

STICKWORK

The title of this article does not refer to hooking, slashing, or cross-checking. It also does not refer to handling a puck or shooting a puck. This article is about an area of the game that needs greater emphasis at all levels. It is about attention to details. The focus of this article is on what players do with their sticks when their team does not have the puck and they are playing defense. One of the keys to playing good team defense is “having good sticks”. How does “having good sticks” help you play good team defense? “Having good sticks” helps create loose pucks and turnovers, which means you get the puck back quicker, which in turn leads to more opportunities to play offense.

One of the main game situations where coaches talk about “having good sticks” is when they are killing a penalty. Playing one man or even two men short forces coaches to talk about stick positioning in hopes of neutralizing the effect of a man advantage. If it is such an important part of killing penalties, imagine the benefits that could be realized if coaches made it a point of emphasis in even strength situations.

If you asked a basketball player if he had the opportunity to increase his reach by four to five feet, would he take it? Every basketball player would give an emphatic yes. Basketball players unfortunately do not have this luxury but hockey players do. By having a stick on the ice and in the proper position, a hockey player can increase his reach and hence the area he covers by four to five feet. Never has this been more important than now because of the changes in how the game is being called by officials at all levels. In the NHL, as soon as a defending player’s stick goes parallel to the ice and makes contact with an opposing player, a penalty is called. USA Hockey also has an initiative in place to prevent defending players from using their sticks to take away offensive opportunities. “Having good sticks” is a skill that must be worked on in order to be an elite defensive team in the new era of hockey.

What does it mean to “have good sticks”. I think this can be broken up into two categories: away from the puck and at the puck. These categories apply to all three zones on the ice: offensive zone, neutral zone, and defensive zone.

“Having good sticks” away from the puck is predicated on having sticks on the ice and taking away passing lanes. It takes away the middle of the ice and keeps pucks to the outside and on the walls. Too often players are in the right spots but a pass beats them because they either don’t have their sticks on the ice or they are taking away the wrong lane. Players that have good hockey sense can often bait an opposing player into making a bad pass. These high level players will take away a passing lane and then read the opposing player’s eyes. Because they know they are taking away one passing lane with their stick and the opposing player’s eyes are looking at another open passing lane, these high-level players can anticipate where the puck will be passed and intercept it creating a turnover and possibly an offensive chance.

The second category where you want to make sure you “have good sticks” is at the puck. As a defending player approaches the puck carrier, he wants to be sure to take an angle

that invites the puck carrier in one direction. As the defending player continues to approach the puck carrier, he should lead with his stick and work to get “stick on puck” and then follow through with a body check. The reference to “stick on puck” is the desire for the defending player to get the blade of his stick in the front of the puck so the puck carrier would have to pass through the blade of his stick.

There are two main areas where the concept of “stick on puck” breaks down. The first is when a defensive player is approaching the puck carrier but does not have his stick on the ice. As he goes to put his stick on the ice and work to get “stick on puck,” the puck carrier makes a pass under his stick before he gets it down to the ice.

The second area where the concept of “stick on puck” breaks down is when a defending player is leading with his stick but picks his stick up as he goes to make contact with the puck carrier. A defensive player often lifts his stick so that he has two hands on his stick in hopes of getting better leverage for a big hit. However, this allows the puck carrier to complete a pass.

The concept of “stick on puck” followed by a body check really needs to be introduced and emphasized when teaching checking at the Pee-Wee level. If eleven and twelve year olds can develop good technique of having their sticks on the ice, leading with their sticks, and attempting to get “stick on puck” and then finishing a check, it will create good habits that they will carry with them to higher levels of hockey. One other important result of teaching “stick on puck” when kids are learning how to check is that it forces them to keep their arms and hands down when checking. This will lead to fewer elbowing and roughing penalties.

Why is “having good sticks” so important? It helps a team create loose pucks and turnovers which leads to transition hockey and scoring opportunities. The quicker you can turn the puck over, the more opportunities you will have to transition from defense to offense. I think all players, forwards and defensemen, would rather spend less time playing defense and more time playing offense. With referees focusing on stick infractions, it is important to give your team every advantage when playing defense in an attempt to get the puck back as quickly as possible. “Having good sticks” must start in practice. It is a skill that is as important as shooting, passing, stickhandling, or skating. If you work on “having good sticks” in practice, you will see the rewards on game day.