

Purposeful Coaching: Defensemen and an Aggressive Mindset

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As coaches, we all appreciate the value of defensemen who can keep things in front of them and be cautious and conservative with the puck. Often though, we ignore the flipside – the aggressive mentality that is necessary for optimal defensive play. This attribute is critical, not just for individual long-term development, but also for the success of our teams in the here and now. Following are five examples of how we can best instill those skills and mentalities in our defensemen:

Strongside Post: As I stressed in last month's examples on long-term development, we need to encourage our players to push the envelope. And just as goalies need to become comfortable at leaving their crease to aggressively play pucks, our net-front defensemen need to become adept at leaving their post to quickly and confidently jump on loose pucks or take away time & space. We can't allow weakside D to think that the best way to protect the net is by simply camping out by it. Or that they are inherently responsible for coverage at the weakside post. Instead, we need D who are always working to take away puck-side time & space and, as much as possible, engaging opponents on the perimeters of the prime scoring areas. If we're teaching the preferred (my opinion) DZ system where we demand low C support and where weakside Ws are responsible for coming down to cover the deep weakside slot, that weakside D needs to be stationed at the strongside post – in coverage but also ready to explode towards pucks or puck carriers advancing out of the corner or rolling behind the net.

With my players, I've liked using the analogy of the net and crease being a fortress. Sure, at its core you want it to be tough and secure and impenetrable, but even more so, you want it to be the vantage point from where you can clearly see the dangers moving towards you from a distance. And the best defense of that fort is one in which you move out to engage the enemy on the perimeter, not allowing them the opportunity to take the battle to our doors. Our defensemen need to understand that when they are the ones at the fort, the strongside post is the best place for them to read and react to those situations – the prime location for surveying the landscape. Unfortunately, that's not instinctual to most D, especially when they've been allowed to think of themselves as primarily, if not solely, responsible for their own side of the ice. Thus, it's imperative that we as coaches steer them to the proper perspective of closer

support of and quicker aggressiveness to the puck. *(Note: On a different yet closely related topic... The above is a perfect example, for when we are doing breakout scheming and reps with our teams, why we should have our front-side D rolling off the strongside post. Not only does it reinforce and align with these coverage/support principles, but it also allows that D to quickly receive the partner pass while still behind the net, where subsequent passing options and angles are much preferred. Consequently, this transitions nicely into the next example of D aggressiveness, taking the puck up the gut).*

Up the Gut: When young defensemen get the puck down low and make the decision to skate it for a few strides, their natural inclination is usually to swing or drift wide, away from the net towards the corner or half-boards. One key problem with this is that they've then squeezed their passing options; everything is either directly in front of them or to just one side, so any passes to the strongside W become more difficult because that lateral angle's been negated. Plus, passes cross-ice to the far-side wing become ill-advised, if not entirely impossible. Instead, D need to learn to step straight up-ice whenever possible. When they carry or receive the puck behind the net and decide to take those initial steps, their first read should be to cut hard off the backside post. Depending on the amount of traffic in front, this may seem risky; however, good defensemen must develop that skill as part of their arsenal. This utilizes the net as a pick and puts D quickly into a position where they're immediately squared up-ice, with speed, and with potential passing options on both sides. This ability becomes essential for powerplay breakouts where D need to be adept at stepping confidently and aggressively straight up-ice, not just slinging it from behind the net to wings on the boards. This also applies to the rest of the DZ and the NZ. In those areas as well, D are generally much better positioned to make good puck plays from the middle of the ice, versus unnecessarily limiting themselves along the perimeter.

Activating F4s: As the puck moves up-ice, good defensemen absolutely must have a mindset that their job is not over. Just as when the puck clears the defensive blueline, and forwards are no longer centers or left wings or right wings but instead are now F1s, F2s, and F3s, defensemen as well need to mentally transition into the role of F4s. Obviously, there will always be a spectrum of D, ranging from offensive to stay-at-home, based on both physical and mental make-up; however, all D must become sufficiently mobile and willing to activate quickly. They need to think of themselves as the fourth piece of the team's offense, jumping up aggressively with the rush through the NZ and filling high-to-mid slot lanes as the play moves into the OZ. During OZ possession, they need to be looking for legitimate opportunities to drive or creep down into the zone, for example, either through backdoor passing plays or through strongside scissor exchanges with forwards coming up the boards. If D simply maintain a basic mindset of just being defenders, that not only impairs the overall offensive capabilities of their teams but also negatively impacts their own personal skill and IQ development.

Proactive Pinch: Arguably, this topic is a subset of the above “Activating F4s”; however, it’s worth noting separately here because of the special mental component to it and how it serves as a great example for how defensemen need to develop and maintain an aggressive mindset. Basically, the idea is that effective pinching in the OZ, or step-ups in the NZ, must be confidently proactive, not hesitantly reactive. In the OZ, defensemen need to be eager to pinch all the way down below the hash, even to the corner if the play dictates, but must do so via quick, decisive, and increasingly instinctive bursts. They must understand, somewhat counter-intuitively, that the deeper they engage an opponent, be it OZ or NZ, the better the support they will receive from their partner or an F3; because the sooner they leave their high position, the more time they are affording teammates to read-and-react to support responsibilities. The best defensemen aren't such because they play rushes well; they are good because they quickly and aggressively stop those rushes before they happen.

Walk the Blue: Defensemen must look to move the puck productively high in the offensive zone, and that usually means quickly and aggressively walking the blueline with it – busting several steps laterally one direction or the other. Often, that entails getting possession along the wall and “walking” towards the middle of the blue in order to create better shooting or passing lanes. Those quick, aggressive steps across the top of the zone create movement in the defenders and allow teammates to slide to the net or into passing lanes, creating a much more dynamic offensive flow, as well as providing the point a better shooting angle. Good defensive teams quickly take away stationary shooting lanes, so if points are not effective in quickly bringing the puck at least a couple steps (usually towards the middle), productive shots and passes from up top become significantly limited.

In summary, the days of defensemen playing only a safe and simple game are well behind us. Thus, in coaching these young players, we need to make sure that we are purposefully teaching them how to be aggressive and assertive and, most importantly, how to read and react to quickly and confidently apply it within the correct situations and circumstances. If we can help instill those abilities and that mindset, our teams will improve. And even better, we can take pride in the fact that we are aiding in the development of quality defensemen.

-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.