

Passing with a purpose

When controlling the puck, a player needs to be able to assess the situation and make the best available play, whether it is passing the puck to a teammate, or keeping it himself to move it up the ice.

Once players have begun to develop the skills of passing and receiving the puck, they need to begin to figure out just when, and more importantly, why, to utilize those skills. Hockey is not like football with designed plays beginning from a standstill, or even basketball for that matter, where the ball movement and player movement is slower and more designed plays can be used. In hockey, virtually every situation that a player is confronted with on the ice is different as there are players in a variety of different spots on the ice, moving at a variety of different speeds. When controlling the puck, a player needs to be able to assess the situation and make the best available play, whether it is passing the puck to a teammate, or keeping it himself to move it up the ice.

That's not to say, that there shouldn't be a "basic team structure" or "system" for controlling the puck, with players in the properly designated positions on the ice (in any of the zones) when their teammate has the puck. But what can't happen is that the players feel they "have" to pass the puck to a specific teammate in a specific situation. That can't happen, because they will never learn how to read the play and make the best play available. That is something that every player needs to learn to be able to compete effectively as they progress in the game.

Every pass should have a purpose. It doesn't, it shouldn't be made. Teams, and individual players work very hard to gain control of the puck. Once they get it, every effort should be made to maintain it. So every pass should be made with that in mind, team puck control. The following are key points to instill in your players for better team puck control.

Make the Easy Play

Great players make the game look easy. That's because they make the easy play. Going for the "home run" more often than not results in a turnover, when the intended result could be achieved with "a couple of singles". Trying to pass through a defender or trying to connect on a sixty-foot pass, is not the right play, when you can make a 15-footer to a teammate with more time and space to make a play once they get the puck.

Make Quality Passes

It goes without saying that every pass should be on the stick. If a pass is not made "tape to tape", that split-second it takes for the teammate to collect it and start to move with it is all of the time it takes for a defender to close on him and take it away. Just as important as accuracy is velocity. Different situations dictate different passes, but in most instances where a direct pass can be made, the puck should be passed crisply and on the ice. Bouncing, wobbly, slow passes allow the defenders more time to adjust and pursue

the puck. Crisp, accurate passes catch defenders out of position and don't allow them time to get back into the play. Many players recognize the correct situation to make a pass, but if they don't deliver the pass with authority, it doesn't matter that they made the right choice.

Move the Puck Quickly

Recognizing which teammates are "open" and "where to move the puck" are essential skills in team puck control. More importantly, players need to be taught to recognize "when" to move it, and the answer is IMMEDIATELY. By waiting just a split second longer, that pass will probably no longer be an option, especially if it is a "long" pass.

Short Passes are the Best Passes

Occasionally, you can catch 3-4 opposing players out of position and beat them all with one good, long pass. Very occasionally. Short passes, 10 to 15 footers, are always the best passes for a couple of reasons. First they have a greater chance of success. It is much easier to hit your teammate's stick from 10 feet than it is from 50 feet. Secondly, the puck receiver will most likely have more time to make a play with it when he gets it. As a long pass makes it's way to it's target, so do the opposing players, as they have more time to adjust. Often, just as the puck arrives, so do the defenders, and the pass is never completed.

Create Something out of Nothing

If a puck carrier has no time or space to make a play, and is being confronted by a defender, the best thing to do, rather than try to beat the defender 1 on 1, is to move the puck to an open teammate, then get open. By moving the puck to a teammate, the player shifts the focus away from himself, which is only an advantage if he moves quickly to an open area to receive a pass back. The "give and go" is an essential part of team puck control and can be used anywhere on the ice. But it is only effective if the initial passer actually "goes" to open ice after making the pass, and breaks down if the player "gives and watches".

Use the "Extra Teammate"

Using the boards to make a pass to himself is the most basic "give and go" play a player can make. Moving the puck off of the boards (or off of the back of the goal net), then skating around the defender to pick it up is an effective move to create something out of nothing. The boards can also be used to "bank a pass" or "rim a pass" along the dasher boards in the corners, when there is not a direct pass available to a teammate.