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The first pass: A measuring stick for all defensemen



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THE FIRST PASS – and preparing for it before arriving at the puck – are the most important skills a defenseman must develop. It's the key to making the D-zone look like a launching pad for attack instead of a disaster area.

By Jack Blatherwick

Let's Play Hockey Columnist

After winning the Stanley Cup for the ninth time as head coach, Scotty Bowman retired in 2002 as the winningest coach in NHL history with 1,467 wins (223 of them in the playoffs).

During a coaches' seminar at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Bowman was asked what he considered to be the most important reasons for his coaching success. He hesitated a few seconds, then said, "I always had the best goaltender in the league and defensemen who could make the strong first pass."

Pushed further to clarify his answer, given that his forwards included a long list of Hall of Famers, Bowman made the point that there is never an effective attack without that accurate first pass coming out of the defensive zone. A decade after his retirement, Bowman's philosophy is still apparent in the Detroit Red Wings personnel and style of play.

Compared to other NHL teams, Red Wings' defensemen rarely ring the puck around the boards. The first pass might be D-to-D, or directly to the stick of a forward, but their passes often set the stage for the forwards to be at their best on the attack.

It is common for college coaches to require defensemen to ring the puck or throw it on the glass into the neutral zone. This is considered 'good, safe hockey, avoiding turnovers.'

But it leads to impotent attacks in the neutral zone, because the wing who has to play the puck on the boards can do little more than chip it into the neutral zone. After this weak start to the attack, the safe answer is, 'Get it deep and forecheck hard.'

Then the cycle continues: ring the puck around the boards; chip it out; dump it deep.

College coaches quietly blame youth and high school coaches for not sending highly skilled defensemen, meaning that coaches of younger D should not employ the college philosophy: play it safe, no turnovers, get it deep. At what stage is the development of passing skills more important than avoiding mistakes? Somewhere we need to break this cycle if we want to produce brilliant D who have the passing skills Bowman is talking about – and if we want the game to progress toward exciting offensive attacks.

Obviously, it is at the youth and high school levels where defensemen must acquire the vision, poise and skill to make that 'strong first pass.' But these are lifelong projects that will require creative coaching and thousands of repetitions. It will also require patience in games, while defensemen learn through trial and error. It is much easier to say to a PeeWee defenseman what is said at the college level, "Don't try anything fancy. Keep the puck on the boards, and avoid turnovers."

Glen Sonmor, former Gopher and North Star's coach, and longtime scout for the Wild, identified what it is about great defensemen that sets them apart from the average, "When they touch the puck in the defensive zone, the next thing you know their team is on the attack."

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