

Setting the Neutral Zone Trap

As the New Jersey Devils plowed their way through the 1995 Stanley Cup Playoffs, the neutral zone trap, a defensive system allegedly employed by the Devils, received a lot of attention. Some people argue, many of them Devil players and coaches, that the system they used is just good, old-fashioned defensive hockey executed perfectly by a hard-working and determined hockey team. We tend to agree. The checking system used by the Devils has been around in various forms and under various names for years. The Devils just happened to have the personnel (excellent size and team speed) and total team commitment to the program. As you may remember, the Trap was a big topic of discussion during the regular season as well, with many teams using it in one form or another. The problem with most teams is that they lack the dedication and discipline to use it as successfully as New Jersey has.

If you look back over the abbreviated regular season, you will notice that the Devils struggled much of the time and ranked very high in the team penalty minute totals. Does this mean that the holding, hooking and interference that we heard so much about during the playoffs is really overlooked in the playoffs when in fact it is being called in the regular season? The answer is yes, to a degree. But then again, everybody does it, as the intensity is cranked up a notch or two, and players play a much tougher and more focused defensive style. The players that suffer are the skilled players and scorers who receive a lot more attention than they do during the regular season.

One thing we should have learned from the 1994-95 playoffs, if we didn't know it already, is that you don't need superstars on your team to be successful. Teamwork and commitment to a plan can help your team achieve its goals.

Let's take a look at the design and execution of the Trap. Maybe it is something that you will want to use with your team on occasion.

DISSECTING THE TRAP

The neutral zone trap is designed to force the offensive team to turn over the puck, either by being checked in the neutral zone or dumping it in and putting it up for grabs. Quick transition on neutral zone turnovers can create man-advantage rushes resulting in excellent offensive chances. When a dump is forced, the defenseman retrieving the puck usually isn't under a lot of pressure as forecheckers are slowed up in the neutral zone area. Having forwards back in the neutral zone allows the defensemen to stand up (rather than give up the blue line) and rarely results in an outnumbered attack for the opposition.

The beauty of the whole system (for the defensive team) is that there are at least seven or eight players in the neutral zone with none of them moving at a great rate of speed. The puck carrier has virtually no passing options, no speed and has no choice but to dump the puck if and when he can get to the red line.

The alternative – a turnover and an offensive chance for the other team (with most of the defending team caught up ice).

SETTING THE TRAP

The first checker (C) takes away the middle of the ice forcing the puck carrier to the boards on one side or the other.

The strong side winger (SW) pressures the puck carrier before the red line forcing a dump or turnover.

The strong side defenseman (SD) supports the play and steps up if necessary.

The weak side defenseman (WD) drifts back to support the middle of the ice and retrieve the puck if and when it is dumped.

