

The Oft-Overlooked and Underused Backhand

Most players, no matter the age, experience, or skill level, prefer to pass or shoot the puck with the forehand side of their stick blade. And for good reason. They handle it much better and pass and shoot it much better on their forehand. But all players, at all ages, need to be able to pass and shoot the puck on their backhand. If time and space permits, it is best to get the puck to the forehand for a more controlled pass or a harder shot.

But oftentimes it doesn't and a player is pressed for time so the puck needs to be passed or shot off of a move, where a player ends up with it on the backhand, or there is no room to bring the puck to the forehand. Or a player collects a rebound on his backhand in front of the net and there is neither the time nor space to bring it to the forehand. In these instances, a player had better be able to use the backhand to pass or shoot the puck. If they don't, they, and their team, won't have control of it for very long.

At the youngest age groups, many players never even use the backhand side of their stick blade, even when handling the puck. Instead they push it along on the forehand, with very poor puck control, and they never have it in a position to make a backhand pass or shot. So the first step is to teach proper stickhandling fundamentals so that players roll their wrists, cupping the puck with the blade of their stick to ensure proper control and to be able to skate with the puck directly in front of their skates, not pushing the puck along off to the forehand side. Once that is accomplished, they can begin to work on situations where they would use the backhand to pass and shoot.

The fundamental principles of the backhand pass and backhand sweep shot are basically the same in terms of the arm movement, puck movement and weight transfer. Where they differ is on the follow through and that is addressed below.

BACKHAND PASS & SHOT

These are essential skills that give a player the ability to pass the puck to either side or shoot the puck from either side of the body. If they can only pass or shoot using their forehand, it severely limits what they can do with the puck, how quickly they can do it, and most importantly the element of surprise for the opposition.

Arm movement

Just like in forehand shooting, a player needs to be able to coordinate the movement of his/her arms and wrists with good balance and body control to extend the arms (and puck) wide to the side. While standing still, players should have a good base of support with skates shoulder with apart and good knee bend for balance and strength on their skates. This is the position they would be in naturally while gliding or striding.

To get any power and control on the pass, the puck needs to be shifted (arms extended) to the forehand side (left side for righthanders, right side for lefthanders) of the body. From this point, the puck is swept across in front of the body and released (with arms extended) on the other side.

Puck movement

As in all puckhandling, the more the puck can be controlled on the heel of the stick blade, the better. This is especially important in backhands because of the curve of the stick blade. If the puck is started in the middle of the blade, it will quickly be lost off of the toe. By starting the puck on the heel, a player can spin the puck from the heel and release it near the toe as it is swept across in front of the body. This causes the puck to spin, keeping it flat on the ice and it also allows for better control of the pass or shot. The longer the puck is on the stick blade, the better the control. A backhand sweep pass has much better accuracy and power than a batted or slapped puck on the backhand.

Weight transfer

In any pass or shot, at the younger age groups, it is essential that they get their whole body involved to generate more power. This means they need to use their legs and transfer their weight from the back foot to the front foot as they sweep the puck across the front of the body. As they prepare for the pass (or shot) and extend their arms to move the puck

to their forehand side, they need to "load up" or shift their weight onto that skate. As they sweep the puck across the body, the weight needs to be shifted to the other skate.

Pass Follow-through

In most instances (but not all) when passing the puck, a player is head-manning it or moving it to a teammate up the ice ahead of them. This can be difficult to do if the puck is not released properly. Many players tend to move the stick blade in an "arc" across the front of their body, as opposed to a straight line. This results in the pass going behind the intended target (especially if that target is up ahead).

As the puck is swept across the body, it is important that both hands move across the body, not just the bottom hand. By moving the top hand with the bottom hand (and keeping the stick blade pointing straight ahead, not to the side), the backhand side of the blade of the stick ends up facing upward. If the puck is released off of the toe, this allows a player to pass the puck to the side, and ahead of them, as opposed to behind them.

In all instances, on the follow-through, the stick blade should be kept low to the ice (no higher than the waist) and pointed in the direction of the intended target.

Shot Follow-through

When shooting the puck on the backhand, the mechanics are very similar to passing the puck. Except obviously, a shot should be much harder and required more weight transfer and more sweeping power with the arms.

High Shot - When wanting to shoot the puck high, a player should use his/her wrists to "open" the blade of the stick while sweeping the puck in front of the body. This allows the stick blade to "scoop" under the puck as it spins from the heel of the blade to the toe enabling it to get the puck up into the air. Other than this, the mechanics of the shot do not need to be altered to get the puck up into the air. Many players tend to flip the puck from directly in front of their skates to get it up resulting in little power and control, and a high (and dangerous follow-through). Opening up the blade as they sweep it will allow them to achieve a high shot with power and accuracy and a lower, safer follow-through.

Low Shot - To shoot the puck low the blade of the stick should remain perpendicular to the ice surface or even a little "closed" (or cupped over the puck) as it the puck is swept across the body and released.

At no time, should the blade of the stick end up above the waist on the follow through. A player is responsible for the control of the stick and there is no purpose in following through above the waist in a dangerous and out-of-control manner.

COMMON PROBLEMS

Starting the puck in front of the body - By not extending the arms (and the puck) to the forehand side and shifting the weight to that leg, a player severely limits the amount of power and control they will have on a pass or shot. The puck needs to be brought back to "load up" for the pass or shot.

No weight transfer - Many players tend not to use their legs, loading up with the weight on the back foot and transferring it to the front foot as they pass or shoot. This results in poor balance and very little power on the pass or shot, especially at the younger ages.

Moving the stick blade in an arc to the side - By not moving both hands across the body simultaneously, the path of the stick blade becomes an arc, not a straight line. Typically a player pulls across with the bottom hand only and the stick blade moves in an arc ending up pointing behind them to the side. Unfortunately this is also where the puck goes.

High follow-through - In an effort to get the shot up into the air, players tend to ignore all of the mechanics of the shot. Instead they start with the puck directly in front of them, then pull over and up with the bottom hand only. This results in a flip shot with no power, very little control, and a very high and dangerous follow-through.