



TACTICAL

Defensive Team Play



REVISED 2/19

OBJECTIVES

- To describe skills needed for successful team play in hockey
- To outline the sequence to be used in introducing team play
- To present some of the unique formations that are effective in youth hockey

TEAM DEFENSE

The two words that best describe team defense are “hard work.” Players generally like to play defense but often have a difficult time putting forth the effort necessary to make team defense effective.

If each defensive player does his job, defense should be no worse than one-on-one times five. The three major problems that cause this to break down are (1) somebody does not stay one-on-one (e.g., a forechecker does not backcheck), (2) a highly-skilled offensive player beats a less-skilled defensive player, or (3) the offense has the advantage of knowing where it is going, how it will get there, and when. In each of these cases, the defense adjusts and someone tries to help out (which is a must). But usually doing so makes it possible for the offense to create a desired two-on-one situation.

There are three conditions that the defense must be prepared to control.

1. Even (one-on-one) – Play the opponent.
2. More offensive players than defensive players (two-on-one) – Play the puck. Play close to the defensive alley, thus encouraging the offense to go outside to try to get to the goal. In this situation, the defensive player should try to gain time so that a teammate can get back to help or give up a poor shot on goal by forcing the shooter to a bad shooting angle. Above all else, don't let the two offensive players get the puck into the slot.
3. More defensive players than offensive players (1-on-2) – This is a good time to body check the offensive player. One defender plays the opponent while the other takes the puck.

In a competitive game, it would be foolish for the defensive team to think it could stop the offense from getting a shot (or shots) on goal. Normally, the offensive team will get 25-30 shots on goal. By playing well, the defense may limit the offense to fewer than 20 shots, but it is suggested that a better measure of success is for the defense to work toward forcing the offense to take poorer shots on goal. Conversely, the offense should try to increase its shots on goal but, more importantly, should try to get better shots.

TERRITORIAL DEFENSE

The simplest of team defenses (and one that is complimentary to “position” offense) is defensive assignments by territory. Figure 7-1 illustrates a common assignment to defensive territories.

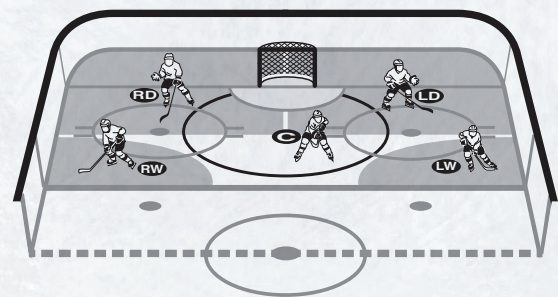


Figure 7-1. *Defensive assignment to territories.*

The wings are responsible for backchecking the offensive wings but, once in the defensive zone, the wings will usually cover the offensive “point men” (usually the offensive team’s defensemen).

ONE-ON-ONE DEFENSE

In one-on-one situations, teach your players to play the opponent, not the puck. Playing the opponent does not mean draping over him or her like a flag. Rather, it means keeping your body between the offensive player and your goal. Make body contact as necessary. If the defensive player follows this rule (assuming comparable skill levels of players), the defense will win as much as 70-80 percent of the time.

FORECHECKING

The objective of forechecking is to prevent the opposition from clearing their zone and to gain possession of the puck in their defensive zone.

There are many forechecking systems and no one system is the best. All systems can be adjusted to meet specific situations. Every team should have at least one system mastered.

The quality level of your team's personnel is an important factor in determining which system you utilize. You may wish to consider a method of designating the player or players who have forechecking assignments. For example, you can forecheck with your center only (i.e., if the center is not able to forecheck, you do not forecheck) You also may decide that the closest player forechecks. This method gives you the potential of later debates about who really was the closest, but it does ensure forechecking.

Regardless of the system or the number of players forechecking, position should be stressed at all times. The forechecker should always "get an angle" on the puck carrier so that, at the very least, he or she can confine the offensive player's movement to one side of the ice. In other words, never forecheck straight at the puck carrier.

ONE-MAN FORECHECKING (1-2-2)

Although this is a conservative system and is easy to teach, when successfully executed it will:

- prevent three-on-two breakouts
- control the boards (eliminating the wings as a breakout option)

- encourage the opposition's defenseman to carry the puck out of the zone
- position one forward (usually the off-side wing) to assist defensively

The forechecker must pressure the puck carrier, forcing him or her to the side. Wings of the offensive team must be covered. The defenseman (point on the puck side) stays in the zone as long as possible.

The purpose of this forechecking pattern is to make the offensive wings unavailable to bring the puck out of the defensive zone. The forechecker tries to take the puck away, to force the offensive player to carry the puck up the side and into the defenseman at the point, to make a bad pass, or to use his or her defenseman to break out.

A highly skilled forechecker will get the puck occasionally, but the offensive team should be able to beat one forechecker by using the three open players to move the puck out.

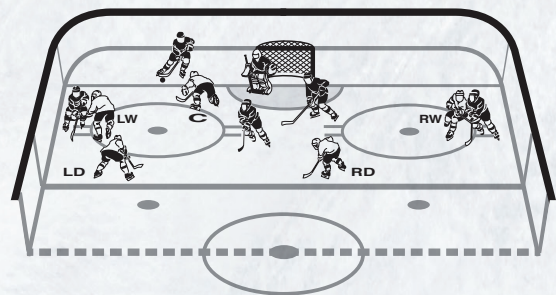


Figure 7-2. *One-man forechecking.*

The basic alignment illustrated in Figure 7-2 uses the center (C) to forecheck the puck carrier. The wings (LW/RW) stay wide so they can check the opposition's wings, and the defensemen (LD/RD) play inside the wings.

Notes for One-Man Forechecking

- Stress pressuring the puck carrier and covering the areas where the puck is likely to go.
- Prevent the opposition from breaking out three-on-two. This is accomplished by keeping both wings back and controlling the boards.

TWO-MAN FORECHECKING (1-1-3)

Two-man forechecking is most successful when the puck carrier is in the back of an imaginary line across the top of the faceoff circles. This is shown as the shaded area in Figure 7-3.

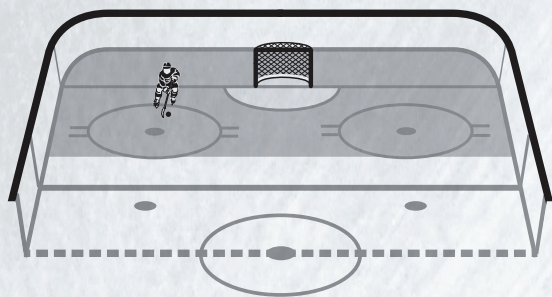


Figure 7-3. Two-man forechecking.

This forechecking system combines aggressiveness with the conservatism of the 1-2-2 system just discussed. One forward, usually a wing, plays back to prevent a three-on-two breakout. The remaining two forwards have an aggressive forechecking responsibility and must exert pressure on the puck carrier.

When successful, this system may result in quick counterattacks on goal since the one defensive forward is in a position to move quickly to the slot.

For illustrative purposes (see Figure 7-4), two forwards, the center and puck-side wing (RW) are assigned forechecking responsibilities. The off-side wing (LW) stays high in the offensive zone. The LW is in a position to move back to become a defenseman or to move to the slot area. The defensemen take normal positions.

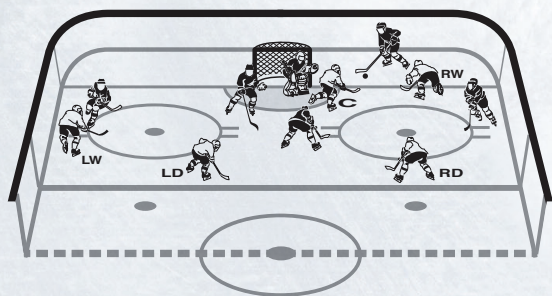


Figure 7-4. Two-man forechecking positions.

The objective of this configuration is to have the off-side wing (LW) control the far board, which pressures the opposition to bring the puck up through the forechecking forwards (C and RW). The first forward (RW) forechecks the puck carrier and the center is in a position to assist the RW or move to the puck if the RW is beaten. The RD is permitted to pinch in toward the boards and the LD is responsible for the middle (see Figure 7-5).

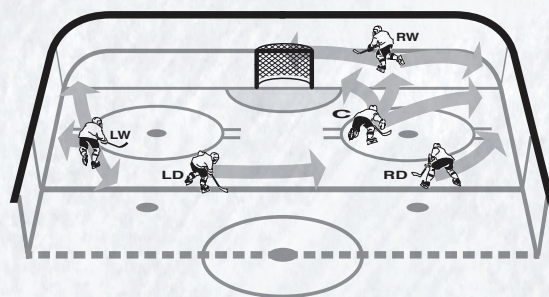


Figure 7-5. Movements of the forwards.

The forwards will often have to rotate. As indicated in Figure 7-6, when the play moves from one side to the other, the off-side wing (LW) will become the forechecker and the puck side wing (RW) assumes the defensive forward's role. The center's role remains constant.

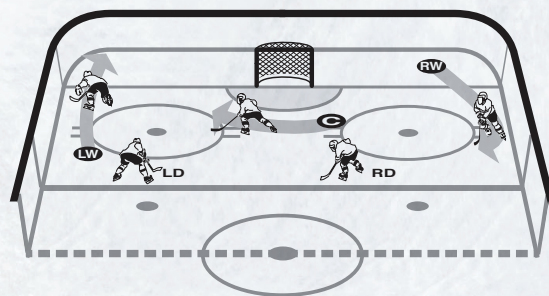


Figure 7-6. Rotation of the forwards.

A forechecker can get the puck for your team by taking it away from the puck carrier or by forcing a bad pass. Obviously, forechecking will not be successful 100 percent of the time. You should, however, insist that your forecheckers force the puck carrier to move down the side of the rink. Do not let them come down the center and pick the side of your defensive zone they wish to attack.

BACKCHECKING – MIDDLE ZONE COVERAGE

It is important that both offensive wings be covered. This forces the puck carrier to face a one-on-one defensive situation. This also does not happen very often, as we discussed in the team offense section.

DEFENSIVE ZONE COVERAGES

Play in the defensive zone is the most critical of the three zones. A mistake here often results in a goal. The primary objective is to prevent a play on net and to regain possession of the puck. The following principles of defensive play should be understood by your players.

- Understand the system. Every player must know each other's responsibilities so that, when a breakdown occurs, they may adapt and help out.
- When checking a player, stay between the player and the goal.
- Play the body - legally!
- Accept defensive responsibility as an essential part of the game.

There are three basic patterns of coverage that seem to be the most popular for youngsters: basic, center on point and wing on point.

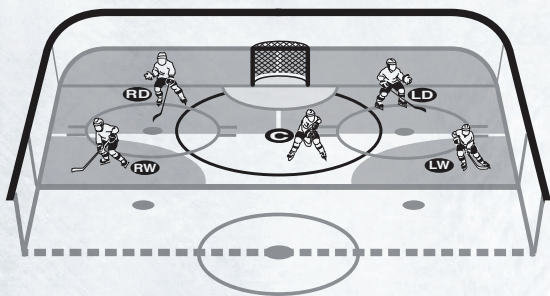


Figure 7-7. Basic coverage zones within the defensive zone.

BASIC DEFENSIVE COVERAGE

As illustrated in Figure 7-7, the defensive zone is divided into five zones. There is some overlapping of the zones. Typically, the wings cover the two points, the center covers the slot area, and the defensemen cover from the front of the net to the corner.

CENTER ON POINT COVERAGE

In this coverage pattern, the wings are responsible for their offensive wings from the time the forechecking pattern is broken until their team recovers the puck and goes on offense. As illustrated in Figure 7-8, the center covers the point on the puck side. The defenseman on the off-puck side stays near the front of the net, usually covering the offensive center. The defenseman on the puck side moves to help cover the puck carrier (usually a wing or the center), but does not “run out” to the point. The strength of coverage is in having four players to cover three forwards. The weakness is that the center has a difficult time moving from point to point. It is usually a good defense for younger teams, because the offense cannot pass well enough to take advantage of the open point man or shoot the puck well enough from the point to consistently score.



Figure 7-8. Center on point coverage.

WING ON POINT COVERAGE

In this pattern, the wings backcheck their offensive wings. When the offensive wing does not have the puck and/or the defenseman on the weak side can assume responsibility for the offensive wing, the defensive wing leaves the offensive wing and moves to cover the point. As shown in Figure 7-9, the defensemen cover the zone in front of and to the side of the net. The center moves back in front of the net to work with the defensemen.

It is important to defend the opposition by covering the entire defensive zone. In a normal situation, one defensive player should be able to play the man or the puck in his zone. For example, the opposition has the puck in the corner, the puck-side defenseman (RD) would cover that player. The other

defenseman (LD) would cover the front of the net. The center covers from the slot to the boards. The wings cover their respective points, maintaining a position between the puck and the point.

The strength of this defense is that all five offensive players are covered one-on-one. This system's weakness is that there are mixups that often occur when the defenseman becomes responsible for the wings. A second weakness is that the center, who most often is involved in deep forechecking, is often late in getting back to help in front of the net.

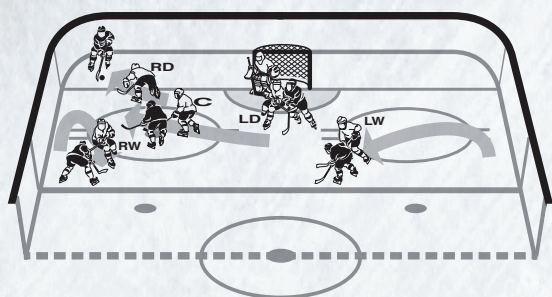


Figure 7-9. Wing on point coverage.

PENALTY-KILL SITUATIONS

The penalties assessed in hockey are more reasonable than in any other sport. The offender is penalized, but the team has an opportunity to prevent damage by working extra hard for a limited amount of time to prevent a goal.

Playing a man short does, however, cause you to change your forechecking strategy. It appears reasonable to apply enough pressure by forechecking to force the direction of play or an inaccurate pass.

It is particularly important to backcheck the wings. This forces the power-play unit to use at least one point player to gain a two-on-one advantage against the defense as the offensive zone is entered.

Most teams use a type of zone coverage when playing four against five. This usually is referred

to as the “box”. In this coverage, one defensive player is positioned on each corner of the box (see Figure 7-10). The wing on the off-puck side should “collapse” the box somewhat to help out in the slot area (see Figure 7-11).

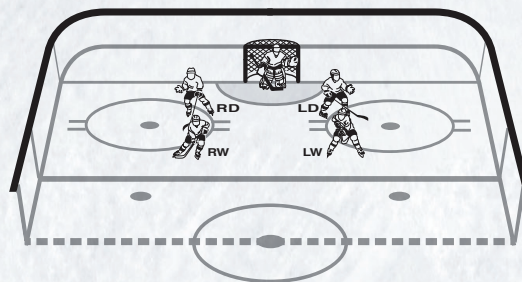


Figure 7-10.

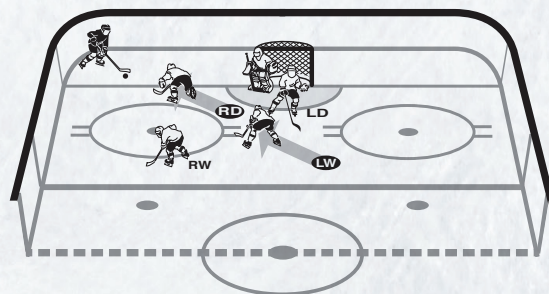


Figure 7-11. Collapsing “box” coverage.

It is important for the defense to avoid chasing the puck and to recognize that the objective is not to prevent any shots on goal, but to prevent the shot from the slot, and/or a good scoring opportunity.

When your opponent has a two-player advantage, the usual approach is to put your fastest player out as a forward and have him or her chase the puck. In the defensive zone, the three defenders try to maintain a triangle. One point of the triangle is on the puck and the other points cover the front of the net. Be sure the three players you have on the ice are the quickest and most agile available at the time.