



Developing Defensemen

Goaltenders are guts and glory – players who play goal love the responsibility of “being the man” the one everyone has to rely on. When your team wins – the goalie usually receives his fair share of the credit. When you lose – he often needs to be able to accept responsibility for the loss.

Forwards are for the most part glitz and glamour – the players scoring the goals, the ones in the offensive spotlight. They are the guys who love to play with the puck – and score goals.

Defensemen, on the other hand, are doing their job best when they are not in the spotlight and don't have the puck. So why do players want to be defensemen?

It is your job as a coach to put some “glamour” into the position by presenting the position as a key element in the success or failure of the team. Defensemen can be viewed as being more important than either the goaltender or forwards. If the

opposing team is limited to few or no quality shots on net, the goaltender's life is relatively easy. If the puck is quickly and efficiently taken from the other team and moved to the forwards to attack, then their life is relatively easy as well. So quality defensemen are crucial to the success of your team.

QUALITIES OF GOOD DEFENSEMEN

Agility/Mobility

Good, quick feet with the ability to move forward, backward and laterally and to change direction quickly. Pivoting from forward to backward and backward to forward while not turning away from the puck is an essential skill. Backward and forward crossovers and the ability to accelerate out of these crossovers is crucial.

Passing skills

All defensemen do not need to be excellent puckhandlers. It certainly is helpful to be able to stickhandle with the best of them – but beating someone in a one-on-one situation when they are the last line of defense is not what you want your defensemen doing. The most important skill for defensemen is to be able to pass the puck crisply and accurately to their partners or up to the forwards. More importantly, it is crucial that they know when to pass—when the intended recipient is open and in the proper position. In this respect they are much like a quarterback in football. In most cases, they should be able to see the whole ice in front of them and the play developing right before their eyes.

Positioning

Playing defense is all about being in proper position. Playing without the puck is the most difficult thing to teach in hockey. Being able to read the play, knowing where everyone on the ice is at all times, and anticipating where they are headed is difficult to teach and takes much practice. A defenseman is, for the most part, always in position if they are “between their man and the puck and their man and their net”.

Patience

Playing without the puck requires plenty of patience. Knowing when to “close” on an opposition player in the corner in the defensive end, “pinch” in the offensive zone to hold the puck in, release for your partner to be an option for an outlet pass are all examples of how defensemen need to be intelligent and patient. Rushing around out of control will quickly put a defenseman out of position – and the puck quickly in your net.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF DEFENSEMEN

Offensive Zone

- Hold the blue line – don't get in too deep – support partner and think defense first
- Be decisive on decisions to pinch – only pinch when there is support from the forwards - it is best to take both the man and the puck – but at the very least be sure to contain the man if the puck is passed off
- Don't get shots from the point blocked – getting the puck deep is the first priority
- Shoot when there is traffic in front of the net looking for screens, deflections and rebounds

Neutral Zone

- Follow forwards quickly up-ice on the rush – don't be lazy
- Be decisive on joining the attack – look for situations where you outnumber the opposition and let your teammates know you are with them
- On neutral zone regroupings, make the easiest and most direct play – don't try to force a pass through someone
- Use your partner and the width of the ice – but be sure it is safe – don't just throw the puck back up into traffic

- Look for quick counter attack and move the puck quickly with a crisp and accurate pass
- Communicate with your partner and backchecking forwards when defending a rush
- Stay in the middle of the ice and force puck carriers to the outside
- Maintain a manageable gap between the attacking forwards and yourself
- Evaluate all situations, take charge and direct your team in the defense of the attack

Defensive Zone

- Always angle opponents to the outside and below the goal line
- Finish all checks and beat opposition player back into the play
- “Block out” for partner on all dump-ins
- Be available for partner as an outlet pass
- Stick should be on the ice at all times to take away space and deflect passes
- Don't get tied up in front of the net
- Know where your man is and where the puck is at all times
- On shots from the point – contain your opponent's stick and clear out the front of the net so your goaltender can see – beat opponents to the rebound
- Play aggressive but under control – don't run around
- No cross ice passes unless 100% certain of completion
- Make the simple play – don't force passes through an opposing player
- Don't try to beat anybody one-on-one