



FACE-OFF STRATEGIES

As coaches, we spend hours and hours with our teams on forechecking systems, breakout systems, defensive zone coverage and the like. We are constantly trying to teach and reinforce ways to get the puck when we don't have it or keep the puck when we do have it.

What we don't spend enough time on is getting the puck when it is often easiest to get – at a face-off.

If you counted the face-offs in an average three period, twelve minute, stop time hockey game you would probably come up with about 20 to 25 face-offs for the game. If your team won every face-off and kept possession of the puck for only 5 seconds afterward, they would have the puck for over two minutes. Now it is not reasonable to think that you will win every face-off – but 60 to 70% is not a bad number. And in some instances you will have the puck for much longer than 5 seconds. So why don't we spend more time on face-offs during practices? They don't require great skating or puck skills by your players. They might not be a lot of fun to practice and they might slow down the tempo of your practice. They do require being ready, willing and able to battle to win possession. And they can and should be practiced. Here are some pointers:

Centers can practice face-off technique together

Obviously your centers are a key ingredient in winning face-offs. All centers and some wingers or defensemen who might take face-offs in a crucial situation should practice the actual puck-dropping part of the face-off. This can be done by taking 5 minutes at the end of practice and having players form groups of three and move to the neutral zone while you work with the remaining forwards and defensemen on shooting or scoring skills in either end. Have one player take 5 or 6 pucks and act as the referee dropping the pucks while the other two in the group work on face-off technique and rotate through so they all have the opportunity to practice.

Face-off readiness

Although only the center is in the face-off circle, all players participate in the dropping of the puck. Being ready, anticipating

the drop of the puck and moving before the opposition are all keys in winning possession. Even if the center loses or ties the draw, his teammates can win possession by being hungrier than the opposition.

Have a plan

All players should know what the center is planning to do with the puck, draw it back, push it ahead, or whatever so they can move accordingly. All players should also know where to go and what to do if they win the draw and what to do and where to go if they lose the draw.

Assign clear responsibilities

Make sure that it is clear to each player what they should be doing individually and who they are responsible for offensively and defensively off the drop of the puck. One missed assignment can result in a goal very quickly.

Practice as a unit

Face-offs are something that involve ten players and both offensive and defensive alignments can be practiced at the same time. If you have fifteen players on your team, have one group rest/watch/learn outside the blue line while the others do the drills.

Competition makes it fun to practice

Challenge your players by making a competition out of the drill where the team that wins clear possession gets a point.

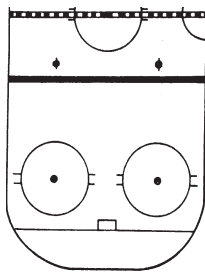
Keep track during games

Have one of your assistant coaches (or a parent) keep a running total during the game of face-offs won or lost. It doesn't have to be very sophisticated where it is charted on paper by center and how they did in each particular zone of the ice (although you can do that if you want). It can be as simple as "won fifteen – lost ten". You will find that in most cases the team that wins 60% or more of the face-offs often also wins the game.

Offensive Zone Face-off Alignments

Back to the point

Center draws puck back to the defensemen on the boards. The left winger "holds his ground" requiring the opposition player to take the long way around him to get to the point man with the puck. Be careful not to take an interference penalty, but the winger can "get in the way" and should not use his stick to hold up the player. The center and right winger should also hold his ground momentarily and then go to the net for a screen, tip or rebound. The defenseman in the middle of the ice should be available as a passing option for a quick shot and should also be the "safety", alert for turnovers and movement out of the zone.



To the Middle

In this alignment the wingers should switch sides – so that a right hand shot is on the left wing side. The center tries to tie up the opposing center and uses his feet or stick to tap the puck just behind him in the face-off circle. The left winger (right hand shot so he can shoot on his forehand and the puck is on a better shooting angle) moves through the circle to pick it up for a quick shot through traffic. The right winger holds his ground to "buy some time" for the shot to be taken.

