



Keys to killing penalties

It used to be, almost by default, that fourth liners on a hockey team automatically became the penalty killers. Ron Mason believes you can teach anybody how to kill penalties as long as they possess the skating abilities to do the job. “You can’t put a poor skater out there to kill penalties,” states the Michigan State coach. “You’ve got to put your better skaters out there to do it and usually your better skaters are your better players.”

Mason says quickness is an essential component of successful penalty killing. “You have to be able to react quickly,” says Mason emphatically. “Some kid that is a fast skater, up and down the ice, isn’t always quick on his edges as far as reacting to puck movement inside a zone.”

It almost goes without saying that good penalty killers bring a large degree of unselfishness to the rink with them. “You have to be able to sacrifice your body to block a shot,” added the winningest active NCAA coach. “Players that are good shotblockers are the kind of people that you want and players that are strong in one or two situations around the puck. Because so often during shorthanded situations there are going to be one on one confrontations around a loose puck and if you’ve got a kid who is really strong on that puck, he’s going to be able to get it and shoot it down the ice for you.”

Coach Mason rates Kelly Miller of the Washington Capitals and Rod Brind’Amour of the Philadelphia Flyers as two of the best Spartans’ penalty killers he ever sent over the boards. Mason also knows that power play thwarters can only be as good as the plan they are asked to execute.

“There are two areas you really have to be aware of,” says Mason, who celebrated a national championship in 1986. “How does the other team organize to come up the ice to your blueline?” Based on that organization, do they shoot the puck in or carry it in once they get to your blueline?

Then, once they’re inside the zone, you have to determine how they’re setting up and who their key player is. Do they set up in an umbrella formation or an overload behind the net type thing? Is there one player who dominates their powerplay? Is there an Al MacInnis basting away from the point, a Brett Hull lurking in the slot, or a Gretzky or Lemieux type who orchestrates everything?”

In other words you have to know the enemy before devising a way to stop the enemy.

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“It’s still important how players react off one another, though,” remarks Mason. “You can’t just stand around in a stationary box anymore. The box has to move a bit, from side to side, and out and back some. It’s probably the easiest way to defend and is easily taught.”

A coach must set up different powerplay formations in practice so his shorthanded defenders can learn to recognize the systems they’re up against and will have to adjust to.

“Your players have to read whether a team is in an umbrella, or if a team is in an overload, which is players concentrated on one side or another, and a setup if a team is utilizing the area behind the net,” notes Mason.

“Because it’s just not going to work if the powerplay team is in an umbrella, and you are defending with a basic box. You are going to have to rotate in a diamond to prevent good scoring chances.”

Mason likes his Spartans to be aggressive penalty killers in their own zone, “attacking with organized challenge,” as he calls it. But passive systems are easier for youngsters to comprehend. “Movement is limited with a passive system, but any movement made is important and has to be into a position so the opposition can’t get a direct shot on the net.”

It’s also imperative to teach penalty killers to keep their sticks on the ice to protect passing lanes and the area in those passing lanes. However, there’s a thinking process that augments this.

“There are many situations where you should have your stick on the ice, but where? And what side of your body should it be on?” queries Mason. “If the opposition is trying to get the puck down low, the stick better be in a position to prevent that pass down low as opposed to preventing the pass out high.”

Thus, passing lanes can have different priorities depending upon their importance to the attacking team, and it’s up to the shorthanded team to shut them down through pre-game preparation and knowing which lanes are vital and key personnel they’re designed to feed.

Mason advises to keep it simple when introducing penalty killing to young players. “I would start basically with very slow, passive-type movement in the zone, defending against a couple different types of powerplay formations so the kids can start reacting a little bit to what the opposition is trying to do.”

Youth hockey coaches must remember that college and professional teams spend hours each week trying to perfect their special teams. Try not to get too complicated, and don’t expect miraculous results if you only have half an hour of ice time each week to devote to them.

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