

Gaining the Upper Hand

To develop more advanced puckhandling skills, players need to get their hands away from their body, extending their arms to the sides and to the front to manipulate their stick to stickhandle, pass and shoot the puck in many different positions. To do this properly, a player needs to be able to move the wrists up and back.

It's hard to imagine that something as fundamentally basic as holding a stick would be overlooked, but believe me it is. Many players simply do not know how to hold their stick properly.

It is a problem in youth hockey that, without exaggeration, is reaching epidemic proportions. It really is that bad. You see it a lot with younger players at the mini mite and mite level, but it is definitely not unique to that age group. It is also very common at the squirt level, somewhat at the pee wee, bantam, midget and high school levels, and even the occasional adult. And travel hockey is not exempt, with plenty of A, AA and AAA players doing it as well.

Rather than holding the stick with the top hand "palm down over the top side" of the stick, with the thumb and fingers pointed down and then wrapped around the stick, many players turn their top hand so the palm is up, with the shaft of the stick resting on top of their hand. Simply put, they have their hand underneath the shaft, rather than over top of it. It sounds like a minor problem, but it really isn't.

Probably, when kids first start out, they do not have the hand strength or manual dexterity to grip the stick with their hand over top. So they slide their hand underneath, which for them is much easier. Well, it might be easier for them to hold at that young age, but it's definitely not easier for them to maneuver. And as they learn to skate and handle the puck with their hand in that position, they develop a habit that is hard to change. As they get older, and need to start to do more complex things with their hands and stick and the puck, they are in a sense, handicapped. They simply don't have the maneuverability that they need.

This often isn't the only problem with the top hand, but it is the most obvious and one of the easiest to spot. Many players also tend to hold their hand too far down the shaft, leaving the butt end, or knob of the stick exposed. This can not only result in a penalty, but it is very dangerous. Sometimes players hold their stick with the butt end exposed because they can't fit their hand around the that part of the stick because a well-meaning parent taped a huge knob on the stick so that if the player dropped it on the ice, it could be easily picked up. Parents should know that, while a player may drop the stick occasionally, he or she should always be carrying it with the top hand on it correctly, so it is much more important to tape a small enough knob that the player can easily hold in the palm of his or hand at the end of the shaft. They can always practice, and learn how to pick up their stick from the ice.

Now back to proper top hand positioning. To develop more advanced puckhandling skills, players need to get their hands away from their body, extending their arms to the sides and to the front to manipulate their stick to stickhandle, pass and shoot the puck in many different positions. To do this properly, a player needs to be able to move the wrists up and back. When a player has his upper hand essentially wrapped around the shaft of the stick, it is virtually impossible to maneuver the stick. And virtually impossible to do anything with the puck effectively.

But even before that, improper upper hand positioning can have a negative affect on a player. As strange as it sounds, it can actually hurt his skating technique. When skating with one hand on the stick a player should have his elbows in close to his sides and be pumping his arms (and stick) straight up and back, not across the body. By moving the arms sideways across the body while skating, a player negatively affects his balance, and ultimately his power and speed. By holding the top hand underneath the top of the stick, the player needs to either have his hand in front of his stomach with his elbow by his side, or with his hand at his side, his elbow is out away from his body. Either way, when he starts to pump his arms, he can't pump them up and back, he ends up moving them side to side across his body, which is not a good thing. By properly holding the stick palm down with the top hand, a player can have his stick at his side, and pump his arms up and back with his elbows in tight to the body.

Sounds like nit picking? It might be. But like anything else, developing good basic fundamentals is essential to being able to build and improve skills. Start with a poor foundation and you are going to end up struggling to improve.

Why is this problem more prevalent these days? Probably because kids don't spend as much time as they used to handling a stick and puck or stick and ball. With more to do and more demands on kids' and parents time, there is less time for "unstructured" play in the back yards and on the streets. Many of the top puckhandlers in the NHL today developed their great hands on the streets playing ball hockey, not on the ice.

But in today's world, with time at a premium, time spent on the ice is often the only time kids get a chance to develop these skills. And for that reason, coaches must be that much more attentive to it try to correct the problem early, before it becomes more difficult to correct.