, it can make your job a heck of a lot easier.

It really comes down to this: **hear, locate feed.**

That was one of my recipes for success throughout my career, and it can be one of yours.

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, facing right, serves as the background for the text.

# PLAY #22:

## The Key to Getting More Scoring Chances Around the Net

This is a tip I've meant to share for a long time because so many players struggle with it.

You've probably heard a piece of advice in the past that goes a little something like this: "Go to the net! That's where the goals are scored!"

If you've had any formal coaching, you've heard this before.

The problem is, players take it WAY too literally. They skate hard to the net while watching the puck carrier with the hopes of getting a pass, only to end up one foot away from the goalie with their stick all tangled up and no room to make a play!

How the heck can you score if you have no room to maneuver?

If you're going to the net for a rebound, that's a different story. You want to get right in the crease and bang the puck in.

But when you're getting open for a pass in the offensive zone—either from a teammate battling in the corner or coming out from behind the net with the puck—the last thing you want to do is be too close to the goalie.

**You want to be higher up in an open passing lane** so that you can get the puck with ease and get a good shot off from a decent angle.

Think about how easy it is for a goalie to stop a shot if you're a foot away from him. He hardly has to move, and you have a really bad angle to shoot from. At that distance, your only play is to try to bang it in.

But the more you back up, the more of a shooting angle you create for yourself, and the more you force the goalie to challenge you.

Again, the more you force the goalie to move, the better your odds are of scoring.

And if that doesn't convince you, just think about the opposing defensemen. There's going to be at least one D-man protecting the front of the net. Why go and stand right next to him so that he can tie you up?

**Stay a little higher** (in what is usually called the high slot) and find the open passing lane.

Be aware of where your opponents are and where your puck-carrying teammate is so that you can position yourself where you have the highest probability of both receiving a pass and getting it off before anyone can get out to pokecheck you or block your shot.

**Don't make the mistake of watching the puck and drifting towards the net.** You'll end up on top of the goalie with no space to get a pass, let alone shoot.

From my personal experience playing with lesser skilled players, this happens a lot when the puck carrier goes around the net and comes out the other side looking for pass options.

The linemates without the puck stay focused on the puck the entire time and inevitably get drawn in too close to the net.

As a result, the puck carrier either tries a blind pass in front (that nearly always misses), or he tries to keep the puck and eventually loses it.

As soon as the puck carrier comes out the other side, he literally has no options because everyone is tied up with the defensemen in front.

If you want to score more goals around the net, you have to stay above the defenders and put yourself in an open passing lane for the puck carrier.

Even if there's a rebound, you're better off having to skate towards the puck than being too close to the net and having to move back out (away from the net) to get the loose puck.

The next time you're trying to get open for a pass in the offensive zone, be aware of your position around the net and back away just a little bit if you find yourself too close.

It'll give you more time, space, and make a world of difference when you actually do get the puck.

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as the background for the entire page. The player is facing right, with their head slightly turned towards the viewer.

# PLAY #23:

## The Best Way to Improve Your Hockey Sense Away From the Rink

If you want to improve your hockey sense, relying solely on your weekly games and practices is a big mistake.

There's a simple way to improve your hockey sense from home, and it's a lot more fun than you think.

Ready for it?

## WATCH HOCKEY ON TV!

Don't get too excited just yet...there's a catch.

It's not just about putting on your favorite game, grabbing a bag of chips and kicking your feet up—that's what **spectators** do.

If you want to improve your hockey sense, you can't watch hockey like a spectator. Instead, you have to watch as a **student of the game** and analyze every single situation in depth while using what I like to call the **WHAT-WHY-HOW** framework:

- **What's** the puck carrier doing?
- **Why is** he doing that and not something else?
- **How** would I react in the same situation?

Or another example...

- **What's** the winger away from the puck doing?
- **Why** is he positioned the way he is?
- **How** would I react, given where the puck currently is?

This is the kind of thought process you have to use if you want to leverage watching hockey to improve your game.

Over time, and once you get comfortable going through these different **WHAT-WHY-HOW** scenarios, you can start trying to **predict what's going to happen next**:



1. Grab your remote and use the pause button to freeze the play just before the puck carrier is about to make a play.
2. Take a second to ask yourself what you would do if you were out on the ice in the exact same situation as the puck carrier.
3. Once you've made a decision, unpause the game and watch the play unfold.

Were you right? Did you choose to make the same play as the puck carrier?

If so, great! You just made the same decision an NHLer would given the situation.

And if not, don't worry...many times there's more than one viable option, so be critical and really challenge yourself to find the ideal play given the situation.

It's better that you take the time now to think things through than when you're out on the ice and have 3 attackers right up in your face.

That's why watching hockey as **a student of the game rather than a spectator** is so powerful. It literally allows you to see 1000's of decision-making situations without actually having to be out on the ice.

The more game scenarios you see, the more likely you are to make the right decision when a similar situation occurs during a game because you've seen it (or a variation of it) before.

This concept is known as **pattern recognition**, and it's key to improving your hockey sense.

**Pattern recognition:** Pattern recognition refers to the capability of athletes to recognize or recall the patterns formed by the configuration of key elements (such as teammates and opposing players) that exist within the playing environment. An enhanced capability to quickly and accurately extract information from these unique pattern structures has been suggested to contribute to other important sports skills such as anticipation (i.e., predicting future events such as the movements of other players) and decision making (i.e., deciding what to do next)”

Here are just a few examples of what you might want to keep an eye on when watching hockey as a student of the game:

### **WATCHING A SPECIFIC PLAYER**

Is there a specific player you'd like to mimic or model your playstyle after? Isolate his play and run through the **WHAT-WHY-HOW** framework.

For example, many young players like Erik Karlsson's ability to dominate both offensively and defensively, yet so little of them focus

try to find out why he's so dominant (they just watch the beauty passes and highlight reel goals).

**Break it down.** Isolate his play and watch his every move until you know exactly why he's successful. **What** does he do that makes him so dominant? **Why** is he making certain decisions over others? **How** would you react in his position, given the situation?

**Go deep.** Why did he choose to pass instead of shoot? How does he deal with pucks rimmed in his zone? What does he do the moment he realizes a shot is about to be taken by the other team?

Asking these kinds of questions will allow you to challenge your thought process and decision-making ability on a much deeper level than you're used to.

## **WATCH A SPECIFIC POSITION**

If you're looking to improve the decision-making skills required for playing a certain position, you can study position-specific game situations.

For example, if you're a winger and struggle to make the right play on the half-wall during a breakout, your ice-time will be limited (no coach likes to play a player that is a liability defensively).

In this case, watching NHL wingers and how they approach breakout situations would be in your best interest.

By paying special attention to how NHL wingers deal with:

- rimmed pucks
- direct breakout passes
- nearby loose pucks
- sideways pressure
- back pressure
- pressure from the opposing D-man
- having no pass options

and more, you'll be in a better position to deal with these scenarios too.

Whichever position you play, think of the scenarios that are imperative to your success and start studying them as much as you can.

For **defensemen**, some of the scenarios I recommend studying are:

- racing back for loose pucks or dump-ins in your zone
- making the first pass on a breakout
- boxing out opponents in front of the net
- carrying the puck up the ice
- getting the puck at the blue line in the offensive zone
- getting the puck in the neutral zone during a regroup
- defending against a 1 on 1
- defending against an odd-man rush

For **centermen**, consider studying:

- different face-off tactics
- what happens directly after a face-off is won or lost in both zones
- covering your man down low in the defensive zone
- being a viable pass option on the breakout for both your defensemen and wingers
- being a viable pass option in the neutral zone

That said, **don't just study your own position.**

It pays to know the role of every position on the ice. Even if you've been playing hockey for years and feel like you know exactly how each position is played, believe me when I say that there's more to it.

I've played hockey as a winger for over 20 years but still learn a ton when I watch great defensemen play at a high level.

I learn their habits and tendencies with and without the puck.

I learn which stickhandling moves they easily defend against and which moves generally catch them off guard.

I learn their thought process and how they approach each different situation, from 1 on 1's to odd-man rushes and more.

This insight gives me a tremendous when going up against D-men because **I've studied their tendencies**

If you're a forward that wants to learn how to beat defensemen more regularly or a defenseman that wants to learn how to outsmart forwards, studying the opposite position is a great way to do so. Knowing other positions as well as you know your own pays big time.

By now, **I hope you're sold on the importance of watching hockey as a student of the game rather than a spectator** to improve your decision-making and overall hockey sense.

But there's one more trick I haven't mentioned yet that tops this...

## **WATCHING YOUR OWN GAMEPLAY**

If you can get your hands on video footage of your own performances, you've got a huge advantage over players that don't.

Maybe you're lucky enough to have your games recorded. If so, you can ask your coach for access to the files for easy viewing.


If you aren't so lucky, you can try asking a family member or friend to film your shifts once in awhile so that you can study your play away from the rink.

I know many coaches like to use video with their teams and point out both the good and the bad, but there's nothing better for a player than to have his gameplay accessible to him at home so that he can watch it on his own time.

If this is at all possible for you, I highly recommend that you take advantage of it.

Watching the pros is one thing, but if you can re-watch your games and see your own mistakes, you'll be in a much better position to know where you're falling short.

Long story short: don't just watch hockey...**study it!**



# PLAY #24:

## How to 80/20 Your Game for Maximum Success

Take a second and think about players currently in the NHL. What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Duncan Keith?

Probably that he's a great skater.

What about Niklas Kronwall? Devastating hitter.

Jonathan Toews? True leader.

Alex Ovechkin? Pure goal scorer.

I think you get the idea...but what am I getting at here?



The answer has to do with the 80/20 rule, also known as:

- Pareto's principle
- The law of the vital few
- The principle of factor sparsity

and more names that all refer to the same concept.

What this fancy principle or rule means is that in life, the majority of your results usually come from a minority of your inputs.

There are a million and one examples of this 80/20 rule at work in our daily lives, but what I really want to stress is its impact on your performance in hockey.

Put simply, **the majority of your successes as a hockey player come from a small minority of things you do well.**

More often than not, the players that stand out do so because they focus on being **exceptionally good at a handful of things**, rather than trying to be the best at everything.

They might be average at a lot of things, but they're exceptionally better than others at a select few things.

From my own personal experience, the day I understood this 80/20 concept, it literally changed the course of my hockey career for the better.

I realized the things I was doing exceptionally well—my 20%—are what were generating 80% of my results, and they put me in a position to be noticed by coaches and scouts at the next level.

For me, it was my speed, strength, and in-your-face style of play that made me stand out.

For you, it might be totally different. But regardless, if you want to maximize your effectiveness as a hockey player, you have to determine what that 20% is that drives 80% of your results.

You have to find what makes you unique as a player and what gives you an edge over others—even if it means somewhat neglecting other parts of your game.

And the best way to find out what your 20% is, **is to just ask**. Ask your parents. Ask your coaches. Ask your teammates.

Ask as many people with hockey knowledge as you can. The things you hear over and over again are usually a good indication of what you excel at.

Once you determine what that 20% is, you can begin to focus all your efforts on perfecting it, because that's your best chance at success.

**Spend most of your practice time mastering that 20%.**

Spend whatever time is left improving your weaknesses.

You'll be unmatched at your 20%, and it'll lead to much of your success as a player.

Now, there's one caveat to this whole concept...

If you have a weakness that really hinders the rest of your game—like skating for example—then it's wise to get that weakness up to a level where it no longer holds you back.

From there, you can go all-in and work on improving your strengths most of the time, while focusing on your skating with whatever time is left.

And it doesn't matter if you only play once a week for fun. If you're a shooter, then shoot the puck as much as possible. If you're a playmaker, make plays. If you're a defensive defenseman, then focus on being reliable.

Find your 20% that generates 80% of your results, and go all-in. You'll be a better player because of it.

A dark blue silhouette of a person in a dynamic, athletic pose, possibly a dancer or a martial artist, is visible in the background. The person is facing right, with one arm extended forward and the other bent. The background is a solid dark blue color.

# PLAY #25:

## How to Guarantee the Improvement of Any Skill You Struggle With

When it comes to self-improvement, people usually fall into one of these two categories:

- a fixed mindset
- a growth mindset

A **fixed mindset** is when someone believes that their basic qualities are set in stone. They believe talent plays a big part in one's success and that there's not much they can do to improve. They accept this as fact and just go through the motions (hint: they're wrong).

On the other hand, a **growth mindset** is when someone believes that their basic abilities can be developed. They believe talent is just the starting point. This mindset creates a love for learning, improving, and a sense of resilience that is essential for significant development (hint: they're right).

**All great athletes embrace a growth mindset.** In order to take a skill from good to great, you have to develop a growth mindset and believe in the idea that small daily progress will lead you to significant improvement over time.

Only once you learn to adopt a growth mindset can you take advantage of the **purposeful practice** needed to make it happen.

## PURPOSEFUL PRACTICE

Here's how to practice with a purpose in order to maximize development of a specific skill.

### GOAL SETTING

Choose a skill that you struggle with and **set a goal to improve it**. Your goal should be reasonable, and not unattainable so as to discourage you.

Your goal should be just outside your comfort zone but within reach. The objective is to set goals that lead to continuous improvement over time.

For example, let's say you're currently able to place your shot where you want on net 5 out of 10 times (on average).

Set a goal to improve to 7 out of 10 times on a regular basis (not just once). This would be an overall improvement and isn't too far out of reach from what you're currently capable of.

In this example, being able to place your shot 7 out of 10 times repeatedly after purposeful practice would mean a noticeable improvement of your shooting accuracy.

In order to achieve this result, you're going to need to evaluate yourself.

## **SELF-EVALUATION**

As you're carrying out the skill during practice, **focus on what you're doing and why you're doing it the way you are.**

If we use the same example as above, notice what you're doing right when you hit your target, and what you're doing differently when you miss. Adapt, modify and try different things as you go to see if there's a better or more effective way of doing things.

In this case, maybe you would try something like different hand placement, different puck-on-blade positioning, or even a different shot release point.

To make this process easier, it helps to have someone you can rely on for advice.

## **ASK FOR FEEDBACK**

This is where it helps to have a coach, parent, or someone knowledgeable give you feedback on what you did well and what you did poorly.

You've already self-evaluated your performance during practice, but it helps to get another opinion. What's more, having someone more knowledgeable than you provide feedback is a sure way to improve—they may notice things that only an outsider could.

As a player, it's important to ask for this feedback whenever necessary, and as a coach, it's important to provide this feedback whenever possible.

Without feedback, players can continue down the wrong path and never see any significant development (this happens a lot more than you'd think!).

You can't be emotional about feedback—constructive criticism is all part of the learning process, and a growth mindset welcomes all forms of feedback. The good, the bad and the ugly is needed in order to grow.

Staying positive or polite can actually be counter-productive.

A young Tiger Woods said it best: “I can’t watch myself swing.”

Feedback from someone you trust is the only way to grow.

This next step is how you really kick development into high gear...

The perfect ‘purposeful practice’ example

The perfect example of practicing with a purpose comes from an article in Fortune Magazine. It’s about golf, but it’s the same for any sport, including hockey:

“Simply hitting a bucket of balls is not purposeful practice, which is why most golfers don’t get better. Hitting an eight-iron 300 times with a goal of leaving the ball within 20 feet of the pin 80 percent of the time, continually observing results and making appropriate adjustments, and doing that for hours every day – that’s purposeful practice.”

That’s how you have to approach hockey practice if you want to get better. Going through the motions won’t do anything for you. You have to be purposeful in all that you do if you want to see improvements across the board.

If you follow this growth framework and incorporate it into your weekly practices, you’ll come out ahead of those that just go through the motions.

The results will be inevitable!



A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as the background for the entire page. The player is facing right.

# PLAY #26:

## Thank You!

Last but not least, I want to send a big **THANK YOU** your way for picking up a copy of this book.

Regardless of what level of hockey you play, I hope you learned a thing or two that will help take your game to the next level.

If for some reason you purchased this book without joining the Built for Hockey community, then [click here to join](#) and be the first to know about new blog posts, books and courses that come out.

And lastly, it took a ton of work, effort, and one too many sleepless nights to put this book together—I would really appreciate it if you respect that and not share this book with anyone else without my permission.

If you enjoyed this book and really want to show some love or help spread the word, then please share this link:

[\*\*http://builtforhockey.com/handbook\*\*](http://builtforhockey.com/handbook)

This is the ultimate level of support and allows me to keep doing what I love while helping the entire Built for Hockey community in the process!

Cheers and best of luck!

Your friend Ben Levesque

# About the Author

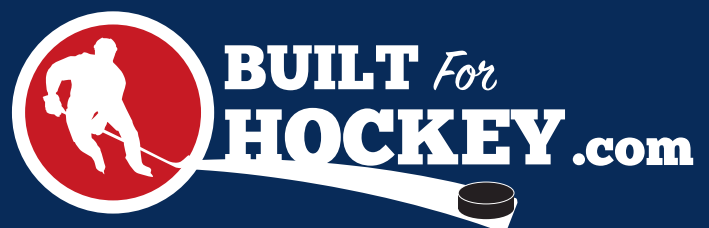
Ben is the creator of Builtforhockey.com, a website dedicated to helping hockey players improve their game with a focus on hockey sense and the mental aspects of the game.



Ben played hockey competitively for over 20 years and has played with and against some of the world's top hockey players. His own accomplishments include a President's Cup (QMJHL), a National Championship (CIS), the Richard Pound award for leadership and proficiency in sport, and he even has a helmet in the Hockey Hall of Fame.

**Ben also advises and mentors young players looking to make it to the next level.**

Connect with Ben via email at **[ben@builtforhockey.com](mailto:ben@builtforhockey.com)** and follow along on Social Media:



A dark blue silhouette of a person in a dynamic, athletic pose, possibly a dancer or a person in motion, set against a lighter blue background. The silhouette is positioned on the left side of the slide, with its arms and legs extended in a way that suggests movement. The person appears to be wearing a headpiece or a hat.

## Resources mentioned:

1. <http://www.livestrong.com/article/531789-dehydration-in-sports-performance/>
2. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alexknapp/2011/04/12/proper-breathing-can-improve-sports-performance-by-15-percent/>
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ironic\\_process\\_theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ironic_process_theory)
4. <https://psychology.iresearchnet.com/sports-psychology/perception-in-sport/pattern-recognition-and-recall/>

A dark blue silhouette of a hockey player in a ready stance, holding a hockey stick, serves as a background for the text.

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