

Purposeful Coaching: Defensive Zone – Concepts Over System

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Of all the different aspects of hockey coaching, the one that seems to most frequently get thrown into a prototypical “systems bucket” is defensive zone coverage. Wings high or low? Centers aggressive or support? Defenseman at strongside or weakside post? Shot blocking or clearing sight lanes? As coaches, we can endlessly debate these points and many more; however, I maintain that what’s truly important is not just coordinating and guiding our players actions within a specified framework. It’s teaching them how to think about and understand situations and responsibilities in the simplest form possible - and then how to practically read and react to the action around them.

Below are several examples of how we can implement defensive zone systems through concepts. These are, in effect, hockey sense building blocks necessary for enhancing our player’s read & react capabilities. Teaching how to play in the defensive zone, thus, becomes less about implementing and executing a system, and more about instilling the mental tools and techniques necessary for performing smartly, quickly, and confidently. *(Note: Some detailed language in a few of these concepts is predicated on the utilization of a “center deep; weakside wing low-slot” system. The key ideas or themes within each, though, are constant, regardless of the specific system utilized).*

Position Accountability: I repeatedly stress to my players the significance of the defensive blueline. In the neutral and offensive zones, it really doesn’t matter their position (forwards especially); they are simply F1s, F2s, and F3s, constantly reading and reacting to each other and filling the proper layers and lanes. Even the defensemen should feel free, even obligated, to become F1-3s or F4s. The point is, all our skaters need to think of themselves as part of a unit of five, attacking, layering, and transitioning as they see fit. However, all that changes once the puck crosses into our defensive zone. There, everyone has clear responsibilities based on specific positions. For example, left wings have left side accountability - right wings, right side. Strongside wings must be careful not to come much below the dot when the puck is in their corner, whereas weakside wings have coverage all the way down to the backside post. And centers must layer themselves with the D, together working as a unit of three - sometimes aggressively suppressing time & space, other times calmly and deliberately providing perimeter support

or net-front coverage. The overarching point is that every player has a specific role per his/her position, and we as coaches must make sure that each of them understands their responsibilities and know that they will be held accountable for them.

Purposeful Faceoffs: A defensive zone faceoff should never be a passive event. All five skaters need to understand exactly where they need to line-up based on the other team's alignment; what they need to do immediately at the drop of the puck; how they need to react based on whether the draw is won, lost, or tied; and how their assignments lead seamlessly into overall DZ coverage responsibilities. For example, in a typical wings-high system, I always want both wings lined-up along the inside hash and immediately moving towards their mid-to-high-slot coverage areas (immediately filling the shooting lane). I want our net-side D at the inside hash as well, immediately picking-up the closest opponent. And I want our other D on the outside hash (if other team leaves a player near that hash) or behind our C (if other team leaves the hash naked by pulling their outside forward back into a shooting position). However, if your system dictates different coverage assignments, then faceoff alignment will likely look a little different as well. The point is that, "whatever the detail, there must be detail." And more importantly, it needs to be clear to your players how their alignment immediately and seamlessly leads to those coverage responsibilities.

Maintain Inside Position: In puck battles or in coverage responsibilities away from the puck, players should generally be on the net-side of their engagement. This is extremely simple in theory, but it's perhaps the most important of all these DZ concepts – and often the hardest one for players to remember, much less master.

Squared 90 to Puck: When players square-up directly to the puck when covering an area or an opponent, they can easily lose sight of what's going on behind them. Instead, they should consciously think about having their body aligned one shoulder to the puck and the other to the coverage area/player (i.e. squared 90 degrees to the puck). The best example is weakside D/W coverage when the puck is in the corner. Both players must watch and cover the slot but also have eyes on the puck. By squaring "90 to puck," they can swivel their head to one shoulder to see the puck and to the other shoulder to see their coverage area. This is much easier and more effective than constantly having to turn their body to maintain both perspectives.

Limit Your Steps: Most skating within sustained DZ coverage should generally consist of no more than a few steps/strides of adjustment. Of course, when engaging a puck carrier along the perimeter or defending a drive into the zone or toward the net, it's important to move quickly and aggressively to take away time & space or to get into a lane; however, once established in one's support/coverage position, extra movement is usually unnecessary - and is more likely to pull us out of position than in. All players

are indeed responsible for necessary re-alignment as the puck moves around the zone, but if everyone is in good position already, this should usually require no more than a few steps at a time. Effective DZ coverage needs to be at least 80% mental – calm, deliberate, and methodical. And when that scale tips too far out of balance in the other direction, we precariously creep from simple adjustments to ill-advised over-skating – and find ourselves susceptible to what we all frustratingly refer to as "running around."

Wing Triangle: The seemingly complicated positioning of wings in the DZ can be easily simplified by conceptualizing/teaching a basic triangle. I tell my wings that they should always be at or moving between one of three "homes" – those being: the inside hash (weakside coverage), the top of the circle (strongside coverage), and the outside hash (breakout). Exact spots can be tweaked per specific systems (e.g. bringing the wings down even further) or game-specific tactics; however the general principle holds - that Ws have three primary DZ positional roles, and that if they quickly and decisively adjust to and along those stations as puck location/possession changes, they will always be positioned close to where they need to be. This concept takes what can otherwise be a very confusing component of coverage and boils it down to a very succinct and understandable set of expectations.

Step to Lane: Shooting lanes in the DZ, particularly from the point, should be defended with the responsible coverage player (usually a W) getting into the shooting lane before moving towards the shooter. The priority is to fill the lane as quickly as possible, and that often requires taking lateral steps to fill the lane first, versus taking a straight path to the shooter. This approach makes getting pucks through to the net as difficult as possible and helps reinforce proper inside-out positioning in coverage areas as the puck moves throughout the DZ.

In summary, my hope is that the above concepts can become an important tool in your coaching arsenals. Sound DZ play is inherently one of the most complicated parts of the game, and to effectively teach it, we of course cannot avoid Xs and Os and at least some degree of system and structure. However, we can likely do a better job of making sure that our players understand the foundational reasons for what we want them to do and why. Breaking the seemingly complicated down into cleaner and clearer nuggets of understanding, recognition, and execution helps everyone see the game better and, thus, be able to react much more astutely and confidently. Thankfully, these concepts can serve as building blocks for creating that much desired hockey sense in our players. And in no place is that sense and awareness needed more than in the defensive zone.

-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

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