Sometimes it pays to be late

Rarely in everyday life do we strive to be late. It is even more rare that we are rewarded with a great opportunity because of it. But in an offensive rush, it is often the latecomer who is in the best position for an excellent scoring chance.

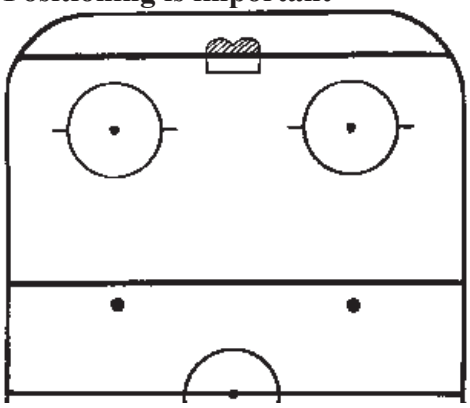
Defensemen like Brian Leetch, Ray Bourque and Paul Coffey have made a living and accumulated some noteworthy statistics by jumping into the play as the late man. But it's not only limited to defensemen. Forwards can also benefit from learning the timing and positioning necessary to put themselves in line for some great scoring opportunities. It's all a matter of being able to read the play and make a split-second decision. A second's hesitation can result in lost opportunity.

Forward trailing the play

There has to be speed and depth to the attack

The puck carrier or a linemate, or both, must be driving into the offensive zone with speed to force the opposing defenseman (or defensemen) to go to the net with them, creating some open space high in the zone.

Positioning is important



The late man should "shade" the puck side of the ice to create a good passing lane. The shorter the pass the better. Also, the more "depth" to the pass the better. This means that it is better to receive a pass from deep in the zone (around or below the hash marks) when you are crossing the blue line "skating into the puck". It is much easier to receive the pass this way, or react to it if it is off target, than to receive a pass from the side. Picking up the puck high in the zone also allows for a better shooting angle and quite possibly more time (unless being pursued by a backchecker). Receiving a pass at the hash marks or tight to the net often puts the shooter in a position without enough time or space to get off a good shot or make a good play.

Timing is Crucial

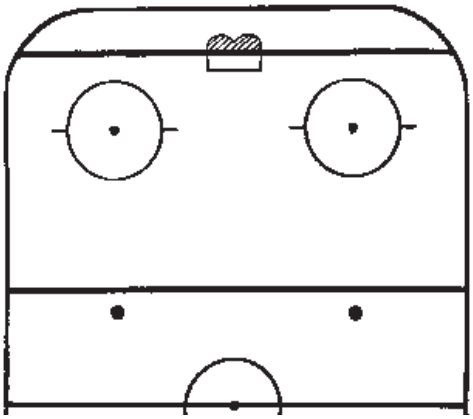
Being in the right place at the right time is the key to scoring goals. Having a knack at arriving at an open area when the puck is on a teammate's stick is not just luck – it is learned. Smart players know that when the puck is being carried into the offensive zone that defenders have a tendency to focus on the puck and don't necessarily pay attention to what else is happening on the ice. When heads are turned or when people are racing to get into position is the time to move into an opening. Brett Hull is a master at this. One second you don't notice him on the ice. The next, he has the puck and is blasting it at the net.

Finish off the play

Continue to the net after the shot. As most goals are scored on rebounds, it is important to be in proper position. A player moving to the net is tougher to defend in rebound situations than one who is already at the net. A moving player can react to whichever direction the puck goes and is often not "picked up" by defenders who are focusing on the puck.

Backchecking position

The late man is in perfect position to back check if there is a turnover and the play moves out of the zone. As a backchecker, he should look for direction from his defensemen as to whom they are playing and whom he should be responsible for.



Defensemen joining the rush

Do the math

Four minus three equals a great scoring chance. Most offensive rushes involve the three forwards moving up-ice on two opposing defensemen with one backchecker helping out – in effect a three on three. The defensemen on the team in possession of the puck are in a great position to see the whole ice and the play developing in front of them. Smart defensemen know that if they are able to beat their checker (one of the opposition forwards) up the ice they can get a great scoring chance as the late man.

Know the score – know the clock

Joining the rush with your team leading 3-2 with two minutes remaining in the game might not be the wisest thing to do – keeping the puck out of your net should be the first priority in that instance.

Know your limitations – know your partner

Puck skills and skating ability often dictate which defensemen become "offensive" and join the rush. Being able to recover back to good defensive position on a turnover is obviously very important. Great skaters like Coffey and Bourque and the legendary Bobby Orr possess the skating ability to react to changes in possession. It also helps to know that your partner won't be right there beside you looking for a pass – but will be supporting you defensively.

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