

Creating Offense Below the Goal Line



Great playmakers set up shop there. Strong wingers grind it out down there. Defensemen sometimes get lost there. The action down below the goal line is often fast and always furious as the offensive team puts on the pressure and the defenders scramble to keep the puck out of their net.

Play below the goal line in hockey is much like being in the red zone in football. Space is restricted requiring power and strength to battle for position and drive to the goal and precise passing and execution is needed to keep possession. What makes hockey unique is the action “behind the net” where the goaltender has to be on top of what is happening behind him, while at the same time aware of what is going on in front of him. Ditto for his teammates who are vulnerable to getting mesmerized by the puck while allowing their defensive responsibilities to move into openings behind them for passes.

The NHL’s all time leading scorer Wayne Gretzky obviously knows how to create offense. It has often been said that the area behind the net is his “office” where he goes to work setting up goals for teammates. He is the master of passing the puck to an open space where a teammate is moving rather than trying to force the puck through a defender.

“I would say that 40 per cent of my assists have come from behind the net,” Gretzky said. “The next biggest number would be hitting the late guy. Between those two plays, I’d say that probably accounts for three quarters of my assists.”

The following are some things to keep in mind when working with your team on play down below the goal line.

Puck control is essential

It goes without saying that you need to be able to maintain possession of the puck both individually and as a team. This is sometimes difficult to do, while keeping a third man high in the slot to be the shooter and/or backchecker in the event of a turnover. The ability to protect the puck while moving (constantly keeping the body between the puck and the defensive player) requires strong skating skills including tight turns and quick stopping and starting in both directions. It also helps to be good at handling the puck with the skates with good balance to be able to fight off checkers and maintain puck possession. Working with a teammate requires anticipation and the ability to sense when to move to an open area. Often the puck is not passed tape to tape but is moved to an area, either directly or off of the boards, for an open teammate to collect.

Keep it deep

Keeping the puck deep does two things. Number one, it keeps it out of your team’s zone. Number two, it makes all of the defenders focus on the action below the goal line, with their backs to the player they are responsible to defend. Teach your players to jump into a hole when their defender’s back is turned. One of the most difficult things to teach defensively is for a player to be in proper position and maintain it without getting mesmerized by the puck. Offensive players should be taught to never throw the puck out from below the goal line without making sure it is a safe tape to tape pass to a

teammate. The best breakout pass for the other team is one that traps two of the opposition players deep in the offensive zone. It is always much safer to throw the puck down deep and put it up for grabs rather than risk a turnover out high.

Use the net

Whenever possible, use the net as a barrier and set up shop. Defensemen often get confused when a puck carrier sets up behind the net. When cleanly beaten to the back of the net, defensemen should not chase behind because they end up taking themselves out of the play as the puck carrier moves out the other side. It is very hard for defensemen to have the sense and discipline to know when they are clearly beat (usually forwards have much more time on power plays) and to not chase behind, but set up off the post in a passing lane, keeping the puck on the perimeter.

Use the width of the net

One of the most difficult things for goaltenders to do is watch the play behind them while being aware of what is going on in front of them. Having to move from one side of the net to the other at the same time compounds that difficulty. Wrap-around goals and “bank-shot” goals are scored for this very reason. It takes that extra second for goalies to look and then move, allowing a pass or the puck carrier to move to the other side for a clean wrap-around or to bank it off the goalie and in as he moves to the post.

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