

Purposeful Coaching: Defensive Zone Coverage Xs and Os

Jonathan Lindahl

jonathan_lindahl@hotmail.com

Alongside skill development, teaching our players how to understand the game and execute responsibilities is critical to our role as youth coaches. And there's not an aspect of hockey that requires as high a degree of instruction as the defensive zone. Not only is DZ coverage and its related tactics and strategies perhaps the most cerebral part of hockey, it also lends itself to significant competitive advantages if done effectively. Thus, the beauty of digging into DZ play is that we not only teach our players a crucial component of the game; we also immediately set our teams up for fundamental shifts in success. And this isn't applicable only to older teams or the highest tiers of abilities. This isn't a skills thing. It's mental, and thus can be taught, in at least some form, to all ages and talent levels.

One quick disclaimer is that while in previous writings I've shied away from prescribing specific systems, this one does do that. My intent isn't to necessarily try to change minds of those who are comfortably utilizing different coverage schemes (although I'd challenge you to at least consider this approach); it's primarily to give direction to those who are maybe looking for help in system implementation or tweaking. I'm a staunch believer that, across our association, we can do a much better job in what we teach and demand regarding DZ coverage, and my hope is that the following detail and context can serve as a small stepping-stone in accomplishing that.

Defensemen & Centers:

It perhaps would seem most logical here to have separate sections for defensemen and centers, versus combining them into one. However, even though there are some slight distinctions to how each of the two positions need to read and react to the action around them, those differences are quite subtle – and it's actually best to think of their primary responsibilities as being essentially the same.

For context, here's a previously written concept (termed "3-D") that touches on how the positions of defense and centers are so closely linked: *Within typical C-low DZ systems, Cs need to think of themselves as the third D. Even if their role tends to be that of support along the deep-to-half-wall*

perimeter, there are times when they will be the first defender on the puck or have primary coverage on the strongside of the net. The best way for those three players to effectively execute coverage is by reading and reacting to each other and working interchangeably and seamlessly as one unit.

Following are keys to understanding some of the detailed responsibilities and interdependencies of defensemen and centers when deep in our zone:

1. D shouldn't think of themselves as left or right. At any given point in time, they are either the D1 (D closest to the puck) or the D2 (D not closest to the puck). The right D, of course, may naturally find themselves to be the D1 more often in the right corner than in the left – and as the D2 in the left corner more so than in the right. However, they can't think that way; they have to be able to fluidly transition between sides without any thought to which side is which. The sole variable in their thinking needs to be how they are coordinating with their partner, and as we'll get to later, with the center as well.
2. The D2 typically protects the **STRONGSIDE** post. For whatever reason, the default thinking in much of youth hockey seems to be that the D in front has primary responsibility for the weakside part of the crease. Once again, this is just one guy's opinion, but I'm a strong proponent that the weakside D (the D2) be stationed near the puck-side of the net. There are three primary reasons for this. First, it allows for an extra layer of protection against the puck or puck carrier getting through the defensive layers already established by our D1 and our C. This properly positioned D2 can step into the attack prior to the puck getting into a prime scoring area. Second, having the D2 on the strongside post, leaves the weakside part of the crease open, thereby, giving us clearly delineated responsibilities between that D and our weakside wing (more on that later). Finally, it affords the D2 the perfect starting point to peel behind the net for a partner pass if we get possession. When we teach our D to go behind the net as an outlet, without dictating that they do it off the strongside post, we are setting ourselves up for ineffective breakouts. We want our D to get those passes as they are skating backwards behind the net, not as they are backing into the opposite corner. Having our net-front D accustomed to being near that strongside post gets them into better position for those quick behind-the-net transitions.
3. However, the D2 doesn't necessarily have to always fulfill that strongside post role - or the D1 provide the primary puck pressure. Having centers work with the two D as a singular unit allows for those three players to work totally interchangeably. Yes, perhaps "ideally" the primary defender on the puck is a defenseman (D1), the defender directly supporting that D is the center, and the defender providing support in the third layer by the net is the other defenseman (D2). However, as the unit of three becomes more proficient in reading and adjusting between the various roles, the notion of "ideal" becomes less and less significant – to the point that the true ideal becomes when we as coaches can throw any two defensemen with any center out there, and each of them is comfortable with and adept at any of the three roles - adjusting quickly and seamlessly between them as the situation dictates. At any given moment, maybe it's the most-typical scenario of a D on the puck, supported directly by the C, and indirectly at the post by the other D (D1-C-D2). Or perhaps it's the C on the puck, with the two D layered behind him (C-D1-D2). Or maybe the C is back by the post, with the second D directly supporting the first D on the puck (D1-D2-C). The ultimate scenario in all of this?... When all these distinctions no longer matter.

Wings:

Whether strong or weakside, wings actually have a much simpler job than the 3-D – not necessarily easier, just simpler. It's less complicated because there's less required coordination with others and more focus on just calmly reading the play and making subtle directional changes, often just a step or two, as the puck and the opponents move throughout the zone.

Unlike defensemen, who have to forget any notion of left vs. right, or centers, who are constantly moving between corners and switching roles with the D, left wings need to stay left; and right wings need to stay right. Once they start swapping with each other or getting too low in the corners to cover for an out-of-position D or C, the entire system begins to break down. For coaches, it's easy to analyze because if there's a coverage gap, for example, where the right wing should have been, it's almost always the right wing's fault. Wings need to understand that they have ownership of very specific areas and that there are other parts of the zone they simply shouldn't go.

Strongside: The strongside wing needs to think of her coverage role as splitting the difference between two primary risk areas - able to move to either of them with short, quick movements as needed. All things equal, when the puck is in the corner (and not in our possession), she should generally be dot distance from the boards and vertically somewhere between the dot and the top of the circle. This allows her to be able to cut-off a high slice out of the corner by the puck carrier, who may try to find a lane just above the D and C low coverage. It also enables her to quickly slide into the shooting lane if the puck goes to the point. Either way, if she is somewhere between the dot and the top of the circle, neither of those scenarios require more than a calm step or two of adjustment. It's extremely important that she doesn't think it's her responsibility to cut-off the passing lane from the corner to the point. That will pull her too far to the boards and leave those more critical internal areas exposed. Also, she needs to be extremely careful in puck battles along the boards, making sure that she ALWAYS maintains inside position. Wayzata teams get exposed, especially by Edina's smart and mobile defensemen, when we recklessly overcommit to those battles. They get us sucked to the perimeter and then create really quick 2-on-1s between their strongside point and their forward on the high half-wall - and then look to hit an ignored backdoor forward as the rest of our players get sucked to the puck to cover for our out-of-position wing. (When I coached JGA, for our DZ drills prior to Edina games we'd set-up cones to section-off or dog-ear the large upper corners of the zone. No one was allowed to enter those triangles. It was one of our methods for stressing how critical it was going to be to have our strongside wings stay diligently committed to protecting the interior lanes and not chase the perimeter).

Weakside: As described in the earlier section on 3-D net-front coverage, we should have our low defender (usually the D2 but sometimes the C) positioned off of the strongside post. That leaves the mid

and backside slot as the responsibility of the weakside W, who needs to read how the opponent's F2 and F3 are playing the zone. If the F2 is relatively tight to the puck, the weakside W's job is simply to cover the F3 (via inside-out positioning) - whether it's high-slot, mid-slot, or all the way down to the top of the crease or backside post. It becomes a little more complicated when the F2 is looser on the puck, especially when he becomes indistinguishable from the F3. Then it's a matter of someone from the low support duo (most likely the C) needing to work with the strongside wing to make sure one of them is within reach of whatever forward is more to the strongside (even if that F is higher than the F further to the weakside – thus, making it hard to label them either F2 or F3). Regardless, it's still the weakside W's responsibility for identifying and covering the most backside F, whether high or low, F2 or F3. The key to any of this for the weakside W is that whatever forecheck the opponent is using, he should consider the interior hashmarks as his home base. As long as he is in that general vicinity, he is within a few steps of whoever he needs to cover – and is automatically either within or really close to being in the shooting lane for whenever the puck gets moved to his point.

At first read, this all may seem complicated. But it's really not, and that's the beauty of it. It all boils down to the defensemen and the centers working as a unit of three down low to pressure and support the puck from the perimeter to the strongside post – and the wings finding their respective strongside and weakside homes, and then subtly tweaking their positioning based on puck location and the movement of opponents.

Yes, 160+ feet further down the ice we want our players to attack, attack, attack. We ask them to hound that offensive end with enthusiasm and speed and energy. However, we don't necessarily want that from them in the defensive zone. Sure, maybe in short bursts or in specific one-on-one battles or net-front scums. But mostly we need them to MANAGE the defensive zone. We need them to be thoughtful and cerebral and diligent and calm. We need them to know their responsibilities and know that they will be held accountable for executing them. It's our job as their coaches to effectively teach that. It's not easy. But it's not as nearly as daunting as it may seem. And the benefits, both to our players' IQ and up on the scoreboard, can be immensely rewarding.

-Jonathan

Jonathan Lindahl has been a member of the Wayzata Youth Hockey Association since 2001 when his oldest of four started in the program. He is a USA Hockey Level 5 and MSHSL certified coach, and over 16 seasons head-coached 21 WYHA teams across all boys' age-levels, from Mites to Junior Gold, as well as girls' 10U-A and 12U-A. He has coached in eight state tournaments and six state championship games. In a 24-month stretch ending in March 2016, his three Jr. Gold A teams played a total of 14 overtime periods

across three state championship games versus Edina - culminating just a week later in an overtime victory versus the Hornets in the title game of the 20-team USA Hockey National High School Tournament in suburban Washington D.C. Jonathan was a long-time member of WYHA's Player Development Committee and was the 2015 recipient of the Robert S. McNamara Award for "longstanding, unselfish contribution to the Wayzata Youth Hockey Association." He has a passion for writing about coaching philosophies, strategies, and tactics.