Support as a concept in hockey is one of the weakest areas handled by coaches. That is likely because it is an activity that happens without the puck.

If you were to ask an NHL or college scout what they watch for in a player, they would tell you skating skills, puckhandling, etc.; but one of the first three or four items would be how the player supports. They would say how a player plays without the puck will make or break them to move up.

**Providing Support**
As competition “moves up” for any player (from ‘B’ level to ‘A’; from JV to varsity; from high school to college), one of the differences is the necessity to play well without the puck. There are the many dozens or even hundreds of support functions that take place during any game.

Without TEAM support, games are just a series of solo efforts seldom successful in the team game of hockey. A hat trick, for example, is usually as a result of at least three good passes and probably at least three good defensive actions that turned the puck over to the offensive side in the first place.

**Examples of Providing Support**
- **Defensemen backing up their partner when the partner is pinching at the offensive blue line or is handling the puck in the offensive zone.**
  Every player that I have coached has heard me say that a breakaway by the opposition is not the fault of the defenseman on the side where the breakaway occurred, but rather the other defenseman that should have been providing back up support.

- **All forwards (and often defensemen) without the puck (when a teammate has the puck) moving to get into position to get a clean pass to help develop the attack.**
  This is a very important aspect of European hockey. In the US, we more often see a youth player attacking up the ice while linemates lollygag along, “admiring” the teammate’s hard work. We also very often see defensemen that are 30 to 50 feet behind the attacking forwards. Good defensemen stay right up behind the attack and become dangerous “trailers” who will score many points in the process.
I generally refer to this movement to get open as “calling for a pass with your feet.” That means yelling for a pass or slapping the ice when not really open is not in order. Moving the feet to get open is the best call for the puck.

- **Good individual responsibility for coverage in the defensive zone.**
  There are no doubt good goaltenders and poor goaltenders. Nonetheless, a large percentage of goals scored are a result of poor support, poor coverage in the zone. If any player doesn’t do his job in the defensive zone, then the risk of open and easy shots on the goaltender increases.

  The biggest support problems in the defensive zone often are forwards. The center runs out to the points or doesn’t cover the second open player in front. The wing doesn’t properly cover the point and lets good shots happen from that area. The wing (side away from the puck) doesn’t patrol the high spot.

- **Good intensity and effort on the “point” of the forecheck.**
  This means that the first one or two players forechecking have to get to the opposition player with the puck quickly before the puck can be moved (out of the zone). A half-hearted or poorly timed forecheck gives the opposition defensemen just enough time to clear the puck. The forecheck is support of the offensive attack. If it fails, the team is immediately put into a defensive posture.

- **Good intensity and effort by the defensemen (both) when retrieving a puck dumped into their zone.**
  This happens many dozens of times each game. This is obviously the opposite view of the previous example. If the defensemen allow the forecheck to be successful, their team is immediately on the defensive in their own zone. Getting to the puck very quickly is probably the most important aspect of this activity, with the D partner providing support for a pass or even for light interference of the forechecker.

  Those are a few examples of important support situations. There are many others: around faceoffs; being in position to jump on rebounds; and defensemen moving down toward the net (in the offensive zone) when an open hole exists.

There are likely 100 or more players in the American Hockey League that never have and
probably never will play in the NHL because they have never mastered proper play without the puck. Often the plus-minus statistics better reflect overall capabilities of players because they are indicative of both offensive and defensive performance. Hard working players that do their job and are good without the puck are possibly the most valuable – and the hardest to find, at all levels.

I was recently scouting a high school game for Elite League players. I had (last year) scouted a player on this team as a sophomore and he seldom took a hard stride unless the puck was on his stick. I told the coach my opinion last year and he passed it on to his player. This year, the player is still dynamic with the puck, but now he is supporting without the puck about 50 percent of the time. He might play in the Elite League next year if he can get that up to 65%-70%.

Coaches need to continually monitor and improve the support situations for their teams. This is especially true for young teams, with the negative consequences being a group of individualists with poor defensive skills – seldom a successful formula.

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