

Puck Support and Spacing

Rule set: Written to NHL rules. Where IIHF, USA Hockey or typical rec-league rules differ in a way that changes how you play, it is flagged inline. This document is mostly about tactics rather than rules, but four rules constrain what good spacing looks like and are cited where they bite: **offside** (Rule 83), **rink dimensions** (Rule 1.2), the **goalkeeper's restricted area / trapezoid** (Rules 1.8, 27.8, 63.2(viii)) and **icing** (Rule 81). **Playing in Britain? The IIHF flags are yours** — every level of UK hockey runs the IIHF book, amended locally; see UK and England Rules.

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Overview

This is the document that sits between knowing your position and knowing your team's systems.

Puck support means being in a place, at a time, where the player with the puck can actually give it to you. **Spacing** means the five of you arranging yourselves so that there is always more than one such place.

Everything else in this guide — breakouts, forechecks, zone entries, power plays — is a named pattern for producing good support. This document is the principle underneath all of them, which is why it transfers to the situations no system covers. If you learn one thing here, learn this: **a puck carrier with two options beats a puck carrier with none, regardless of how skilled either of them is.**

1. The central idea: hockey is a set of relationships

Beginners are taught hockey as five jobs. Centre does this, wingers do that, defence do the other. That model gets you through your first season and then quietly starts costing you games, because it is wrong in one specific way: **your correct position is not a place on the ice. It is a distance and an angle from two moving things — the puck, and your teammates.**

Watch a good team and you will notice that no player is ever standing where you would draw them on a whiteboard. They are constantly adjusting, because the whiteboard position was only ever correct relative to a puck that has since moved three metres.

Spacing beats skill

- Goal** Offer two options at different angles — the nearest defender physically cannot cover both
- Risk** Zero options means winning a one-on-one duel, and even elite players lose that duel a lot of the time
- Risk** One option is coverable — the defence takes away a single lane, and a good defender will
- Read** The moment a second defender commits, a third option opens somewhere else
- Key** Spacing is a large part of possession, not a footnote to skill — reasoning, not a measured result

This is not a motivational slogan; it is arithmetic.

A puck carrier under pressure has to make a decision in well under a second. The value of that decision is capped by the number of options in front of them:

- **Zero options** — they must beat their man one-on-one or lose the puck. Even elite players lose that duel a lot of the time.
- **One option** — the defence can take it away by covering one lane, and a good defender will.
- **Two options at different angles** — the single nearest defender physically cannot cover both. Someone else has to come, and the moment a second defender commits, a third option opens somewhere else.

So a team of average players who consistently offer two options is putting its carriers into a situation the defence cannot solve by individual effort. A team of good players who offer none is asking every one of its carriers to win a duel every time they touch the puck. Over sixty minutes, the first team has the puck more. **Spacing is a large part of possession, not a footnote to skill** — this is the reasoning behind the argument, not a measured result, and no study is quoted for it. See Time and Space for the flip side — what the carrier does with the options once they exist.

Why this is the hardest thing to learn

Because it is invisible. A great pass is obvious. The teammate whose positioning made the pass possible did their work three seconds earlier, twelve metres away, and nobody claps. Most players

never get feedback on their spacing, so most players never fix it.

2. The support triangle

The rule: the puck carrier should always have at least two passing options, at different angles and different distances.

Two options is the minimum because one is coverable. Different angles is the crucial half of the sentence — two options in the same direction are effectively one option.

Why a triangle and not a line

Never	String three teammates in a straight line — one stick blade in one lane kills two options at once
Action	Pull one of the three off the line into the middle, so the lanes diverge
Key	A triangle is the smallest shape where all three corners have two teammates at different angles
Goal	Keep a shape that survives the pass — a triangle rotates and stays connected, a line must be re-formed
Mindset	The triangle is not a formation you set up; it is a shape you keep while everything moves

Put three teammates in a straight line — say all three strung up the boards — and look at what a defender can do. One defender standing in that line is between the carrier and *both* receivers. A single stick blade in a single lane kills two options at once. The line is the cheapest shape in hockey to defend.

Now pull one of those three off the line, into the middle. The three players form a triangle, and three things become true at once:

1. **No single defender can be in both lanes.** The lanes now diverge. Covering one means turning your body away from the other.
2. **Every player has two teammates at different angles.** A triangle is the smallest shape where that is true of all three corners simultaneously — which means whichever corner ends up with the puck, the support requirement is already satisfied.

3. **The shape survives the pass.** When the puck moves from corner A to corner B, you still have a triangle. Nobody has to sprint to rebuild it. A line, by contrast, has to be completely re-formed after every pass.

That third point is the one that matters most in a real game. The triangle is not a formation you set up; it is a shape you *keep* while everything moves. As the puck travels, the triangle rotates, stretches and tilts, but it stays connected.

The triangle is a minimum, not a maximum

Key With five skaters you are not building one triangle, you are building overlapping ones

Position Three players form the immediate support triangle around the puck

Position A fourth provides width on the far side; a fifth sits above the play as the safety

With five skaters you are not building one triangle, you are building overlapping ones. Realistically, three players form the immediate support triangle around the puck, a fourth provides width on the far side, and a fifth sits above the play as the safety. More on those roles in sections 5 and 6.

3. Support distance

Support has a working range. Outside it in either direction, you are not supporting — you are decoration.

Too close

Never Support from inside a stick's reach of your teammate's checker — one body then guards two of you

Risk Standing in the carrier's escape route shrinks their world when they need somewhere to turn into

Risk Receive from two metres away and their forechecker is on you before the puck settles

Key Supporting too close moves the problem, it does not solve it

- **One defender covers both of you.** If you are within a stick's reach of your teammate's checker, that checker is guarding two players with one body. You have handed the defence a

free man elsewhere.

- **You take away the carrier's escape.** A puck carrier fighting for space needs somewhere to turn into. If you are standing in it, you have shrunk their world.
- **You inherit the same pressure.** Receive a pass from two metres away and the forechecker who was on your teammate is on you before the puck settles. You have moved the problem, not solved it.

Too far

Risk	A long pass spends longer on the ice, giving every defender time to read it and get a stick in the lane
Risk	It arrives faster, often bouncing, and you receive it with a defender already closing
Convention	Larry Bruyere puts possession play on the short pass — "the 8-to-10-foot-or-less pass"
Key	Support does not end when the puck leaves — whoever passed to you now needs support from you

- **The pass takes too long.** A long pass spends longer on the ice, which gives every defender time to read it and get a stick in the lane. **Larry Bruyere**, a former USA Hockey Pacific District coach-in-chief, makes the point that possession play is built on the short pass: "*generally, the 40-foot pass isn't a good option. The 8-to-10-foot-or-less pass is really what the small-area games are all about.*" (He is speaking as an interviewee — the article is **Mike Doyle's**, for USA Hockey, 30 March 2017. Bruyere wrote no work on the subject; the words are his, the piece is Doyle's.)
- **A long pass is harder to receive.** It arrives faster, often bouncing, and you are receiving it with a defender already closing.
- **You arrive too late to help after the pass.** Support does not end when the puck leaves; whoever passed to you now needs support from *you*.

Practical distances

Convention	A default of roughly two to three stick lengths, 10 to 15 feet — a starting point, not a rule of hockey
Convention	8 to 10 feet when the carrier is pressured, stretching to 15 when they have time
Action	Shorten under heavy pressure, in your own zone, and below the offensive goal line
Action	Lengthen in open ice and above the offensive dots; in the neutral zone go longer and mostly lateral
Action	On wider international ice, check the rink first — distances scale, angles do not
Key	The self-test is time, not distance — would the puck reach you before that defender does?

There is no governing body that publishes a support distance, and coaches differ. What follows is a widely-taught rule of thumb, not a rule of hockey — treat it as a starting point and let your coach adjust it.

A useful default is roughly two to three stick lengths — call it 3 to 5 metres, 10 to 15 feet. A senior stick is about 1.5 metres, so you can pace this on the ice without a tape measure. That range is close enough for a hard, flat, one-second pass and far enough that one defender cannot mark both of you.

Note the tension with the one sourced number. Bruyere's "8-to-10-foot-or-less pass" above is *tighter* than this default, and deliberately so: he is describing small-area, heavy-pressure possession play, which is the "shorter" end of the table below. Read the two together as a range rather than a contradiction — **8 to 10 feet when the carrier is pressured, stretching to 15 when they have time.** Where they conflict, the sourced figure is the more defensible one; the 10-to-15 default is coaching rule of thumb.

Then adjust:

Situation	Adjust support distance	Why
Heavy pressure, carrier on the boards	Shorter — closer to two stick lengths	The carrier has no time; the pass must be immediate. Short and safe beats good and late.
Carrier has time, open ice	Longer	You can afford the extra half-second, and the extra distance stretches the defence.
Defensive zone	Shorter and tighter	Turnovers here become chances against immediately. Connectedness beats ambition. See Breakouts.
Neutral zone	Longer, and mostly lateral	You want width to stretch their line across the ice, and you have room to receive.
Offensive zone, below the goal line	Shorter	Everything below the dots happens in tight quarters at speed.
Offensive zone, above the dots	Longer	Point players are deliberately far from the puck; that is what makes them uncovered.
Wider international ice	Slightly longer — but check the rink first	IIHF Rule 1.2 sanctions a sheet 60 m long and 26 m to 30 m wide . At the wide end (30 m $\approx$ 98 ft) you have about thirteen feet more width than an NHL rink and the same tactical shape occupies more ground. At the narrow end (26 m $\approx$ 85.3 ft) it is essentially NHL width and nothing changes. "International ice is wider" is only true of the wide end of the range. Distances scale; angles do not.

 **If you play in Britain, this points the wrong way.** The 2025-26 In-House Rules authorise rinks "*with a non-standard playing surface (below 56 m $\times$ 26 m)*" for all levels of hockey, **except** Sutton in England and Coatbridge and Limekilns Road in Scotland, which are permitted up to U16 only — an authorisation that is short of IIHF Rule 1.2 on **both** dimensions — so the likely correction here is smaller and shorter, not wider. Measure your rink; UK and England Rules has the detail.

The self-test is not distance, it is time. Ask: *if my teammate released the puck right now, would it reach me before that defender does?* If yes, you are in range. If no, you are decoration.

4. Support angles: behind, level and ahead

Distance tells you how far. Angle tells you what kind of option you are. There are three, and they do different jobs.

Support behind the puck — the outlet

Position	Between the puck and your own net, or at least further back than the carrier
Goal	Offer a guaranteed, low-risk reset into space the opposition has already vacated
Key	This is the option that exists when the other two are covered
Risk	With nobody behind the puck, the only answer to good pressure is a dump-out — a turnover you chose
Action	Whoever is lowest provides it — usually a defenceman or the centre in your own end
Action	Call for it; the verbal cue in most teams' vocabulary is "back"

You are between the puck and your own net, or at least further back than the carrier.

- **What it offers:** a guaranteed, low-risk reset. The pass goes backwards into space the opposition has already vacated, which means it is the least contested pass on the ice.
- **Why it is non-negotiable:** it is the option that exists when the other two are covered. A team with no support behind the puck has no answer to good pressure except dumping it away, and dumping it away is a turnover you chose.
- **Who provides it:** whoever is lowest. In your own end that is usually a defenceman or the centre; in the offensive zone it is often the player who just came off the wall.

The verbal cue for this in most teams' vocabulary is "**back**" — see On-Ice Communication.

Support level with the puck — the lateral option

Position	Roughly the same distance from your own net as the carrier, but across from them
Goal	Change the side — move the puck to the half where their strong-side coverage is thinnest
Read	In the offensive and neutral zones a pass across the face of people is normal and high-value
Never	Pass across the middle in your own defensive zone — an interception there is a point-blank chance
Action	In your own end, take the lateral option behind your own net, not through the slot

You are roughly the same distance from your own net as the carrier, but across from them.

- **What it offers:** a change of side. Most defensive pressure is organised strong-side — that is, concentrated on the half of the ice the puck is on. A lateral pass moves the puck to the half where their coverage is thinnest, and forces every defender to reset.
- **The catch:** a lateral pass crosses in front of people. In the offensive and neutral zones that is a normal, high-value play. **In your own defensive zone a pass across the middle is the highest-risk pass in hockey**, because an interception there is a point-blank chance. The lateral option in your own end goes *behind your own net*, not through the slot.

Support ahead of the puck — the attacking option

Position	Further up ice than the carrier
Goal	Gain territory — this is the only one of the three angles that gains ground
Risk	The most interceptable of the three, and if it fails you are behind the play and cannot recover
Rule	Offside needs both skates completely over the line before the puck completely crosses it (NHL Rule 83)
Rule	A raised trail skate is onside under NHL and IIHF rules, but USA Hockey Rule 630(a) requires skate contact
Action	Time your entry rather than parking in the zone

You are further up ice than the carrier.

- **What it offers:** territory. This is the only one of the three that gains ground, and gaining ground is how you score.
- **The cost:** it is the most interceptable, and if it fails you are behind the play and cannot recover.
- **The offside constraint:** a pass to a teammate ahead of you into the offensive zone only works if they are onside. **Offside requires both skates to have completely crossed the blue line before the puck completely crosses it.** One skate on or behind the line keeps them onside, and a skate in the air over the neutral zone counts as onside **under NHL and IIHF rules — not under USA Hockey, where Rule 630(a) requires skate contact.** So the ahead-of-the-puck option at the blue line is real but requires the receiver to time their entry, not just park in the zone.

The principle: all three at once

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| Goal | Have all three angles available simultaneously — that is the actual content of "good spacing" |
| Risk | All behind is safety with no attack; all ahead leaves no outlet; all level goes side to side and never up |
| Action | Ask which of the three angles is currently missing, then go and be that one |

A team needs all three angles available simultaneously. This is the actual content of "good spacing".

If all your support is behind the puck, you are safe and going nowhere — you will complete lots of passes in your own end and never attack. If all your support is ahead, you have no outlet and every possession ends in a turnover under pressure. If everything is level, you can go side to side and never up.

When you find yourself skating to support, the useful question is not "am I open?" but "**which of the three angles is currently missing?**" Go and be that one.

5. Above, level and below the puck

This is the vocabulary coaches use to organise five players quickly, and it is worth learning precisely because it appears constantly in Defensive Zone Coverage, Forechecking Systems and

every backchecking instruction you will ever be given.

Above the puck means between the puck and *your own* net. **Below the puck** means the puck is between you and your own net. **Level** means neither.

Two things about this vocabulary trip people up:

- **It is not about the offensive or defensive end.** "Above" always means goal-side of the puck relative to the net you are defending, in every zone. A forward deep in the offensive corner is *below* the puck if the puck is at the point.
- **It flips instantly on a turnover.** The moment possession changes, the players who were usefully below the puck attacking are now stranded below the puck defending. This is why the concept matters: it is the same word describing an asset and a liability, and only possession decides which.

The safety rule

Key	Someone must always be above the puck — in every zone, at all times
Goal	One player is not part of the attack; they are the insurance against the attack failing
Convention	Under the house default — low zone collapse, 2-1-2 forecheck — both defencemen hold the points unless one activates
Options	A 1-2-2 puts two forwards above as a layered wall; a single-high structure makes the weak-side winger the safety
Action	Before you go below the puck, know who is above it
Key	F1, F2 and F3 are roles defined by order of arrival, not fixed people

Someone must always be above the puck. In every zone, at all times, one player is not part of the attack — they are the insurance against the attack failing.

Who it is depends on the system, and this is a coaching choice, not a law:

- Under the **house default** used throughout — a low zone collapse (zone) defensive-zone scheme with a 2-1-2 forecheck — the convention in the offensive zone is that both defencemen stay above the puck at the points unless one of them deliberately activates, and the third forward supports high. Note that **F1, F2 and F3 are roles defined by order of arrival, not fixed people**: F1 is whoever gets there first.

- Under a **1-2-2 forecheck**, the deepest forward is alone below the puck and two forwards sit above as a layered wall, so the "above the puck" population is larger and the forecheck is less aggressive.
- Some teams run a **single-high** offensive-zone structure where one defenceman is licensed to walk the line and the weak-side winger becomes the safety. Others insist both defencemen hold.

Find out which one your team plays. The habit that transfers regardless of system: before you go below the puck, know who is above it. As Defender puts it, one defenceman is always above the puck — which of you it is can change; that there is one cannot.

6. Width and depth

Support has two dimensions and amateur teams only use one. **Depth** is spread up and down the ice; **width** is spread across it. Depth mostly happens by accident because players naturally string out along the direction of play. Width has to be deliberate.

Why wingers stay wide

Position	Wide on the boards in the neutral zone, even when it feels useless — that feeling is the point
Key	Two defenders cannot both cover the middle and both cover the boards
Goal	Occupy a defender who has to stay wide with you, so the middle stays open for somebody else
Never	Drift inside to get closer to the play — your checker drifts in too and the middle closes
Risk	Drifting in gains you no option; it deletes one for a teammate

A winger hugging the boards in the neutral zone often feels useless — they are far from the puck and rarely get it. That feeling is the point.

Two defenders cannot both cover the middle and both cover the boards. A winger standing wide occupies a defender who must stay wide with them. That defender is now not in the middle. The space in the middle — the most valuable real estate on the ice — exists *because* someone is standing somewhere else.

The moment that winger drifts inside to get closer to the play, their checker drifts inside too, and the middle closes. The winger has not gained an option; they have deleted one for somebody else. The Winger document makes the same point from the position's side: drifting into the middle collapses your line's spacing.

The counterintuitive rule: to help a battle, move away from it

Never	Skate into a board battle your teammate already controls — you crowd the exits and bring your checker
Action	Move to open ice about five metres away with your stick down, so the puck has somewhere to go
Read	Go in to win the puck when it is a genuine 50-50 scramble and nobody has it
Read	Stay out and offer an exit when your teammate has the puck and is trying to survive
Convention	Many teams assign a support player to arrive at the wall — find out if that is your job

Your teammate is pinned on the boards in a two-player battle. Every instinct says go and help.

Usually, don't — at least not into the battle. Consider what actually decides that battle. Your teammate needs to get the puck *out* of the pile. If you skate into the pile, you have added a body to a space where there is already no room, and brought your checker with you, so the exits are now more crowded than before. If instead you move to open ice five metres away with your stick down, the puck has somewhere to go — and the instant it squirts free, you have it with time.

The exception — and it is a real one — is when the battle is a genuine loose-puck scramble your teammate cannot win alone, or when you are the designated second player in your team's board-battle system (many teams do assign a support player to arrive at the wall). See Body Contact and Battles. The distinction: go in to *win the puck* when it is genuinely 50-50 and nobody has it; stay out and offer an exit when your teammate already has it and is trying to survive.

Depth means somebody deep and somebody high

Position	In the offensive zone, one player below the goal line and one at the blue line
Goal	Stretch the zone vertically so the defence must choose which end of it to defend
Never	Put all five between the dots and the goal line — that is a scrum with a net behind it, not an attack

In the offensive zone, depth means having a player below the goal line *and* a player at the blue line. That vertical stretch is what forces the defence to choose which end of the zone to defend. Five players between the dots and the goal line is not an attack, it is a scrum with a net behind it.

7. The "puck magnet" problem

Of all the habits that separate beginner from intermediate hockey, this is the one coaches name most often. (An observation from coaching material, not a measured ranking.)

Watch any young or new team and the puck looks like it has gravity. Wherever it goes, bodies converge. Ten players end up inside a five-metre circle, nobody can move, the puck squirts out to whichever team happens to have someone outside the pile, and the whole thing repeats twenty metres away.

Why players do it

Three reasons, all of them understandable:

1. **The puck is where the action is.** Watching the puck is what your eyes do by default. Skating toward the thing you are looking at is what your legs do by default.
2. **It feels like effort.** Skating hard at the puck looks and feels like trying. Skating hard away from the puck to a spot where you might not get it feels like slacking. Coaches who reward visible effort accidentally train this in.
3. **Nobody wants to be the player who wasn't there.** Being near the puck feels safe. If it goes wrong at least you were involved.

Why it is wrong

Risk You do not arrive alone — you arrive as two players, in a space that was already crowded

Key A teammate five metres away is an option; one metre away, inside the same checking bubble, is not

Risk You vacate the empty space the puck is about to come out into, and it belongs to the other team

Risk Converging leaves nobody above the puck, which turns a routine turnover into an odd-man rush

- **You bring your checker with you.** You do not arrive alone. You arrive as two players, in a space that was already crowded. You have made the area more congested, not less.
- **You remove an option, you don't add one.** A teammate five metres away is an option. A teammate one metre away, inside the same checking bubble, is not.
- **You vacate the space the puck is about to go to.** Pucks come out of piles. They come out into empty space. If everyone is in the pile, the empty space belongs to the other team.
- **It leaves nobody above the puck.** Converging is how five players end up below the puck at the same time, which is how a routine turnover becomes an odd-man rush the other way. See Defending the Rush.

How to train yourself out of it

Action Every time the puck moves, ask "who is closest?" — if it is not you, your job is the space

Key How many players pressure is decided by your system, not improvised — learn your role before you move

Action Skate to where the puck will be available — up the wall or behind the net — not to where it is

Action Use cross-ice and half-ice small-area games, where crowding loses you the puck immediately

Action Ask to be filmed — spacing is the one thing you cannot self-assess in the moment

- **Adopt a default question.** Every time the puck moves, ask "*who is closest?*" If it is not you, your job is not the puck — your job is the space. This single question, asked reflexively, fixes most of it.

- **Know how many of you are meant to be pressuring — it is not always one.** The habit to break is *everybody* converging, not the second pressurer. How many go is set by your system: under a **1-2-2** one forward pressures and the rest hold their layers, but under the house-default **2-1-2** two forwards go deep on purpose and F3 reads behind them; man-on-man coverage in your own end is different again. Forechecking Systems and Playing Without the Puck both state it that way. What is invariant is that the number is **decided, not improvised**: everyone not in a pressuring role is in a support or coverage role. Learn which one you are before you move.
 - **Skate to where the puck will be available, not where it is.** The puck is in a corner battle; it will emerge either up the wall or behind the net. Go and stand in one of those two places. See Scanning and Anticipation.
 - **Use small-area games.** Cross-ice and half-ice games with restricted space punish converging immediately and obviously — you physically cannot succeed by crowding, so the habit breaks itself. This is the mechanism the coaching literature on constrained practice keeps returning to: standing still or arriving late to support visibly loses you the puck, so the lesson lands without a lecture. See Practice and Development.
 - **Ask to be filmed.** Spacing is the one aspect of your game you genuinely cannot self-assess in the moment, because you cannot see yourself in the pattern.
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8. Support in each zone

The principle is constant; the shape it takes is not.

Defensive zone — the breakout triangle

Targets	The strong-side winger on the wall, roughly level with the faceoff dot — the short up option
Targets	The centre, swinging low through the middle and curling toward the same side
Targets	The defence partner on the far side, reached behind the net — never through the slot
Position	The weak-side winger higher and wider than everyone, for the width that stops one side being loaded
Priority	In your own end the safe outlet outranks the attacking option — support short, keep the angles safe
Action	Use the goalie as support — best view on the ice, no puck to look at
Rule	Firing it the length of the ice is icing: defensive-zone draw, no line change (NHL Rule 81.4) and no timeout (Rule 87.1 — Rule 81 contains no timeout provision)
Rule	Both consequences are NHL and IIHF only; USA Hockey imposes neither, and shorthanded you may ice it at all (NHL 81.6, USA Hockey 624(b)(1)) — Special Teams owns the carve-outs
Rule	Under NHL, KHL and IIHF rules the goalie may play the puck behind the goal line only inside the trapezoid, unless keeping skate contact with the crease (NHL Rule 1.8; 27.8, 63.2(viii))
Key	Most rec, beer-league and youth associations have no trapezoid — there your goalie is a genuine fourth breakout option
Rule	The goalkeeper's restricted area is IIHF Rule 27.7, not the NHL's 27.8 — and in England and Wales its status is unsettled, because England Ice Hockey's Rules & Regulations 22.3 say the restricted area is "not currently enforced"; keep your goalie inside it and ask your league

Your defenceman retrieves the puck behind your net. Before they turn, they need options, and the standard set is three:

- **The strong-side winger on the wall**, roughly level with the faceoff dot on the boards. This is the up option, and it is short. See Breakouts.
- **The centre**, swinging low through the middle and curling toward the same side — the middle option, and the one that turns a breakout into an attack.
- **The defence partner** on the far side, reached *behind the net*, below the goal line. Never through the slot.

Those three plus the carrier form a support structure with an outlet at three different angles. Add the weak-side winger, who is normally higher and wider than everyone else, and you have the width that stops the defence loading one side.

The defensive-zone-specific rule: your support must be short and your angles must be safe. Everything else in this document says "create the attacking option". In your own end, the safe outlet outranks it. A tidy exit with possession is a win; a clever exit that fails is a goal against.

Why spacing is worth the effort here: the alternative is icing. If nobody gives the retriever a short option, the only remaining play is to fire the puck the length of the ice — and under **NHL Rule 81** that stops play, brings the faceoff back into your own end, and forbids your line from changing (and your team from taking a timeout) before the draw. That is the price of a breakout with no support. The one general escape is that a shorthanded team may ice the puck without a whistle, **but do not treat that as unconditional** — NHL Rule 81.6 withdraws it from a team shorthanded by a *major* penalty that has left nobody on the penalty bench, and USA Hockey grants it only from Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult (Rule 624(b)(1)), so below those levels a shorthanded team cannot ice the puck at all. Special Teams owns that rule and both carve-outs; take it from there rather than from memory.

The goalie is part of your support. They have the best view on the ice and no puck to look at. "Man on", "time", "reverse" — the calls in On-Ice Communication are how the carrier finds out which of the three options is actually there. Note that under NHL, KHL and IIHF rules the goalie may only *play* the puck behind the goal line inside the trapezoid — the markings are set out in **NHL Rule 1.8**, and playing the puck outside them is a two-minute delay-of-game minor under **Rules 27.8 and 63.2(viii)**. The sole exception is a goalie who plays the puck while **maintaining skate contact with the crease** — there is no teammate-based exception. Most rec, beer and youth leagues have no trapezoid, in which case your goalie can be a genuine fourth breakout option behind the net rather than only a voice. 🇬🇧 In England and Wales, how much of a support they can be behind the goal line is unsettled — in Scotland and BUIHA hockey the In-House Rules do not amend Rule 27, so 27.7 reads as live: England Ice Hockey's *Rules & Regulations* 22.3 say the restricted area is "*not currently enforced*" while the In-House Rules are silent, so keep them inside it and ask your league (UK and England Rules).

Neutral zone — three lanes

Position	One player in each of the three lanes — strong-side boards, middle, weak-side boards
Convention	One player per lane is the usual default, a coaching choice rather than a law
Risk	Two players in the same lane can be covered by one defender — "same lane, same checker"
Options	A 1-3-1 regroup stacks the middle lane deliberately, to overload the seam and pull their defence in
Action	Ask whether your team spreads or stacks — identical for one stride, then opposite decisions
Technique	Different lane, different speed, on curved routes so you receive already facing forward
Goal	Stretch the ice with width, so their forwards and defence cannot squeeze the middle

The neutral zone is organised by **lanes**: the strong-side boards lane, the middle lane, and the weak-side boards lane.

The usual default is one player per lane, and it is a coaching choice rather than a law. Two players in the same lane can be covered by one defender — that is precisely the "same lane, same checker" failure, and it is why most teams spread one player across each lane. The realistic alternative is a **1-3-1 regroup**, which deliberately stacks the middle lane with a low centre and a high middle support in order to overload the seam and pull the opposing defence inward, accepting that one checker can see both. **Find out whether your team spreads or stacks in the neutral zone** — the two look identical for the first stride and then require opposite decisions.

The supporting principle here is **"different lane, different speed"**: you want a lateral option across the ice and a change of pace, so the defence cannot set a single gap that handles everyone. Curved routes into open ice beat straight lines, because a curve lets you receive the puck already facing forward.

Width here is doing the heavy lifting. A stretched neutral zone is one where their forwards and defence cannot be close enough to each other to squeeze the middle. See Neutral Zone Systems and Zone Entries.

Offensive zone — below, level, above

Position	Someone below the puck, someone level with it and someone above it, at all times
Position	Below is behind or beside the net; level is the half-wall or slot; above is the point and often a third forward high
Key	Support here is rotation, not position — the puck moves round the perimeter faster than anyone can skate
Action	When you leave one of those layers, someone fills it — the layer must stay occupied, not your spot
Convention	Rotation rules are a coaching choice and change who may go below the puck — ask which your team plays

The offensive zone is where support becomes rotation rather than position, because the puck moves around the perimeter faster than anyone can skate.

The organising requirement is that at all times you have **someone below the puck, someone level with it, and someone above it** — the same three-angle rule from section 4, expressed in offensive-zone geography. **Below** is usually behind or beside the net, the reset when the wall play dies; **level** is the half-wall (the boards level with the faceoff dot) or a slot player, giving the lateral option; **above** is the point and often the third forward high, the safety and the shot.

When you leave one of those layers, someone fills it. This is the rotation, and it is the part amateur teams skip. Nobody's position is theirs; it is the *layer* that must stay occupied.

The full treatment — the attack triangle, how the shape rotates as the puck moves around the perimeter, the defencemen's three depths, and the realistic alternatives to the house default (overload, five-man rotation, 1-3-1 spread) — is in **Offensive Zone Play §3, "Offensive Zone Structure"**, and is not repeated here. The rotation rules are a coaching choice and the answer changes who is allowed to be below the puck, so **ask which your team plays.**

9. Timing over position

Standing in the right place is worth much less than arriving at the right place at the right moment. Two reasons, and both are large.

A stationary open player is easy to cover. If you get to the good spot early and stop, the defence has as long as they like to walk over and stand next to you. You have converted an open teammate into a marked one by being early.

A moving player receives better. The pass arrives while you already have speed, so you can attack immediately rather than spending a stride accelerating. A stationary receiver in traffic is a turnover waiting to be delivered.

Supporting late

Action	Delay deliberately, so you arrive with speed as the puck arrives
Technique	"Puck first, feet second" — let the carrier commit a defender before you launch
Goal	Cross the space at full speed while the defender is stationary with their head turned to the puck
Key	A late arrival with speed is the hardest thing in hockey to defend
Rule	The puck must cross the blue line before or as your second skate does (NHL Rule 83 offside)
Never	Delay in your own zone — the carrier needs the outlet now, and a late arrival there is an absent one

The counterintuitive skill is **deliberately delaying so that you arrive with speed as the puck arrives.**

The cue used in neutral-zone coaching is "**puck first, feet second**" — let the carrier commit a defender before you launch. A half-second delay before you accelerate does three things: it stops you drifting offside at the blue line, it means the defender's head has already turned toward the puck when you go, and it means you cross the space at full speed while they are stationary.

This is what people mean when they say a player "arrives late." It is not a criticism. **A late arrival with speed is the hardest thing in hockey to defend**, because by the time the defenceman reacts you are already past the point where they could have set a gap. The trailer on a rush, the defenceman jumping into the slot, the weak-side winger cutting to the back post — all the same mechanism.

The offside constraint bites here and is worth being exact about: the puck must cross the blue line before, or at the same moment as, your second skate. Both skates over before the puck is offside. One skate on or behind the line and you are fine. Timing your route so the puck beats you across is the whole skill.

When not to delay: in your own zone, where the carrier needs the outlet *now* and a late arrival is just an absent one. Supporting late is an attacking tool.

10. Moving to create a passing lane

Being open and being available are different things, and confusing them is why players complain that nobody passes to them.

Unmarked means no defender is standing next to you. **Available** means the pass can physically be completed. Availability needs three things at once:

1. **A clear lane.** No stick, no skate, no body between the puck and you. A defender ten metres away who happens to be standing on the line between you and the carrier has taken you out of the play just as thoroughly as one who is marking you.
2. **A target.** Stick on the ice, blade flat, angled so the puck can be received. A raised stick is an invisible one. If your blade is not down, you are not a passing option no matter how much space you have.
3. **A carrier who knows you exist.** Their head is often down. Use your voice — "here", "middle", "back". The On-Ice Communication document is largely a list of ways to convert yourself from open into available.

It is the receiver's job, not the passer's

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Mindset | Most players wait to be found; good support players go and make themselves findable |
| Action | If the lane is blocked, move — even a metre puts you the other side of the obstruction |
| Action | Move to the passing angle, not to the space — a small gap with a clean line beats a big unusable one |
| Action | When a forechecker seals the carrier on the boards, get below or behind them, where the seal does not reach |
| Key | Keep adjusting as the puck moves — most failed support is a player who found a good spot once and stopped |

This is the mindset shift. Most players wait to be found. Good support players go and make themselves findable.

Practically, that means:

- **If the lane is blocked, move — even a metre.** Shifting one stride sideways can put you either side of the obstruction. You do not need to be more open, you need to be *differently* placed.
 - **Move to the passing angle, not to the space.** The biggest patch of empty ice is often unusable because nothing can be delivered into it. A smaller gap with a clean line to the puck is worth more.
 - **Change the angle when the carrier is under pressure.** If a forechecker is sealing them against the boards, the lane up the wall is gone. Get below them or behind them, where the seal does not reach.
 - **Keep adjusting as the puck moves.** Your lane was clean two seconds ago. Almost every failed support play is a player who found a good spot once and then stopped updating it. See *Playing Without the Puck*.
-

11. Support when defending

The principle inverts cleanly, and the inversion is the part that most defensive breakdowns come from.

Attacking, the second player's job is to give the carrier an option. Defending, the second player's job is to support the first defender — not to duplicate them.

Layering, not converging

Never	Skate at the carrier your teammate is already pressuring — both of you are beaten by the same pass
Position	Behind and to the side of your teammate, covering the space and the passing lane they cannot
Risk	Two players on one puck means the other three cover four of them, and it is the free man who scores
Read	Which way your teammate is angling the carrier — stand where the carrier goes if they get beaten
Technique	Close enough to take over the check, far enough not to be beaten by the same move
Action	Talk — "I've got your back", "you have time", "man on"; the layer only works if they know it is there
Convention	A double-team is a coaching decision, commonly allowed below your own goal line — ask where and when

Your teammate is pressuring the puck carrier. You are the second defender. There are two things you can do:

- **Converge** — skate at the same puck carrier. Now two of you are attacking one puck, both committed, both beaten by the same pass. An opponent has been left free somewhere by definition, because you have used two bodies on one player.
- **Layer** — position yourself behind and to the side of your teammate, covering the space and the passing lane they cannot. You are the answer to what happens *if* they get beaten, and you are also the reason the carrier cannot simply pass out of the pressure.

Converging is not a small error, and it is worth being blunt about the arithmetic: **two players on one puck means the other three of you are covering four of them**, and it is the free man who scores.

Three things make the layer an actual position rather than a vague instruction to hang back:

- **Read which way your teammate is angling the carrier, and stand where the carrier goes if they get beaten.** You are covering their mistake before it happens, not reacting to it afterwards.
- **Be close enough to take over the check, far enough not to be beaten by the same move.** (The distance is below.)

- **Talk.** "I've got your back," "you have time," "man on." The layer only works if the pressuring player knows it is there — see On-Ice Communication.

Layering is almost always correct. It is the structure inside every named defensive system: a forechecking F1 pressures while F2 supports on the puck-side and reads the escape; a defensive-zone pressure player attacks the puck while the next player covers the lane behind them; a penalty-killing box or diamond has each player covering the passing option behind the one who steps up. (Reminder on precision: a **box** is two forwards high and two defencemen low, with no single top player, while a **diamond** has a single apex.)

The exception is a deliberate double-team, which is a coaching decision, not a default. Many teams will send two players at a puck along the boards *below the goal line* in the defensive zone, because a turnover there is contained by the net and the boards. Under the house default low zone collapse, the second player supports rather than doubling except in that low-corner situation. **Ask your coach where and when doubling is allowed** — freelancing it is how backdoor goals happen.

The same distance question, inverted

Position	Offset diagonally from the first defender, not directly behind them
Convention	A similar two-to-three-stick-lengths range — near enough to arrive in about a second
Risk	Too close and one move beats you both; too far and the carrier skates through the gap between you
Convention	Whether you may hold the layer at all is system-dependent — ask how your team's coverage changes it

Too close to the first defender and you are both beaten by one move. Too far and the carrier simply skates through the gap between you before you can close. The layered defender wants to be near enough to arrive in about a second and far enough that a single deke does not beat both of you — in practice, a similar two-to-three-stick-lengths range, offset diagonally rather than directly behind.

Whether you are allowed to hold that layer at all is system-dependent, and the answer changes between zone, man-to-man and hybrid coverage. Playing Without the Puck → Layer, do not duplicate sets out how the job changes under each and what to ask your coach; Defensive Zone Coverage is the full treatment.

12. How to see it

Spacing is invisible until you decide to look at it, and then it is the most obvious thing on the ice.

Watching a game

- Action** Stop watching the puck — for one full shift, watch a single player who does not have it
- Action** Count the options every time a player receives the puck; good teams average two or more
- Action** Look at the shape, not the players — could you draw a triangle around the puck?
- Action** Watch the far side; the weak-side winger is the best single indicator of spacing discipline
- Action** Count how many are below the puck when possession changes — it predicts the next thirty seconds
- Action** Watch the trailer on a rush, not the two who carried it in

Stop watching the puck. For one full shift, deliberately watch a single player who does not have it. This is uncomfortable and it is the fastest way to learn the game. See [How to Watch Hockey](#).

Then look for these:

- **Count the options.** Every time a player receives the puck, count how many teammates could receive a pass right now. Good teams average two or more. Watch what happens to possession when the count is zero.
- **Look at the shape, not the players.** Are the five making a spread pattern with people at different depths and widths, or a clump? Freeze the picture in your head and ask whether you could draw a triangle around the puck.
- **Watch the far side of the ice.** The weak-side winger is the best single indicator of a team's spacing discipline. Are they wide and high, holding the ice open? Or have they drifted in to watch the puck?
- **Count how many are below the puck** when possession changes. That number predicts whether the next thirty seconds are a rush against.
- **Watch the trailer on a rush.** Notice how often the dangerous chance comes from the third player arriving late, not from the two who carried it in.

Self-checking on the ice

- Key** One question, asked constantly — "where are my two options?"
- Action** On the puck, name the two before you receive it; if you can only name one, buy time or move it on
- Action** Off the puck, ask whether you are one of somebody's two options right now — if not, move
- Action** After every pass, go again — pass and move is how the support triangle survives the pass

One question, asked constantly: **"Where are my two options?"**

- **When you have the puck** — before you receive it, ideally — name the two. If you can only name one, you already know your first move: buy time and let a second appear, or manufacture it by moving the puck to someone who has two.
- **When you don't have the puck** — ask *am I one of somebody's two options right now?* If the carrier looked up this instant, could they give it to you? If the honest answer is no, you are not supporting, you are watching. Move.
- **After every pass you make** — the job is not finished. The player you just passed to needs two options and you are the closest candidate. **Pass and move** is not a nicety, it is how the support triangle survives the pass.

Common Mistakes

- **Skating to the puck instead of to the space around it.** The instinct is universal and it is wrong more often than it is right. You arrive with your checker; you crowd the carrier; you vacate the space the puck is about to reach.
- **Supporting from too close.** You feel involved, but one defender is now covering two of you, and you have taken away the carrier's escape route.
- **Supporting from too far.** The pass takes a second to arrive, a stick gets into the lane, and you were never really an option.
- **Two players in the same lane.** In the neutral zone especially: one checker handles both of you, and one of you was wasted.

- **Standing still in the right place.** Correct position, arrived too early, now marked. The defence had all the time in the world to walk over.
 - **All support on one angle.** Three teammates all behind the puck is safety with no attack; three all ahead of it is an attack with no reset. You need all three angles at once.
 - **Nobody above the puck.** Everyone chases the play, the puck turns over, and it is a rush the other way. This is the mistake that shows up on the scoresheet.
 - **Wingers drifting into the middle.** It feels like getting involved. It closes the space that made the middle valuable, and it puts you in your centre's lane.
 - **Piling into a board battle your teammate already controls.** You brought a defender into the one area that needed to stay clear — the exit.
 - **Two defenders attacking the same puck carrier — when nobody called for it.** Both beaten by one pass, and by definition someone is unmarked. Support the first defender rather than duplicating them. The exception is a **called** double-team, usually below your own goal line where a turnover is contained; that is a coaching decision, not something you decide alone.
 - **Stick off the ice while "open".** No blade, no target, no pass. You were unmarked and unavailable, which counts as absent.
 - **Finding a good spot once and then stopping.** The puck moved. Your spot was correct three seconds ago. Support is continuous, not a destination.
 - **Assuming your team's rotation rules.** Who is allowed below the puck in the offensive zone is a coaching choice and varies. Guessing is how you end up as the extra man deep with nobody home.
-

Key Takeaways

1. **A puck carrier with two options beats a puck carrier with none, regardless of skill.** That sentence is the whole document. Everything else is detail about how to be one of the two.
2. **Two options are only two if they are at different angles.** Two teammates in the same lane are one option, because one defender covers both.
3. **The triangle is the shape that survives the pass.** A line can be killed by one stick and has to be rebuilt after every pass; a triangle rotates and stays connected.
4. **Support has a working range — roughly two to three stick lengths as a default, shorter under pressure and in your own end, longer in open ice.** The real test is

time, not distance: would the pass beat the checker?

5. **You need support behind, level with, and ahead of the puck at the same time, and somebody is always above it.** Behind is the outlet you always need, level changes the side, ahead gains ground. Which player takes the high job depends on your team's system — that there is one does not. Ask which layer is missing and go be it.
 6. **The way to help a teammate in a battle is usually to move away from them.** They need somewhere to put the puck, not another body in the pile. Defending, the same logic usually runs in reverse: layer behind the first defender rather than converging on the same puck, because two players on one carrier are both beaten by one pass. **"Usually" is doing work there** — a deliberate double-team below your own goal line is a common coaching instruction, and man-to-man coverage can require you to leave the layer entirely, so ask where and when your team doubles.
 7. **Wingers stay wide because the middle only exists if someone is holding the outside.** Drifting in to get closer to the play deletes the space that made the play possible. How far that stretches — and who is allowed below the puck — is a coaching choice, so ask what your team's rotation rules are.
 8. **Arriving late with speed beats standing early in the right place.** "Puck first, feet second" — let the carrier commit a defender, then go.
 9. **Being unmarked is not being available.** You need a clear lane, a stick on the ice, and a carrier who knows you are there. That is the receiver's job, not the passer's.
 10. **Ask yourself "where are my two options?" every few seconds.** On the puck and off it. It is the single habit that turns positioning into support.
-

A note on verification: the tactical principles here are drawn from published coaching material and are widely taught, but **there is no governing body that publishes support distances or spacing standards** — the figures given as rules of thumb are coaching guidance and vary by coach, level and ice size. The one sourced distance is Larry Bruyere's "8-to-10-foot-or-less pass" as the basis of small-area possession play. The NHL rink width of 85 feet is verified against **NHL Rule 1.2**: "*The official size of the rink shall be two hundred feet (200') long and eighty-five feet (85') wide.*" The international sheet is verified against **IIHF Rule 1.2**: "*The official size of the rink shall be 60m long and 26m to 30m wide*" — a range whose narrow end is essentially NHL width. See Rink Map and Glossary. Offside, icing and trapezoid statements are cited to the rulebook inline.

Time and Space

Rule set: Written to NHL rules. Where IIHF, USA Hockey or typical rec-league rules differ in a way that changes how you play, it is flagged inline. **Playing in Britain? The IIHF flags are yours** — every level of UK hockey runs the IIHF book, amended locally; see [UK and England Rules](#).

RELATED

[Puck Support and Spacing](#)

[Scanning and Anticipation](#)

[Playing Without the Puck](#)

[Defending the Rush](#)

[Body Contact and Battles](#)

[Zone Entries](#)

[Rink Map and Glossary](#)

[UK and England Rules](#)

Overview

Hockey has one currency, and it is time and space. Every tactic in this guide — every forecheck, every breakout, every gap, every fake — is either a way of getting more of it for yourself or a way of taking it off the other team. This document names that currency and teaches you how to move it around.

If you read one hockey IQ document, read this one first. It is the frame that makes the rest of this guide make sense.

1. The central idea: skill is what you do with time and space

Key	Skill is what you spend; time and space are what you earn
Goal	Create time and space with every move — a move that beats nobody and opens nothing is a habit, not a skill
Action	Grade yourself on the room you had when the puck came to you, not on your hands
Action	Look over your shoulder before you receive, turn away from pressure, put your stick in a passing lane
Mindset	Hockey IQ is a learnable habit, not a mysterious gift — and it is learnable faster than skating

Here is the reframe. **Skill is not what makes players good. Skill is what they spend.** Time and space are what they earn.

Take two players with genuinely identical hands, identical shot, identical top speed. Put them on the same line. One consistently produces; one consistently doesn't. The difference is almost never the hands. It is that the first player receives the puck with a metre and a half of clean ice and a head that is already up, and the second player receives it with a stick on their hip and no idea what is behind them. Same skill. Completely different result, because one of them had something to spend it on and the other didn't.

Garrett Szeremley, writing for the coaching resource PV Elite (<https://www.pvelitehockey.com/bulletin/timeand-space>), puts the same point more bluntly: **every move in hockey has one purpose, which is to create time and space.** A toe drag that beats nobody and opens nothing is not a skill, it is a habit. A simple shoulder fake that moves a defender's hips six inches and opens a passing lane *is* a skill, even though it would look like nothing on a highlight reel.

This has three practical consequences.

- **Stop grading yourself on your hands and start grading yourself on your room.** After a shift, ask how much space you had when the puck came to you, and what you did to earn it. That is a far more useful question than "did my move work."
- **The cheapest improvements available to you are almost all time-and-space improvements.** Looking over your shoulder before you receive costs nothing and buys you more than a year of stickhandling in the garage. So does turning away from pressure instead of into it. So does putting your stick in a passing lane.

- **Hockey IQ is not a mysterious gift.** It is the accumulated habit of manufacturing room for yourself and denying it to others. It is learnable, and it is learnable faster than skating is.

2. What "time" actually means

Key	Your time is the distance to the nearest threatening defender divided by their closing speed — a teaching model, not a measured quantity
Read	Closing speed, not distance — twenty feet closing hard is less time than three feet travelling away
Read	The hips, not the stick — a player accelerates where the hips face
Read	Feet or glide — a defender in full crossovers is committed and can be beaten by going the other way
Read	How many are arriving — one closing opponent you solve with a move, two you solve by getting rid of the puck
Action	Reverse the puck back against the flow into the ice an over-skated forechecker has just vacated

Beginners hear "you've got time" and picture seconds on a clock. That is the wrong model, and it will get you hit.

A working model: your time is the distance to the nearest threatening defender divided by the speed at which they are closing on you. Both halves matter, and the second one matters more than players expect. This is a teaching model, not a measured quantity — nobody is computing it on the ice — but it predicts the situations that surprise people.

Work through the two cases that catch players out.

You can have time with an opponent three feet away. A forechecker who has over-skated you and is now travelling away from you at speed has a closing velocity of roughly zero, or even negative. They are three feet from your body and several strides from being able to do anything about you, because before they can reach you they have to stop, turn and rebuild speed — three or four tenths of a second minimum, usually more. This is exactly the moment a **reverse** works: you send the puck back against the flow into the space the forechecker has just vacated. (A *reverse* goes back against the direction of play; a *rim* goes onward around the boards with it. They

are different plays.) The player who feels the opponent nearby and panics throws the puck away. The player who reads the closing speed calmly makes a play.

You can have no time with an opponent twenty feet away. A defenceman skating backwards at you with a tight gap, on balance, with their stick already in your lane, is twenty feet off and closing at maybe fifteen feet per second of relative velocity. You have a bit over a second, and part of that second is already spoken for by the puck being on your backhand. Meanwhile the "twenty feet" made you feel safe. It wasn't.

So read closing speed, not distance. Concretely, look at three things when you scan:

- **Which way are their hips pointed?** Hips are the honest signal — a stick can be anywhere, but a player accelerates where the hips face. This is the same read that gap control is built on.
- **Are their feet moving or are they gliding?** A gliding defender can change direction fast. A defender in full crossovers is committed and can be beaten by simply going the other way.
- **How many of them are arriving?** One closing opponent is a problem you can solve with a move. Two arriving from different angles is a problem you solve by getting rid of the puck, because whatever space you open against the first one, the second one occupies.

See Scanning and Anticipation for the habit that makes these reads automatic.

3. Creating time and space for yourself

Six of these seven tools require no skating speed and no hands. That is the point.

Deception — defenders react to what you show them

Key	Space is created in the defender's mind before it exists on the ice — show them the wrong option
Options	Fake shot, look-off, head and shoulder fake, or skating at one shoulder to open the other
Technique	Fake shot — weight onto the back leg, shoulder dropped, stick starting back; it only sells if you sometimes really shoot from there
Technique	Look-off — head and eyes hard to one option, then deliver to another, and only on a pass you have already surveyed
Read	A deceived defender pivots their hips, reaches with the stick or shifts weight — every one is a positional loss you can spend
Never	Fake when you have no time — two closing forecheckers and your back to the boards means the simple play

Space is created in the defender's mind before it exists on the ice. A defender cannot cover every option, so they cover the option they believe is coming. **Show them the wrong one.**

- **The fake shot.** Load your weight onto the back leg, drop the shoulder, and start the stick back. A shot-blocking defender drops a knee or turns a hip; a goalie sets. Both of them have just stopped moving laterally. Now the pass across, or the step around, is open. The fake only works if it would have been a real shot — if you never actually shoot from there, nobody buys it. **Deception is credit, and you build it by occasionally paying up.**
- **The look-off.** Turn your head and eyes hard to one option, then deliver to another. This works on goalies and on defenders, and it works because head-and-eye direction is the earliest cue available to them, so it is the one they are trained to read. The cost is that you are not looking where you are passing, so it only belongs on passes you have already surveyed. Look, then look away, then pass.
- **The head and shoulder fake.** The smallest and most under-used move in hockey. A hard head-and-shoulder dip to your forehand side while carrying wide will move a defender's shoulders and, half the time, their weight. You do not need to beat them; you need them to be leaning the wrong way for a fifth of a second, which is enough to change a contested lane into an open one.
- **Showing one option to open another.** Skate at a defender's inside shoulder and they close the middle, which opens the outside. Skate at the outside shoulder and they widen, which opens the middle. You are not trying to beat them at the point of contact — you are trying to make them commit before you decide.

The Edge Ice Academy (<https://www.edgeiceacademy.com/article/how-deception-creates-space-without-speed>) coaching material describes what a deceived defender actually does: they pivot their hips, reach with the stick, or shift weight in response to a cue that was false. Every one of those is a positional loss you can spend.

One warning. Deception costs you a beat. If you have no time — two closing forecheckers, back to the boards — fake nothing and make the simple play. Fakes are a luxury good, purchased with time you already have.

Delay and curl-back — turning away from pressure

Action	Turn away from the pressure, curl back, and hold the puck for a second or two while your support arrives
Position	The offensive zone and the offensive blue line area — including a zone entry where you are first man in with no support
Technique	A tight turn with the puck on your outside hip, body between puck and defender, feet still moving
Goal	Synchronise the play — a forward one stride late becomes a second attacker if you give him a second and a half
Read	Somebody has to take the depth role for the delay to work; then the defence must step or fall back, and either answer creates something
Never	Delay in your own defensive zone, and never delay when you already have numbers
Mindset	Be willing to look, for a second, like you are going backwards

This is the most valuable under-used skill in amateur hockey. It is also the least natural, because every instinct says "go forward."

The play: you carry the puck into contested ice, you see that the option ahead isn't there, and instead of forcing it you **turn away from the pressure** — a tight turn or curl back toward your own end, protecting the puck on the outside of the turn — and hold it for one or two seconds while your support arrives.

Why it works:

- **It buys the only thing your teammates need, which is time to get there.** A forward who is one stride late is useless; a forward who is one stride late and given a second and a half is a second attacker. You are not delaying the play, you are *synchronising* it. See Puck Support and Spacing.

- **It decelerates the defence with you.** **Greg Revak**, writing at Hockey's Arsenal (<https://hockeysarsenal.substack.com/p/zone-entry-middle-delay>), describes the middle delay on zone entry — and note the detail his title carries that the short version drops. It is not just the carrier slowing down: *"if a player away from the puck takes the depth role, then the puck carrier can utilize the space up high to challenge the defense."* Somebody has to go deep for the delay to work. That poses the defence what Revak calls the question — *"Are you going to step or fall back?"* — and either answer creates something. Step up and they leave space behind them for a teammate to attack; fall back and they concede the space in front, which is a clean entry and a shot from the top of the circles.
- **It preserves the space behind the defence instead of spending it.** Space behind a defender is the most valuable real estate on the ice, and you burn it the moment you attack into it alone. Delaying keeps it in the bank until a teammate can get there with speed.

The physical skill is a tight turn with the puck on your outside hip, body between puck and defender, feet still moving. See Puck Handling and Body Contact and Battles. The mental skill is being willing to look, for a second, like you are going backwards.

Where delay belongs and where it doesn't. Delay in the offensive blue line area and the offensive zone. Delay on a zone entry when you're first man in with no support. **Do not delay in your own defensive zone**, where a lost puck is a scoring chance, and do not delay when you already have numbers — a 2-on-1 attacked at speed is worth more than a 3-on-2 attacked slowly.

Changing pace — why a change of speed beats top speed

Action	Glide, look, explode — the glide buys the scan, the scan tells you where to go, the explosion goes there
Key	Separation comes from the difference between your speed and theirs, not from your absolute number
Technique	Two or three hard crossovers out of a glide produce more separation than ten strides of continuous hard skating
Read	The moment a closing defender changes speed is the moment they are least able to change direction
Never	Skate hard the whole shift — you never have a gear left and you never have your head up
Action	Use it off the puck too — drift, let your check relax, then break

Defenders don't defend speed, they defend *rhythm*. A player skating hard in a straight line at a constant velocity is trivially easy to match, because matching only requires the defender to pick a speed and hold it.

Deceleration is a weapon. Glide, and the defender closing on you has to make a decision: close harder and risk you going around them, or ease off and give you room. Whatever they choose, the moment they change speed is the moment they are least able to change direction.

Then explode. Two or three hard crossovers out of a glide produce more separation than ten strides of continuous hard skating, because the separation comes from the *difference* between your speed and theirs, not from your absolute number. Two players both flat out at the same speed stay exactly the same distance apart forever.

Practical version: **glide, look, explode.** The glide buys the scan (see below), the scan tells you where to go, the explosion goes there. Skating hard the whole shift means you never have a gear left and you never have your head up.

This applies without the puck too, and there it is worth more. A winger who drifts, lets their check relax, and then breaks is far harder to cover than one who sprints constantly. See *Playing Without the Puck*.

Using the net and the boards

Position	Behind your opponents' net — attackable from only two sides, with the whole offensive zone laid out in front of you
Key	Nothing behind the goal line is a scoring chance against you, so a mistake there is cheap
Action	Behind your own net you are pivoting, not surveying — one look, one decision, move it
Technique	Face the wall with the puck below your body and your back to the ice, so a defender can only come from one 180-degree arc
Goal	Use wall possession to survive pressure and wait for support, not to create offence by itself
Risk	The boards remove half your options too

Two structures on the ice cannot be skated through, and you should treat both as teammates.

Behind the net is the safest pivot in hockey. Standing behind your opponents' net with the puck, you can only be attacked from two sides, you can see the entire offensive zone laid out in

front of you, and any defender who commits to one side has surrendered the other. Nothing behind the goal line is a scoring chance against you, so a mistake there is cheap. It is the one place on the ice where you can genuinely stop, lift your head, and choose.

The same is *not* true behind your own net, where a turnover is a wraparound or a walk-out. Behind your own net you are pivoting, not surveying — one look, one decision, move it.

The boards are a wall nobody can attack you through. Facing the wall with the puck below your body and your back to the ice, a defender can only come from one 180-degree arc. This halves the number of angles you have to defend and is why puck protection along the wall is a genuine possession skill rather than a stalling tactic. It is also why the **half-wall** — the boards level with the faceoff dot — is a real position on the power play: the half-wall player has the wall covering one side, the corner behind, and the whole zone in front.

The trade-off is honest: the boards remove half your options too. Wall possession is for surviving pressure and waiting for support, not for creating offence by itself.

Attacking into space, not at people

- Never** Skate directly at a defender — you hand them a stationary problem they can win by doing nothing
- Action** Attack the seam, the gap between two defenders that neither has clearly claimed
- Goal** Force a communication and a decision between two players rather than a reaction from one
- Action** On a rush, drive the ice between the two defencemen rather than at the outside shoulder of one
- Action** On a zone entry, put the puck into the space behind the defender rather than at the defender
- Targets** The space your teammate is skating into, never their current blade — a stationary stick freezes them
- Action** In the offensive zone, move to the empty ice rather than to the puck

The single most common waste of an odd-man rush is skating directly at a defender. You have handed them a stationary problem and made their job a coin-flip they can win by doing nothing.

Attack the seam. The seam is the gap *between* two defenders — the space neither has clearly claimed. Attacking it forces a communication and a decision between two players rather than a

reaction from one, and communication under pressure is where teams break. If they both take you, you have created a two-on-one somewhere else. If neither does, you're through.

Same idea across the whole sheet:

- On a rush, drive the ice between the two defencemen rather than at the outside shoulder of one.
- On a zone entry, put the puck into the space behind the defender rather than at the defender. See Zone Entries.
- On a pass, hit the space your teammate is skating into rather than their current blade. A pass to a stationary stick freezes them; a pass into space keeps them moving and moving players are hard to defend.
- In the offensive zone, move to the empty ice rather than to the puck. Four players converging on one puck is how you turn a five-on-five into a five-on-two against yourselves.

Scanning before you receive

Key	Knowing your out before the puck arrives buys you more time than any move you will ever learn
Action	Shoulder-check as the pass is being made, not after — two looks are better than one
Read	Your clock starts the instant the puck touches your blade, so arrive already decided
Technique	Catch the puck with your hands and your peripheral vision, not by staring at it

Knowing your out before the puck arrives buys you more time than any move you will ever learn. This is not an exaggeration and it is not a nice-to-have.

The mechanism: the time you have with the puck starts the instant it touches your blade. If you spend the first half-second of that finding out where everyone is, you have spent most of your budget on information you could have gathered for free while the puck was still in transit. A player who scanned before receiving starts their clock already decided, which effectively doubles the time they have.

The habit is a shoulder check as the pass is being made, not after. Two is better than one. It is uncomfortable at first because you feel like you'll miss the puck; you won't, because you catch the puck with your hands and your peripheral vision, not by staring at it.

This has its own document — Scanning and Anticipation — because it is the highest-leverage habit in the game.

Getting open

Action	Separate from your check with a change of direction, not a race — stop when they expect you to go, or cut across their momentum
Read	Break when their head turns to the puck, and time it to the carrier's head coming up rather than to your own eagerness
Action	If you are early, curl and come again rather than stand still waiting
Action	Present a target — a stick on the ice in a clear lane, plus your voice, plus movement
Rule	NHL Rule 56.1 — you are "allowed the ice he is standing on" and are not required to move to let an opponent proceed
Rule	NHL Rule 56 and USA Hockey 625 — there is no legal pick on a skater; moving into an opponent's path without initially having body position is the two-minute minor
Options	Space you got to first, a rub made while genuinely going somewhere yourself, or screening the goalie from outside the crease without contact
Rule	NHL Rule 69.1 — positioning that impairs the goalkeeper's ability to move freely in the crease or defend the goal can void a goal with no contact at all

Space when you don't have the puck is space you have to manufacture, because nobody is going to hand it to you.

- **Separate from your check with a change of direction, not a race.** You will rarely out-skate a defender in a straight line. You will regularly beat them by stopping when they expect you to go, or cutting across their momentum. The moment to break is when their head turns to the puck — every defender's eyes leave their man eventually, and that half-second is your window.
- **Time your break to the puck carrier's head, not to your own eagerness.** Arriving open two seconds before the carrier can look up means you were open and are now covered. The right moment to break is when the carrier's head comes up. If you are early, curl and come again — a second effort into open ice is worth more than standing still waiting.
- **Present a target, then move.** A stick on the ice in a clear lane, plus your voice, plus movement. See On-Ice Communication.

On picks — a genuine correction, because this one is widely got wrong. Hockey is **not** basketball. There is no legal pick or screen on a skater. Under NHL Rule 56 (Interference), you may not use your body to impede or block an opponent who does not have the puck, and USA Hockey's interference rule (625) uses the words "pick" and "block" explicitly to describe the offence. **The test is movement, not stillness.** Rule 56.1 says "*a player is allowed the ice he is standing on*

(body position) and is not required to move in order to let an opponent proceed" — standing still is exactly what is protected. What is penalised is the player who "*moves into an opponent's path without initially having body position, thereby taking him out of the play.*" Skating across to spring a teammate is the two-minute minor.

What *is* legal is more limited and worth being exact about:

- **Occupying space you got to first.** If you are skating a route toward the puck or the net and a defender runs into you, that is generally on them — and per the rule quoted above, you are entitled to the ice you are standing on and are **not** obliged to move out of their way. What turns it into a minor is *moving into their path* once they are coming, without having had body position first.
- **A "rub" or "traffic"** — moving through the same ice as a defender, on your way to a real destination, so that they have to go around you. The distinguishing question a referee asks is whether you were playing the puck or playing the man.
- **Screening the goalie is normally legal**, and it is the one true screen in hockey. Standing outside the crease in the goalie's sightline without contacting them is permitted. Contacting them inside the crease so as to impair a save is not — and neither is *positioning* that impairs the goalie's ability to move freely in the crease or defend the goal (Rule 69.1), which can void a goal with no contact at all. See Offensive Zone Play.

4. Taking time and space away

Everything above, run in reverse. Defending is the business of reducing someone else's budget.

Gap control — the defenceman's version

Key	Gap is the distance between you and the puck carrier — the single biggest lever a defenceman has over an attacker's time
Read	Watch the hips, not the puck — hips tell you where they are actually going
Risk	A tight gap removes their time but puts space behind you, exactly where a chip-and-chase or a give-and-go wants to go
Risk	A loose gap protects the space behind you but hands them a full head-up survey and a shot in stride
Convention	Gap distances are a coaching starting point, not a law — take the numbers from Defending the Rush, which owns them

Gap is the distance between you and the puck carrier. Controlling it is the single biggest lever a defenceman has over how much time an attacker gets.

The trade-off is symmetrical and there is no free option:

- **A tight gap** removes the attacker's time — they cannot look up, they cannot pick a corner, they cannot make a skilled play. But it puts space *behind* you, which is exactly where a chip-and-chase or a give-and-go wants to go.
- **A loose gap** protects the space behind you but hands the attacker a full head-up survey and a shot in stride.

Coaching guidance commonly puts a good gap through the neutral zone at **roughly two to three stick lengths**, tightening to about a stick and a half at the red line and about **one stick length** by your own blue line. Treat that as a starting point, not a law — the right gap depends on your backwards speed relative to their forwards speed, and on whether they have support arriving. Defending the Rush owns these numbers; take them from there rather than from memory. One to one and a half stick lengths in the neutral zone is a *tight* gap, not the default — see Neutral Zone Systems.

The read is the same one from section 2: **watch the hips, not the puck**. Hips tell you where they are actually going. See Defending the Rush for the full treatment, including gaps on odd-man rushes.

Angling — steering with your route, not your body

- Action** Close on a curve that removes the middle of the ice, leaving the attacker only the option you want them to have
- Goal** Steer them to the boards — you are not chasing them and you are not hitting them
- Key** An angle is geometry, so it does not depend on you being faster; you arrive where they will be, on the side you chose
- Never** Learn the mechanics from this section — Body Contact and Battles owns route, closing speed, stick and finish

Angling means taking a pursuit route that leaves the attacker only the option you want them to have. You are not chasing them and you are not hitting them. You are closing on a curve that removes the middle of the ice, so that the only place left to go is the boards.

Why it beats chasing, which is the reason it belongs in a document about time and space: a chase is a race you might lose, and if you lose it you are behind the play. An angle is geometry, and geometry does not depend on you being faster. You arrive at the point where they will be, on the side you chose — so you take their space away without ever having to win a foot race for it. It also works in every league, because steering somebody is not touching them.

The mechanics are owned by Body Contact and Battles → Angling — your route versus their route, momentum back toward your own net, closing speed and not crossing over as you close, where your stick goes, and what the angle ends in under checking and non-checking rules. Do not learn it from this paragraph; that section quotes USA Hockey's definition and Seth Appert's coaching directly.

The active stick — free space denial

Action	Point your stick at a lane or a threat, not resting on the ice between your feet
Key	A blade placed in a lane before the pass prevents passes that are never even attempted
Risk	A stick jabbed at the puck after the pass is a gamble that pulls you out of position when it fails
Technique	One hand on the stick to extend reach when closing space, two hands in a battle or to lift a stick
Technique	Keep the blade flat on the ice — a lane blocked at ankle height is blocked, a blade waving at hip height is not

Putting your stick blade in a passing lane costs you nothing and removes an option from your opponent. It is the highest return-on-effort action in defensive hockey and it is the first thing tired players stop doing.

The principle: your stick should be pointed at a lane or a threat, not resting on the ice between your feet. A stick placed in a lane *before* the pass is made prevents passes that never even get attempted — the carrier looks, sees a blade, and looks elsewhere, which costs them time. A stick jabbed at the puck *after* the pass is a gamble that pulls you out of position when it fails.

Practical detail: one hand on the stick to extend reach when you are closing space, two hands when you are in a battle or need to lift a stick. Keep the blade flat on the ice — a lane blocked at ankle height is blocked; a blade waving at hip height is not.

Pressure with support — why lone pressure creates holes

Key	Lone pressure does not take space away, it moves it — behind you
Action	Send pressure only with a second layer, positioned to take the puck if the first forces a rushed play and to cover the ice they left
Convention	The house default here is a 2-1-2 forecheck and a low zone collapse — F1 pressures, F2 takes the first escape option, F3 holds the high middle
Convention	F1/F2/F3 are roles defined by order of arrival, not by position — whoever gets there first is F1
Options	A 1-2-2 holds two back and denies the neutral zone entirely; a 1-3-1 trap concedes more and denies harder
Action	Find out what your team plays before your first shift, and go on the same trigger as everyone else
Risk	If you go and your teammate doesn't, you have made a hole rather than closed one

Sending one player to pressure the puck, with nobody behind them, does not take space away. **It moves it.** The pressuring player vacates the ice they came from, and if they are beaten, that ice is now a clean lane and your team is a man short behind the puck.

Pressure only takes space away when there is a **second layer** — a teammate positioned to take the puck if the first pressure forces a rushed play, and to cover the ice the first player left.

This is a system question, so name your system. **The house default throughout is a 2-1-2 forecheck and a low zone collapse (zone) defensive-zone coverage.** In a 2-1-2, F1 pressures, F2 takes the first escape option, F3 holds the high middle as the safety valve — and **F1/F2/F3 are roles defined by order of arrival, not by position; whoever gets there first is F1.** A 1-2-2 puts one forechecker in and holds two back, which concedes possession behind their net but denies the neutral zone entirely. A 1-3-1 neutral-zone trap concedes even more and denies even harder.

The point is not which is right. The point is that **if you go and your teammate doesn't, you have made a hole rather than closed one** — so find out what your team plays before your first shift, and go on the same trigger as everyone else. See Forechecking Systems and Defensive Zone Coverage.

Take away the middle first

Priority	The middle before the outside, in every zone — the middle has more options radiating out of it
Read	Shots from the slot go in at a far higher rate than shots from the wall, and a carrier in the middle can attack either side
Action	When you are beaten and have to concede something, concede the outside — steer to the wall and defend the inside shoulder
Key	For a defenceman at the offensive blue line, an attacker going around you on the outside is a manageable mistake; through you on the inside is a scoring chance
Convention	A strong general principle rather than an absolute — some coaches ask for the wall taken away in specific spots, and some penalty kills overload one side, so ask

Not all space is equal, so don't defend it equally. **The middle of the ice is worth more than the outside**, in every zone, for the same reason throughout: the middle has more options radiating out of it.

- In the defensive zone, the middle is the slot, and shots from the slot go in at a far higher rate than shots from the wall.
- In the neutral zone, a puck carrier in the middle can attack either side; a puck carrier on the wall can attack one.
- Even in the offensive zone as a defending team, killing the middle forces the play to the perimeter where a shot has to beat a screen, a stick and a goalie who can see it.

So when you are beaten and have to concede something, **concede the outside**. Steer to the wall, defend the inside shoulder, and accept a wide shot in exchange for killing a slot pass. The corollary for defencemen at the offensive blue line: an attacker going around you on the outside is a manageable mistake; an attacker going through you on the inside is a scoring chance.

This is a strong general principle rather than an absolute — some coaches will ask their defencemen to take away the wall in specific spots, and some penalty-kill structures deliberately overload one side. Ask.

Deny the reception, not the pass

Never	Lunge at the passing lane — passes are fast and you are guessing
Action	Arrive as the puck does, on a route that puts you on the receiver with your stick on their blade or in their receiving lane
Priority	Defend the receiver's next action, not the pass — take away their forward option and the pass gained them nothing
Goal	The result of an interception without having to guess right, and without being out of position when you are wrong
Key	A receiver forced to catch a puck while being closed on loses their scan — a whole second of blindness you created without touching anybody

You will spend a career trying to intercept passes and mostly failing, because passes are fast and you are guessing. There is a better version.

Arrive as the puck does. Rather than lunging at the passing lane, take a route that puts you on the receiver at the moment the puck reaches them, with your stick on their blade or in their receiving lane. The result is the same as an interception — no clean possession — but it does not require you to guess right, and it does not put you out of position when you're wrong.

Two ideas make this work:

- **Defend the receiver's next action, not the pass.** If you take away their forward option as they receive, the pass "worked" and gained them nothing, because they now have to turn back with you on them.
- **A receiver forced to catch a puck while being closed on loses their scan.** They will have to look at the puck. That is a whole second of blindness you created without touching anybody.

This is what "taking away time" concretely means. You are not preventing the play; you are making it arrive with no room attached to it.

5. Where time and space live — a map of the ice

Position	Behind the net — no shot exists from there, so it is under-defended, and any defender who commits to one side gives you the other
Position	The weak side — defences slide toward the puck, so the far side is always the last to be covered
Position	The half-wall, the boards level with the faceoff dot — a wall on one side, sightlines to the whole zone, awkward for a defender to attack
Position	The seams between two defenders, in any zone — space by ambiguity rather than by distance
Action	With the puck, move it toward space; without the puck, move yourself toward where the space will be, usually the weak side
Never	Plan to stickhandle in the slot — plan on arriving with no time, for one touch, a tip or a rebound
Never	Treat the strong-side corner as a playmaking zone — win the battle, then move the puck out of it
Never	Slow down in the middle of the neutral zone — cross it with speed or don't cross it with the puck

Learn this like a map, because it tells you where to go with the puck and where to go without it.

Places space usually exists:

- **Behind the net.** No shot exists from there, so it is under-defended, and any defender who commits to one side gives you the other. The best pivot point on the ice.
- **The weak side.** The side away from the puck. Defences slide toward the puck — this is what a zone collapse *is* — so the far side is always the last to be covered. This is why an east-west pass beats a north-south one so often; you are not just moving the puck, you are outrunning the defensive slide.
- **The point.** The blue line. Defended last because it is furthest from the net, which is why the point shot exists at all. Space here is real, but it is the least dangerous space on the sheet, so it is space to *use*, not space to admire.
- **The half-wall.** The boards level with the faceoff dot. A wall on one side, sightlines to the whole zone, and awkward for a defender to attack because they have to commit to coming out. The natural home of the primary puck-mover on a power play — in a **1-3-1** there are two half-wall players, one point, one bumper in the middle and one net front.

- **The seams.** Between two defenders, in any zone. Space by ambiguity rather than by distance.

Places space almost never exists:

- **The slot** — the ice in front of the net between the faceoff circles. Every defensive system in hockey is built to fill it. That's exactly why it's valuable, but plan on arriving with no time: one touch, or a tip, or a rebound. Do not plan to stickhandle there. Note the distinction kept throughout: the **high slot** is from the dots up to the top of the circles; the **goalmouth** is the immediate net front. They are different jobs.
- **The strong-side corner.** The corner where the puck is. Two, three, sometimes four players converge. This is a battle zone, not a playmaking zone — win it, then move the puck out of it. See Body Contact and Battles.
- **The middle of the neutral zone.** The most heavily patrolled ice on the sheet, because both teams' structures pass through it and every trap is designed to fill it. A carrier who slows down there gets swarmed. Cross it with speed or don't cross it with the puck.

The practical translation: **with the puck, move it toward space** — behind the net, weak side, point, half-wall. **Without the puck, move yourself toward where the space will be**, which is usually the weak side, and where the puck will need you next. See Puck Support and Spacing.

6. How the rules create space

- Rule** Offside — both skates must completely cross the blue line before the puck does; one skate on or behind keeps you onside (NHL Rule 83.1)
- Rule** A skate raised over the neutral zone is onside under NHL and IIHF rules, but offside under USA Hockey Rule 630(a), which requires skate contact
- Action** Drag a trail skate at the line instead of braking early — keeping the blade in contact is legal under all three rule sets
- Rule** Delayed offside is recoverable — all attackers clear and tag up (Rule 83.3(i) requires skate contact with the blue line by every one of them), then all may re-enter
- Rule** Rule 83.3 brings the whistle if an attacker touches the puck, attempts to gain a loose puck, forces the defending carrier deeper, or is about to make contact with him
- Rule** Hybrid icing (NHL 2013-14, IIHF 2014) — Rule 81.1 makes the determining factor "which player would first touch the puck", with the end-zone dot only the decision deadline; too close to call is icing
- Rule** Outside the trapezoid the goalie may not play the puck behind the goal line — dimensions from Rule 1.8, penalty under 27.8 and 63.2(viii), the sole exception being skate contact with the crease
- Action** Dump wide of the trapezoid so a defenceman must retrieve it with your forechecker arriving — worth much less in a league that has none, and most rec and youth associations have none
- Rule** The restricted area is IIHF Rule 27.7, not the NHL's 27.8; England Ice Hockey's Rules & Regulations 22.3 say it is "not currently enforced" in England and Wales — so plan as though their goalie may come for a dumped puck
- Rule** Screening from outside the crease without contact is normally legal, but Rule 69.1 voids the goal if your positioning alone impairs the goalkeeper's ability to move freely or defend

The rulebook is not a list of things you may not do. It is a set of geometric constraints that manufacture space and stop teams from destroying it. Reading them this way makes them much easier to remember and much easier to exploit.

Offside prevents cherry-picking. No attacker may enter the offensive zone ahead of the puck, so nobody can park behind the defence and wait. Without it, hockey would be two goalies and ten players standing at the far blue lines. **Both skates** must completely cross the blue line before the puck completely crosses it — one skate on or behind the line keeps you onside, and a skate raised in the air over the neutral zone counts as onside **under NHL and IIHF rules — but not under**

USA Hockey, where Rule 630(a) requires skate *contact* and a raised skate is offside.

Space to exploit: you can be well ahead of the puck and still legal, and most amateur players give away several feet of free attacking space by braking too early at the line. Drag a trail skate instead — keeping the blade in contact, which is legal under all three rule sets.

A **delayed offside** — linesman's arm up, no whistle yet — ends when **all** the attacking players clear the zone (**tagging up** — Rule 83.3(i) requires skate contact with the blue line by every one of them, at which point they may all re-enter) or when the defending team passes or carries the puck into the neutral zone. It becomes a whistle if, while the arm is up, an attacker does any of **four** things (Rule 83.3): **touches the puck, attempts to gain possession of a loose puck, forces the defending puck carrier further back into his own zone, or is about to make physical contact with the defending puck carrier.** The last two catch people out — you do not have to touch anything. **Space to exploit:** delayed offside is recoverable. Get everyone out, tag, re-enter, and you have kept the possession.

Icing prevents clearing forever. Without it, a leading team would simply fire the puck the length of the ice on every touch and there would be no game. Under **hybrid icing** — NHL from 2013-14, IIHF from 2014 — the race is to **the puck**, and the end-zone faceoff dot is only the **decision deadline**. Rule 81.1: *"the determining factor is which player would first touch the puck, not which player would first reach the end zone face-off dots"*, and the linesperson must decide by the instant the first player's skate reaches that dot. **A race too close to call at that moment is icing.** **Space to exploit and space to fear:** after your own icing, the faceoff is in your defensive zone, your team **cannot change lines**, and **cannot use a timeout** — a tired unit trapped in its own end is the price. Note that icing is waved off if the team is shorthanded, which is why a penalty kill can clear freely — **though not in every book, and not unconditionally:** NHL Rule 81.6 withdraws the exemption from a team shorthanded by a *major* that has left nobody on the penalty bench to come out, and USA Hockey grants it only *"For all Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult classifications only"* (Rule 624(b)(1)), so below those levels a shorthanded team cannot ice the puck at all. Special Teams owns this rule. It is also waved off if the puck comes directly off a faceoff, if it goes in the net (that's a goal), if the opposing goalie plays it or leaves the crease and moves toward it (NHL — **USA Hockey does not wave off for goalie movement**), or if a linesman judges an opposing skater could have played it. To nullify a potential icing, a teammate must "gain the line" — the puck must contact the centre red line **on a stick**, not a skate. Some youth and rec leagues still use no-touch (automatic) icing and a few use touch icing; find out which yours uses, because it changes whether chasing your own dump-in is worth anything.

The trapezoid limits the goalie. The goalkeeper's restricted area is the marked area behind the net, **22 feet wide along the goal line, 28 feet along the end boards, 11 feet deep** —

which is what **NHL Rule 1.8**'s figures work out to. What 1.8 itself specifies is per-post: seven feet outside each crease (eight feet from each post) at the goal line, widening to eleven feet from each post at the end boards. The three totals above are arithmetic from those.

Do not convert those numbers and assume they are yours under the IIHF book. IIHF Rule 1.8 prints its own: "*The outside dimension of the marking along the goal line is 6.80m and along the boards is 8.60m.*" The widths are close to the NHL's (22 ft is 6.71 m; 28 ft is 8.53 m), but **the depth is not** — the IIHF goal line sits **4.0 m** from the end boards (Rule 1.5) against the NHL's 11 feet, or 3.35 m, so the IIHF trapezoid is roughly **two feet deeper**. That is the difference that changes where a puck is retrievable, and it is the one a conversion hides. Outside it, the goalie may not play the puck behind the goal line; violation is a two-minute delay-of-game minor under **Rules 27.8 and 63.2(viii)**. (Cite 27.8 for the penalty only — its own dimensions are stale pre-2014 wording and disagree with 1.8. See Rules Primer.) **The sole exception is the goalie maintaining skate contact with the crease** — there is no teammate-based exception. It applies in the **NHL (since 2005-06), the KHL, and IIHF play (since the unified 2021-22 rulebook)**, and **most rec, beer-league and youth associations do not use it. Space to exploit:** the rule exists specifically to stop goalies acting as a third defenceman and killing the forecheck, so a dump-in placed *wide* of the trapezoid must be retrieved by a defenceman with your forechecker arriving. If your league has no trapezoid, wide dumps are much less valuable. See Zone Entries.  **In England and Wales, treat this as unsettled.** The IIHF book carries the rule (Rule 27.7, not the NHL's 27.8), but England Ice Hockey's *Rules & Regulations* 22.3 say the restricted area is "*not currently enforced*" and the 2025-26 In-House Rules do not mention it — though their Introduction says "*unless otherwise stated, all rules will be enforced in line with the IIHF Rule Book*", which points the other way, so the published documents do not settle it. For you as the attacking team the safe assumption runs the other way: plan as though their goalie **may** retrieve the puck, ask your league, and look behind the net to see whether the lines are painted at all. Treat an unmarked sheet as a hint rather than a ruling: IIHF 27.7 turns on "*the position of the puck*", not on the markings.

The crease protects the goalie — and by extension protects the most valuable space on the ice. The NHL crease is **8 feet wide at the goal line and 6 feet deep at its deepest point** (Rule 1.7): straight side lines start one foot outside each post and run 4 ft 6 in out, and a **6-foot-radius** arc struck from the centre of the goal line closes them off. The 4 ft 6 in is the length of the *side* lines, not the depth — the depth is the 6-foot radius. See Rink Map and Glossary, which owns the rink dimensions. Inside it you must not impair the goalie's ability to make a save. Outside it, *incidental* contact is legal if a reasonable effort was made to avoid it. **Space to exploit: screening — standing outside the crease in the goalie's sightline without contact — is normally legal.** The one limit is Rule 69.1, which disallows a goal where an attacker "*either by his positioning or by contact, impairs the goalkeeper's ability to move freely*

within his crease or defend his goal" — so positioning alone can cost you a goal if you crowd far enough. Short of that, the rule protects the goalie's body, not their view. Taking a goalie's eyes is free space, and it is under-used at every amateur level.

The offside and icing lines together define the shape of the ice. In the NHL the blue lines sit 75 feet from the end boards and 50 feet apart, and every neutral-zone system in hockey is built around that 50-foot corridor.

7. How space changes with the score, the clock and the rink

- Read** A team protecting a lead concedes the point and the wall and takes away the middle — take the space that is offered
- Never** Force the middle against a team protecting a lead; that is how you generate a counter-attack against yourself
- Action** Walk the line, shoot for tips and work below the goal line — pull them out of shape rather than through it
- Read** With the goalie pulled, six attackers create a genuine spare man and a lot of room at the blue line, and clearing options become worth an enormous amount
- Key** Fatigue and rink size move the same variable — closing speed; a tired player's effective gap is bigger than their actual one
- Read** "Olympic ice" is no longer a reliable synonym for wide ice — Beijing 2022 was played on the North American surface, so check the venue
- Action** On wide ice, more delay, more east-west, more patience before entries; on narrow ice, decide earlier and use the walls
- Action** Skate a warm-up lap and notice how far it is from the half-wall to the far dot — that number is your time budget

Space is not a constant. Four things move it.

The score. A leading team, especially late, deliberately gives up space it doesn't need and takes away space that matters — fewer players below the puck, a passive 1-2-2 or a trap in the neutral zone, everything funnelled to the outside. The consequence for you as the trailing team is that **there will be more room at the point and on the wall, and almost none in the middle.** Trying to force the middle against a team protecting a lead is how you generate a counter-attack

against yourself. Take the space that's offered — walk the line, shoot for tips, work below the goal line — and pull them out of shape rather than through it. See Game Management and Risk Management.

The clock. In the last two minutes of a one-goal game the trailing team pulls the goalie, and space distorts completely: six attackers create a genuine spare man and a lot of room at the blue line, while the defending team's clearing options become worth an enormous amount because the net is empty. Early in a period, space is close to normal. In the last thirty seconds of a shift, space shrinks for you personally because your legs are gone — a tired player's *effective* gap is bigger than their actual one, which is the real argument for short shifts.

Fatigue and the rink both change the same variable: closing speed. Anything that reduces how fast defenders arrive increases everyone's time.

Rink size. This one is bigger than most players expect.

- The **NHL sheet is 200 by 85 feet** (about 61 by 26 m), corner radius 28 feet.
- The **traditional international sheet is 60 by 30 metres** (about 197 by 98 feet) — nearly identical length, roughly 13 feet wider. The current IIHF rulebook permits a range of widths (commonly given as 26 to 30 m), and recent top-level events have gone narrow: **the 2022 Beijing Olympics were played on the North American 200 × 85 ft surface (about 61 × 26 m)** — the IIHF's own report of the tournament says so in terms. So "Olympic ice" is no longer a reliable synonym for "wide ice" — check the venue.  **If you play in Britain, this points the wrong way.** The 2025-26 In-House Rules authorise rinks "*with a non-standard playing surface (below 56 m × 26 m)*" for all levels of hockey, **except** Sutton in England and Coatbridge and Limekilns Road in Scotland, which are permitted up to U16 only — an authorisation that is short of IIHF Rule 1.2 on **both** dimensions — so the likely correction here is smaller and shorter, not wider. Measure your rink; UK and England Rules has the detail.

What the extra width actually does: the length is the same, so the change is entirely lateral. On a wide sheet, the distance from the wall to the middle is greater, so a forechecker who commits to the boards takes longer to recover, defenders defending the wall are further from the slot, and east-west puck movement gains more than north-south does. The result is a game that rewards skating, puck movement and patience, and punishes an aggressive forecheck that misses.

On the narrow NHL sheet the opposite: space compresses, the walls are close, the forecheck arrives sooner, and quick decisions and physical play get rewarded. **Practical translation if you move between sheets:** on wide ice, more delay, more east-west, more patience before entries

— the space is genuinely there. On narrow ice, decide earlier, use the walls, and accept that possession behind the net is worth more than possession in the corner.

And in your rec league: most facilities are close to NHL dimensions in North America and closer to international elsewhere, but plenty of older barns are neither. Skate a warm-up lap and notice how far it is from the half-wall to the far dot. That number is your time budget.

8. How to develop this

- Action** Play small-area games — less space per player means more touches, more decisions per touch and less time to make each one
- Action** If your team doesn't run them, run them yourself — three-on-three in one zone, two nets, no offside, first to five
- Action** When you spectate, don't watch the puck — pick one player and watch only them for a full shift, including the twenty seconds they don't touch it
- Read** Watch a defenceman's gap from the moment the attacker gets the puck — most of it is decided before the attacker reaches the red line
- Action** After every shift, ask "did I have more time than I thought?" — the honest answer is almost always yes
- Key** Panic is the default state of an inexperienced player, and panic spends time you actually had
- Action** Get one more look before you receive, and when you don't know, take the turn away from pressure rather than the pass into it
- Mindset** Trust "time" when you hear it — a teammate or the goalie can see what you can't

Time and space is a trainable habit, not a personality trait. Three things move it fastest.

Small-area games. Cross-ice and half-ice games with reduced space are the standard development tool — USA Hockey (<https://www.usahockey.com/smallareagames>) publishes a full library and builds its coaching curriculum around them. The mechanism is straightforward: less space per player means more touches, more decisions per touch, and less time to make each one. You are training your decision speed under artificially harsh conditions so that a full sheet feels roomy. A player who can operate in a quarter-ice 3-on-3 has a fundamentally different sense of "I have time" than one who has only ever played full ice.

If your team doesn't run them, run them yourself with whoever is around: three-on-three in one zone, two nets, no offside, first to five. It is also, not incidentally, the most fun hockey there is.

Watch for it deliberately when you spectate. Watching hockey is a training activity if you do it right, and doing it right means **not watching the puck**. Pick one player and watch only them for a full shift — including the twenty seconds they don't touch the puck. What you will see, and cannot see any other way, is how much of what looks like skill is actually arrival: getting to open ice before the puck does, checking over the shoulder twice before receiving, curling back when nothing's there. See [How to Watch Hockey](#).

Two specific things to look for:

- **Watch a defenceman's gap on a rush**, from the moment the attacker gets the puck. Notice how much the gap is decided before the attacker even reaches the red line.
- **Count how many times a good centre looks over their shoulder** in the ten seconds before receiving a breakout pass. The number is higher than you think, and it is the whole trick.

Ask yourself one question after every shift: "did I have more time than I thought?"

The honest answer, for almost every developing player, in almost every situation, is **yes**. Panic is the default state of an inexperienced hockey player, and panic spends time you actually had. Every rushed pass, every blind rim, every puck flipped into the neutral zone at nobody was a moment where the real answer to that question was "yes, considerably."

The correction is not "be braver," which nobody can act on. It is:

- **Get one more look before you receive**, so you know the answer before the puck arrives instead of guessing.
- **When you don't know, take the turn away from pressure** rather than the pass into it. Delay costs you a second; a turnover in your own end costs you a goal.
- **Trust "time" when you hear it**. If a teammate or the goalie tells you nobody's on you, believe them — they can see what you can't. See [On-Ice Communication](#).

Track it for ten games and the habit takes. It is the fastest improvement available to almost any amateur player.

Common Mistakes

- **Grading yourself on your hands instead of your room.** Beautiful skill executed with no space produces nothing. The players who look effortless mostly arranged not to be pressured.
- **Reading distance instead of closing speed.** Feeling safe because a defender is twenty feet away, and panicking because one is three feet away and travelling in the wrong direction. Both readings are backwards.
- **Skating hard the entire shift.** You never have a gear left, you never have your head up, and you are trivially easy to match because your speed never changes. Glide, look, explode.
- **Attacking at a defender instead of into a seam.** Skating directly at someone hands them a problem they can solve by standing still.
- **Turning into pressure instead of away from it.** The instinct to go forward at all costs is the single most expensive habit in amateur hockey.
- **Delaying in your own defensive zone.** Delay is an offensive-zone and blue-line tool. Below your own goal line it is how goals get scored against you.
- **Scanning after you receive.** By then you have spent half your time budget on information that was free two seconds ago.
- **Breaking into open ice before the carrier can see you.** You were open, and now you are covered, and the carrier never had a chance to use you. Break when their head comes up.
- **Pressuring the puck with nobody behind you.** You did not take space away, you relocated it, and now it's behind you.
- **Moving into a defender's path to spring a teammate.** That's a two-minute interference minor — Rule 56.1's pick is the player who "moves into an opponent's path without initially having body position," not the player who simply stands still, who is "allowed the ice he is standing on." Hockey has no legal pick on a skater — only screening the goalie, and rubs made while genuinely going somewhere yourself.
- **Standing still on the half-wall or at the net front.** A stationary player is covered by a defender who also gets to watch the puck. Movement is what makes coverage expensive.
- **Letting the stick go to sleep.** The blade in a passing lane is the cheapest thing you do all shift and the first thing you drop when tired.
- **Forcing the middle against a team protecting a lead.** They are conceding the outside on purpose. Take what's given.

Key Takeaways

1. **Time and space are the currency of hockey, and time is distance divided by closing speed, not seconds.** Skill is what you spend; time and space are what you earn. You can have time with an opponent three feet away who is moving the wrong way, and none with one twenty feet away who is closing hard. Read hips, not distance. (That formula is a way of thinking about it, not a quantity anyone measures.)
2. **Deception and a change of speed create space before it exists on the ice.** Fake shots, look-offs and shoulder fakes work because defenders must react to what you show them — and only if you sometimes mean it. Separation comes from the *difference* between your velocity and theirs, not your top speed: glide, look, explode.
3. **Buy your time before the puck arrives, and again after it does.** Scanning before you receive buys more than any move, because your clock starts when the puck touches your blade — arrive already decided. And once you have it under pressure, turning away and curling back to let support arrive is the most under-used skill in amateur hockey. You are not going backwards, you are synchronising.
4. **Attack the seam between two defenders, not one defender.** Force a decision between two players rather than a reaction from one.
5. **Behind the net and the boards are structures nobody can attack you through.** Use them as pivots. Behind their net is the best surveying spot on the ice; behind your own, it's one look and move it.
6. **Take away the middle first and concede the outside.** In every zone, the middle is worth more because more options radiate out of it.
7. **Deny the reception rather than the pass, with your stick rather than your body.** A blade in a lane before the pass prevents passes that are never attempted; a jab at the puck after the pass is a gamble. Arrive as the puck does — you don't have to guess right, and the receiver loses their scan.
8. **Pressure without a second layer doesn't remove space, it relocates it** — behind you. Find out whether your team forechecks 2-1-2, 1-2-2 or something else, and go on the same trigger as everyone else. This guide assumes a 2-1-2 and a low zone collapse unless it says otherwise; yours may differ.
9. **The rules and the rink are space-shaping tools.** Offside stops cherry-picking, icing stops endless clearing, the trapezoid stops the goalie being a third defenceman, the crease protects the goalie's body — but not their sightline, which is why a screen from *outside* the paint, without contact, is legal. Not *free*, though: under Rule 69.1 positioning alone can void the goal if it stops the goalie moving or defending. And width changes everything lateral — NHL 200×85 ft against a traditional international 60×30 m, though "Olympic ice" no longer

means wide, since Beijing 2022 ran NHL-width sheets. In England and Wales the trapezoid is the one of those to check rather than assume — England Ice Hockey's *Rules & Regulations* 22.3 say it is not currently enforced, though the In-House Rules' Introduction says "*unless otherwise stated, all rules will be enforced in line with the IIHF Rule Book*". Plan as though their goalie may come for a dumped puck.

10. **After every shift, ask: "did I have more time than I thought?"** The answer is almost always yes. Acting on that one question will improve you faster than anything else on this list.
-

Scanning and Anticipation

Rule set: Written to NHL rules. Where IIHF, USA Hockey or typical rec-league rules differ in a way that changes how you play, it is flagged inline. This document is about perception and habit rather than rules; the few places a rule shapes the read are noted where they apply. **Playing in Britain? The IIHF flags are yours** — every level of UK hockey runs the IIHF book, amended locally; see UK and England Rules.

RELATED

[Time and Space](#)

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[UK and England Rules](#)

Overview

Every hockey conversation eventually arrives at the same word: *vision*. He sees the ice. She has hockey sense. They know where everybody is. It is said the way you would describe eye colour — as a thing you either got or didn't.

That is mostly wrong, and it is wrong in a useful way. Players who look like they see the whole ice have almost always simply **already looked**. They gathered the information a second or two before you noticed they needed it, at a moment when the puck was somewhere else and nobody was watching them. What you see as vision is the *output* of a habit you missed.

This document is about that habit: **scanning** (deliberately gathering information before you need it) and **anticipation** (using it to work out what happens next). Scanning is the more teachable of the two and it comes first, because anticipation with no information is just guessing in a confident voice.

The central idea: vision is a habit, not a gift

Key	Players who look like they see the whole ice have almost always simply already looked
Action	Look while the puck is being retrieved, again as the passer's head comes up, and once more just before it arrives
Priority	Looks taken while the puck is travelling are free; looks taken after it arrives are paid for in possession time
Goal	Decide before the puck arrives — a decision started afterwards takes about as long as a forechecker needs to reach you
Mindset	The most improvable thing in your game — it costs no fitness, no ice time and no talent

Consider two players receiving the same pass on the half-wall — the boards area level with the faceoff dot in the offensive or defensive zone, roughly halfway between the goal line and the blue line.

Player A watches the puck travel toward them the whole way. The puck arrives. *Now* they lift their head, find that a forechecker is two feet away, panic, and throw the puck up the boards into nobody.

Player B looked over their inside shoulder while the puck was still being retrieved behind the net, looked again as the passer's head came up, and took a last glance a heartbeat before the puck arrived. They knew about the forechecker before the puck was even passed. They received the puck already turning away from the pressure, and moved it to the support they had seen three seconds earlier.

From the bench, Player B looks quicker, calmer and more skilled. Their hands are not better. **They took two or three brief looks, at moments when looking was free.** That is the entire difference, and it is the most improvable thing in your game — it costs no fitness, no ice time and no talent.

The mechanism is worth stating plainly, because it tells you *when* the habit pays:

- **Information gathered while the puck is coming is free.** You have nothing else to do with your eyes.
- **Information gathered after the puck arrives is expensive.** You are now paying for it with possession time, and the picture is changing while you look.
- **A decision made before the puck arrives is instant.** A decision started after it arrives takes about as long as a forechecker needs to reach you.

Everything below is an elaboration of those three lines.

Part 1 — Scanning

The mechanics of a scan

Technique	A head turn, not an eye flick and not a chin dip — your chin should pass over your shoulder
Technique	A snapshot, not a stare — take the photograph and process it afterwards
Action	Check both shoulders, not just your favourite; the surprise lives on the side you were not planning to use
Never	Let a scan cost you a stride — scan while gliding, while crossing over, while pivoting
Key	The last look is always back at the puck

A scan is a **head turn**, not an eye flick, and not a chin dip. Two practical points follow.

- **Turn far enough to actually see.** Your chin should pass over your shoulder. If you only move your eyes, you get a smear of your own shoulder pad and the frame of your cage or visor. Helmets, cages and visors cut your usable peripheral view more than people admit — that is exactly why the head has to do the work.
- **It is a snapshot, not a stare.** You are taking a photograph and processing it afterwards, not reading the ice. **Nobody has published a measured duration for a hockey scan.** The hockey study below sets only a *floor*: it counted a head turn as a scan only if it lasted at least 0.2 seconds, which tells you what is too brief to count and nothing about what is typical. The other nearby figure, the 242-millisecond average *fixation* in the football eye-tracking study, is a different construct altogether. So no duration is quoted here. The usable test is behavioural: if you are still looking a second later, you have stopped playing.
- **Check both shoulders, not just your favourite.** Almost every player has a preferred side — usually the side they intend to pass to. The information you actually need is on the side you were not planning to use, because that is where the surprise lives.
- **Keep skating.** A scan that costs you a stride is a scan you will stop taking, because it makes you slower and you will correctly conclude it isn't worth it. Scanning while gliding, while crossing over, while pivoting — all of it is trainable and all of it is the point.

- **The last look is always at the puck.** Scan, scan, scan, then eyes back to receive. A player who is still looking away when the puck arrives has traded a good decision for a missed reception, which is a bad trade.

What the research actually says

Hockey has its own measurement. Berg and colleagues, in the *Journal of Sports Sciences* (2025), hand-coded 22 televised games from the top Swedish men's and women's leagues — the SHL and SDHL — frame by frame, and measured **2,545 puck receptions** by **88 professional players aged 16 to 36** across five teams. It is the primary evidence for this whole section. The football research that follows corroborates it rather than standing in for it.

What Berg measured:

- Players took a mean of **1.48 scans (SD 1.01) in the last five seconds before receiving the puck** — about **0.30 scans per second**, or one scan roughly every **3.4 seconds**.
- **They took no scan at all in 39% of receptions.** At least one scan was recorded in only **61%** of the 2,545 sequences, and 71% of sequences contained either none or one.
- **Scanning was associated with better outcomes.** The action after reception succeeded **78.8%** of the time when the player had scanned first, against **70.1%** when they had not — "*a difference between the two types of sequences of 8.7% (95% CI = [5.3%, 12.1%])*". In a two-level model controlling for opponent pressure, body contact and time in the game, scanning still predicted success ($\beta = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.17]).
- **It worked the same for everyone.** Neither gender ($\beta = 0.09$, 95% CI [−0.56, 0.61]) nor positional role ($\beta = -0.31$, 95% CI [−0.90, 0.32]) moderated the effect. Women scanned slightly more often than men (1.55 against 1.39 per five seconds) and defencemen slightly more than forwards (1.60 against 1.43) — but the *benefit* of scanning did not differ by either.
- **Pressure and contact mattered more than scanning did.** Sequences with no opponent pressure ($\beta = -0.11$) and no body contact ($\beta = -0.18$) were likelier to succeed, both larger coefficients than scanning's. Getting open is worth more than looking around; looking around is what you can do when you are not open.

Two things about how it was measured are worth keeping. Berg's team used a **five-second window**, not the ten seconds the football studies use, and chose it deliberately: hockey situations change far faster, so an older look is a staler photograph. And a scan was defined narrowly — a **clear head movement turning the face away from the puck, held for at least 0.2 seconds** (five frames). That is the head turn described above, not an eye flick.

Corroboration from football, and what does not transfer

The football (soccer) literature is larger, older and better controlled, and it points the same way. Treat it as support for the principle; the hockey arithmetic above is the arithmetic that applies to you.

The headline study. Jordet, Bloomfield and Heijmerikx presented "The Hidden Foundation of Field Vision in English Premier League Soccer Players" at the 2013 MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference. Using close-up broadcast footage (Sky Sports' PlayerCam), they coded 1,279 game situations involving 118 EPL midfielders and forwards and found that the better players explored more frequently before receiving the ball, and that exploratory frequency was positively related to pass completion — most strongly for midfielders playing forward passes.

The follow-up, with better controls. Jordet and colleagues published a season-long study in *Frontiers in Psychology* (2020) covering 9,574 individual possessions by 27 players at one Premier League club across 21 home matches. Their findings:

- Mean scanning frequency was **0.44 scans per second** (SD 0.30) — roughly **3 scans in the 10 seconds before receiving the ball**.
- Central midfielders scanned most; forwards least.
- Players scanned slightly more before **successful** passes (0.46/s) than unsuccessful ones (0.40/s).
- After controlling for player ability and pass difficulty, the authors described the effect as a "**small, positive role**" for scanning in pass completion.

Note the word *small*. This is a real effect, not a dramatic one, and the authors say so.

The counter-evidence, which matters. Caso, McGuckian and van der Kamp published "No evidence that visual exploratory activity distinguishes the super elite from elite football players" in *Science and Medicine in Football* (online 2024, in print 2025). They compared 18 award-winning "super elite" Champions League players with 18 elite teammates matched by team, match and position, and found **no significant difference in scanning frequency or performance between the groups**. They did find that players scanned more before their final reception than the one before it.

A tempting reading of these results together is that **scanning helps, and past a certain point more scanning does not make you Messi** — that it is a threshold to clear rather than a dial to crank. **That reading goes further than the evidence allows, and Berg's team explicitly decline it.** Because they coded scanning as a yes/no variable, they write: "*we cannot say whether a higher scanning frequency would be more beneficial compared to a lower one.*" Caso's

null result compares two groups who are *both* already elite, which says nothing about players further down.

So the honest position: **going from no scan to at least one scan is measured, and in professional hockey it is worth 8.7 percentage points of action success. Going from two scans to four is not measured at all.** If you are the player taking one look every five seconds, the evidence for you is strong and direct. If you are already scanning constantly, nobody has shown that more helps — working on the *quality* of what you take in is the better bet, but that is reasoning, not a finding.

One more finding that should change how you read all of this. Aksum, Magnaguagno, Bjørndal and Jordet (*Frontiers in Psychology*, 2020) put eye-trackers on players in real 11-a-side matches and analysed 2,832 fixations. Players spent most of their fixation time on **the player in possession of the ball** — not on open space, which was the *least* fixated category of all, and not much on isolated teammates or opponents. Fixations averaged 242 milliseconds, far shorter than lab studies had suggested. So the popular coaching line "stop looking at the ball, look at the space" is not quite what elite footballers do. What they do is keep the ball as their anchor and add fast peripheral snapshots around it.

Weigh that finding carefully, though: the sample was five male football players, aged 17 to 23, watching a ball carrier. No study has done the equivalent in hockey — Berg's team counted head turns rather than fixations, and hockey's on-ice gaze work (Martell and Vickers, 2004) measures *when* the gaze settles in a live defensive-zone task rather than what share of looking time goes where. So the Aksum result is here because it is the closest thing that exists, not because it is about your sport. Five players is not enough to overturn a coaching instruction, and they were not on skates. Treat it as a reason to doubt "don't look at the puck", not as proof.

What does not transfer from football to hockey:

- **Speed and rink size.** An NHL rink is 200 by 85 feet against a football pitch of roughly 115 by 75 yards, and skaters cover ground far faster than runners. The picture you photograph goes stale much more quickly, which argues that hockey scans need to be *more recent*, not necessarily more numerous.
- **Where the puck sits.** A football is at your feet; a puck is on a stick out in front of you, higher in your visual field. Head-up puck control is genuinely easier in hockey than head-up ball control in football, so the excuse is weaker.
- **You can skate backwards.** A defenceman retreating backwards already faces most of the play. Their scanning problem is the opposite one — checking *behind* them, toward their own net.

- **The boards.** Hockey lets you play the puck off a wall, which means "no option" is much rarer, which changes what you are scanning for.
- **Line changes.** The personnel on the ice changes mid-shift. A scan taken forty seconds ago may be describing five people who have gone to the bench.
- **The numbers themselves.** Do not go on the ice trying to hit 0.44 scans per second. That is a football rate measured across a ten-second window. Hockey's own figure, measured the way hockey needs measuring, is **0.30 scans per second across five seconds** — and the authors are explicit that their data cannot tell you whether more would be better.

A coaching benchmark that measurement now contradicts. Several hockey coaching resources — Better Hockey's scanning material is the clearest — recommend scanning **roughly every one to two seconds when you are off the puck**, with a final look in the last half-second before receiving, and say that untrained players typically start at something like one scan every four or five seconds.

That benchmark is not merely unsupported; Berg's data contradict it. Professional SHL and SDHL players average **one scan per 3.4 seconds** in the window before receiving, and take **no scan at all in 39% of their receptions**. A player hitting "every one to two seconds" would be scanning two to three times as often as the measured professional average. And the rate the coaching material attributes to *untrained* players — one scan every four or five seconds — is close to what professionals were actually recorded doing.

One caveat in the coaching material's favour, stated plainly: Berg measured only the five seconds before a pass reception, while the coaching benchmark describes general off-puck play, so the two are not counting quite the same thing. But the reception window is the *high-value* window, the one where scanning is cheapest and most useful. If professionals do not hit one scan per one-to-two seconds there, the benchmark is not a description of elite play. Use it, if at all, as a nudge to look more often than you currently do — not as a number that anybody has shown to be right.

When to scan

Priority	The highest-value moment is the one to three seconds while the puck is travelling to you
Action	Look while the puck is on the far side of the ice — nothing is being asked of your hands
Action	On the backcheck, look over your inside shoulder and count opponents, not pucks
Action	Before receiving on the wall take an early look and a late one — the early one tells you your options, the late one whether they still exist
Action	Scan during stoppages — who is out, who takes the draw, which defence pair, where your bench is, the score and the clock
Action	Break the reflex of following your own pass; the moment the puck leaves your blade you are an off-puck player
Convention	The scan counts below are coaching craft — nobody has validated an optimal number for any of these moments

Ranked by value.

⚠ The scan counts below are coaching craft, not measurements — and it matters here more than anywhere else in this guide. The "scan every one to two seconds" coaching benchmark is dismantled above, on the grounds that Berg et al. measured professionals at one scan per 3.4 seconds and were explicit that *"we cannot say whether a higher scanning frequency would be more beneficial compared to a lower one."* That caution applies with exactly the same force to "two or three looks", "at least twice" and "two looks minimum" below. **Nobody has validated an optimal number of scans for any of these moments.** The *ranking* — which moments are worth spending your eyes on — is the part worth acting on; the counts are a way of making it concrete enough to practise, and you should treat a coach who gives you different numbers as equally well founded.

1. **Before the puck comes to you.** The single highest-value moment in hockey. The instant you can see that the puck is likely to arrive — a teammate is retrieving it, a teammate's head comes up, the puck is loose and you are closest — you have a window of one to three seconds where your eyes have no other job. Use all of it. Two or three looks, finishing with your eyes back on the puck.
2. **While the puck is on the other side of the ice.** This is the most wasted time in hockey. Nothing is being asked of your hands. Look at your own side: who is near you, where is the

seam behind you, where is the net-front threat. Players who do this are the ones who "always seem to be in the right place".

3. **On the backcheck.** A **backcheck** is racing back toward your own end after your team loses the puck — as distinct from a **forecheck**, which is pressuring in the *opponent's* end. Backchecking with your eyes locked on the puck is the most common scanning failure in the sport, and it has its own section below. Look over your inside shoulder — the shoulder nearer the middle of the ice — at least twice on the way back, and count *opponents*, not pucks.
4. **Before you receive on the wall.** Receiving along the boards is the most dangerous reception in hockey, because half your escape routes are made of wood and glass and one of your blind sides is behind you. Two looks minimum: one early, one just before the puck arrives. The early look tells you your options; the late look tells you whether they still exist.
5. **During a stoppage.** Completely free information that almost nobody takes. Details below.
6. **Immediately after you make a pass.** Your eyes follow your pass by reflex. Break that reflex. The moment the puck leaves your blade, you are an off-puck player, and your next job — finding support position, or getting to the net — depends on what you can see right now. See Puck Support and Spacing.

Scanning during a stoppage deserves its own list, because it is pure profit and it costs nothing but attention:

- Who they have on the ice, and whether it is their top line.
- Who is taking the draw and which way they usually turn.
- Whether their defence pair is the mobile one or the stay-at-home one — this decides whether you can beat them wide.
- Where your bench is relative to the play, which is where you are changing to.
- Whether the last change belongs to the home team, which tells you whether the matchup you are looking at is deliberate.
- The score, the time, and the penalty clock, which change what risk is acceptable. See Game Management and Risk Management.

What to look for, in priority order

Key	Beginners scan for the puck and stop; experienced players keep the puck as their anchor and spend every extra look on people and space
Priority	Pressure on you, then your outlet options, then the danger you are responsible for, then the space you could move into
Read	Which side pressure arrives on, and how fast it is closing — their speed and angle matter more than their distance
Options	Know your first option, your support option and your safe out before the puck arrives
Read	In your own end, ask who scores if the puck goes to the net right now — usually the net front or the high slot
Convention	Your eyes follow your system — the house-default low zone collapse alternates puck and nearest danger, man-to-man does not; find out which you play
Convention	The "anchor on the puck carrier" cue is imported from eye-tracking five footballers — a strong hint, not a hockey measurement

The great divide is not *whether* you look at the puck. The eye-tracking evidence above — five elite **footballers**, aged 17 to 23, watching a **ball** carrier — found that players fixate the player in possession more than anything else, and open space least of all. That is football, and it is five people. Hockey has its own on-ice gaze research (Martell and Vickers, 2004, using a live defensive-zone task), but it asks a different question: *when* the gaze settles, not what share of looking time goes to which object. So read the "puck carrier is the anchor" finding as a strong hint imported from another sport, not as a hockey measurement. The divide is what you look at **around** the puck: **beginners scan for the puck and stop there; experienced players keep the puck as their anchor and spend every extra look on people and space.** The puck is the easiest thing on the ice to find — it is where everyone is skating and where all the noise is. It does not need a dedicated scan. What needs one is the stuff that will not announce itself.

Take the information in this order, because this is the order in which it can hurt or help you.

1. Pressure on you. Who is closest, how fast are they coming, and from which side?

- **Which side matters more than the distance.** A checker arriving on your forehand side takes your best play away; one arriving on your backhand side leaves your strong hand free.
- **Their speed decides your play, not their distance.** A forechecker fifteen feet away at full speed is more urgent than one eight feet away and gliding.

- **Their angle tells you where they want you to go.** A forechecker taking an angle that cuts off the middle is steering you to the boards, where they intend to seal you. One coming from outside is steering you into the middle, usually because a teammate is waiting there. Go where they *don't* want you, if you can.

2. Your outlet options. An **outlet** is the pass that gets the puck away from pressure and up the ice. You want three things, in this order:

- **The first option** — the play you would most like to make.
- **The support option** — the teammate who is close enough to give the puck to under pressure, usually behind or beside you rather than ahead.
- **The safe out** — the rim, the glass, or icing it if you're shorthanded *and your rule set allows it* (USA Hockey grants the shorthanded exemption only at Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult — Rule 624(b)(1) — and NHL Rule 81.6 withdraws it from a team shorthanded by a *major* with an empty penalty bench; Special Teams owns the rule). A **rim** sends the puck *onward* around the boards with the flow; a **reverse** sends it *back against* the flow. These are not the same play and mixing them up is a turnover. Knowing your safe out before the puck arrives is what stops panic; you are never trapped, you are only choosing.

3. The danger you are responsible for. Everything above is about you. This is about the goal. In your own end, the question is: *if the puck goes to the net right now, who scores?* Usually that is a body at the net front — the immediate area in the goalmouth — or a player sneaking into the **high slot** (the area from the faceoff dots up to the top of the circles).

This part is system-dependent, so name your system. **The house default throughout is a low zone collapse — a zone-based defensive-zone coverage in which the skaters sag toward the net and take whoever comes into their area.** Under a collapse, your eyes alternate between the puck and the most dangerous body near you, and "your man" is whoever is currently in your area. Under a **strict man-to-man** system, your assignment gets far more of your visual attention and the puck gets less. Under a **hybrid** — man-on-man low, zone up high — it changes depending on where you are standing. **Find out which one your team plays**, because it directly determines where your eyes belong. See Defensive Zone Coverage.

4. The space you could move into. Last, not because it is unimportant, but because it is the thing you can afford to be wrong about. Where is the ice nobody is standing in? Where will it be in two seconds? This is what turns a competent player into a dangerous one, and it is covered properly in Time and Space and Playing Without the Puck.

The pre-scan: deciding before the puck arrives

Key	The puck's arrival should trigger an action, not begin a decision
Action	Use look, decide, receive, act — not receive, look, decide, act
Technique	Name your first option in your head in one or two words — "up the wall", "reverse" — because naming is what commits you
Technique	Name your bail-out too, so a plan A that evaporates leaves you on plan B rather than starting from zero
Action	Let the last look overrule you — cancelling a stale plan is the whole reason that look exists
Mindset	Accept being wrong sometimes; a second-best play made instantly beats the perfect play made a second late
Action	Use your ears as well — a teammate shouting "time" or "man on" is a scan taken on your behalf

This is the single habit that makes players look fast, and it is worth more than everything else in this document combined.

The puck's arrival should trigger an action, not begin a decision.

Most players use the sequence: *receive* → *look* → *decide* → *act*. That takes well over a second, and at hockey speed a second is long enough for a closing forechecker to erase the gap you thought you had. Good players use: *look* → *decide* → *receive* → *act*. Same actions, different order, and the reordering is free.

How to actually do it:

- **While the puck is travelling to you, name your first option in your head.** One or two words: "*up the wall*," "*D-to-D*," "*reverse*," "*glass*." Naming it is what commits you; a vague intention is not a decision.
- **Name your bail-out too.** If the first option evaporates in the half-second before the puck arrives — and it often will — you want to already be on plan B rather than starting from zero. A player with a plan A and a bail-out never panics, because panic is what happens when you run out of options mid-play.
- **Let the last look overrule you.** The final glance before the puck arrives exists precisely to cancel a plan that has gone stale. This is not indecision; it is the whole reason the last look exists.

- **Accept being wrong sometimes.** A pre-decided play that turns out to be second-best, executed instantly, beats the perfect play executed a second late almost every time. Below the professional game, hockey appears to reward speed of decision more than quality of decision — **that is coaching consensus rather than a measured finding**, but it is very widely held and it matches what happens to a slow decision under a forecheck.

The listening version. Everything above can be done with your ears as well as your eyes. A teammate shouting "time" or "man on" is a scan they took on your behalf and gave you for free. This is why talking teams look faster: they are running on more information per player than they individually gathered. See On-Ice Communication for the call list.

Part 2 — Anticipation: reading the play

Scanning tells you where things *are*. Anticipation tells you where they are *going*. Almost all of it comes down to reading bodies, and there is a general rule that runs through every read below.

Reading a puck carrier: watch the chest and hips

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| Read | Put your eyes on the numbers on their chest, or their belt — you will see the puck perfectly well peripherally |
| Read | Feet and hips together are a reliable second cue — hips rotated and outside foot planted means they are going that way |
| Never | Bite on a head fake, a shoulder dip or a puck fake — those are free to produce and aimed precisely at you |
| Key | The centre of the body is where to weight your attention, not a single magic cue you can read in isolation |
| Risk | The best carriers can lie with their hips too — when one genuinely beats you, re-establish position instead of chasing |
| Action | When you have the puck, deceive with your head and hands — they cost you nothing |

Look at the middle of their body, not at the puck, the stick or the head.

The reason is not folklore, though the evidence is one line of research rather than a mountain of it, and the later work complicates the earlier work.

Brault, Bideau, Kulpa and Craig (PLOS ONE, 2012) studied deceptive side-steps in rugby and described the **medio-lateral (side-to-side) displacement of the centre of mass** as an **"honest signal"** — honest because it is mechanically tied to where the runner can actually go, and therefore has to be *minimised* if the attacker wants to keep the option of changing direction. Experts were tuned to it: they waited significantly longer before committing (268 ms against 193 ms for novices) and were right far more often on deceptive movements. Novices were pulled around by trunk rotation and foot placement — the cues the attacker was producing deliberately.

Lynch, Olivier, Bideau and Kulpa (PLOS One, 2019) — also rugby, not hockey — then undercut the simple version of that. When they showed people *only* a moving sphere representing the attacker's centre of gravity, experts and novices both dropped to around chance, and adding a centre-of-gravity marker to a full-body display did not help. Their conclusion was that global body motion alone is not enough: local cues — limb motion and trunk orientation — are necessary too.

Put together: the centre of the body is *where to weight your attention*, not a single magic cue you can read in isolation.

The hockey translation:

- **Put your eyes on the numbers on their chest, or their belt.** You will see the puck perfectly well in your peripheral vision; you do not need to look at it. The reason this area is worth your attention is mechanical: head, shoulders, hands and stick can all be thrown one way without the player going anywhere, whereas shifting the mass of the body sideways is part of how a change of direction actually gets made — which is why Brault's group found the side-to-side travel of the centre of mass to be the most reliable single cue they measured. It is a bias in your favour, not a law; see the caveat three bullets down.
- **Do not bite on a head fake, a shoulder dip or a puck fake.** These are free for the attacker to produce and they are aimed precisely at you.
- **Watch their feet as a second cue.** Feet and hips together are a very reliable pair. A player whose hips have rotated and whose outside foot has planted is going that way.
- **Caveat: the very best puck carriers can lie with their hips too.** A genuine change of direction with the whole body, sold and then reversed, will beat you. When it does, you were not beaten by a fake; you were beaten. Accept it and re-establish position.

The mirror image, for when you have the puck: **your head and hands are your deception tools and they cost you nothing.** A look-off, a shoulder drop, a puck fake — all free. See Puck Handling.

Reading a passer

Read	Most passes go roughly where the front shoulder points — an unsquared passer cannot pass hard across their body
Read	An open blade lifts the puck into a saucer or a chip; a closed blade pointed at a lane means that lane is about to be used
Read	At most levels players look at their target before passing to it, often a full second before
Countered by	The look-off — a player staring at one option and passing to another has already scanned, so read the shoulders and blade instead
Action	Pressure a passer who received without scanning — they have to look before they pass and will telegraph it

A pass is much easier to predict than a carry, because a pass has to be aimed.

- **Shoulders.** Most passes go roughly where the front shoulder points. A passer who has not squared up cannot make a hard, accurate pass across their body.
- **The stick blade angle.** An open blade — heel down, face rolled back — lifts the puck; that is a saucer pass or a chip. A closed blade keeps it flat and hard along the ice. If the blade is closed and pointed at a lane, that lane is about to be used.
- **Where their eyes have already been.** At most levels, players look at their target before passing to it — often a full second before. If you saw them look at the far winger while the puck was still being received, the far winger is the pass.
- **The look-off is the counter, and it tells you something too.** A player who is *staring* at one option and passing to another is deliberately deceiving you, which means they scanned earlier and already know where everyone is. Against a player like that, stop reading their eyes and read the shoulders and blade instead.
- **A passer who has just received the puck without scanning has to look before they pass.** They have no choice; they don't know where anyone is. That's your cue — pressure them immediately, because they will need an extra beat and they will telegraph the pass when they take it.

Reading pressure: knowing where the forecheck is coming from

Key	F1, F2 and F3 are roles set by order of arrival, not positions and not people — your left winger can be F1 one shift and F3 the next
Read	Against the house-default 2-1-2, two bodies arrive fast from two directions and the wall gets sealed early
Action	Escape a 2-1-2 behind the net — a reverse to your partner or a wheel, into the space the forecheckers came from
Options	Against a 1-2-2, an early up-the-wall pass or a regroup; against a 1-3-1 trap, skate it up or chip past the layer; against a full press, the safe out
Action	Find out what your opponent is forechecking on your first shift, and tell the bench
Rule	After your own icing you take a defensive-zone faceoff with no line change (NHL Rules 81.4, 82.1) and no timeout (87.1) — expect immediate pressure
Rule	USA Hockey blocks neither (Rules 624, 636(f)), so there the tired line gets off

A **forecheck** is your opponents pressuring you in your own end to force a turnover. Forechecks have shapes, and the shape tells you where pressure will arrive **before it arrives** — which means you can pre-decide your breakout instead of reacting to it.

The roles in a forecheck are **F1, F2 and F3 — these are roles defined by order of arrival, not positions and not specific people**. Your left winger can be F1 on one shift and F3 on the next.

The house default throughout is a 2-1-2 forecheck — two forwards pressing in deep, one forward high, two defencemen holding the offensive blue line. If you are being forechecked by a 2-1-2:

- **You will have two bodies on you fast, from two directions.** F1 attacks the puck; F2 attacks the most obvious outlet.
- **The wall gets sealed early**, so the wall pass is the one most likely to be intercepted.
- **The escape is behind the net** — a reverse to your partner, or a wheel around the net — because the two forecheckers are committed and there is space where they came from.

Realistic alternatives, and how the read changes:

- **A 1-2-2.** One forechecker in deep, two across the middle, two back. You get more time in the corner, so you can look up. But the two middle forwards are taking away the wall pass and the centre lane, so the time you are being given is deliberate — they want you to carry the

puck into a wall of three. The counter is usually a hard, early up-the-wall pass before the second layer sets, or a controlled regroup back to your own goal line.

- **A 1-3-1 or other neutral-zone trap.** Almost no pressure in your corner at all, which feels wonderful and is bait. The wall is heavily covered and the middle is filled. The counter is usually to skate the puck up with speed and force someone to commit, or to chip it past the layer rather than passing into it.
- **An aggressive 2-1-2 or a full-ice press.** Everything is pressured immediately. The counter is the safe out — glass and out, or a rim — and living to play the next shift.

Find out what your opponent is playing, on your first shift, and tell the bench. This is a real job and almost nobody does it. See Forechecking Systems and Breakouts.

There is also a rules-driven read here worth knowing: **after your own team ices the puck, play stops, the faceoff is in your defensive zone, and your team cannot change lines (Rules 81.4 and 82.1) and cannot take a timeout (Rule 87.1).** So a tired unit that ices the puck is about to face a fresh opposing unit in their own end. If you are on the ice for that draw, expect immediate pressure and pre-decide the safe out.

Reading a shooter

- Read** Hands wide with the bottom hand down the shaft means a slap or heavy wrist shot that takes time to load; hands close means a quick release or a pass
- Read** Weight transfer decides whether — weight still sitting back means the shot is not coming yet, whatever the hands are doing
- Read** Blade angle at release decides where — an open blade lifts it, a closed blade keeps it low
- Never** Read the head — any shooter worth worrying about is looking somewhere other than where they intend to shoot
- Action** As a defender, get your feet into the lane a line-walking shooter is creating rather than lunging at them
- Action** As a goaltender, move your head to look around a screen rather than over it
- Rule** A screen from outside the crease without contact is normally legal, but positioning that impairs the goalkeeper can still void the goal (NHL Rule 69.1)

Whether you are a goaltender or a defender trying to block a shot, the cues are similar.

- **The hands are the loudest cue.** Hands wide apart, bottom hand well down the shaft, means weight is going into the shot — a slap shot or a heavy wrist shot, and it will take time

to load. Hands close together means a quick release, a snap shot, or a pass.

- **Weight transfer decides *whether*.** A shot requires weight moving onto the front leg. Weight still sitting back means the shot is not coming yet, whatever the hands are doing — they are waiting for a lane, a screen, or a pass.
- **Blade angle at release decides *where*.** An open blade lifts the puck; a closed blade keeps it low. If you are a goalie, blade angle is the difference between committing to a low save and getting beaten upstairs.
- **Do not read the head.** Any shooter worth worrying about is looking somewhere other than where they intend to shoot.
- **For defenders: a shooter who has walked the line is hunting a lane, not a shot.** Walking the line means sliding along the blue line to change the angle. Your job is to get *into* the lane they are creating, feet first, not to lunge at them — over-committing is how a point shot becomes a two-on-one behind you. See Risk Management.
- **For goaltenders,** coaching resources consistently list hands, blade angle, weight shift and foot position as the read, together with tracking the puck through traffic by moving your head to look *around* screens rather than over them. **Note:** precise figures circulate for how much shoulder rotation or weight shift predicts shot direction, and how many milliseconds of advantage this buys. None of them has a credible source behind it, so they are deliberately not reproduced here. See Goaltender.

A rules note that changes the read: screening a goalie — standing outside the crease in their sightline without contact — is normally legal. The only limit is Rule 69.1, which disallows a goal where an attacker "*either by his positioning or by contact, impairs the goalkeeper's ability to move freely within his crease or defend his goal*" — positioning alone can qualify, but that is a post-hoc call on the goal, not a whistle in the moment. So an attacker planted in front is not doing anything you can appeal at the time; the goalie's answer is to move their head and find the puck around the body, not to wait for a whistle.

Reading a defenceman (as an attacker on the rush)

Read	A tight gap closing hard means they intend to end this at the blue line — momentum is a commitment
Action	Against a hard closer, change pace — slow down and let them over-skate, cut underneath, or chip the puck past them and race
Never	Skate straight into a hard closer at full speed; that is exactly the collision they set up
Read	A soft gap concedes the line to protect the slot — beat it with the delay, the drop pass, or a shot for a rebound with a body arriving
Read	Skates parallel and square means uncommitted; hips opened to one side means they have committed, so attack the side they opened or abandoned
Options	Against a defender standing up at the line, chip and chase, pass laterally into another lane, or regroup rather than force it
Key	The stick is the weakest of these cues — a stick is easy to move, so weight it below the feet

Your **gap** is the distance between the defender and you. Reading the defender is mostly reading what they are doing with that gap and with their feet.

- **A tight gap — one to one and a half stick lengths, closing hard** (the tight-gap value carried by Neutral Zone Systems; the *default* gap scale is owned by Defending the Rush at two to three stick lengths through the neutral zone). They intend to end this at the blue line and they have momentum. Momentum is a commitment. Change pace: slow down and let them over-skate you, cut underneath them, or chip the puck past them into space and race. Do not skate straight into a hard closer at full speed; you are giving them exactly the collision they set up.
- **A soft gap — they are backing off, protecting the middle.** They are conceding the blue line to protect the **slot** — the dangerous scoring area in front of the net. You will get in with possession, but you will not get to the slot. The plays that beat this are the delay (curl back and wait for the second wave), the drop pass, or a shot deliberately aimed for a rebound with a body arriving at the net.
- **Their feet.** Skates parallel and square means they have not committed and can still pivot either way. Skates angled, or hips opened toward one side, means they *have* committed — they are preparing to turn and skate that direction. Attack the side they have opened, or the side they have abandoned, but recognise the commitment first.
- **Standing up versus backing off at the line.** Standing up at the blue line takes the entry away, so you beat it with a chip-and-chase, a lateral pass to a teammate entering in a

different lane, or a regroup rather than forcing it. Backing off gives you the line and takes the middle. Note the vocabulary here: **stepping up** is challenging forward in the neutral zone or at your own line; a **pinch** is stepping *down* from the *offensive* blue line. They are different plays in different places.

- **Their stick.** An active stick in the middle lane is protecting the middle; a trailing or outside stick means the middle may be open. A stick is easy to move, though, so this is the weakest of these cues — weight it below the feet.

See Zone Entries and Defending the Rush.

Reading the play's next state

Read	A hard rim follows the curve and arrives predictably; a soft one dies in the corner, and a flip off the glass lands somewhere else entirely
Action	Learn your home rink's boards and glass deliberately, and bounce a couple off the end boards in warm-up at an away rink
Convention	The rebound heuristic — the puck kicks off the way the pad or blocker was facing — is coaching craft, not a measured finding
Action	Arrive at the net moving, stick on the ice, expecting the puck rather than watching for it
Read	Arriving second, off-balance, on your backhand or against an established bigger player means you will probably lose that battle
Action	Play for the next state instead — get where the loose puck will squirt out, or tie your opponent up for a teammate

The most advanced read is not about a person at all. It is about where the *puck* is about to be, given physics and geometry.

- **Where a loose puck will go.** A hard rim around the boards follows the curve and arrives predictably; a soft one dies in the corner. A puck flipped in off the glass comes down in a very different place from one that hits the boards. Rinks differ — some have lively glass, some have a dead spot behind the net where pucks stop instead of wrapping. **Learn your home rink deliberately**, and take thirty seconds in warm-up at an away rink to bounce a couple off the end boards and find out.
- **Where a rebound will go.** The working heuristic is that a rebound comes off in the direction the goalie's pad or blocker was facing when the puck hit it — so a shot from an angle tends to kick out toward the far side, and the place to arrive is on the far post rather

than square in front of the shooter. **This is a coaching heuristic rather than a measured finding**, and goalies who steer rebounds deliberately will break it. The reliable part is the instruction it produces: arrive at the net moving, with your stick on the ice, expecting the puck rather than watching for it.

- **Which battles you will probably lose.** This one saves more goals than any of the others. If you are arriving second, off-balance, on your backhand, or against a bigger player who is already established with body position, **you will probably lose this battle**. The read is to stop trying to win it and instead play for the *next* state: get to where the loose puck will squirt out, or tie the opponent up so a teammate can take it. A player who insists on winning every battle loses the puck and their position; a player who concedes the battle and takes the second puck ends up with possession. See Body Contact and Battles.

Pattern recognition: how experience turns into instinct

Key	Experience does not give you faster eyes — it gives you fewer things to think about, because details compress into recognised units
Action	Name patterns out loud after they happen, on the bench — unnamed experience mostly evaporates
Action	Predict out loud before they happen and check yourself; a wrong prediction you notice beats ten right ones you never made
Action	Work on one pattern per week — trying to notice everything means noticing nothing
Action	Chase decisions per minute, not ice time — a three-on-three in a third of the ice gives you far more reads
Convention	Off-ice cognitive tools are a supplement to playing and being watched by someone who knows what they are looking at, not a substitute

What experienced players actually have is not faster eyes. It is **fewer things to think about**, because experience has compressed groups of details into single recognised units.

A new player looking at a defensive-zone situation sees ten separate people in ten separate places and has to work out what each one means. An experienced player sees "*low-to-high developing, net front unmarked*" — one thing, with an answer attached. Same picture, a fraction

of the processing. That compression is why instinct feels instantaneous: nothing is being computed, something is being *recognised*.

The bad news is that it takes repetitions. The good news is that you can get far more value out of the repetitions you already have.

How to accelerate it deliberately:

- **Name patterns out loud after they happen.** On the bench, after a shift: "*that was an overload, they had three on the strong side and the weak-side point was wide open.*" Naming is what turns an experience into a retrievable pattern. Unnamed experience mostly evaporates.
- **Predict out loud before they happen, then check yourself.** Watching a game, say what will happen next — "they'll reverse it", "he's going to walk the line and shoot for the tip". Being wrong is the useful part; a wrong prediction that you notice is worth more than ten correct ones you never made. This is the fastest single method in this document.
- **Work on one pattern per week.** "This week I am only paying attention to what the weak-side defenceman does on the breakout." Trying to notice everything means noticing nothing.
- **Get more decisions per minute.** A three-on-three in a third of the ice gives you many times the number of reads per minute of a full-ice drill. Volume of *decisions*, not volume of ice time, is what builds recognition. See Practice and Development.

A caution about off-ice "hockey IQ" testing and training. Fortin-Guichard and colleagues (*Journal of Sports Sciences*, 2025) tested 40 elite male players around 15–16 years old with a battery of perceptual-cognitive tasks — cognitive testing, video-based anticipation with eye-tracking, virtual-reality hockey and small-sided games — while five scouts independently tracked the same players for a year. **The scouts on their own were more accurate than the tests on their own; the best results came from combining the two.** Note what "accurate" means here: the yardstick was **agreement with coaches' assessments of the players**, not an objective outcome such as who was later drafted or who went on to play professionally. So this is evidence about predicting expert judgement, not about predicting careers. The honest conclusion is still that off-ice cognitive tools are a useful supplement and not a substitute for playing hockey and being watched by someone who knows what they are looking at.

The precondition: the head-up habit

Key	If you have to look at the puck to control it, none of the rest of this is available to you
Technique	Keep the puck in your peripheral vision — aware of it the way you are aware of your own hands
Technique	Hands away from your body, so the puck is out in front where your peripheral vision can see it
Technique	A soft grip — tension in the hands is what makes you look down at a puck you cannot feel
Action	Train it with a forcing function, not willpower — stickhandle while calling out fingers or coloured cards, ten to fifteen minutes a day

None of the above is available to you if you have to look at the puck to control it.

This is the gate. A player who must watch their own stick can scan only when they do not have the puck, which removes them from precisely the moments where scanning is worth most. Head-up puck control is therefore not one skill among several — it is the **entry requirement for hockey sense**, and it is the reason "keep your head up" is the most repeated instruction in the sport.

What it takes, briefly (the full treatment is in Puck Handling):

- **Puck in your peripheral vision, not your central vision.** You should be aware of it the way you are aware of your own hands, not the way you read a page.
 - **Hands away from your body**, so the puck is out in front where your peripheral vision can see it, rather than tucked in at your feet where it cannot.
 - **A soft grip.** Tension in the hands is what makes people look down; you look down to check on a puck you cannot feel.
 - **Practise it with a forcing function, not with willpower.** Stickhandling while someone holds up fingers or coloured cards for you to call out is the standard drill and it works, because it makes looking down *fail the drill* rather than merely being discouraged. Ten to fifteen minutes a day off the ice, with a ball or a puck on a slideboard, moves this faster than almost any other off-ice work.
-

Anticipation versus guessing

Key	Anticipation is acting on information; guessing is acting on hope
Read	The test is not whether you were right — ask whether your position would still be useful if you turn out to be wrong
Action	Jump a lane only on a real cue, with support behind you, and arrive in it with your feet — reaching is the signature of a guess
Position	Jump in the neutral or offensive zone, where being wrong costs a rush against rather than a goal against
Never	Jump as the last player back, deep in your own zone, or again after you have already missed once this shift
Risk	A successful jump creates a chance and a failed one in your own zone concedes one — so the read has to be well over 50/50

These look identical when they work and identical when they fail, which is why they get confused. They are not the same thing.

Anticipation is acting on information. Guessing is acting on hope.

The test that actually distinguishes them is not whether you were right. It is this:

Would my position still be useful if I turn out to be wrong?

An anticipating player moves somewhere that is defensible either way — they have shaded toward the likely pass while remaining between the puck and the net. A guessing player has committed to a position that is worthless unless the guess lands. That is the whole distinction, and it is teachable in one sentence.

When jumping a passing lane is the right play:

- You have an actual cue — you read the passer's shoulders, or their blade is closed and pointed at that lane, or their eyes have already been there.
- There is **support behind you**. Someone else is covering the ice you are vacating.
- The puck is in the **neutral zone or the offensive zone**, where being wrong costs you a rush against rather than a goal against.

- You can get to the lane **with your feet**, arriving in it — not by reaching with your stick from where you are standing. Reaching is the physical signature of a guess.
- The game state tolerates it. Tied in the second period, fine. Protecting a one-goal lead with two minutes left, no. See Risk Management and Game Management.

When it is how you concede a breakaway:

- You are **the last player back**. There is no version of this where the risk is worth it.
- You are **in your own defensive zone**, especially in the middle of it, where a miss is a point-blank chance rather than an inconvenience.
- You decided **before the passer even had the puck**. That is not a read; that is a plan you made and then went looking for a reason to execute.
- You are **reaching** rather than skating. A stick-only jump leaves your body in the wrong place and your feet stopped, which is the worst of both worlds.
- **You have already missed once this shift**. Chasing a bad gamble with another one is the most reliable way to turn one mistake into a goal.

The honest asymmetry: a successful jump usually creates a scoring chance. A failed jump in your own zone usually concedes one. Because those outcomes are not symmetrical, the read has to be more than 50/50 confident to be worth taking — and considerably more than that in your own end.

How to train it

- Options** Shoulder-check outlet drills, number and colour calls, constrained small-area games — anything that fails if you do not look
- Action** Talk in every drill; a call is a scan you did not have to take yourself
- Action** Watch your own shifts and genuinely count your head turns, then count those of a teammate whose vision you rate
- Action** Pause the video a second before you receive, name your three options, then unpause and see what you did
- Action** At a live game, watch one player for a whole shift away from the puck — the broadcast camera crops everyone else out
- Action** Off the ice, head-up stickhandling with a visual task, daily, in short blocks
- Risk** Reaction and peripheral-vision tools train the eyes, not the hockey

On the ice:

- **Shoulder-check outlet drills.** Any drill where you must check over your shoulder before receiving, and where the coach changes something behind you so that failing to look means failing the drill.
- **Number or colour calls.** A coach or partner holds up a number of fingers or a coloured card; you call it out while handling the puck or receiving a pass. The forcing function again — the drill is unpassable with your head down.
- **Constrained small-area games.** Three-on-three in a zone; two-touch rules; a rule that you must call the name of the player you are passing to before you receive. Constraints manufacture scanning without anyone having to nag about it.
- **Talk in every drill.** Calls are scans you did not have to take yourself. A talking team is running on more information than it collected. See On-Ice Communication.

With video:

- **Watch your own shifts and count your head turns.** Genuinely count them. Most players are shocked by the number, and the shock does more than any amount of instruction.
- **Pause the video one second before you receive the puck and ask yourself what your three options were.** Then unpause and see what you did. The gap between those two things is your scanning deficit, measured directly.

- **Watch one teammate you think has good vision, and count theirs.** Comparison is more motivating than an abstract target.

Watching live hockey:

- **Go to a game and watch one player for a whole shift, away from the puck.** This is the single best training method available to a spectator, and **live** is much the easiest way to do it, because the standard broadcast camera follows the puck and crops out everyone else. It is not the only way: wide-angle or "all-22"-style tactical feeds, which show the whole ice at once, do exist for some leagues and competitions and are the next best thing if you can get access to one. Watching a good centre for one full shift — where they look, when they turn their head, where they go when they have no involvement — teaches more about hockey sense than a season of highlight packages. See [How to Watch Hockey](#).
- **Watch the defenceman who does not have the puck.** Almost all the interesting anticipation in hockey happens in the person the camera is ignoring.
- **Predict out loud.** As above — being wrong, and noticing, is the mechanism.

Off the ice:

- **Head-up stickhandling with a visual task**, daily, in short blocks.
- **Reaction and peripheral-vision tools** (light-based trainers, reaction balls) are widely used. Be realistic about them: they train the eyes, not the hockey. The Fortin-Guichard study above is a reminder that off-ice measures alone do not capture game sense.

Common Mistakes

- **Puck-watching on the backcheck.** You skate back with your eyes on the puck, arrive in your zone with no idea who came back with you, and pick up nobody. **This is the most common scanning failure in hockey.** Fix: two looks over your inside shoulder on the way back, counting opponents.
- **Staring at the puck carrier.** As a defender it means you get beaten by the pass rather than the player. As a supporting teammate it means you skate to where the puck was. Watch the carrier's chest with your central vision and take snapshots of everything else.
- **Only watching your own assignment.** The opposite error, and it produces players who are technically covering someone while a goal is scored six feet away. Which failure you are prone to depends on whether your team plays man-to-man or the house-default low zone collapse — know which, and know the failure mode that comes with it.

- **Not scanning during stoppages.** Ten to twenty seconds of completely free information, several times a period, ignored by almost everybody.
- **The "I didn't see him" goal.** The back-door tap-in, conceded because four players watched a puck battle in the corner for three seconds. It is not a mystery and it is not bad luck — it is a scanning failure with a name. **Rule of thumb: every time the puck goes into a corner in your own end, check the net front.**
- **The chin dip.** Glancing down-and-sideways without turning the head, which feels like scanning and shows you almost nothing. If your chin did not pass your shoulder, you did not scan.
- **Scanning only to your strong side.** You collect information about the option you had already chosen and none about the one that would have surprised you.
- **Looking, but not deciding.** Scanning that does not end in a named first option is just head movement. The information has to become a plan before the puck arrives or it was wasted.
- **Still looking away when the puck arrives.** The last look is always at the puck. A missed reception cancels the value of three good scans.
- **Treating a scan count as the goal.** What is measured in hockey is the difference between scanning and not scanning — 78.8% against 70.1% action success. Whether *more* scanning beats *some* scanning has never been tested, and Berg's team say so themselves. Clear the bar first; then work on the quality of what you take in rather than the count.
- **Guessing and calling it anticipation.** If your position is worthless when you are wrong, you guessed. Score the process, not the outcome — a gamble that happened to work is still a gamble.

Key Takeaways

1. **Vision is not a gift, it is a habit of looking early.** Players who seem to see everything have simply already looked, at moments when looking cost them nothing.
2. **Scan before the puck comes to you.** That one-to-three-second window while the puck travels is the highest-value time in hockey, and most players spend it watching the puck approach.
3. **A scan is a head turn, both shoulders, quick enough that you never lose a stride** — a snapshot rather than a stare — and the last look is always back at the puck.
4. **Keep the puck as your anchor and spend your extra looks on people and space.** This is not "stop watching the puck" — though note the evidence for the anchor is imported: it comes from eye-tracking five elite **football** players watching a **ball** carrier, not from

hockey. It is about what you add around the puck, in priority order: pressure on you, your outlet options, the danger you're responsible for, the space you could use.

5. **Decide before the puck arrives.** Name your first option and your bail-out while the puck is travelling, so its arrival triggers an action instead of starting a decision. This one habit is what makes players look fast.
 6. **Read the chest and hips, not the head, hands or stick.** The head and hands are the tools of deception — the centre of the body is the honest part.
 7. **Read shape, not just bodies.** A forecheck's structure tells you where pressure will arrive before it arrives; a defenceman's gap and feet tell you what they have already committed to.
 8. **The most advanced read is where the puck will be next** — where a rim ends up, where a rebound kicks, and which battles you are going to lose so you can play for the loose puck instead.
 9. **You cannot scan if you have to look at the puck.** Head-up puck control is the entry requirement for everything else here.
 10. **Anticipation is acting on information; guessing is acting on hope.** The test is whether your position is still useful when you are wrong.
-

What is measured here, and what is not. Several things above are labelled inline but worth repeating together. **(1)** The scan-frequency figures for hockey come from **Berg et al. (2025)**, a peer-reviewed, open-access study of 2,545 puck receptions by 88 SHL and SDHL professionals — 1.48 scans per five seconds, at least one scan in 61% of receptions, 78.8% against 70.1% action success. The football figures are corroboration only, and are labelled as football wherever they appear. **No duration is quoted for a hockey scan:** Berg et al. report only a 0.2-second minimum for a head turn to be counted, not a typical length, and the 242-millisecond figure in the Aksum study is an average *fixation*, a different construct, not repurposed here as a scan length. **(2)** The "scan every one to two seconds" coaching benchmark is contradicted by Berg et al.'s measured professional rate of one scan per 3.4 seconds, and is presented that way — with the caveat, stated inline, that they measured only the pre-reception window while the benchmark describes general off-puck play. **(3)** The claim that elite players anchor on the puck carrier rather than on space rests on the Aksum eye-tracking study: **five male football players aged 17 to 23, watching a ball carrier.** It is labelled as football at every point of use, including in Key Takeaway 4. Hockey's own on-ice gaze research (Martell and Vickers, 2004) measures the *timing* of gaze in a live defensive-zone task rather than what share of looking time goes where, so it does not settle the same question. **(4)** The claim that hockey below the professional level rewards speed of decision over quality of decision is coaching consensus, not a measured finding. **(5)**

Precise figures for shooter tells (degrees of shoulder rotation, centimetres of weight shift, milliseconds of goaltender advantage) circulate widely with no credible source behind any of them; the shooter-reading section is therefore qualitative. The rebound-direction heuristic is likewise a coaching rule of thumb rather than a measured finding.

Risk Management and Decision-Making

Rule set: Written to NHL rules. Where IIHF, USA Hockey or typical rec-league rules differ in a way that changes how you play, it is flagged inline. **Playing in Britain? The IIHF flags are yours** — every level of UK hockey runs the IIHF book, amended locally; see UK and England Rules.

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Overview

Every time you touch the puck you place a bet. You are trading a chance of gaining something against a chance of losing something, and the two are almost never equal in size. This document is about learning to see that trade clearly and fast enough to act on it.

This is the thing coaches mean when they say a player "makes good decisions", and it is almost never taught explicitly. Players get told *what* the right play was after it went wrong. They rarely get told *how to work it out in advance*. That is what follows: the map, the rules, the checklists, and the reasons behind each — because a rule you understand transfers to situations nobody described to you, and a rule you memorised does not.

The central idea: every play has an expected value

Expected value is the plain-English idea that a decision is worth *what you gain if it works, weighted by how often it works, minus what you lose if it fails, weighted by how often it fails*.

In hockey terms:

(chance the play works × what you gain) – (chance it fails × what you lose)

You already do this. When you rim the puck around the boards instead of trying a cross-ice pass, you have just decided that a low-value certainty beats a high-value gamble. You made that calculation in about a third of a second and you did not notice yourself making it. **Making it conscious — in practice, on video, on the bench — is how you improve it**, because unconscious calculations do not get better on their own. They just get faster at being wrong.

What the analytics say about the "gain" side

Public tracking work has actually put numbers on the upside of different puck decisions. Thibaud Chatel's "Hockey Decision Tree" work at Hockey Graphs (March 2020), built from roughly **11,000 possession sequences tracked manually by Chatel and his colleague Mathieu Brosseau** in France's Ligue Magnus and Switzerland's NLA over three seasons (Chatel is the sole author of the write-up, but the tracking was the two of them — "*by my colleague Mathieu Brosseau and myself*"), valued each type of play as *how often it leads to a shot attempt* multiplied by *the average expected goals of the sequences it appears in*.

Expected goals (xG) is a model estimate of how likely a given shot is to become a goal, based mostly on where it was taken from and under what circumstances. An xG of 0.10 means "shots like this go in about one time in ten."

Play	Leads to a shot attempt	Average xG of those sequences	Value of the play
Successful high-danger pass (a pass into the middle of the offensive zone)	87%	0.129	≈ 0.112 xG
Successful controlled zone entry (carrying or passing the puck over their blue line)	60%	0.067	≈ 0.040 xG
Successful carry-out of your own zone	37%	0.064	≈ 0.024 xG
Failed dump-out of your own zone	4%	0.076	≈ 0.003 xG

Three things to take from that table:

1. **The gaps are enormous.** A completed pass into the middle of the offensive zone is worth roughly *thirty-seven times* a failed dump-out and *over four times* a clean carry out of your own end (0.112 against 0.024, which is Chatel's own phrasing). Not all good plays are equally good.
2. **Getting out of your own zone with the puck is worth about eight times getting out of it badly.** Possession compounds.
3. **These numbers only measure what you gain.** They say nothing about what a failure costs you at the other end. That is the missing half of the equation, and it is the half most players ignore — which is exactly why the rest of this document is mostly about cost.

Honest caveat: this data is from two European professional leagues, manually tracked. The direction of the findings is what matters, not the third decimal place. Do not quote these as NHL numbers.

The cost side is invisible, and that is the problem

- Key** When a risky pass works everyone sees it; when it fails, the goal arrives eight seconds later and looks like somebody else's mistake
- Risk** The chain from your decision to the puck in your net is long enough that most players never connect the two
- Action** Start connecting the two yourself — it improves your decision-making faster than any skill you can train

When a risky pass works, everyone sees it. When it fails, the goal usually arrives eight seconds later and looks like somebody else's mistake — a missed coverage, a screened goalie, a bad bounce. **The chain of causation from your decision to the puck in your net is long enough that most players never connect the two.** Coaches connect it. Video connects it. Start connecting it yourself and your decision-making improves faster than any skill you can train.

Risk is a function of location

The same pass is brilliant in one place and catastrophic in another. This is the single most useful idea in this document. Risk is not a property of the play; it is a property of the play *and where you are standing when you make it.*

First, the vocabulary, because the whole map depends on it:

- **The slot** — the area in front of the net between the faceoff circles. The **high slot** runs from the faceoff dots up to the tops of the circles; the **goalmouth** is the immediate net front. Shots from here go in far more often than shots from anywhere else, which is why it is the most valuable real estate on the ice for both teams.
- **The point** — the blue line, where defencemen stand in the offensive zone. Not to be confused with the **half-wall**, which is on the boards level with the faceoff dot.
- **North** — toward the opponent's net. **South** — toward your own. **East-west** — across the ice.
- **Odd-man rush** — an attack where the attackers outnumber the defenders back, such as a 2-on-1 or 3-on-2.

Why location dominates everything

The reason location matters so much is that **shot danger is largely about where the shot is taken from**. MoneyPuck's public expected-goals model — trained on more than 800,000 NHL shots from 2007-08 to 2014-15 — puts distance from the net and shot angle among its most important inputs, and reports that in its **2015-16 test season the 15% of shots the model rated highest accounted for over half of all goals**. Scoring is that concentrated.

Be precise about what that does and does not show. Location is not the model's only input: it uses around fifteen, including shot type, the time and distance since the previous event, whether the shot is a rebound and how far the puck moved before it, and the man-advantage situation. So "shot danger is about location" is the biggest part of the story rather than the whole of it — pre-shot movement matters too, which is exactly why the cross-ice pass in the offensive-zone hierarchy below is so valuable.

Flip that around and you have the defensive version of the same fact: **the space in front of your own net is worth defending out of all proportion to its size**, and any decision that risks putting the puck there is a decision with an outsized cost.

The risk map

- Read** Grade every area by one question — if I lose the puck here, how many seconds and how many bodies stand between the turnover and a shot on my net?
- Risk** Your own slot is catastrophic — the opponent gets the puck in the highest-percentage shooting area with zero seconds of recovery time
- Risk** Your own zone generally is high — the puck is 30-50 feet from your net and one pass from the slot
- Risk** The middle of the neutral zone is high — dangerous and disorganised, and this is where odd-man rushes are manufactured
- Risk** The offensive blue line is moderate — the cost scales with how many of your players are ahead of the puck
- Risk** The offensive corners and below their goal line are low — this is where you should be at your most creative

Every area of the ice can be graded by one question: **if I lose the puck here, how many seconds and how many bodies stand between the turnover and a shot on my net?**

Where you are	Risk of a turnover	Why
Your own slot	Catastrophic	A turnover here is not a chance against, it is very nearly a goal against. The opponent gets the puck in the highest-percentage shooting area on the ice with your goalie unset and your defenders facing the wrong way. Zero seconds of recovery time.
Your own zone generally	High	Everyone on your team is already home, which helps, but the puck is 30–50 feet from your net and one pass from the slot. The margin for error is a stick length.
Middle of the neutral zone	High	Counter-intuitive, and the reason it surprises people: a turnover at centre ice catches two or three of your players skating the wrong way at full speed. This is where odd-man rushes are manufactured. Your own zone is dangerous but organised; centre ice is dangerous <i>and</i> disorganised.
The offensive blue line	Moderate	A turnover here does not threaten your net immediately, but it starts a rush the other way against a defence that has been supporting the attack. Cost scales with how many of your players are ahead of the puck.
The offensive corners and below their goal line	Low	You are 150-plus feet from your own net with all five teammates between the puck and danger. The opponent needs a clean breakout, a neutral-zone crossing and an entry before they threaten anything. This is where you should be at your most creative.

Why north turnovers are so much worse than south turnovers

- Key** A turnover has a direction, and the direction changes the cost more than the location does
- Risk** A north turnover — losing it while it travels toward your own net — makes the turnover and the counterattack the same event
- Risk** A south turnover deep in their end separates the turnover from the counterattack by four or five seconds, which is enough to get organised
- Action** Weigh the direction of a risky play as well as its location — a blind pass up your own wall is bad, the same pass in their end is a nothing play

A turnover has a direction, and the direction changes the cost more than the location does.

- **A "north" turnover** — you lose the puck while it is travelling toward your own net, or you lose it to an opponent already facing your net. Their momentum is toward your goal. Your momentum is away from it. Every body on the ice is instantly on the wrong side of the puck. The turnover and the counterattack are the same event.
- **A "south" turnover** — you lose the puck deep in the offensive zone, moving away from your net. Their momentum is toward you, which means it points at up to 178 feet of ice they have to cross while your five players get back — goal line to goal line on a 200-foot rink, because **NHL Rule 1.5** places each goal line 11 feet from the end boards. The turnover and the counterattack are separated by four or five seconds, which is enough time to be organised.

Practical consequence: the direction of a risky play matters as much as the location. A blind pass up the wall out of your own zone is a bad idea; the *same* blind pass in the offensive zone is a nothing play. This asymmetry is the reason the "never" list below is almost entirely about your own end.

The "never" list — and why each one exists

Read the reason, not the rule. Every item below is a rule with a mechanism, and the mechanism is what lets you handle the case nobody warned you about.

Only one of the nine is an actual law of hockey: number 9, the puck over the glass. The other eight are coaching conventions — near-universally taught, but conventions all the same, and each is flagged as such below. Several of them carry a *secondary* penalty risk, which is a different thing from being a rule, and that is noted where it applies.

1. Never pass D-to-D through the slot — go behind the net

Never	Pass D-to-D through your own slot — an interception leaves the interceptor in the slot facing your goalie
Action	Take it behind the net instead — a longer route by maybe eight feet, and half a second slower
Risk	A failure behind the goal line is a battle behind the net rather than a shot from twenty feet
Convention	A coaching convention, not a rule — some teams allow a D-to-D exchange high in the zone, above the tops of the circles
Action	Find out where your coach draws that line

D-to-D means one defenceman passing to their partner. In your own zone, the two obvious routes are *through* the front of the net or *behind* it.

Why not through. A pass through your own slot travels across the highest-danger area on the ice, in front of the net, at knee-to-stick height, through the exact space where a forechecker is standing. If it is intercepted, the interceptor is already in the slot facing your goalie with the puck. That is not a chance against. That is a goal.

What to do instead. Take it behind the net. It is a longer route by maybe eight feet, it takes half a second longer, and a failure there produces a battle behind the goal line rather than a shot from twenty feet.

Coaching convention. Some teams do allow a D-to-D exchange high in the zone, above the tops of the circles, where the interception would happen 50 feet out. Know where your coach draws the line.

2. Never make a blind backhand pass up the middle of your own zone

Never	Make a blind backhand pass up the middle of your own zone — the worst tool, the worst information and the worst location in one motion
Risk	The backhand arrives slowly and imprecisely, and blind means you do not know whether the target is a teammate or an opponent
Action	Turn your shoulders and take the extra half-second to look
Options	Put it on the boards so a mistake becomes a battle, or use the glass if you genuinely have no time
Convention	No rule forbids it — about as close to universally taught as coaching gets, and the claim that it is a top source of amateur goals is coaching observation, not measurement

A **blind pass** is one made without seeing the target — you throw it to where you assume someone is.

Why not. Three failures compound. The backhand is your least accurate and least powerful side, so it arrives slowly and imprecisely. Blind means you do not know whether you are passing to a teammate or an opponent. And the middle of your own zone is where the interception is most expensive. You have combined the worst tool, the worst information and the worst location in one motion. Coaches name this as one of the commonest sources of amateur goals against — **coaching observation, not measurement.** Nobody publishes a ranking of amateur mistakes, and On-Ice Communication says exactly that about the same class of claim; the reasoning above is what should persuade you, not the ranking.

What to do instead. Turn your shoulders and take the extra half-second to look, or put it on the boards where a mistake becomes a battle rather than a chance. If you genuinely have no time, the glass is always there.

Coaching convention. No rule forbids it. It is as close to universally taught as coaching gets, and I am aware of no system that asks for it.

3. Never make a cross-ice pass in your own defensive zone

Never	Make a cross-ice pass in your own defensive zone — it crosses every forechecking stick and spends the longest of any pass in the air
Risk	If it is picked off, it is picked off by someone whose momentum already carries them toward your net
Risk	Even when it works it usually puts your teammate under immediate pressure facing the boards
Action	Move the puck north, or move it behind the net
Action	If the only outlet is on the far side, go D-to-D behind the goal line and then north — two low-risk passes beat one high-risk one
Convention	Nothing in the rulebook touches this — some teams accept it above the tops of the circles, almost nobody below them

Why not. An **east-west** pass in your own end crosses every forechecking stick on the ice, travels perpendicular to the direction you want to go, and if it is picked off it is picked off by someone whose momentum already carries them toward your net. It also takes the longest time in the air of any pass available to you, which means the most time for someone to read it.

There is one more cost people miss: even when it *works*, a cross-ice pass in your own end usually puts your teammate under immediate pressure facing the boards, because the forecheck slid across with the puck. You took a big risk to create a worse situation.

What to do instead. Move the puck north or move it behind the net. If the only outlet is genuinely on the far side, go D-to-D behind the goal line first and *then* north — two low-risk passes beat one high-risk one.

Coaching convention. Nothing in the rulebook touches this. Some teams will accept a cross-ice pass above the tops of the circles, where an interception is not a slot chance; almost nobody accepts one below them.

4. Never both defencemen to the puck

Never	Send both defencemen to the same puck — you commit 100% of your defensive-zone depth to a 50/50 battle
Risk	Lose it and there is literally no one between the puck and your goalie
Action	One goes and takes the body or the puck; the partner covers the space it will squirt into, staying between puck and net
Action	Talk about it out loud
Convention	A coaching convention with real exceptions — aggressive systems send both defencemen below the goal line on a specific read
Key	Somebody must be home; what varies is who — find out what your team plays

Why not. If both of you attack the same puck, you have committed 100% of your defensive-zone depth to a 50/50 battle. Win it and you gain nothing you would not have gained with one of you. Lose it and there is no one — literally no one — between the puck and your goalie except forwards who are facing the wrong way.

What to do instead. One goes, one supports. The one who goes takes the body or the puck; the partner reads the likely outcome and covers the space it will squirt into, staying between the puck and the net. Talk about it out loud — see On-Ice Communication.

Coaching convention, with real exceptions. Aggressive defensive-zone systems will send both defencemen below the goal line on a specific read — usually when a forward has already dropped in to cover the net front. The principle survives: **somebody must be home**. What varies is who. The house default throughout is a **low zone collapse (zone) coverage**, in which the strong-side defenceman pressures and the weak-side defenceman holds the net front; find out what your team plays.

5. Never force a low-percentage pass at the offensive blue line with no support back

Never	Force a low-percentage pass at the offensive blue line with no support back
Risk	The cost of the failure is not the loss of possession, it is the odd-man rush — one touch turns your five-man attack into their three-man rush
Read	If this pass is intercepted right now, how many teammates are behind the puck? Fewer than two, do not make it
Options	Chip the puck past the defender into the space behind them and race, or dump it into the far corner and forecheck
Convention	Not a rule and genuinely negotiable — a team trailing late, or built to attack in waves, will accept this risk deliberately

Why not. The offensive blue line is where your attack is at its most stretched — your forwards are ahead of the puck, your defencemen have often stepped up to hold the zone. A turnover there converts your five-man attack into their three-man rush in one touch. **The cost of the failure is not the loss of possession; it is the odd-man rush.**

What to do instead. Two legal, low-cost alternatives always exist: **chip the puck past the defender into the space behind them** and race for it, or **dump it into the far corner** and forecheck. Both concede possession, but both concede it roughly 114 feet from your net, going south — the offensive blue line sits 64 feet from their goal line (**NHL Rule 1.5**), so it is about 114 feet from yours, not the full length of the ice. See Zone Entries for which to pick.

The test to run: *if this pass is intercepted right now, how many of my teammates are behind the puck?* If the answer is fewer than two, do not make it.

Coaching convention. Not a rule, and genuinely negotiable: a team that is trailing late, or one built to attack in waves, will accept this risk deliberately. See the game-state table below.

6. Never stickhandle in your own slot

Never	Stickhandle in your own slot — stickhandling buys time, and there is no time to buy and nothing worth buying it for
Risk	Head down, surrounded, in the highest-danger area — you either gain nothing or concede everything
Action	Take the puck out of the slot first — one stride to the wall, behind the net, or a hard shot of it off the glass
Key	Change the location first, then make the decision
Convention	Not a rule — about as close to unanimous as coaching advice gets, but it is still advice

Why not. Stickhandling is a play that buys time. In your own slot there is no time to buy and nothing worth buying it for. Your head is down, you are surrounded, you are in the highest-danger area on the ice, and the only outcomes are "you get out of it having gained nothing" or "you lose it having conceded everything."

What to do instead. Take the puck out of the slot before you do anything with it — one stride to the wall, behind the net, or a hard shot of it off the glass. **Change the location first, then make the decision.** This one sentence is most of what this document is about.

Coaching convention. Not a rule. It is about as close to unanimous as coaching advice gets, but it is still advice.

7. Never leave your feet to make a check

Never	Leave your feet to make a check — you cannot change direction in the air
Risk	A carrier who reads it makes you miss with one movement, and you are out of the play for four or five seconds
Action	Skate, stay on your feet and keep your stick in the lane — take away the option rather than the puck
Rule	NHL Rule 42.1 penalises a player who "skates, jumps into or charges" an opponent, and USA Hockey Rule 607 names "leaving one's feet (jumping)" — the leap is written into the offence
Technique	Blocking a shot is a separate question, and the coached default is a standing block — close with your feet, not by lunging
Key	The real cost is positional, not disciplinary — down is out of the play

Why not. You cannot change direction in the air. A puck carrier who reads it makes you miss with one movement, and you are now on the ice behind the play, out of it entirely, for four or five seconds. The upside is small — best case you break up one play — and the downside is that you have removed yourself from the defensive structure at the precise moment it needed five players.

What to do instead. Skate. Stay on your feet, keep your stick in the lane, take away the option rather than the puck. A defender on their feet with a good stick beats a defender sliding with a great one.

Part coaching convention, part rule — and the two halves are worth separating.

- **⚠ Leaving your feet to check someone is itself named as an offence, whatever you may have been told.** **NHL Rule 42.1 (Charging)** opens: "A minor or major penalty shall be imposed on a player who **skates, jumps into** or charges an opponent in any manner." Jumping is listed as its own penalisable action, alongside charging, before the rule goes on to define a charge by "distance traveled". **USA Hockey Rule 607** is explicit in the same direction: charging "**includes skating or leaving one's feet (jumping) into the opponent to deliver a check.**" So the disciplinary risk of leaving your feet is not secondary — it is written into the rule by name. **Rule 44.1 (Clipping)** is about "throwing the body across or below the knees of an opponent"; it notes that an illegal low hit may be delivered by a player who "may or may not have both skates on the ice", which means that for *clipping* specifically, feet-off-the-ice is neither necessary nor sufficient. But that is a point about clipping, not a general licence: under 42.1 and USA Hockey 607 the leap is named. Treat the penalty risk of leaving your feet as **real and primary**, on top of the positional cost below.

- **Blocking a shot or a pass is a separate question, and it is coached technique — but the coached default is a *standing block*, not a slide.** Body Contact and Battles → Shot Blocking owns the method: get close, present your padded surfaces square to the puck, keep your feet on the ice, keep your head out of the lane, keep your hands tucked behind you, never turn your back or sideways, don't lead with your stick — and "**close with your feet, not by lunging. A lunge is a slide, and a slide that misses is a defender out of the play with no way to recover.**" A dropped or sliding block is a specific choice for a specific moment, not the technique to learn first, and it is explicitly wrong on a 2-on-1 (where your job is the pass) and when you are screening your own goalie.
- **The real cost is positional, not disciplinary.** Down is out of the play. That is the reason to stay up, and it applies just as much when there is no penalty in prospect.

8. Never change with the puck in your defensive zone, or when the play is coming at you

Never	Change with the puck in your defensive zone, or when the play is coming at you
Risk	A line change is the most vulnerable four seconds your team has — the main risk is the opponent attacking four-on-five
Action	Change when the puck is deep in their end, when your team has clear possession in the neutral zone, or at a stoppage
Mindset	If you are tired and stuck in your own zone, you are not tired enough to change — get the puck out first
Rule	A departing player must be within five feet of the bench and out of the play before the substitute steps on, or it is a bench minor for too many men (NHL Rule 74.1)
Convention	No rule forbids changing at a bad moment — 74.1 governs only how the exchange is made

Why not. A **line change** is the most vulnerable four seconds your team has: for part of it you have players who are effectively not in the play. Under NHL **Rule 74.1**, a departing player must be within five feet of the bench and out of the play before the substitute steps on, and a bench minor for **too many men** follows if the two overlap in any meaningful way. But the penalty is not the main risk — the main risk is that the opponent attacks four-on-five into a zone where you have no margin.

What to do instead. Change when the puck is deep in *their* end, when your team has clear possession in the neutral zone, or at a stoppage. If you are tired and stuck in your own zone, **you**

are not tired enough to change. Get the puck out first, then change on the fly as the play moves north. See Game Management.

Coaching convention, with a rule attached to one failure mode. No rule forbids changing at a bad moment; Rule 74.1 only governs *how* the exchange is made. The convention is about the four seconds of vulnerability, not the penalty.

9. Never shoot the puck over the glass from your own zone — it is a delay-of-game minor

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Rule | Shooting or batting the puck directly out of the playing surface from your defending zone is a minor, except where there is no glass (NHL Rule 63.2(iii)) |
| Rule | What counts is where the puck was when you hit it, not where it crossed the glass (NHL Rule 63.2(iii)) |
| Rule | Over the glass behind the players' bench is penalised; into the bench itself is not (NHL Rule 63.2(iii)) |
| Rule | Directly off a faceoff, no penalty is assessed (NHL Rule 63.2(iii)) |
| Rule | USA Hockey has no equivalent — Rule 610(c) penalises only a deliberate shoot-out, and 631(d) makes an accidental one a last-play faceoff |
| Rule | Even where no penalty applies, the faceoff goes to the nearest spot in the zone the puck was shot from (NHL Rule 85.1) |
| Action | Off the glass and out — hard, low and along the boards so it stays in; if you are panicking, aim lower than feels right |
| Action | Check your league — many recreational and youth associations do not enforce puck-over-glass at all |

This is an actual rule, not a convention. NHL Rule 63.2(iii) imposes a minor penalty on any player who "shoots or bats (using his hand or his stick) the puck directly (non-deflected) out of the playing surface from his defending zone, except where there is no glass." Three details that matter on the ice:

- **The determining factor is where the puck was when you hit it,** not where it crossed the glass. Touch it inside your blue line and it goes out, and you are going to the box.
- **Over the glass behind the players' bench is penalised.** Into the bench itself is not.
- **Directly off a faceoff, no penalty is assessed.**

Rec-league note: in a rink with no glass along a stretch of boards, the rule does not apply there — and many recreational and youth associations do not enforce puck-over-glass at all. Check your league. Even where there is no penalty, NHL **Rule 85.1** puts the faceoff at the nearest spot *in the zone the puck was shot from*, so you have bought yourself a defensive-zone draw for nothing.

What to do instead. Off the glass and out — hard, low, and along the boards so it stays in. The difference between a clear and a penalty is often a few degrees of stick blade. If you are panicking, aim lower than feels right.

The "almost always right" list

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| Action | Off the glass and out when you are in trouble — it moves you from catastrophic to high, not to safe, so get organised once it lands |
| Action | Shoot on net with traffic — the worst realistic outcome is an offensive-zone faceoff or a puck retrieved in the corner |
| Action | Take the simple play under pressure — the give-and-go you can make with three seconds becomes a giveaway with one |
| Action | Put the puck deep when your line is tired — tired players make late decisions, and late decisions in your own end are how goals happen |
| Rule | Shoot it in from your own side of the centre red line and, if their goalie freezes it, the faceoff is in their zone and they may not change lines (NHL Rule 63.8) |
| Action | Take the safe option in the last minute of a period — give them nothing to walk off with |
| Priority | When you have time, make the possession play; when you do not, get it out — the differentiator is possession, not method |

Every one of these is a low-variance play: modest upside, very small downside. **You will never be the story of the game for making them, and that is the point.**

- **Off the glass and out when you are in trouble.** You concede possession, and you concede it in the neutral zone — roughly 65 to 110 feet from your net, since your own blue line is only 64 feet from your goal line (**NHL Rule 1.5**), not at the far end of the rink. In the risk map above the neutral zone is graded **High**, so this is not a move from catastrophic to low; it is a move from **catastrophic to high**, bought with distance and with the two or three seconds your five players need to get set. That is still overwhelmingly worth making — but

the puck is landing in the zone where odd-man rushes are manufactured, so get off the ice or get organised rather than assuming the danger has passed.

- **Shot on net with traffic.** A shot that reaches the net with a body in front produces rebounds, deflections and scrambles, and the worst realistic outcome is a faceoff in the offensive zone or a puck retrieved in the corner. A pass attempted instead of that shot can be intercepted and go the other way. See Shooting.
- **The simple play under pressure.** When you are being closed down, the difficulty of every option rises but the difficulty of the *simple* option rises least. The give-and-go you can make with three seconds becomes a giveaway with one.
- **Puck deep when your line is tired.** Tired players make late decisions, and late decisions in your own end are how goals happen. There is a rule-based bonus here too: under NHL **Rule 63.8**, if you shoot the puck into their end **from your own side of the centre red line** and their goalie freezes it, the faceoff is in *their* zone and **the defending team may not change lines**. You have trapped their unit out there while you get fresh legs.
- **The safe option in the last minute of a period.** A goal conceded in the final minute costs more than a goal conceded at any other time, because the other team gets to walk off with it and you get no chance to answer. The last 60 seconds of a period is when the cross-ice pass in your own end goes from "bad idea" to "unforgivable."

The honest counterweight. "Safe" is a default under pressure, not a philosophy. Alex Novet's work at Hockey Graphs, using Corey Sznajder's tracking of roughly **230,000 zone exits** — Sznajder had at that point tracked **roughly half the games** of the 2016-17 and 2017-18 NHL seasons, not both seasons in full — found that **carry-outs and pass-outs led to a subsequent zone entry almost nine times out of ten, while dump-outs succeeded only about one time in five** — and that when a team *retained possession* on a dump-out, its success rate rose to the same roughly 89%. The differentiator is possession, not method. So: **when you have time, make the possession play. When you do not, get it out.** Confusing the two in either direction costs you.

Decision hierarchies by zone

This is the most practical section here. Each list is a **priority order**: run down it and take the first option that is genuinely available. The point of a hierarchy is that it removes deliberation — you are not weighing five options, you are checking four boxes in order and stopping at the first "yes."

The prerequisite. None of this works if you start looking when the puck arrives. You need one or two shoulder checks *before* you receive it, so that by the time it is on your blade the list is already down to two options. That is what Scanning and Anticipation is for. The hierarchy is the decision; the scan is the information.

Defensive zone — you have just retrieved the puck, forecheck arriving

Priority	Quick-up → Up → Wheel → D-to-D → Reverse → Rim → Glass, taking the first option genuinely available
Key	This is a hierarchy for a retriever with no time to read, not a ranking of breakout plays
Action	Quick-up first — first look up ice, then down; the window closes before you finish checking the rest of the list
Read	Reverse beats a forechecker who has over-run you; rim beats one who is sealing you against the wall
Never	Take D-to-D through the slot — go behind the goal line
Action	Nothing there? Take the hit, protect the puck against the boards and eat the faceoff
Never	Solve it by putting the puck over the glass

This is the same order taught in Defender — **Quick-up → Up → Wheel → D-to-D → Reverse → Rim → Glass** — with the reasoning attached. **It is a hierarchy for a retriever under pressure, not a ranking of breakout plays:** Breakouts is the authority and is explicit that which breakout you run is chosen by reading the forecheck in front of you, not picked off a list of favourites. Use this list when there is no time to read anything.

1. **Quick-up.** *Did we just win this puck, with their forwards still below it and no shape formed?* → Move it up ice on the first touch. Breakouts rates this the lowest-risk, highest-reward exit there is, precisely because the two or three seconds after a turnover are the least organised the opposition will ever be. It is first on the list because the window closes before you finish checking the rest of it. **First look up ice, then down.**
2. **Up.** *Is a teammate open going north on my side of the ice, with no opponent between us?* → Pass it. Highest value, lowest risk of the structured exits, and the fastest way out.
3. **Wheel.** *Do I have a clear lane to skate it out myself — around behind the net and up the far side, or straight up my own side, with nobody between me and the neutral zone?* → Go. A carry-out is the most valuable exit there is, and it beats a pass only when the lane is genuinely clear.

4. **D-to-D.** *Is my defence partner open with time?* → Take it across **behind the goal line**, never through the slot. This changes the side of the ice and forces the forecheck to reset its angle.
5. **Reverse.** *Has the forechecker over-committed and skated past me?* → Send it **back against the flow** into the space they just left, to a partner or centre arriving behind you. A **reverse** and a **rim** are opposite plays chosen by the same read: reverse beats a forechecker who has over-run you; rim beats one who is sealing you against the wall. Getting this read wrong is one of the most common defensive-zone turnovers there is.
6. **Rim.** *Can I send it hard onward around the boards to my winger's side?* A **rim** goes onward around the boards, with the flow of play. A 50/50 puck on the wall is an acceptable outcome; it is a battle, not a chance.
7. **Glass and out.** *Can I get it off the glass and out?* → Do it. No shame in this at all.
8. **Nothing?** → Take the hit, protect the puck against the boards, and eat the faceoff. Or ice it — icing puts the draw in **your own** defensive zone and denies you a line change, which is bad, but a penalty and a power play is worse. **Never solve this by putting it over the glass.**

Neutral zone — you are carrying through the middle third

Priority	Stretch pass behind their defence → winger with speed on the wall → middle lane with support → gain the line with control → chip or dump
Read	Anyone behind their defence? That is the highest upside available here, and it travels away from your own net
Action	Move it to a winger with speed going north and follow — north passes to moving targets are the safest productive play in this zone
Risk	Take the middle lane only with support — a turnover there creates an odd-man rush going the other way
Never	Turn back into the middle of the ice at your own blue line, or make an east-west pass across centre ice
Convention	That last one is coaching consensus, not a counted comparison — no public data ranks odd-man rushes by the play that created them
Options	Nothing there? Chip the puck past their defenceman into space and race, or dump to the far corner and forecheck

1. **Is anyone behind their defence?** → Stretch pass or area pass into that space. Highest upside available in the neutral zone, and it travels away from your own net.

2. **Is a winger with speed available on the wall going north?** → Move it and follow. North passes to moving targets are the safest productive play in this zone, which is why they rank above anything through the middle.
3. **Is the middle lane open with a teammate supporting?** → Take it, but only with support, and knowing you are choosing the highest-risk square on the risk map above. The middle of the neutral zone is graded **High** *specifically because* a turnover there creates an odd-man rush going the other way.
4. **Can I gain their blue line with control, with a teammate arriving?** → Carry wide, protect the puck on the outside, and drive the line.
5. **None of the above?** → Chip the puck past their defenceman into space and race, or dump to the far corner and forecheck.
6. **Never at any point in this list:** turn back into the middle of the ice at your own blue line, or make an east-west pass across centre ice. Both are named across coaching material as prime manufacturers of 2-on-1s against — *coaching consensus, not a counted comparison; no public data ranks odd-man rushes by the play that created them*. Defending the Rush lists neutral-zone turnovers as one of four causes and states it the same way.

Offensive zone — you have the puck below or at the tops of the circles

Priority	Lane to the net with traffic → pass into the middle → puck to the net for a rebound → cycle → point with a screen → chip back deep
Key	Failure here is cheap and success here is worth more than anywhere else — this is where you get to be dangerous
Action	Shoot the moment there is a lane to the net with a body in front of the goalie
Read	Rank by value times availability — but when the seam into the middle is genuinely there, it outranks everything
Action	Under pressure with support below you, take it behind the net or to the corner and cycle
Key	"The point is open" means a lane to the net, not just a lane to the defenceman
Never	Force it through their blue line on the way out — losing the puck in their corner is free, losing it at their line is a rush against

This is where you get to be dangerous. The risk map says failure here is cheap; the expected-goals data says success here is worth more than anywhere else. Both point the same way.

1. **Is there a lane to the net with a body in front of the goalie?** → Shoot. Now.

2. **Is there a pass into the middle available — the slot, the backdoor, or across the middle of the ice?** → Make it. This is the 0.112 play in the table above, the single most valuable thing you can do with a puck — with that table's caveat attached: those values were manually tracked in **two European professional leagues**, so take the ranking, not the decimals, and do not quote them as NHL numbers. Passes that cross the middle of the ice from net to net force the goalie to move laterally and reset, which is what makes them so dangerous. **Why it is ranked second and not first:** value is not the only term. A lane to the net with a body in front is available far more often than a clean seam pass, and a shot that misses costs you almost nothing, whereas a middle pass that misses is the most common way an offensive-zone possession becomes a rush the other way. Rank by value *times* availability. When the seam is genuinely there, it outranks everything.
 3. **Can I get the puck to the net for a rebound or deflection with traffic?** → Do it. Low-quality shots with a body in front beat high-quality passes that never happen.
 4. **Am I under pressure with support below me?** → Take it behind the net or to the corner and cycle. You keep the puck, you keep them in their end, and you keep tiring them out.
 5. **Is the point open with a clear lane and a screen set?** → Back to the point. But "open" means a lane to the *net*, not just a lane to the *defenceman*.
 6. **Nothing at all?** → Chip it back deep and re-forecheck. **Do not force it through their blue line on the way out.** Losing the puck in their corner is free; losing it at their blue line with your defence pinched is a rush against.
-

Risk and game state

Key	The correct risk level is not a personality trait — it moves with the scoreboard and the clock
Action	Leading by one in the third, take risk down and reach for the safe options earlier than usual; leading by three, down hard
Action	Trailing late, take risk up — pinch, activate, force the entry; not raising your risk when trailing is not being safe
Action	Shorthanded, down and clear it hard — the one exception is a genuine 2-on-1 the other way
Action	On the power play, up inside their zone and down at the blue line — a shorthanded rush against four attackers is the worst-value event there is
Rule	NHL regular-season overtime is five minutes of 3-on-3 sudden death (Rule 84.1); playoff overtime is full 20-minute periods at 5-on-5 (Rule 84.5)
Convention	In 3-on-3 the convention is to be patient, regroup rather than force an entry, and only attack with numbers
Action	Empty net and trailing, risk up to the maximum — the only bad decision is a slow one

The correct risk level is not a fixed personality trait. **It moves with the scoreboard and the clock.** Full treatment lives in Game Management; here is how it maps onto the decisions above.

Situation	Adjust risk	What actually changes
Leading by one, third period	Down	The value of a goal for is now lower than the cost of a goal against, because a goal against gives them the game back and a goal for only extends a lead you already have. Take options 4-6 in the defensive-zone hierarchy earlier than usual.
Leading by three	Down hard	Nothing you can do with a creative play is worth what a comeback would cost. Manage the puck, forecheck, get changes.
Trailing late	Up	The arithmetic inverts. A goal against when you are down two costs you almost nothing; a goal for is worth everything. Pinch, activate, force the entry, take the low-percentage pass. A player who does not raise their risk when trailing is not being safe, they are being unhelpful.
Tied, early	Neutral	Play the hierarchies straight.
Shorthanded	Down, with one exception	You are outnumbered, so a turnover in your own end is worse than usual. Clear it and clear it hard. The exception: a genuine 2-on-1 the other way while shorthanded is one of the highest-value plays in hockey, and a shorthanded goal is worth chasing when you actually read one — see the anticipation-vs-gambling test below.
On the power play	Up in their zone, down at the blue line	You can afford creativity inside the offensive zone. You cannot afford a turnover at the offensive blue line, because a shorthanded rush against four attackers is the worst-value event on a power play.
Overtime (NHL regular season)	Situation-dependent, high stakes	NHL regular-season overtime under Rule 84.1 is five minutes of 3-on-3 , sudden death. With that much space, every turnover is an odd-man rush and there is no next shift to fix it. The convention is to be patient, regroup rather than force an entry, and only attack with numbers. Playoff overtime (Rule 84.5) is different — full 20-minute periods at 5-on-5, sudden death, so it is regulation hockey with the cost of a mistake set to maximum.
Last minute of a period	Down	See the "almost always right" list. Give them nothing to walk off with.
Empty net, you are trailing	Up to the maximum	There is no such thing as too risky. The only bad decision is a slow one.
Empty net, you are leading	Down to the minimum, but shoot it	Under Rules 25.1 and 57.4 , if you have possession in the neutral or attacking zone with no defender between you and the empty net and you are fouled, the goal is simply <i>awarded</i> — not a penalty shot. Take the shot.

Anticipation versus gambling

Jumping a passing lane, pinching at the offensive blue line, activating as a defenceman into the rush — these are all risks, and they are all necessary. Hockey played with no risk is hockey that never scores. The question is never *should I take risks*; it is **is this one anticipation or a gamble?**

Definitions first, because these three get conflated:

- **Pinch** — stepping *down* from the **offensive** blue line to keep a puck in their zone.
- **Step up** — challenging an attacker forward, in the neutral zone or at your own blue line.
- **Activate** — a defenceman joining the attack below the top of the circles in the offensive zone.

The distinction

Key	Anticipation is acting on information; gambling is acting on hope — they look identical from the bench when they work
Read	The carrier's hips and shoulders turned toward the receiver, two looks at the receiver, the receiver's stick already presented as a target
Read	You counted their other options and there are none, or you have seen this player make this exact pass already tonight
Mindset	You are gambling if the honest answer is "it felt like a pass was coming"

Anticipation is acting on information. Gambling is acting on hope. They look identical from the bench when they work. They are completely different decisions.

You are anticipating if you can answer *why* before you move — the carrier's hips and shoulders turned toward the receiver, they looked at the receiver twice, the receiver's stick is already presented as a target, you counted their other options and there are none, or you have seen this player make this exact pass already tonight. The full cue list is in Scanning and Anticipation. You are gambling if the honest answer is "it felt like a pass was coming."

The second test: who is behind you?

Read	Before you jump a lane, pinch or activate, ask not only "am I right?" but "what happens if I am right and I still miss it?"
Key	A pinch with your centre high in the zone behind you is a good pinch even if you lose the puck — the worst case is a 2-on-2
Risk	The same pinch with your centre below the goal line is a bad pinch even if you win the puck — you were one bounce from a 2-on-1
Priority	Three questions in half a second — information or a feeling? who is behind me if I miss? what does the scoreboard allow?
Action	Two yeses and a green light from the third, go; otherwise hold your position, which is itself a decision

Even a well-read risk is a bad risk if nobody is covering the space you left. **Before you jump a lane, pinch or activate, the question is not only "am I right?" but "what happens if I am right and I still miss it?"**

A pinch with your centre high in the zone behind you is a good pinch even if you lose the puck, because the centre becomes the third defender and the worst case is a 2-on-2. The same pinch with your centre below the goal line is a bad pinch even if you win the puck, because you were one bad bounce from a 2-on-1 and you did not know it.

So the full test, in three questions you can run in half a second:

1. **Do I have information, or a feeling?**
2. **If I miss, who is behind me?**
3. **What does the scoreboard say about how much I can afford?**

Two yeses and a green light from the third: go. Otherwise, hold your position — which is itself a decision, and often the right one.

The asymmetry of hockey mistakes

Key	A missed offensive chance costs you a chance; a defensive-zone turnover costs you a goal
Risk	Ten creative plays in their end with eight failures leaves you clearly ahead; ten in your own end with eight failures puts some in your net
Priority	In your own end simple is usually right — the downside is enormous and the upside of complexity is small
Priority	In their end creative is usually right — the downside is nearly zero and the upside is the most valuable event in hockey
Mindset	The players people call "smart" are not the ones who take the fewest risks, but the ones who take them in the right end of the rink

Here is the structural fact that makes hockey different from most team sports:

A missed offensive chance costs you a chance. A defensive-zone turnover costs you a goal.

Those are not the same size. Not remotely. If you attempt ten creative plays in the offensive zone and eight fail, you have lost eight chances you never had in the first place and gained two you would not otherwise have had — you are clearly ahead. If you attempt ten creative plays in your own zone and eight fail, some of those eight are in your net.

At roughly **3.1 goals per team per game** in the 2025-26 NHL regular season (8,086 goals in 1,312 games), a single conceded goal is around a third of a team's normal scoring output. **One avoidable defensive-zone turnover can be worth more than an entire period of good offensive work.**

This is the whole reason for the two-speed philosophy:

- **In your own end: simple is usually right.** Not because simple is virtuous, but because the downside is enormous and the upside of complexity is small. The best possible outcome of a fancy play in your own zone is a clean breakout — which the boring play also achieves, most of the time.
- **In their end: creative is usually right.** Not because creativity is virtuous, but because the downside is nearly zero and the upside is the most valuable event in hockey.

The players people call "smart" are almost never the ones who take the fewest risks. **They are the ones who take their risks in the right end of the rink.**

Penalty risk as a decision

A penalty is a decision like any other, and it has a price you can actually look up. **This document owns the arithmetic of that price** — what a minor costs, what a penalty shot is worth, and which fouls are not priced as minors at all. The game-state half of the topic — which score-and-clock situations make a penalty unforgivable, and what the published evidence actually says about why amateur players take them — belongs to Game Management, "Discipline as Game Management", and is not repeated here.

In the 2025-26 NHL regular season, teams scored 1,595 power-play goals on 7,555 opportunities — a league-wide conversion rate of 21.1% (aggregated across all 32 clubs from the NHL's public team power-play report; see Sources). Teams on the power play also conceded 205 shorthanded goals, about 2.7% of opportunities. So the honest arithmetic:

Taking a minor penalty hands the opposition roughly a one-in-five chance of a goal, netting out to something a little under one goal against for every five penalties you take.

Against ~3.1 goals per team per game, that is a meaningful piece of a game, given away.

When a penalty is genuinely worth taking

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| Read | Is the thing you are preventing more likely to become a goal than the one-in-five chance you are handing over? |
| Action | Take the penalty to deny a certain goal — a 21% chance beats a 100% chance every time |
| Options | Late in a game, a minor that breaks a rush which would tie or win it is a defensible trade |
| Options | Stopping play when you are pinned and exhausted with no change available is real, effective and universally disliked |
| Never | Retaliate, send a message, stand up for a teammate after the whistle, or take anything at all in the first period |

Rarely, and less often than players think, because the test is unforgiving: **is the thing you are preventing more likely to become a goal than the one-in-five chance you are handing over?** Three cases pass it.

- **Denying a certain goal.** If the choice is a goal or a penalty, take the penalty. A 21% chance beats a 100% chance every time. This is real, and it is the honest case for hooking someone down in front of an open net.
- **Late in a game, to break a rush that would tie or win it.** A minor with 30 seconds left when you lead by one is a defensible trade: they get a fraction of a power play, not a two-minute one.
- **Stopping play when you are pinned and exhausted with no change available.** Cynical, effective, and universally disliked. It is a real tactical option and it is also a good way to lose your teammates' goodwill — see Team Play and Culture.

Note what is *not* on that list: retaliation, sending a message, standing up for a teammate after the whistle, and anything at all in the first period. For the situations where a penalty is not merely unprofitable but catastrophic — leading late, already killing one, already on the power play, either side of a 6-on-5 — see the "when it absolutely isn't" list in Game Management.

The critical exception nobody accounts for: fouls that are not priced as minors

Rule	Fouling a puck carrier from behind in the neutral or attacking zone, with no opponent between him and the goalkeeper, is a penalty shot (NHL Rule 57.3)
Rule	Play the puck first and trip him in the process and it is a minor for tripping, not a penalty shot (NHL Rule 57.3)
Rule	With your own goalkeeper pulled, ANY foul denying the chance is an awarded goal — neither awarded-goal clause carries the "from behind" requirement (NHL Rules 25.1 and 57.4, cited as a pair)
Rule	A skater — "a defending player, except a goalkeeper" — covering the puck in your own crease is a penalty shot (NHL Rule 67.4), or an awarded goal with your net empty (67.5)
Key	A penalty shot beats a power play but by less than the phrase suggests — 28.8% over eleven NHL seasons, computed for this document
Action	Prevent the breakaway four seconds earlier with your positioning — chasing from behind saves nothing, and saves nothing at all with your net empty

Some fouls do not cost you 21.1%, because they do not produce a power play at all. Two families matter, and each has a worse version when your own goalie is out of the net.

1. Fouling a breakaway from behind costs you a penalty shot. Under NHL **Rule 57.3** — the tripping rule, which the hooking, holding, slashing and interference rules all cross-reference for this purpose — a penalty shot is awarded when all four of these are true:

1. The infraction took place in the neutral or attacking zone — that is, over the puck carrier's own blue line.
2. The infraction was committed **from behind**.
3. The player was in possession and control (or, in the referee's judgement, clearly would have obtained it) and was denied a reasonable chance to score. Getting a shot away does not automatically rule it out — the rule says a penalty shot still applies if the foul denied a *"more" reasonable* scoring opportunity.
4. There was **no opposing player between them and the goalkeeper**.

Two riders in the same rule are worth knowing. If you play the **puck first** and trip the opponent in the process, it is a minor for tripping and not a penalty shot. And if the attacker has already beaten the goalie and is fouled with the open net in front of him, it is *still* only a penalty shot, because — in the rulebook's words — *"no goal can be awarded since the goalkeeper is still on the ice."*

2. With your own goalie pulled, that same foul is an awarded goal. The referee stops play and simply gives them the goal. There is no shot to save and nothing to be gained.

Which rule number governs that? Two, and they are not alternatives — cite them as a pair. Rule **25.1** is the general awarded-goal rule: a goal is awarded when the defending team has taken its goalkeeper off the ice, an attacking player has (or clearly would have obtained) possession and control in the neutral or attacking zone *"without a defending player between himself and the opposing goal"*, and an infraction by the defending team prevents him from scoring. Rule **57.4** is the operative clause for the tripping family specifically: *"If, when the opposing goalkeeper has been removed from the ice, a player in control of the puck (or who could have obtained possession and control of the puck) in the neutral or attacking zone is tripped or otherwise fouled with no opposition between him and the opposing goal, thus preventing a reasonable scoring opportunity, the Referee shall immediately stop play and award a goal to the attacking team."* Rule 25.3 routes you from the general rule to the rulebook's **Table 10**, which lists the seven infractions that produce an awarded goal with the net empty: delaying the game (Rule 63), handling the puck (67), illegal substitution (68), interference (56), leaving the bench (70), throwing a stick (53), and tripping — *"fouling from behind - including hooking, holding, slashing,*

etc." (57). The rulebook's own index settles the question by printing both numbers together: "Control of the puck — awarded goals ... 25.1, 57.4."

One difference is worth flagging, because it cuts against what most players assume.

The "from behind" requirement is part of the **penalty-shot** test in 57.3. It does **not** appear in the text of either awarded-goal clause: 25.1 and 57.4 ask only that the attacker was fouled with nobody between him and the empty net. Table 10's row label does still read "fouling from behind", so treat this as a wording gap rather than a settled on-ice practice — but on the rule text as written, the empty-net awarded goal is easier to trigger than the penalty shot, not harder.

3. Covering the puck in your own crease costs you a penalty shot — or, again, a goal. If a skater other than the goalkeeper "*falls on the puck, holds the puck, picks up the puck, or gathers the puck into his body or hands from the ice in the goal crease area*", play stops immediately and the other team gets a penalty shot (**Rule 67.4**). Against a puck that was going in anyway, that is a trade worth making. But if your goalie has already been replaced by an extra attacker, **Rule 67.5** awards the goal outright — you have prevented nothing at all.

What a penalty shot is actually worth. It is a better scoring opportunity than a two-minute power play — a clean, unopposed attempt from centre ice against a goalie who must stay in the crease until the puck is touched. **Across the eleven NHL regular seasons from 2015-16 to 2025-26, penalty shots converted at 28.8% — 137 goals on 476 attempts** (computed from the NHL's skater penalty-shot report; see Sources). Set that against the 21.1% power-play rate above and the gap is real, but narrower than the phrase "penalty shot" makes it sound. The two most recent seasons both sit below that eleven-season average, and each was close to or beneath its own season's power-play rate: **21.9% in 2024-25 against a 21.6% league power-play rate — roughly level; 17.1% in 2025-26 against 21.1% — clearly below.** Do not read that as a trend. Penalty shots are rare enough — between 27 and 59 a season league-wide over that span — that any single season bounces around wildly, so the eleven-season number is the one to use.

So the practical rule: if you are chasing from behind and the only way to stop them is a foul, you are probably not saving anything, and if your net is empty you are saving nothing at all. **The time to prevent the breakaway is four seconds earlier, with your positioning.** See Defending the Rush.

The far more common case

- Key** Most penalties in amateur hockey are not tactical trades — nobody decided to take them, which is exactly why they are addressable
- Risk** Stick fouls that are really skating fouls — a hook because you stopped skating twenty feet ago, a trip because your feet quit
- Risk** Retaliation — a slash after losing a battle, a cross-check after the whistle, an answer to something the referee missed
- Action** Fix the stick penalty in conditioning and the retaliation penalty in the mental game
- Key** Use frustration as a lens for fixing your own game, not as a fact about the population — no published study codes penalty motive

Most penalties in amateur hockey are not tactical trades at all. Nobody decided to take them, which is exactly why they are addressable. Two habits produce the bulk of them:

- **Stick fouls that are really skating fouls** — a hook because you stopped skating twenty feet ago, a trip because your feet quit and your stick took over.
- **Retaliation** — a slash after losing a battle, a cross-check after the whistle, an answer to something the referee already missed.

The stick penalty is almost always a skating problem, and the retaliation penalty is almost always a composure problem. One is fixed in conditioning, the other in the Mental Game.

⚠ **Be careful how strongly you state the second one.** The familiar claim that *most* amateur penalties are frustration penalties is **half measured and half folklore**, and the full working is in Game Management, "Frustration penalties". The short version, which you should not restate without the qualification attached: that amateur penalties are mostly **aggression-type infractions** is measured — Gilbert and Trudel coded 850 penalties across 55 Bantam games and found 62.4% were minor aggression penalties. That most are **frustration-driven** is coaching experience with no measurement behind it, because no published study codes penalty *motive*, and two findings (McFaul et al. 2026 on head-contact events; Kirker et al. 2000 on observed aggression) point the other way. Use frustration as a lens for fixing your own game, not as a fact about the population — and read the review before you repeat the claim.

Playing to the score — and to your level

Key	The right risk profile in a Tuesday-night beer league is not the right risk profile in a competitive one
Risk	Support is less reliable — in a team that does not practise, the give-and-go you can see is one your teammate cannot
Risk	Recovery is worse — a rec-league turnover frequently meets nobody at all, so the cost side of every calculation is higher, not lower
Risk	Goaltending is more variable both ways — get pucks to the net, and treat your own turnovers as costing more
Action	Tighten nothing in your game except your own end and you will win more games — try things in the offensive zone instead
Key	Risk level is a dial, not a switch — a big lead, a tired bench or a backup in net all shift you toward the simple play

An honest section, because most hockey advice pretends everyone plays in the same league.

The right risk profile in a Tuesday-night beer league is not the right risk profile in a competitive one. The reasons are not about talent, they are about the structure of the game:

- **Support is less reliable.** The high-value plays in the table at the top of this document — the controlled entry, the high-danger pass; manually tracked in two European professional leagues, so a direction rather than an NHL measurement — depend on someone being where you expect them. In a team that practises twice a week, they are. In a team that does not practise, the give-and-go you can see is one your teammate cannot.
- **Recovery is worse.** In a good league a turnover meets a backcheck. In a rec league a turnover frequently meets nobody at all, which means the cost side of every one of your calculations is *higher*, not lower.
- **Goaltending is more variable.** Which cuts both ways: shots from distance go in more often, so getting pucks to the net is worth relatively more; but so do the chances you concede, so turnovers cost relatively more too. Both effects push toward the same conclusion.

The blunt version: most amateur teams lose far more goals to unforced turnovers than they gain from creative plays. If you tightened nothing in your game except *your own end*, you would win more hockey games. The creativity is not the problem, and nobody is asking you to stop trying things. **They are asking you to try them in the offensive zone.**

The same logic applies within a game and within a season. A team with a big lead, a tired bench, or a backup goalie in net should shift its whole distribution toward the simple play. A team that is being outplayed and needs to change the game should shift the other way. **Risk level is a dial, not a switch, and knowing where to set it is a skill in itself.**

Recovering from a bad decision

You will make bad decisions. Everyone does, at every level. **What separates good players is almost entirely what happens in the next four seconds.**

The immediate response

- Action** Turn and skate to the middle of the ice between the puck and your net — become the extra defender
- Action** Get to the inside and take away the middle; deny the pass to the slot and a scoring chance becomes a shot from the outside
- Action** Talk — one word, "turnover", "back", "I'm high", reorganises four teammates who are still reading the play
- Never** Foul the puck carrier from behind — backchecking hard is the right play, but a trip, hook, hold or slash there is a penalty shot
- Never** Change while the play is live because you are embarrassed — finish the shift

1. **Turn and skate.** Not toward the puck — toward the middle of the ice between the puck and your net. The most useful thing you can do after a turnover is become the extra defender. Chasing the puck carrier from behind achieves nothing (and, as above, invites a penalty shot).
2. **Get to the inside.** Your job now is to take away the middle, not to win the puck back. Deny the pass to the slot and you have turned a scoring chance into a shot from the outside.
3. **Talk.** One word — "turnover", "back", "I'm high" — reorganises four teammates who are still reading the play. Silence is the second mistake.
4. **Finish the shift.** Do not change while the play is live because you are embarrassed. That is how a giveaway becomes a giveaway plus a 4-on-5.

Do not compound it

- Key** The most damaging thing about a bad decision is the decision that tries to fix it
- Never** Force a low-percentage play to make up for a giveaway — a pinch you have not read, a cross-ice pass, a hit you leave your feet for
- Risk** The second mistake is nearly always worse, because the first was an error of execution and the second an error of judgement made on purpose
- Mindset** The next play is a new play — its expected value has nothing to do with what just happened
- Key** If the boring option was right before your turnover, it is still right after it

The most damaging thing about a bad decision is the decision that tries to fix it. The pattern is universal and it looks like this: you give the puck away, you feel it, and thirty seconds later you force a low-percentage play to make up for it — a pinch you have not read, a cross-ice pass, a hit you leave your feet for.

The second mistake is nearly always worse than the first, because the first was an error of execution and the second is an error of judgement made on purpose.

The discipline is: the next play is a new play. Its expected value has nothing to do with what just happened. If the boring option was right before your turnover, it is still right after it. Working on that separation is squarely the subject of the Mental Game.

After the game

- Action** Watch the video if you have it
- Read** Ask "what did I see, and what was actually there?" — the gap between those two answers is your development plan
- Key** Bad decisions are the most coachable thing in hockey, because unlike a shot or a stride they can be fixed in a conversation

Bad decisions are the most coachable thing in hockey, because unlike a shot or a stride they can be fixed in a conversation. Watch the video if you have it. Ask "what did I see, and what was actually there?" The gap between those two answers is your development plan. See Practice and Development.

Common Mistakes

- **Treating risk as a personality rather than a location.** Players describe themselves as "a safe player" or "a creative player". Both are wrong. The same player should be extremely safe in their own slot and extremely dangerous in the opponent's, in the same shift.
- **Only counting the risks that failed visibly.** The cross-ice pass in your own end that got through is not evidence the play was good; it is evidence you got away with it. Judge decisions by the odds you faced, not the outcome you got.
- **Making the decision after receiving the puck.** By then your options have halved. The scan comes first; the hierarchy is just what you do with what the scan told you.
- **Stickhandling out of trouble instead of relocating out of it.** One stride to the wall changes the risk of every option on your list. Do that before you decide, not instead of deciding.
- **Chasing the puck carrier from behind after a turnover.** You will not catch them, and if you foul them from behind you have converted your turnover into a penalty shot under Rule 57.3.
- **Both defencemen going to the same puck.** Almost always caused by nobody saying anything. It is a communication failure that presents as a positional one.
- **Panicking the puck over the glass.** The most avoidable minor penalty in hockey. Aim lower, use the boards, or eat the hit.
- **Changing lines because you are tired rather than because the situation allows it.** Tiredness is not a green light. The play dictates the change, not your lungs.
- **Not raising your risk level when trailing late.** Playing "responsibly" while losing 3-1 with four minutes left is not responsible. It is a slow-motion concession.
- **Compounding.** One bad decision followed by a worse one to fix it. This costs more goals than the original mistakes ever did.

Key Takeaways

1. **Every play is a bet: the chance it works times what you gain, against the chance it fails times what you lose.** You already make this calculation dozens of times a shift. Making it conscious is the only way to make it better.
2. **Risk is a property of location, not of the play — so change the location before you make the decision.** The same pass is brilliant in their corner and catastrophic in your slot,

and one stride out of your own slot improves every option on your list.

3. **Rank the ice by cost:** your own slot is catastrophic, your own zone is high, the middle of the neutral zone is high (it manufactures odd-man rushes), the offensive blue line is moderate, and the offensive corners are nearly free.
 4. **North turnovers are far worse than south turnovers.** Losing the puck while it travels toward your net makes the turnover and the counterattack the same event.
 5. **Understand the "never" list, do not memorise it** — no D-to-D through the slot, no blind backhand up the middle, no cross-ice pass in your own end, never both defencemen to the puck, never force it at their blue line with nobody back, never stickhandle in your own slot, never leave your feet to hit, never change with the puck in your own zone, and never put it over the glass from your own end. **Only that last one is an actual rule** (a minor under Rule 63.2); the other eight are coaching conventions.
 6. **When you have time, make the possession play; when you do not, get it out.**
Tracked NHL data shows carry-outs and pass-outs lead to a subsequent entry nearly nine times in ten, dump-outs about one time in five — but the differentiator is *possession*, not method.
 7. **Anticipation is information; gambling is hope.** Before you jump a lane, pinch or activate, answer: do I have a read, who is behind me, and what does the scoreboard allow?
 8. **Hockey's mistakes are asymmetric** — a missed chance costs you a chance, a defensive-zone turnover costs you a goal. That is why simple is right in your end and creative is right in theirs.
 9. **A minor penalty is roughly a one-in-five chance of a goal against** (21.1% league-wide in the 2025-26 NHL regular season). Worth it to deny a certain goal; almost never worth it out of frustration — and fouling a breakaway from behind buys you a **penalty shot** against (Rule 57.3), not a minor, or an **awarded goal** if your own net is empty (Rules 25.1 and 57.4).
 10. **Do not compound.** The next play's expected value has nothing to do with the last one. Turn, skate to the inside, talk, and finish the shift.
-

Playing Without the Puck

Rule set: Written to NHL rules. Where IIHF, USA Hockey or typical rec-league rules differ in a way that changes how you play, it is flagged inline. **Playing in Britain? The IIHF flags are yours** — every level of UK hockey runs the IIHF book, amended locally; see UK and England Rules.

RELATED

Puck Support and Spacing

Time and Space

Scanning and Anticipation

Defending the Rush

Risk Management

Body Contact and Battles

How to Watch Hockey

Center

Winger

Defender

Goaltender

UK and England Rules

Overview

You will hold the puck for well under a minute in a hockey game. Everything else you do — every stride, every read, every decision about where to be and who to watch — happens without it. This document is about that overwhelming majority of the game.

It is organised around **four off-puck states**, because "off-puck play" is not one skill. What you should be doing when your team has the puck is almost the opposite of what you should be doing when the other team has it, and both are different again from the two chaotic states in between — a loose puck nobody owns, and a transition where possession has just changed and neither team has settled. Most amateur players have a vague plan for one of these four states and no plan at all for the other three.

The good news, and the reason this document is worth your time: off-puck play is the cheapest improvement available to you. It needs no new skill. It needs a decision about where to go and the willingness to go there.

The central premise: you almost never have the puck

This is worth quantifying honestly, because the number is more extreme than most players guess.

What the tracking data says

The NHL installed puck and player tracking (PPT) in every arena for the 2021-22 season, and added an individual puck-possession model to its data stream in March 2023. A 2025 study from the University of Waterloo used that data across 1,194 games of the 2023-24 NHL season, covering 671 skaters, to measure how long individual players actually hold the puck at **5-on-5** — five skaters a side with both goaltenders in net. Note that 5-on-5 is not the same as even strength: 4-on-4 and 3-on-3 are also even strength, and the paper deliberately reports 5-on-5 only. Every figure below is 5-on-5.

The headline findings, all normalised to 20 minutes of ice time so that players with different roles can be compared:

Measure	Forwards	Defencemen
Total puck possession per 20 minutes of ice time	0:40 (95% CI 0:39–0:41)	0:49 (95% CI 0:48–0:50)
Number of separate possessions per 20 minutes	31.3	37.1
Average length of one possession	1.27 sec	1.32 sec
Puck possession <i>in the offensive zone</i> per 20 minutes	0:18	0:09

The study's own summary of that first row: players spend **about 3.3% to 4.2% of their ice time with the puck**.

Two more numbers from the same work, because they reframe what "having the puck" even means:

- The average individual possession lasts **1.29 seconds** across all skaters. In the offensive zone — where you most want to do something clever — it drops to **1.05 seconds**.
- The single highest total possession time in the league belonged to Quinn Hughes at **1:37 per 20 minutes**, followed by Cale Makar at 1:25 and Mathew Barzal at 1:21. Even the most puck-dominant player in the NHL holds it for under two minutes per twenty.

USA Hockey's own hand-tracked puck-possession study of the 2002 Olympic Winter Games and the 2002 Youth Tier I National Championships puts the **men's per-game average at 1:07** with the puck (1:01.4 in the men's gold-medal game itself). Different method, different era, same order of magnitude.

The youth half of that study is more interesting than it first looks, and it has to be read bracket by bracket rather than as one number:

Level	Game length	Puck possession per game
Olympic men (per-game average)	60 min	1:07.05
Olympic women (per-game average)	60 min	1:12
14-and-Under nationals	48 min	1:06.02
16-/18-and-Under nationals	51 min	48.3 s
12-and-Under nationals	45 min	38.4 s

So the striking line — that the best youth players held the puck about as long as the best professionals — is true of the **14-and-Under** bracket and of that bracket only. The two levels either side of it are well under half the Olympic figure. The headline nobody should lose sight of is the one USA Hockey itself drew: across every level measured, from Olympic professionals down to 12-and-Under, **the maximum average a player possessed the puck in a single game was a minute and twelve seconds.**

Putting it in your terms

Some arithmetic, all of which is mine rather than any source's — including the two inputs it starts from.

Across the 2024-25 NHL regular season, forwards who played at least 40 games averaged **15:17 of ice time per game**; defencemen averaged **19:31**. A separate sample of 8,325 shifts from 11 NHL games in that season gives a **mean shift length of 47 seconds and a median of 45. Neither of those is a published figure** — the ice-time averages are calculated from Hockey Reference's 2024-25 skater table, the shift lengths from the NHL's public shift-chart API across a small sample of games chosen for convenience. They are not on the same footing as the peer-reviewed possession data above. See *Notes on verification*.

Take a forward with 15:17 of ice time. If the study's 5-on-5 rate held across all of it:

- They are on the ice for roughly **a quarter of the 60-minute game.**
- They hold the puck for **about 30 seconds** — under **1% of the game clock.**
- That 30 seconds arrives as roughly **24 separate possessions**, each lasting a little over a second.
- Across about 19 or 20 shifts, that is **a bit more than one possession per shift.**

- In the offensive zone, with the puck, they have **about 14 seconds** for the whole game.

For a defenceman at 19:31, the equivalents are about **48 seconds** total and **roughly 9 seconds** in the offensive zone.

What that means for how you practise

Key	Working only on what you do with the puck trains three to four percent of your ice time — the other 96% is untrained
Risk	The untrained 96% decides whether your possessions happen in a dangerous place with your head up, or in a corner with two men on you
Mindset	Skill work is not wasted — one and a quarter seconds is a brutally short window in which to be unskilled
Action	Improve the fifteen minutes you spend on the ice without the puck — it is the most reliable way to get more out of your thirty seconds with it

If you spend every practice and every stickhandling session working on what you do with the puck, you are training **three to four percent of your ice time**. That work is not wasted — those 24 possessions are where goals get created, and one and a quarter seconds is a brutally short window in which to be unskilled. But the other **96%** is currently untrained, and it is the part that decides whether those 24 possessions happen in a dangerous place with your head up, or in a corner with two men on you.

Put it the other way round. The most reliable way to get more out of your thirty seconds with the puck is to improve the fifteen minutes you spend on the ice without it.

Caveat, stated once and applying to all of the above: the possession figures are 5-on-5 only and are normalised per 20 minutes of ice time. Real ice time includes power plays and penalty kills, where possession patterns differ. The NHL calls this dataset unofficial and it may differ from hand-tracked data. The arithmetic combining possession rates with ice time and shift length is mine, not the researchers'. Treat the numbers as the right *shape*, not as decimals to defend.

The four off-puck states

Read	At any instant that you do not have the puck you are in one of four states — your team has it, they have it, it is loose, or it has just changed
Priority	When two states apply, take the one that names the more urgent job — a loose puck you can get to is State 3, whatever else is going on
Convention	A working sort, not a mathematical partition — states 3 and 4 genuinely overlap, and the value of the sort is that it changes what you look at and where you skate
Key	The state changes without warning several times a shift, and most bad off-puck play is a player still doing the right thing for the previous state
Key	Most players have a plan for one state only, which is exactly why States 3 and 4 are where the most improvement is available

Here is the organising idea for the rest of this document. At any instant that you do not have the puck, you are in one of four states, and each one asks something different of you:

State	Who has the puck	Your job in one line
1. Support	Your team	Get open, create options, occupy defenders
2. Defending	Their team	If you are the closest, pressure the puck. If you are not, deny space, watch your man, and layer behind whoever is
3. Scramble	Nobody — the puck is loose	Win the race with body position, or protect what is behind you
4. Transition	Just changed, nothing settled	Recognise it first and act before the other side does

This is a working sort, not a mathematical partition. States 3 and 4 overlap: a loose puck in the middle of a change of possession is genuinely both. When two apply, take the one that names the more urgent job — if there is a puck on the ice that nobody owns and you can get to it, that is State 3, whatever else is going on. The value of the sort is that it changes what you look at and where you skate, not that it carves the game into disjoint boxes.

Two other things about this framework matter more than the framework itself.

The state changes without warning, several times a shift. A blocked shot turns State 1 into State 3 in a tenth of a second. Most bad off-puck play is not a player doing the wrong thing for the

state — it is a player still doing the right thing for the *previous* state. This is why Scanning and Anticipation is the foundation under all of this: you cannot switch states you have not noticed.

Most players only have a plan for one state. Offensive players have a plan for State 1. Defensive players have a plan for the covering half of State 2. Almost nobody has a plan for States 3 and 4, which is exactly why those two are where the most improvement is available.

State 1 — Your team has the puck and you don't

You are one of four teammates without the puck. Your job is to make the puck carrier's next decision easy. There are three ways to do that, and only one of them involves receiving a pass.

Get open

Become a passing option. This is the obvious one and it gets its own full section below.

Create options you never use

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| Goal | Be a credible option even when the puck never comes — one the carrier looks at and declines has still made a defender respect it |
| Key | Two credible options force a defender to choose; one option lets them sit in the lane |
| Position | Support is about being available in a different place, not about being close — the geometry belongs to Puck Support and Spacing |

A passing option that the carrier *looks at* and declines still did its job, because a defender had to respect it. Two credible options force a defender to choose; one option lets them sit in the lane. This is the whole logic of Puck Support and Spacing — support is about being available in a *different place*, not about being close.

Occupy a defender

- Action** Take a defender away from where the play is going to happen, whether or not the puck ever comes to you
- Key** Being the wrong player to receive the pass does not excuse you from doing anything
- Read** As the far-side winger with the puck on the opposite half-wall, whether you drift into the middle or hold width changes what the strong-side defenceman can do

Take a defender away from where the play is going to happen, whether or not the puck ever comes to you. Also below, in its own section, because it is the least understood work in hockey.

The reason to think of these as three separate jobs: on any given shift you may be the wrong player to receive the pass, and that does not excuse you from doing anything. If you are the far-side winger and the puck is on the opposite half-wall (the boards area roughly level with the faceoff dot), you may not touch the puck at all — but whether you drift into the middle or hold width changes what the strong-side defenceman can do.

State 2 — They have the puck

Somebody on your team has to go to the puck, and the other four have to do something else. Both halves of that are off-puck work, and both are covered here — the pressuring job first, because everyone else's job is defined relative to it, and then the four players who are not pressuring, which is where amateur teams actually leak goals.

If you are the one pressuring

Goal	Take options away and force the carrier to decide early — winning the puck is a bonus, not the job
Action	Angle, do not chase — approach on a curve that closes one side of the ice, so the only route left is the one your support is covering
Action	Steer them where your help is; angling a carrier into the middle while your support sits on the wall is worse than not pressuring at all
Technique	Arrive under control — close the last few feet with short strides, stick out front, in a position to change direction
Priority	Stick on the puck, body on the man, in that order — take the body only when it does not cost you the lane behind you
Action	Talk, because you are the trigger — "I've got the carrier" tells your support where to stand, and silence makes four people guess
Convention	Who goes is a coaching choice — under the 2-1-2 and low zone collapse used throughout the nearest player pressures; under a 1-2-2 only one forward pressures at all, and under a trap almost nobody pressures deep

Roughly a fifth of the time it is you: **F1 on the forecheck, the first defender back on a rush, the strong-side defenceman in your own corner.** (F1, F2 and F3 are roles defined by order of arrival, not positions — whoever gets there first is F1.) The job is not to win the puck; winning it is a bonus. The job is to **take options away and force the carrier to decide early**, so that your four teammates are covering a narrower set of possibilities than they were a second ago.

- **Angle, do not chase.** Approach on a curve that closes one side of the ice, so the only route left is the one your support is covering. Skating straight at somebody gives them both sides and gives you nothing.
- **Steer them where your help is.** Your pressure and the second layer are one play, not two. Angling a carrier into the middle while your support sits on the wall is worse than not pressuring at all.
- **Arrive under control.** Full speed with your feet stopped is how you get beaten with one movement. Close the last few feet with short strides, stick out front, in a position to change direction.
- **Stick on the puck, body on the man — in that order.** Take the body only when it does not cost you the lane behind you. A missed hit is a five-second absence.

- **Talk, because you are the trigger.** "I've got the carrier" tells your support where to stand. Silence makes four people guess.
- **Who goes is a coaching choice.** Under the house default used throughout — a **2-1-2 forecheck** in their end and a **low zone collapse** in yours — the nearest player pressures and the second supports. Under a **1-2-2** only one forward pressures at all and the others hold the middle; under a trap, almost nobody pressures deep. Find out which you play. See Forechecking Systems and Defensive Zone Coverage.

If you are not the one pressuring

Position	Four of you are in this position at any moment, and only one teammate is on the puck
Risk	This is where goals get conceded, because the four non-pressuring players either all chase the puck or all stand still
Key	The single organising question is "what is behind me, and who is it?"

Four of you are in this position at any moment, and this is where goals get conceded, because the four non-pressuring players either all chase the puck or all stand still.

The single organising question: **what is behind me, and who is it?**

Watch your assignment, not the puck

Never	Watch the puck on defence — five teammates are already looking at it, and your man is the one thing nobody else is looking at
Technique	Keep your assignment in your peripheral vision while your eyes take short, repeated looks at the puck — not the reverse
Read	If you cannot see your man and the puck in the same glance, you are in the wrong place — adjust your position until you can
Convention	Coaches name puck-watching as the commonest amateur defensive error — an observation rather than a measured ranking, since nobody publishes a breakdown of amateur mistakes

The defensive error coaches name most often in amateur hockey is watching the puck — an observation rather than a measured ranking, since nobody publishes a breakdown of amateur mistakes. It feels responsible. It is not, because the puck is the one thing on the ice that five

teammates are already looking at, and the man you are supposed to be covering is the one thing nobody else is looking at.

The technique is to keep your assignment in your **peripheral vision** while your eyes take short, repeated looks at the puck — not the reverse. If you cannot see your man and the puck in the same glance, you are in the wrong place: adjust your position until you can.

Stick in the lane, body between man and net

Technique	Blade on the ice, flat, in the passing lane between the puck and your man — a stick held six inches up removes nothing
Position	Put your body between your man and your own net, not between your man and the puck
Technique	Face up-ice enough to see the play, stay on the goal side of your man, and let your stick reach across into the lane
Priority	When you cannot both seal the lane and stay net-side, net-side wins in the defensive zone
Key	A pass completed twenty feet from your net is survivable; a player alone at the goalmouth is not

Two separate tools, and players routinely use only one.

- **Your stick takes away the pass.** Blade on the ice, in the passing lane between the puck and your man. A stick lying flat in a lane removes a pass that a stick held six inches up does not.
- **Your body takes away the shot and the net drive.** Position yourself between your man and your own net, not between your man and the puck.

Doing both at once is a body-position problem: face up-ice enough to see the play, stay on the goal side of your man, and let your stick reach across into the lane. When they conflict — you cannot both seal the lane and stay net-side — **net-side wins in the defensive zone**, because a pass completed twenty feet from your net is survivable and a player alone at the goalmouth is not.

Layer, do not duplicate

Never	Go and pressure a carrier a teammate is already pressuring
Position	Be the second layer instead — behind and slightly to the side of them, in the space they would be beaten into
Key	Take the layering distances from Puck Support and Spacing rather than from memory
Convention	System-dependent — under the low zone collapse used throughout you sink toward the slot and cover areas; in man-to-man you may have to leave the layer to follow your check to the point; a hybrid is man low and zone high
Action	Ask your coach which coverage you play, and what the trigger is for switching

If a teammate is already pressuring the puck carrier, **do not go and pressure them too**. Position yourself as the **second layer** instead: behind and slightly to the side of them, in the space they would be beaten into.

Puck Support and Spacing → Support when defending has the geometry — the converge-versus-layer choice, how far behind and how far off to the side to sit, what to read while you sit there, and when a deliberate double-team is the exception. Take the distances from there rather than from memory.

What belongs here is the part that is not geometry at all:

This is a system-dependent job. In the **low zone collapse (zone) coverage** taken as the default throughout, the non-pressuring players sink toward the slot and cover areas, so layering behind the puck-pressurer is natural. In **man-to-man** coverage you stay with your assigned player wherever they go, which means you may have to leave the layer to follow them out to the point. In a **hybrid** scheme you play man-to-man low and zone high, so the answer changes depending on where you are standing. Ask your coach which one you play, and ask what the trigger is for switching. Full detail in Defensive Zone Coverage.

State 3 — The puck is loose

Nobody has it. It is on the boards, in a corner, sitting in the slot after a save, or skittering out of a scrum. This is the state nobody teaches, and it recurs dozens of times a game.

Who goes

Convention	Who goes is a coaching choice — under the 2-1-2 default the nearest two forwards go and the third reads; under a 1-2-2 one player goes and the other two hold the middle
Key	F1, F2 and F3 are roles defined by order of arrival, not by position — whoever gets there first is F1
Position	In your own zone under a low zone collapse, the closest player takes the corner, one teammate supports on the boards side and one covers the net front — never two
Action	One player goes hard, one player supports, nobody else joins — the rule that survives every system
Risk	Two players arriving at the same loose puck from the same angle is a turnover waiting to happen, because both are committed and neither is available
Action	If it is genuinely ambiguous, call it — "I got it", "yours", "help" — and the call resolves it

The honest answer is that this is a **coaching choice**, and the worst version is not knowing.

Under the house default used throughout — a **2-1-2 forecheck** in the offensive zone — the first forward in (F1) pressures the puck and the second (F2) supports them, so on a loose puck in their end **the nearest two forwards go and the third reads**. Remember that **F1, F2 and F3 are roles defined by order of arrival, not by position**: whoever gets there first is F1, whether they are a centre or a winger.

Under a **1-2-2**, only one forward goes and the other two hold the middle, so on the same loose puck **one player goes and the others do not**. Under a **1-3-1 neutral zone** structure the read is different again. In your own zone, under a low zone collapse, the loose puck in the corner is taken by whoever is closest with **one teammate immediately supporting on the boards side and one covering the net front** — never two.

Find out which of these your team plays. Then, the rule that survives every system:

One player goes hard. One player supports. Nobody else joins. Two players arriving at the same loose puck from the same angle is a turnover waiting to happen, because both are committed and neither is available.

If it is genuinely ambiguous, **call it** — "I got it," "yours," "help" — and the call resolves it. Hockey's off-puck problems are disproportionately communication problems.

Then how you arrive — owned elsewhere

Key	Deciding who goes is the off-puck question this document answers; how you arrive belongs to Body Contact and Battles, §10
Priority	Winning the puck never justifies arriving in any orientation other than the safe one
Technique	Get your skates parallel to the boards before contact, and take it on your forearm and hip, not the point of your shoulder
Technique	Head up, chin off your chest
Never	Turn your back to the wall, and never duck
Key	Squaring your chest to the boards is the fallback for when you cannot turn in time, not the target

Deciding *who* goes is the off-puck question, and it is the one this document answers. What the two players who go should actually do when they get there is not: winning the race is not winning the puck, and how you arrive, how you take body position, what the rules entitle you to, and — above all — how not to get hurt doing it all belong to **Body Contact and Battles → Loose Puck Races and 50-50 Pucks**, which quotes the USA Hockey entitlement standard and the NHL interference rule that make inside body position legal, and carries "first to arrive, last to commit" with its limits.

⚠ **One thing from there that outranks winning the puck, repeated here because the moment it applies is this one.** A puck race to the wall is the single most dangerous moment in hockey — Body Contact and Battles → §10, Loose Puck Races and 50-50 Pucks states, under "Protecting yourself on the boards", that "*puck races to the wall are where checking-from-behind and boarding injuries happen*", and **everything in its §6 applies at exactly this moment**. The non-negotiables: get your **skates parallel to the boards** before contact, take it on your **forearm and hip** — not the point of your shoulder — with your **head up and chin off your chest**, and **never your back to the wall, never duck**. Squaring your chest to the boards is the fallback for when you cannot turn in time, not the target. Winning the puck never justifies arriving in any other orientation.

What to prioritise when structure has broken down

- Priority** The front of your own net first — if nobody is there, go there, because nothing else matters as much
- Priority** Then take away the shooter's stick, not the puck — lift it or seal the blade
- Priority** Then get it out of the danger area — anywhere is better than the slot, and this is the one moment an unglamorous clear is unambiguously correct
- Rule** Not directly out of play, though — from your own zone that is a two-minute delay-of-game minor (NHL Rule 63.2(iii)); off the glass and along it is fine
- Priority** Then, and only then, look for the outlet — the exit pass before the danger is gone is how a scramble becomes a goal against
- Action** The mirror image applies in their end — net front first, sticks free, and shoot from anywhere before you try to be clever

Sometimes there is no structure left — a scramble in front of your net, three players down, sticks everywhere. When you cannot work out the right play, work down this list in order:

1. **The front of your own net.** If nobody is there, go there. Nothing else matters as much.
2. **Take away the shooter's stick, not the puck.** Lift it or seal the blade. You do not need to win the puck to prevent the shot.
3. **Get it out of the danger area** — anywhere is better than the slot. This is the one moment where an unglamorous clear is unambiguously correct.
4. **Then, and only then, look for the outlet.** Trying to make the exit pass before the danger is gone is how a scramble becomes a goal against.

The mirror image applies in their end: net front first, sticks free, and shoot from anywhere before you try to be clever. See Risk Management for the general principle.

State 4 — Transition, possession undecided

Possession has just changed, or is in the act of changing, and neither team has organised. This is the most chaotic state, and the highest-leverage one, because **defensive structure takes several seconds to form and your opportunity exists only inside those seconds.**

Why it matters so much

- Key** Every organised defensive structure is designed and rehearsed, and against a set structure your options are limited
- Read** In the two or three seconds after a turnover that structure does not exist yet — players facing the wrong way, defencemen up ice, forwards behind the puck
- Key** Almost all clean scoring chances in hockey originate in that window
- Risk** The same is true against you — two seconds of your own disorganisation is where you concede

Every organised defensive structure — a defensive-zone box or collapse, a neutral zone trap, a set forecheck — is designed and rehearsed. Against a set structure your options are limited. In the two or three seconds after a turnover, that structure does not exist yet. Players are facing the wrong way, defencemen are up ice, and forwards are behind the puck. Almost all clean scoring chances in hockey originate in this window.

The same is true against you. Two seconds of your own disorganisation is where you concede.

What to do off the puck in transition

Action	When you have just won it, turn and go immediately — start moving on the likelihood of possession, not the certainty of it
Risk	Skating hard in the wrong direction is a survivable error; being late means the window is gone
Action	Get width and get depth in the same instant — if everyone does the same one, the breakout dies
Never	All go — transition is exactly where the "one more forward joined the rush than should have" goal against comes from
Read	When you have just lost it, find the most dangerous man, not the puck — usually the man arriving late into the middle rather than the carrier
Never	Everyone sprint to the middle — two wingers and a centre converging there leaves both outside attackers unmarked
Convention	A coaching choice rather than a law — the standard assignment used throughout is centre in the middle lane, wingers on the outside; others use first man back takes the middle, or man-on-man from the puck outward
Action	Count — know whether it is a 2-on-1, a 3-on-2 or a 3-on-3, because the correct behaviour differs completely

When your team has just won it:

- **Turn and go immediately.** The single biggest transition error is the half-second of hesitation while you confirm your team actually has it. Start moving on the *likelihood* of possession, not the certainty of it. If you are wrong, you have skated hard in the wrong direction — a survivable error. If you are late, the window is gone.
- **Get width and get depth in the same instant.** Somebody has to stretch the ice so the defence has to retreat, and somebody has to be close for the short outlet. If everyone does the same one, the breakout dies. See Breakouts.
- **Do not all go.** Transition is exactly where the "one more forward joins the rush than should have" goal against comes from. Read Risk Management.

When your team has just lost it:

- **Find the most dangerous man, not the puck.** In transition the puck carrier is usually not the threat — the man arriving late into the middle is.

- **Sprint back on your lane, and make sure somebody has the middle.** Under the standard assignment used throughout — a coaching choice rather than a law — **the centre takes the middle lane and the two wingers take the outside lanes.** So "everyone sprint to the middle" is exactly wrong: two wingers and a centre converging on the middle leaves both outside attackers unmarked. What is always true is that *somebody* owns the middle and nobody assumes it is somebody else — if you are back first and the middle is empty, it is yours. Some teams formalise that as **first man back takes the middle**; others pick up **man-on-man from the puck outward**. Defending the Rush sets out all three.
- **Count.** Your only real job while backchecking is to know whether it is a 2-on-1, a 3-on-2 or a 3-on-3, because the correct behaviour differs completely. Defending the Rush covers this in full.

Recognising it first

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Key | Transition is won by whoever recognises the change of possession earliest, and recognition is a trainable habit |
| Action | Get your head up before the turnover happens, so you already know where the space is when it does |
| Risk | If you find out about turnovers by seeing the puck go the other way, you will always be second |

Transition is won by whoever recognises the change of possession earliest, and recognition is a trainable habit — it is the payoff for scanning. If your head is up before the turnover happens, you already know where the space is when it does. If you find out about turnovers by seeing the puck go the other way, you will always be second.

Getting open: the mechanics of separating from a check

Now the detail on State 1's most obvious job.

Unmarked is not the same as available

Key	Unmarked means no defender is near you; available means the carrier can actually get you the puck — the second is the one that matters
Technique	Stick on the ice, blade flat, in a position to receive — the blade is your target, so give the passer something to hit
Position	Give a straight passing angle from the puck to your blade; if the carrier would have to bend the pass around a body, you are not available
Read	Look for a defender's stick lying flat across the only lane — the commonest failure, and it leaves you unmarked and unavailable
Action	When you get open, look at the passing lane, not at your defender — if it is blocked, move three or four feet to open the angle
Action	Say something — a short call gives the carrier information their eyes may not have

This distinction is the whole section, so it comes first.

Unmarked means no defender is near you. **Available** means the puck carrier can actually get you the puck. They are very different, and the second is the one that matters. To be available you need all three of:

1. **A stick on the ice, blade flat, in a position to receive.** A stick held up in the air is a stick that cannot take a pass. The blade is your target — give the passer something to hit.
2. **A passing angle.** A straight line from the puck to your blade. If the carrier would need to bend the pass around a body, you are not available no matter how alone you are.
3. **No defender's stick in that lane.** The most common failure. You are ten feet from anyone, waving, and there is a defenceman's stick lying flat across the only line between you and the puck. You are unmarked and unavailable.

The practical consequence: **when you get open, immediately look at the passing lane, not at your defender.** If the lane is blocked, move — often only three or four feet, changing the angle enough that the line opens. A small adjustment that opens the lane is worth more than a big burst that does not.

And say something. A short call gives the carrier the information their eyes may not have.

Change of speed

Key	Defenders match speed but struggle to match changes of speed, because reacting costs them a beat
Action	Slow down, then explode — coasting for a stride invites the defender to close and settle, and the moment they settle you go
Never	Arrive at your top speed with nowhere to go — speed is only useful if it creates separation at the moment the pass comes
Technique	Stopping is a change of speed too — a hard stop while your check keeps going creates separation and leaves you facing the play

Defenders match speed. They struggle to match *changes* in speed, because reacting costs them a beat.

- **Slow down, then explode.** Coasting for a stride invites the defender to close and settle. The moment they settle, go. This is the most effective and least used move in amateur hockey, because slowing down feels like laziness.
- **Never arrive at your top speed with nowhere to go.** Speed is only useful if it creates separation at the moment the pass comes.
- **Stopping is a change of speed too.** A hard stop while your check keeps going creates as much separation as any burst, and it leaves you facing the play.

Change of direction

Technique	Two steps one way, then hard the other — the defender's weight has to transfer before they can follow
Read	Attack their hips — break in the direction their hips are not facing
Options	Curl rather than stop-start when you want to keep options; a full stop makes you a stationary target and costs three strides to restart
Action	Come back toward the puck — you arrive with speed the defender cannot match from a standstill, and you shorten the pass

- **Two steps one way, then hard the other.** The defender's weight has to transfer before they can follow, and edge-work costs them more time than it costs you because you knew it was coming.

- **Attack their hips.** Break in the direction their hips are *not* facing. A defender whose hips are square to the boards cannot easily follow you to the middle.
- **Curl rather than stop-start when you want to keep options.** A tight turn keeps your feet moving and your head up; a full stop makes you a stationary target and costs you three strides to restart.
- **Come back toward the puck.** Almost every amateur skates away from the carrier and hopes. A player skating *toward* the puck arrives with speed the defender cannot match from a standstill, shortens the pass, and gives the carrier a target moving into space rather than away from it.

Screens and picks — what is actually legal

Rule	You are allowed the ice you are standing on and are not required to move in order to let an opponent proceed (NHL Rule 56, Interference)
Rule	You may block an opponent's path provided you are in front of him and moving in the same direction (NHL Rule 56, Interference)
Rule	Moving laterally without establishing body position and then making contact with a non-puck carrier is penalised as interference (NHL Rule 56)
Rule	A pick — moving into an opponent's path without initially having body position — is an interference minor (NHL Rule 56)
Rule	You are always entitled to use body position to lengthen an opponent's path to the puck, without your stick, your free hand or an otherwise illegal check (NHL Rule 56)
Action	Run your route close past a teammate so your check has to go around them — legal traffic, available on almost every faceoff and net drive
Never	Stop in a defender's path and take the contact, or drift sideways into a chaser
Key	"Screen" here means the goaltender's sightline and nothing else — the rulebook has no legal skater-on-skater screen, so call yours traffic, or a route
Convention	Obstruction is called far less consistently at amateur level than in the NHL, in both directions — do not build your game on getting away with picks, and do not assume the referee will punish theirs

Using a teammate's body to separate from your check is legal within limits, and the limits are precise. The NHL rulebook (Rule 56, Interference) defines them.

Body position is defined as "the player skating in front of or beside his opponent, traveling in the same direction." From that definition follow the rules that matter to you:

- **You are allowed the ice you are standing on.** The rulebook states that a player "is allowed the ice he is standing on (body position) and is not required to move in order to let an opponent proceed." Simply being somewhere is not a penalty, even if it is inconvenient for an opponent.
- **You may block a path if you are in front and moving the same direction.** "A player may 'block' the path of an opponent provided he is in front of his opponent and moving in the same direction."
- **You may not step laterally into someone.** "Moving laterally and without establishing body position, then making contact with the non-puck carrier is not permitted and will be penalized as interference." This is the line most illegal picks cross.
- **A "pick" is a penalty.** The rulebook defines it as checking an opponent who is not in possession and is unaware of the impending hit — specifically "one who moves into an opponent's path without initially having body position, thereby taking him out of the play." Interference minor.
- **You may lengthen an opponent's path with your body.** "A player is always entitled to use his body position to lengthen an opponent's path to the puck," provided they do not use their stick to make themselves bigger, do not use their free hand, and do not use the position to deliver an otherwise illegal check.
- **A stick used to impede without body position is hooking, not interference.** Different penalty, same underlying idea.

The practical, legal version of this for a player trying to get open: **run your route close past a teammate so that your check has to go around them.** You are not hitting anybody, your teammate is not moving into anybody, and the defender simply loses a stride navigating traffic. That is a **legal route through traffic**, and it is available on almost every faceoff and every net drive.

A word about the word. Throughout this guide, **screen** means one thing: standing in the *goaltender's* sightline. There is no such thing in the rulebook as a legal skater-on-skater screen — the rulebook's vocabulary for skater-on-skater obstruction is body position, blocking, picks and interference. Calling your route a "screen" blurs two rules that work completely differently, so this document calls it traffic, or a route.

The illegal version is stopping in a defender's path and taking the contact, or drifting sideways into a chaser. If the defender is *unaware* of you and you *move into their path*, that is the definition of a pick.

Rec and beer-league note: obstruction is called far less consistently at amateur level than in the NHL, in both directions. Do not build your game on getting away with picks, and do not assume the referee will punish theirs.

Timing your break

Key	Arriving open too early is the same as not being open — the defender has that second to recover
Action	Watch the passer, not the space
Read	Break when their head comes up, when the puck comes to the middle of their blade or their forehand, when they have just beaten a checker, or when their shoulders turn toward you
Technique	Hold, hold, hold, then go on their look — keep moving in a small way throughout, so your check stays honest

This is the most neglected mechanic in getting open, and the most valuable.

Arriving open too early is the same as not being open. If you break into space a second before your teammate is ready to pass, a defender has that second to recover, and by the time the carrier looks up you are covered again. Then you stop, the play dies, and you blame the passer.

The fix is to **watch the passer, not the space**. Break when:

- Their head comes up.
- The puck comes to the middle of their blade, or they move it to their forehand.
- They have just beaten a checker and have a free second.
- Their shoulders turn toward you.

Concretely: **hold, hold, hold, and then go on their look**. Holding is not passivity, because you should be moving in a small way the whole time — a curl, a drift, a change of angle — to keep your check honest. It is the *committing* burst that waits for the passer.

This is also why the pass and the break should be thought of as one action shared between two players. See Passing and Receiving.

Occupying defenders: the work nobody claps for

Some off-puck work exists purely to move a defender somewhere unhelpful. You will never get an assist for it and it is often the thing that made the goal possible.

Drive the net

Action	Skate hard at the net without the puck — a half-hearted glide does not move anybody
Goal	Pull a defender with you, because leaving a man driving the goalmouth is unacceptable to any defenceman
Goal	Create a rebound and deflection threat, which changes the goalie's depth and attention
Key	The drive bends the defence toward the net and opens the ice behind you — the high slot and the point
Mindset	If you are going, go as if you expect the puck

Skating hard at the net without the puck does three things at once:

- It pulls a defender with you, because leaving a man driving the goalmouth is unacceptable to any defenceman.
- It creates a rebound and deflection threat, which changes the goalie's depth and attention.
- It bends the defence toward the net, which opens the ice **behind** you — the high slot (dots to the top of the circles) and the point.

The most common goal in hockey involves someone drawing a defender to the net and someone else shooting into the space they vacated. **The drive has to be genuine.** A half-hearted glide does not move anybody. If you are going, go as if you expect the puck.

Screen the goalie

Rule	A goal is disallowed where an attacker, "either by his positioning or by contact", impairs the goalkeeper's ability to move freely within his crease or defend his goal — no contact is required (NHL Rule 69.1)
Rule	A goal is disallowed if you establish a significant position within the crease so as to obstruct the goalkeeper's vision and impair his ability to defend his goal (NHL Rule 69.3)
Position	Stand where the goalie's eyes are, not where the puck is going — occupy the sightline between the puck and the goalie
Position	Keep both feet outside the crease; outside it, incidental contact is legal if you made a reasonable effort to avoid it
Never	Initiate contact with the goaltender, inside or outside the crease
Key	Staying out of the blue paint is necessary, not sufficient — positioning alone, from outside it, can still take the goal off the board
Action	Keep your stick on the ice — a screen is a tip threat and a rebound threat, not a place to stand and watch
Technique	Move late — getting out of the way at the last instant, so the goalie picks the puck up a fraction too late, is more disruptive than a static body

Standing in the goaltender's line of sight so they cannot see the shot is **legal from outside the crease** — and that qualifier is not a footnote, it is the rule.

Rule 69.1 disallows a goal where an attacking player, *"either by his positioning or by contact, impairs the goalkeeper's ability to move freely within his crease or defend his goal."* **Positioning alone is enough; no contact is required.** Rule 69.3 goes further inside the paint: if an attacker *"establishes a significant position within the goal crease, so as to obstruct the goalkeeper's vision and impair his ability to defend his goal,"* the goal is disallowed — and "significant position" means their body, or a substantial part of it, in the crease for more than an instant.

So: staying out of the blue paint is necessary, not sufficient. Rule 69.1 turns on whether you impair the goalkeeper's ability to move freely within his crease or defend his goal, and it says in terms that position *"whether inside or outside the crease, should not, by itself, determine whether a goal should be allowed or disallowed"* — so positioning alone, from outside the paint, can still take the goal off the board even if you never touch anybody. Stand in the paint and it is close to automatic.

To screen properly:

- **Stand where the goalie's eyes are, not where the puck is going.** Your job is to occupy the sightline between the puck and the goalie.
- **Keep both feet outside the crease.** Outside it, incidental contact is legal if you made a reasonable effort to avoid it; initiating contact is not, inside or out.
- **Do not stand still and watch.** A screen is also a tip threat and a rebound threat. Keep your stick on the ice.
- **Move late.** Getting out of the way at the last instant, so the goalie picks up the puck a fraction too late, is more disruptive than a static body.

More detail from the other side in Goaltender, and on the crease rules in Offensive Zone Play.

Be a decoy on the weak side

Position	The weak side is the side of the ice away from the puck — stand there with your stick down and your feet moving
Goal	Force the defence to keep somebody accounting for you; a player standing on the weak side watching does not
Action	Look like you are about to receive a pass — blade down, body open to the puck, one small step toward the seam

The **weak side** is the side of the ice away from the puck. A player standing on the weak side with their stick down and their feet moving forces the defence to keep somebody accounting for them. A player standing on the weak side watching does not.

The difference is small and entirely about intent: **look like you are about to receive a pass.** Blade down, body open to the puck, one small step toward the seam. That is what makes a defender stay.

Stretch the defence for width

Goal	Defences want to defend a narrow rink and collapse toward the middle — your width is what stops them
Position	As the far winger in the offensive zone, hold your position near the boards; drifting into the middle to look busy lets the defence compress
Key	On a rush, a wide forward makes the defenceman respect the outside lane, widening the gap between the pair — and that gap is where the middle drive goes
Position	In the neutral zone, a stretched forward high near the far blue line pins a defenceman deep and shortens the ice your breakout has to cover
Convention	How much width a team wants in the offensive zone is a coaching choice — some want the far winger high and wide against the counter-attack, others want them crashing the back post on every shot; ask

The rink is 85 feet wide. Defences want to defend a narrow rink, so they collapse toward the middle. Your width is what stops them.

- In the offensive zone, if you are the far winger, **holding your position near the boards** keeps a defender out there with you. Drifting into the middle to look busy lets the defence compress, and compressed defences are much harder to score against.
- On a rush, a wide forward forces the defenceman to respect the outside lane, which widens the gap between them and their partner — and the gap between defencemen is where the middle drive goes.
- In the neutral zone, a stretched forward high near the far blue line pins a defenceman deep and shortens the ice your breakout has to cover. See Neutral Zone Systems.

System note: how much width a team wants in the offensive zone is a coaching choice. Some coaches want the far winger high and wide to protect against the counter-attack; others want them crashing the back post on every shot. Both are defensible and they are not compatible. Ask.

Supporting the puck carrier: the receiver's half of the pass

Key	A completed pass has two authors — if you are waiting to be found, you are doing a quarter of your job
Action	Give a target — stick on the ice, blade flat, angled to receive, something specific to aim at rather than a general area
Position	Give a lane — be open along a line the puck can travel, and adjust your position to create it rather than expecting the puck to bend
Action	Give a time — arrive as the passer is ready, not before
Technique	Arrive facing where you intend to go, and open your body up-ice before the puck arrives
Action	Give information — "time", "man on", "reverse", "over"; one word said early is worth more than a perfect route
Options	When the carrier is pinned they need a close, safe, catchable option — being the boring five-foot outlet is a real job

Puck Support and Spacing is the full treatment of where to be. This section covers only the thing that document does not: **your responsibility, as the man without the puck, for making the pass possible.**

A completed pass has two authors. If you are waiting to be found, you are only doing a quarter of your job. The receiver owes the passer:

- **A target.** Stick on the ice, blade flat, angled to receive. Give them something specific to aim at rather than a general area.
- **A lane.** Not merely being open, but being open *along a line the puck can travel*. Adjust your position to create the line; do not expect the puck to bend.
- **A time.** Arrive as the passer is ready, not before — see "Timing your break" above.
- **A next play.** Arrive facing where you intend to go. A player who receives a pass with their back to the play has taken a good pass and turned it into a battle. Open your body up-ice before the puck arrives.
- **Information.** "Time," "man on," "reverse," "over" — one word, said early, is worth more than a perfect route. See On-Ice Communication.
- **A soft target when they are under pressure.** When the carrier is pinned, they do not need a spectacular option forty feet away; they need a close, safe, catchable one. Being the

boring five-foot outlet is a real job.

The general principle from Time and Space applies here in reverse: **you can give a teammate time by where you stand**. A support option in a good place buys the carrier the extra second they need to see the whole ice.

Effort without the puck

Everything above is about knowledge. This section is about the part that requires none.

Backchecking

Key	Backchecking is racing back toward your own end when possession is lost; forechecking is applying pressure in the opponent's end
Never	Chase the puck carrier — the dangerous man is the one arriving unmarked into the middle lane, and covering a lane beats catching the carrier
Never	Use your stick, body or free hand to restrain a carrier from behind — you must skate to regain position
Convention	Which lane is yours is a coaching choice — the assignment used throughout gives the centre the middle and the wingers the outside; alternatives are first man back takes the middle, and man-on-man from the puck outward
Key	Under every one of those assignments, somebody owns the middle and nobody assumes it is somebody else
Action	Backcheck to a man, not to a place — pick up a player and communicate that you have them
Risk	Skating hard to the top of the circles and stopping, having covered nobody, spends the energy and buys nothing

Backchecking is racing back toward your own end when possession is lost. It is the opposite of **forechecking**, which is applying pressure in the opponent's end. The two words are easily confused and mean nearly opposite things.

Backchecking well is mostly about two decisions, both made while sprinting:

- **Do not chase the puck carrier — take your lane.** Your instinct is to chase the carrier. Resist it. The dangerous man is the one arriving unmarked into the middle lane, and

covering a lane is worth more than catching the carrier from behind — from which position, incidentally, you are not permitted to use your stick, body or free hand to restrain them. You must skate to regain position. **Which lane is yours is a coaching choice.** Under the standard assignment used throughout, the **centre takes the middle lane and the wingers take the outside lanes** — so as a winger, "take the middle" is not your instruction unless you are the first man back and nobody else has it. Alternatives are **first man back takes the middle** and **man-on-man from the puck outward**. Find out which your team plays; Defending the Rush sets out all three. Under every one of them, somebody owns the middle and nobody assumes it is somebody else.

- **Backcheck to a man, not to a place.** Pick up a player and communicate that you have them. A backchecker who skates hard to the top of the circles and then stops, having covered nobody, has spent the energy and bought nothing.

The second effort

- Key** The second effort is the play after the play — you lose a battle and, rather than gliding out of it, you turn and go again
- Action** Go to the rebound rather than admiring your shot, and take one more stride when you get beaten wide
- Read** The player who won the first battle almost always relaxes for a beat, and that beat is available to whoever takes another stride

Roughly: the play after the play. You lose a battle, and rather than gliding out of it you turn and go again. You shoot, and rather than admiring it you go to the rebound. You get beaten wide, and rather than conceding you take one more stride.

Second efforts win a disproportionate number of pucks because the opponent has already relaxed. The player who won the first battle almost always relaxes for a beat, and that beat is available to whoever is willing to take another stride.

Finish your route

- Action** If you commit to driving the net, arrive at the net; if you break into a lane, complete the break even after the pass has gone elsewhere
- Risk** Within a period defenders learn your drives are not real and stop respecting them, and you have lost the ability to occupy anybody
- Risk** An abandoned route leaves you in an in-between place, neither supporting nor defending, and that is where odd-man rushes get conceded

If you commit to driving the net, **arrive at the net**. If you break into a lane, **complete the break** even after the pass has gone elsewhere.

Half-finished routes are the most common off-puck failure in amateur hockey, and they cost twice. First, defenders learn within a period that your drives are not real and stop respecting them, which means you have lost the ability to occupy anybody. Second, an abandoned route leaves you in an in-between place, neither supporting nor defending, and it is from those places that odd-man rushes get conceded.

The honest point about effort

- Mindset** Off-puck effort is the most visible thing about you and the easiest thing to change
- Key** Your coach cannot easily see whether you made the right read, but can see exactly who backchecked, who finished the route and who watched
- Key** "Compete", "hard to play against" and "reliable" are almost always descriptions of off-puck behaviour
- Action** It requires no new skill — backcheck hard into your lane, finish your route, take a second stride into a battle
- Never** Skate hard in random directions — effort in the wrong place is just fatigue

Off-puck effort is the most visible thing about you and the easiest thing to change.

Your coach cannot easily see whether you made the right read. They can see, from the bench, exactly who backchecked, who finished the route, who got to the net front and who watched. When a coach describes a player as "compete", "hard to play against", or "reliable", they are almost always describing off-puck behaviour.

And it requires no new skill. You do not need better hands, a harder shot or faster feet to backcheck hard into your lane, finish your route, or take a second stride into a battle. It is the only part of hockey you can improve to a genuinely high standard between one game and the next. Most players never do, which is why doing it separates you so cheaply.

That is not a licence to skate hard in random directions. Effort in the wrong place is just fatigue. Everything in the four states above tells you where to spend it.

Off-puck play by position

Brief, because the position documents cover each in full. Take the one line that applies to you.

Position	Your off-puck job in one line	The characteristic error
Centre — Center	Low support in your own end, middle-lane driver on the rush, and the player who reads which state the shift is in and tells everyone else. You are most often the second layer behind pressure.	Duplicating pressure instead of layering behind it.
Winger — Winger	Width and the point. In your own end you usually have the opposing defenceman on your side — that is coverage, not puck pursuit. In their end your width is what stops the defence compressing.	Leaving your lane to go to the puck.
Defenceman — Defender	Gap control (the distance you keep from an attacker), net-front coverage, stick in the lane, and the hold-or-pinch decision at the offensive blue line — which is made entirely without the puck. A pinch is stepping down from the <i>offensive</i> blue line; stepping up is challenging forward in the neutral zone or at your own line.	Both defencemen going to the same puck.

Goaltender. A special case, because you are off the puck essentially all game: your off-puck work is depth, angle, tracking and communication. You are also the only player who sees the entire ice on every play, which makes you your team's most under-used source of off-puck information — call the loose puck, call the unmarked opponent behind the play, call the change. Note that in the NHL, KHL and IIHF play the **trapezoid** restricts where you may play the puck behind the goal line; most rec, beer-league and youth associations do not use it. See Goaltender. 🇬🇧 In England and Wales, how far you may go for a puck behind your goal line is unsettled — in Scotland and BUIHA hockey the In-House Rules do not amend Rule 27, so 27.7 reads as live: the IIHF book has the

restricted area at Rule 27.7, but England Ice Hockey's *Rules & Regulations* 22.3 (2024-25) say it is "*not currently enforced*" and the 2025-26 In-House Rules do not mention it — though their Introduction says "*unless otherwise stated, all rules will be enforced in line with the IIHF Rule Book*", which points the other way. Stay inside the trapezoid until your league tells you otherwise (UK and England Rules).

How to train it

Off-puck play is trainable, but not by the drills most teams run. A line rush drill with no defenders trains none of it.

Small-area games

- Goal** Small-area games are the most efficient off-puck training available, because in a small space you cannot hide and you are constantly forced into one of the four states
- Action** Ask for two-touch or one-touch — it removes the option of skating out of trouble, so the only way to succeed is off-puck movement by everybody else
- Action** Make a goal count only with a net-front presence, which forces net drives
- Action** Require a change of direction before receiving, which trains separation
- Action** Play three minutes with no talking, then three with mandatory calls — the difference makes the value of communication self-evident

Games played in a reduced space — cross-ice, one zone, three-on-three, with modified rules — are the most efficient off-puck training available, because in a small space you cannot hide and every player is constantly forced into one of the four states.

USA Hockey's coaching material makes this case explicitly. Its *Teaching Concepts Through Small-Area Games* manual describes hockey as "an instinctive, largely unscripted game," notes that players "will be forced to make decisions repeatedly while battling for space in confined areas," and identifies the second component of development, after skills, as "'**sense,' both with and without the puck**" — hockey sense being "the ability to read the play and react (or anticipate) appropriately." The manual quotes NHL coach Mike Sullivan: "Situations in hockey rarely occur the same way we draw them up in practice. We, as coaches, would like to make the game black and white. The fact of the matter is that the game, by nature, is gray."

Useful constraints to ask your coach for, or to impose in a shinny game:

- **Two-touch or one-touch.** Removes the option of skating out of trouble, so the only way to succeed is off-puck movement by everybody else.
- **A goal only counts with a net-front presence.** Forces net drives.
- **You must change direction before receiving.** Trains separation.
- **Silent play, then loud play.** Play three minutes with no talking, then three with mandatory calls. The difference is startling and it makes the value of communication self-evident.

Watch yourself on video away from the puck

Action	Watch a filmed shift and never look at the puck — watch only yourself
Read	Look for long glides, routes abandoned three-quarters of the way, standing still watching a battle, and facing the wrong way when the puck came free
Technique	Pick three shifts and write down how many times the state changed, how many of those changes you reacted to late, and one moment you were unmarked but not available

If any of your games are filmed, the single most valuable exercise available to you is this: **watch a shift and never look at the puck.** Watch only yourself.

You will see things you do not believe. Long glides. Routes abandoned three-quarters of the way. Standing still watching a battle you could have joined. Facing the wrong way when the puck came free. Almost every player's first honest off-puck video session is uncomfortable, and almost every player improves immediately afterwards, because the problems are obvious once seen.

A structured way to do it: pick three shifts, and for each one write down (a) how many times the state changed, (b) how many of those changes you reacted to late, and (c) one moment where you were unmarked but not available.

Watch a live game and follow one player

- Action** At a live game, or on a wide-angle feed, pick one player and watch only them for a full shift — not the puck
- Read** Notice how much a good centre moves when nothing is happening, and how often they adjust position by a few feet in response to something you had not noticed
- Key** A standard broadcast follows the puck and crops out exactly the four players you are studying, so live is better

The best off-puck education available for free: at a live game, or on a wide-angle feed, **pick one player and watch only them for a full shift** — not the puck. Two minutes of a good centre shows you how much they move when nothing is happening and how often they adjust their position by a few feet in response to something you had not noticed. Live beats a standard broadcast, which follows the puck and crops out exactly the four players you are studying. Full method in How to Watch Hockey.

Self-check questions for the bench

- Position** The bench is where off-puck improvement actually happens — thirty seconds and a clear view
- Action** After each shift ask yourself one of the six questions — one, not all six
- Key** Pick one question and use it for a whole game; six questions asked vaguely change nothing, one asked six times changes behaviour by the third period

The bench is where off-puck improvement actually happens, because you have thirty seconds and a clear view. After each shift, ask yourself one of these — one, not all six:

1. **Which of the four states was I in when the shift went wrong?**
2. **Was I ever unmarked but unavailable?** (No lane, no stick down, wrong angle.)
3. **Did I finish every route I started?**
4. **On the loose pucks, did I arrive with body position or just with speed?**
5. **When we lost it, how long did it take me to turn?**
6. **Did I duplicate a teammate's pressure instead of layering behind them?**

Pick one question and use it for a whole game. Six questions asked vaguely change nothing; one question asked six times changes behaviour by the third period.

Common Mistakes

- **Training only the 3-4%.** Spending every spare hour on stickhandling while never once thinking about where to be. Skill work is necessary and it is not the majority of your game.
- **Watching the puck on defence.** It feels attentive. It means nobody is watching the man who scores.
- **Duplicating pressure instead of layering.** Two players on one puck carrier leaves a free attacker somewhere, and the free attacker is the one who hurts you. Two exceptions worth knowing before you call it a mistake: a **deliberate double-team below your own goal line**, which many teams coach because a turnover there is contained by the net and the boards; and **man-to-man coverage**, where following your check out of the layer is the job. Freelancing either is the actual error.
- **Being unmarked but unavailable.** Alone in space with your stick in the air, or with a defender's stick lying in the only passing lane, and then blaming the carrier for not seeing you.
- **Breaking too early.** Getting open a second before the passer is ready, being covered again by the time they look up, and stopping.
- **Skating away from the puck to get open.** Coming back toward the carrier is faster, shorter and harder to defend, and it is the option almost nobody takes.
- **Half-hearted net drives.** A glide toward the net occupies nobody. Within a period the defence stops respecting you, and you have lost the ability to create space for anyone.
- **Abandoning routes.** Costs you twice: defenders learn to ignore you, and you end up stranded in the in-between space where odd-man rushes are conceded.
- **Both players going to the same loose puck from the same angle.** Neither is available, both are committed, and one opposing player now beats two of yours.
- **Racing to a loose puck square to the boards.** You arrive first and lose it immediately, because the second man simply pins you. Speed without body position is a wasted sprint. **And the safety rule outranks the possession one:** get your **skates parallel to the wall**, take contact on your **forearm and hip**, head up and chin off your chest — **never your back to the boards, never duck.** Puck races to the wall are where checking-from-behind and boarding injuries happen (Body Contact and Battles, §6).
- **Making the outlet pass before clearing the danger.** In a defensive-zone scramble, trying to start the breakout before the net front is safe is how scrambles become goals.

- **Standing still on the weak side.** The difference between a decoy that occupies a defender and a passenger who occupies nobody is a stick on the ice and one step toward the seam.
 - **Stepping laterally into a checker to block for a teammate.** That is the rulebook's definition of a pick and it is an interference minor. (And it is not a "screen" — keep that word for the goaltender's sightline.)
 - **Backchecking to a place instead of to a man.** Sprinting to the top of the circles and stopping, having covered no one, spends the energy and buys nothing.
 - **Assuming the answer to "who goes?" is universal.** Under a 2-1-2 two forwards pursue; under a 1-2-2 one does. Not knowing which your team plays is the actual problem.
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Key Takeaways

1. **You have the puck for about 3-4% of your ice time.** NHL tracking data puts forwards at roughly 40 seconds and defencemen at 49 seconds per 20 minutes of **5-on-5** ice time (which is not the same as even strength — the study reports 5-on-5 only). Everything else you do on the ice is off-puck.
2. **The average possession lasts about 1.3 seconds — and about 1 second in the offensive zone.** You do not get long enough with the puck to fix a bad position. Your off-puck work decides what those seconds are worth.
3. **There are four off-puck states, not one.** Your team has it; they have it; it is loose; it just changed hands. Each has a different job, and most players only have a plan for one of them.
4. **Unmarked is not available.** Being available needs three things: your stick flat on the ice, a straight passing angle, and no defender's stick in the lane. Fix the lane before you complain about the pass.
5. **Break on the passer's look, not on the open space.** Getting open a second early is the same as never getting open. Hold, hold, hold, then go when their head comes up.
6. **Come back toward the puck.** Skating away and hoping is the amateur default; arriving toward the carrier with speed is shorter, faster and much harder to defend.
7. **Occupying a defender is real work with no reward attached.** A genuine net drive, a legal route that makes a defender navigate traffic, a screen on the goalie from outside the crease, a live weak-side decoy and honest width create more goals than they get credit for — and they only function if you commit fully.

8. **On defence, layer behind pressure rather than duplicating it.** Two players on one puck usually means somebody is free, and the free man scores. **Whether you are allowed to hold that layer is a system question, not a law:** under the low zone collapse assumed throughout you sink and cover the area behind the pressurer, but under man-to-man you follow your check even if that pulls you out of the layer, and most teams deliberately double-team a puck *below their own goal line*, where the net and the boards contain a turnover. Ask your coach which coverage you play and where doubling is allowed.
9. **Win loose pucks with body position, not just speed — and with the safety orientation before either.** Arriving first, square to the boards, with your exit undecided, loses the puck to the second man. Turn your hips, get low and wide, and know where it is going before you get there. **The override that outranks all of it:** a puck race to the wall is where the catastrophic injuries happen, so get your **skates parallel to the boards**, take it on your **forearm and hip**, head up and chin off your chest, and **never turn your back to the wall or duck**. See Body Contact and Battles, §6.
10. **Off-puck effort is the most visible thing about you and the cheapest thing to improve.** Backcheck to the middle, finish your route, take the second stride. None of it requires a skill you do not already have.

NOTES ON VERIFICATION

- The **individual possession figures** come from a peer-reviewed conference paper (LINHAC 2025) using NHL puck-and-player-tracking data from 2023-24. The paper itself states that the NHL considers this possession dataset **unofficial** and that it "may differ from other datasets that track possession information (e.g., a hand-labelled dataset)." All of its figures are **5-on-5 only** and **normalised to 20 minutes of ice time**.
- The **2002 possession figures** are taken directly from **USA Hockey's own 2002 puck-possession study** of the Olympic Winter Games and the Youth Tier I National Championships, whose data tables are printed at pp. v-vi of USA Hockey's *Small Area Competitive Games* (https://cdn1.sportngin.com/attachments/document/38c0-3079160/USA_Hockey_Small_Area_Competitive_Games.pdf) handbook, also cited in Practice and Development. Two things follow, and both cut against the way these numbers are usually repeated. **1:07.05 is the men's per-game tournament average, not a Modano or Sakic figure** — those player names come from the gloss in **Harry Thompson's "The Power of Practice"**, a *USA Hockey Magazine* feature that reports the study rather than measuring anything itself. And **1:06.02 is the 14-and-Under bracket alone**, not youth nationals generally.
- The **ice-time averages** (forwards 15:17, defencemen 19:31 for players with 40+ games in 2024-25) are computed from Hockey Reference's 2024-25 NHL skater table, not a figure published by that site.

- The **shift-length figures** (mean 47 seconds, median 45) are computed from the NHL's public shift-chart API across a sample of **11 regular-season games from 2024-25 (8,325 shifts)**. That is a small sample chosen for convenience and it is not a league-wide published statistic.
 - All **arithmetic combining** possession rates, ice time and shift length (the "about 30 seconds", "about 24 possessions", "about 14 seconds in the offensive zone" figures) is mine. It assumes the 5-on-5 possession rate holds across all ice time, which is an approximation.
 - The **interference and pick rules** are quoted from the **NHL Official Rules 2025-2026**, Rule 56.1.
 - The USA Hockey material on small-area games is quoted from *Teaching Concepts Through Small-Area Games* (USA Hockey, 2014, written and compiled by Ken Rausch and Dan Brennan; flexxCOACH is credited in the manual for video and audio production only, not as a publisher).
 - The **coaching content** — getting-open mechanics, the four-state framework, loose-puck priorities, the bench questions — is a synthesis of standard coaching practice and is **not** a rule of hockey. Where a specific assignment depends on a system (who pursues a loose puck, how much width a winger holds, man versus zone coverage) that is flagged in the text. Ask your coach.
 - The **four states are a teaching device, not a partition**. States 3 (loose puck) and 4 (transition) genuinely overlap, and the four are not mutually exclusive.
 - The **goaltender-interference wording** in the screening section is quoted from **NHL Official Rules 2025-2026, Rules 69.1 and 69.3**. Note that Rule 69.1 disallows a goal for impairment "either by his positioning or by contact" — contact is not required — which is why the "outside the crease" qualifier is attached to the legality claim itself.
 - **"First to arrive, last to commit"** is a coaching heuristic with no known originator, not a law of hockey. The phrase and that caveat sit with the rest of the loose-puck material in **Body Contact and Battles**, §10.
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