

FACE-OFFS

A key component of every game is the face-off. It often dictates the flow of a particular shift and in many instances the whole game. The reason is simple. Puck possession. Get the puck and you control the game, at least in the short term. From that point on it is your job to maintain it and do something with it. Which is much better than losing the face-off and having to try to get it back.

Everyone should be involved

Obviously, the ability of the centerman to win the draw is very important. But it is just as important for the rest of the team to be prepared to move quickly on offense or defense on a cleanly-won draw, or to battle for a loose puck on a tie. Face-off readiness is something that can be taught to every player. All it takes is the knowledge of where the player needs to go and the ability to work hard to get there in a hurry.

Everyone should be on the same page

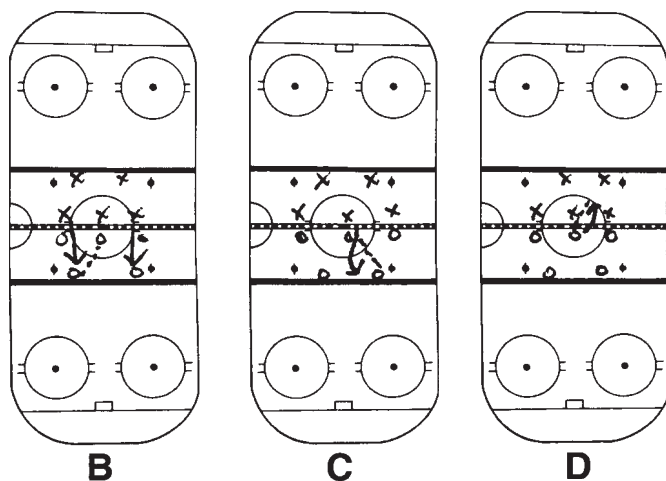
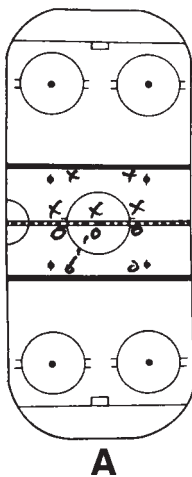
For every face-off, each player should know their individual responsibility and the responsibilities of each of the players on the ice. They also have to believe that each of the players on their team will do their job effectively, so that they are able to focus on their particular responsibility and do it well. Face-off responsibilities do not have to be complex. In fact, they can be as simple as “wingers get to the point”. Or they can be as complex as “if the draw is won, the center supports the puck on the strong side and if the draw is lost the center goes to the point and the weakside winger takes the opposition center”. The point is only you, as a coach knows what your team has the ability to comprehend and execute on the ice. As a rule of thumb, the simpler your strategy, the better it will be executed.

The following are face-off strategies for all three zones of the ice. For all diagrams, the team winning the draw is (O) and the team losing the draw is (X). Each of these strategies can be adapted to the level of the team that you coach. For example, at the mite level you would be more concerned with players moving to the proper spot on the ice. For pee wees you would want to make sure that the players are “blocking out”, then moving to support the puck on offense, or forechecking or picking up their assignment on defense.

Neutral Zone Face-offs

For all face-offs in the neutral zone, the one thing that you have more to work with than you do in the end zones is room. Take advantage of it. The more room a player has, the more time there is and the better chance the player has of making a play.

Back to the Defense - On most occasions, the best play on any face-off win in the neutral zone is to draw the puck back to the defenseman (figure A). The defenseman, then has time to either skate with the puck, pass it up to a winger, or draw opposing forecheckers to him and make a pass to his partner to advance the puck up the ice. The wingers should momentarily “block out” the opposing forecheckers at the face-off by holding their ground and making them skate around them to get to the puck, then move to an area to get open. The center should also momentarily block out the opposition center, then move to support the puck. The team that loses the draw then has to work together to try to retrieve the puck. One option is having the wingers (figure B) attack the defensemen



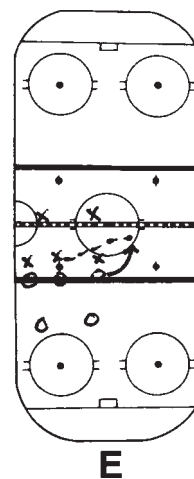
with the center responsible for the center, and the two defensemen picking up the wingers. You could also have the center and one winger forecheck the defensemen with the other winger holding his ground. Any strategy is possible as long as each player knows his responsibility.

Another more defensive-oriented option (figure C) is to have the center forecheck, with the wingers holding their ground in the neutral zone, ready to react to a pass. The defensemen would support the play and be responsible for the wingers.

Moving Forward - Sometimes it is best not to draw the puck back, but to tip it forward (figure D), or to the side (figure E) with players anticipating the movement of the puck and moving into position to pick it up. This is often difficult to defend against because of how quickly the play develops.

End Zone Face-offs

The worst-case scenario is to lose a face-off cleanly in your own zone. At the very least, the defensive team should be playing to tie the draw and put the puck up for grabs. Don't “overcoach” and make drastic changes, just because you get surprised and give up a goal or good scoring chance. By overreacting to a certain play or alignment, you often open yourself up to being beaten on a different play later on. The most important thing to keep in mind in formulating strategy is “who is the most dangerous player on the ice” in terms of opposition scoring potential. Have your team plan to defend the most dangerous option first and then take care of a less-dangerous option if and when it arises. Offensively, you are trying to win the puck cleanly for a quick shot on net, or if the situation presents itself, a chance to get quick and clean possession for a play close to the net. The worst-case scenario is that you lose the draw cleanly, yet the puck is nowhere near your net and you have plenty of time to react on defense – so be aggressive.

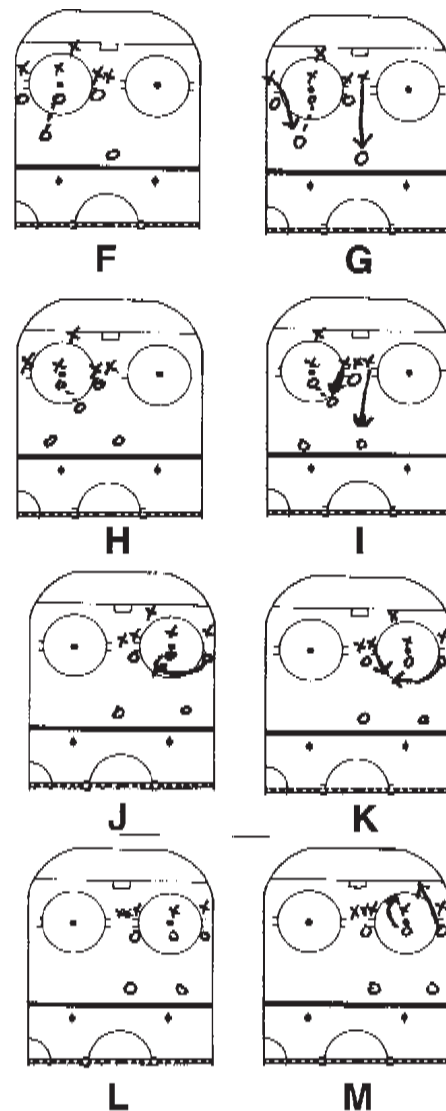


Back to the Point – The most-often-used strategy is to draw the puck back to the point, which gives the offensive team the most time to get a shot off at the net. One defenseman (figure F) should be situated in a position to get the puck quickly and get it on the net. The center, after winning the draw, should block out the opposing center and go to the front of the net for a tip, screen or rebound. Both wingers should also block out briefly and then move to the net looking for deflections and rebounds. The non-shooting defensemen should be in a more defensive posture in case the shot is blocked and is knocked out of the zone. For the defensive team, (figure G), the center should be responsible to stay with the center and deny him the puck. The wingers should work to quickly get to the point to take away the shot or pass, and the defensemen are responsible for the wingers so they do not get good offensive position in front of the net.

A variation of drawing the puck back can be used by putting the off-winger outside the top of the circle (figure H) for a quick shot at the net. This can be used at the younger age groups when you don't want to move a defenseman up that far into the zone, but is easier to defend against because the defensive wingers outman the "inside" offensive winger (figure I). The play has to happen very quickly to get a shot off.

Another variation is to have the board-side winger move in behind the center as the puck is dropped for a quick shot at the net (figure J). When using this alignment, you would want to utilize a player with the correct-hand shot as the shooter. For example, in figure J the shooter coming off of the boards should be left-handed so that he is shooting the puck on his forehand. This alignment works on occasion, because it is difficult to defend against as there is confusion as to who should challenge the shooter. From a defensive perspective (figure K), you would want to have your winger in front of the net be alert to the play and challenge the shooter, as there is no reason for him to be going to the point. If the opposition continually uses this play with success, move your board-side winger to the inside and move your defensemen up on the boards (figure L).

Moving Forward – Just like in the neutral zone, a team can go forward with the puck in the offensive zone. However, we wouldn't recommend it as a good strategy for the defensive team. When the defensive team is clearly anticipating a win back to the point and has adjusted their alignment accordingly, it is a good time for the center to move forward with the puck, either tipping it past the other center and retrieving it himself, or tipping it into the corner to be retrieved by a winger (figure M). Defensively, players should anticipate the drop of the puck and be able to react quickly either way, in a offensive or defensive posture.



QUICK DRAW – Face-off tips for centers

1. Although the feet must be aligned, one on each side of the "t", that doesn't mean a center can't "cheat" and **line up on an angle** – even though it may "tip" the other team to his intentions
2. Some centers prefer to watch the referee's hand, some prefer to watch the face-off dot on the ice. It is really a matter of personal preference, but keep in mind that you can react when the puck leaves the referee's hand. **Anticipation and quickness** are very important in getting the stick on the puck first.
3. **Strength and leverage are important.** Centers should have a good low center of gravity with good knee bend, and feet apart for stability. The bottom hand should be down on the stick (past the mid-point at least) and the top hand can be slid down as well for better leverage.
4. **Communication is important** – all players on your team should know where the center is planning to go with the puck.
5. If going to the "backhand side", **some centers prefer to turn the bottom hand over on the stick for improved leverage.** The only drawback to this is if there is a tie, and you need to do something very quickly with the puck directly in front of you - your hands are not positioned properly on your stick to be able to do it. But it is also a matter of personal preference.
6. If being consistently beaten, **make adjustments** to go for a tie by trying to tie up your opponents stick. A tie can easily become a win with the help of linemates or by using your feet to control the puck once the other center's stick is tied up.

