

# As The Game Evolves, The Slap Shot Is No Longer The Favorite Weapon In Shooters' Arsenals

By Jessi Pierce



Slappers. Clappers. Blueline blasts.

By any name they have been a fan favorite for more than 70 years.

They bring the noise. They bring the power. They bring the fans from their seats as a player brings the heat as they send the puck speeding toward the twine with impressive velocity.

They're.... becoming obsolete?

As hockey continues to evolve into a game of small puck battles and speed, fewer players are utilizing the traditional trademarked hockey shot.

"You just don't see people taking many slap shots anymore," says USA Hockey ADM regional manager Scott Paluch. "Watch hockey at the highest level, it's almost non-existent. I can't remember in an actual youth hockey game the last time I saw somebody line up and take a slap shot."

## FAST FACTS ON THE SLAP SHOT

New York Rangers forward **Alex Shibicky** is believed to be the first NHL player to use a slap shot in a game in 1937.

Two-time Olympian **John Mayasich** is often credited with introducing the slap shot to college hockey during his freshman year at the University of Minnesota in 1953.

**Bernie Geoffrion** of the Montreal Canadiens popularized the use of the slap shot in the 1950s and earned the nickname "Boom Boom" because of his thunderous shot.



Washington Capitals defenseman **Zdeno Chara** holds the NHL slapshot record of 108.8 miles per hour accomplished in the 2012 NHL All-Star Skills Competition.

Say it isn't so. Are those blasts from the point little more than a blast from the past?

"I do think, around the league, accuracy is becoming increasingly important when you're shooting the puck," explains Washington Capitals defenseman John Carlson. "For how skilled goaltenders are in today's game, being able to pick spots on where to shoot the puck is increasingly becoming the best way to score goals. You lose a bit of your accuracy with slap shots."

For blueliners like Carlson, who owns 115 goals in his 12-year NHL career, with 64-feet between them and the goal, a slap shot was once thought to be the only choice to get the puck down onto the net.

But in today's game with so many mitigating factors working against the old-school slap shot, like equipment evolutions, goalies, speed, etc., the shot seems to be slowly fading from a shooter's arsenal.

But fear not fans of those who bring the heat. The slap shot isn't going the way of the wooden stick. At least not anytime soon.

"I do think there is still a place in the game for them," Carlson says.

## Stick Flex Versus Muscle Flex

To understand how we arrived at this point it's important to understand the evolution of the hockey stick and the mechanics of the slap shot. The first hockey stick manufacturers in Canada created a one-piece stick in the 1800s. By the 1940s it had been transformed into laminated layers glued together for more flexibility.

By the 1950s wooden blades were wrapped in fiberglass for more reinforcement, and curves found their place in bettering a player's shot in the 1960s. By the time composite sticks were adopted into the game in the 1990s, a shooter no longer needed the excessive windup required with wooden sticks to generate needed velocity.

"We all used slap shots just to reach the net," says New York Rangers assistant coach and retired NHLer Greg Brown. "You'd have guys coming up the wing on the rush doing the same thing, putting in those slap shots just for the force to get the puck on net."

"The sticks are so much better now, so you can get enough heat with a wrister or snapshot, which makes a slap shot not as needed."

Minnesota Wild defenseman and USA Hockey National Team Development Program alum Ian Cole is one of those who has switched up the flex of his sticks as his choice of shots has changed.

"When I was in college and my first couple years of pro, I was using a 110-flex stick. And I honestly loved it. I would just take slap shots all the time. I could absolutely wire it. It was great," says Cole, who won back-to-back Stanley Cups with the Pittsburgh Penguins in 2016 and 2017.

"But for the ability to make quick, hard passes, a little more flex is beneficial. With my wrist shot, I couldn't get enough flex when my stick was that stiff. Since then I've gone on to 105 and 102 [flex]. It might take off a

# BLAST FROM THE PAST

little bit of that top-end speed as far as miles per hour on the slap shot, but it's much more useful in every other situation to use more flex.

"There's always tradeoffs like that. For me it was going down in flex to mix my wrist shots, quick shots with good placement and hard. That's more of the shot I needed in the NHL."

## The Need For Speed

There's no denying that the game is much quicker today compared to even five or 10 years ago. Today, it's about quick hands, quick sticks and quick decisions in order to score goals.

"Whether shooting or passing, the puck has to be in a ready position to be distributed somewhere, whether to a teammate or a shot on goal," Paluch says. "Everything is happening quicker and quicker. Now we're seeing the teaching of that, the mechanics of handling the puck and making it more ready to leave your stick and go in someplace positive. Teaching that part to our players is really becoming paramount. It's shorter and quicker, the mechanics of both shooting and passing."

Shooters and passers need to have the ability to move the puck off their stick as the opposition collapses quicker, allowing little to no time and space.

"Before, you used to get up at the point, and the forwards would come out in their own time," Cole says. "Now, those wingers covering the point are already on their way as soon as the puck starts to go from low to high. Not only do they close that space quickly, but they are great at blocking shots, and defenseman are great at boxing out, trying to step in front of pucks and knock pucks down and go in the other direction. So, a quick shot with good placement oftentimes is better than a hard shot that hits a shinpad or something."

## VIDEO - EPIC SLAPSHOTS



## Goalies and Shot Blockers

Brown, who coached 14 seasons at his alma mater Boston College from 2004-2018, says he began seeing a greater emphasis placed on shot blocking.

"In college, with the full facemask, the guys are fearless to get in front of the shots, so you really have to get the puck down as quickly as possible," he says. "Some teams and players are so good at blocking shots you never want to even try a shot from too far outside."

Not to mention the size of goalies has increased along with their ability to track the puck, making it harder to blow one by them, especially if they can see the shot coming.

But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. You just have to pick your spots.

"If you are going to take a slap shot, you almost have to be on the move a little bit and create a lane so you can move laterally across the line. That's really only the chance you have to get a puck down," Brown says.

"It's just about getting the puck to the net quickly and with enough traffic in front of the net so the goalie doesn't get a good track on it. If it's 105 mph or 95 mph, it doesn't matter, you just have to get it to the net."

Cole says there is nothing worse than having a shot blocked and causing a turnover the other way. Taking too much time to load up a blast gives defenders more of an opportunity to get in the shooting lane.

"You want to get it by at least the first layer of forwards," Cole says. "When they come out so hard and close that space quickly, if you hit them in the shinpads and it ends up behind you, they're gone on a breakaway and there's nothing you're going to do about it. They're gone. So, you want to get offense, but at the same time, you don't want to get offense so badly you let up breakaways behind you."



## FATHER KNOWS BEST

“He just said to use all your body and lay into it and flex the stick as much as possible. Let the stick do the work.”

— **Ryan MacInnis** of the Cleveland Monsters (AHL) on the advice he received from his father, Al, who is credited with having one of the hardest shots in NHL history.



Quinn Hughes of the Vancouver Canucks uncoils a blast during his rookie season in the NHL.

## Keep It In Your Toolbelt

Don't worry, this isn't meant as a deterrent for shooters who love to grip it and rip it. As with most things, there remains a time and place for the slap shot to still be an effective tool.

"You have a little more time with the man advantage," encourages Brown. "On the power play there are fewer bodies to get the puck through, so it's still a good weapon there. And it should still be practiced because it can be effective if you move the puck well and have created lanes. It's always good to be able to deliver the puck down with power where a lot of guys practice shooting for sticks now."

So whether it's with the man advantage, or just the opportunity to get the puck on net in hopes a teammate will be there to tip or deflect the shot, the slap shot—while seemingly depleting in usage—still holds an important role for shooters in all positions.

"Most of my opportunities come from the blue line, where a wrist shot or snap shot may not be the best option," says Carlson, who won the hardest shot competition at the 2019 NHL All-Star Skills event.

"Taking a slap shot with traffic in front can often be my best opportunity. Not to mention, having guys in front of the net for both teams, you never know how the puck is going to deflect towards the net. With a puck coming towards the net a bit harder off of a slap shot, it can always catch a stick or maybe even a leg on the way to the net, and that's always tough for a goaltender to handle." ☆

*Jessi Pierce is a freelance writer based in St. Paul, Minn.*

## NHL SLAPSHOTS PER GAME

NHL slapshots are being utilized less and less each year.

13.7 | 2012

13.0 | 2013

12.5 | 2014

11.9 | 2015

11.5 | 2016

10.9 | 2017

10.0 | 2018

9.5 | 2019

9.2 | 2020

