

# Breakouts

**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. Two rules matter enormously here: the **trapezoid** (which decides whether your goalie can retrieve a rim) and **icing** (which decides what a failed clear costs you). **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

|                   |                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>       | Turn defending into attacking — the organised exit from your own defensive zone                                                                          |
| <b>Key</b>        | The most-run system in hockey — several times a shift, every shift, all game                                                                             |
| <b>Risk</b>       | It falls apart because five players ran five different plays, not because anyone lacked skill                                                            |
| <b>Convention</b> | Almost everything here is a coaching choice, not a law of hockey — teams call the same play different names, and some call different plays the same name |
| <b>Action</b>     | Learn the framework here, then find out what your team actually calls and actually runs                                                                  |

A **breakout** is your team's organised exit from your own defensive zone — the set of routes, passes and reads that turn defending into attacking. It is the most-run system in hockey: you do it several times a shift, every shift, all game. It is also the system that most often falls apart at amateur level, and almost never because someone lacked skill. It falls apart because five players were running five different plays.

This document covers what a breakout is, the five jobs inside it, the named options and when each is right, the two positional habits that cause most amateur failures (winger timing and centre height), and how the whole thing changes against different forechecks and in special situations.

**A note on what follows.** Breakouts are the purest example of the thing this guide keeps warning about: almost everything in here is a **coaching choice, not a law of hockey**. Different teams call the same play different names, and some call *different* plays the same name. Where that happens it is flagged. Learn the framework here, then find out what your team actually calls and actually runs.

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## A Note on Language

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Terms used throughout, defined once here:

- **Strong side** — the side of the ice the puck is currently on. **Weak side** — the opposite side.
- **Low** — closer to your own goal line. **High** — closer to the blue line you're facing.
- **The wall** — the boards along the side of the rink. "On the wall" means playing tight to the boards.
- **The hash marks** — the short red lines marking the outer edges of each faceoff circle, two feet long and 5'7" apart, **four per circle** (NHL Rule 1.9): a pair on the boards side and a pair on the middle-of-the-ice side. They sit level with the faceoff dot, which in your own end is **twenty feet out from the goal line** — a long way above the crease, not beside it. They're the standard landmark for where a winger stands on the breakout, so getting the distance right matters. **"On the wall at the hash marks" means the band on the boards between the hash-mark line and the goal line — at or just below the dot line, not above it.** That is roughly the bottom third of the distance from the goal line to the blue line (which sits 64 feet out, Rule 1.5). Throughout this document, "between the hash marks and the goal line" is that same spot.
- **Forecheck** — pressure applied by the attacking team in *your* defensive zone, trying to stop your breakout. The opposite of a **backcheck** (racing back to defend your own end). Full treatment in Forechecking Systems.
- **F1 / F2 / F3** — the forecheckers, numbered by **order of arrival**, not by position. F1 is whoever gets there first. These are roles, not people; your centre is often F2 or F3.
- **Outlet** — a teammate available to receive the first pass out of the zone.
- **The point** — the position at the blue line, at the top of the offensive zone. When your opponents "have the point", that is where their defencemen are standing. Not to be confused with the **half-wall**, which is the boards level with the faceoff dot, far below it.
- **The top of the circle** — the edge of a faceoff circle furthest from the goal line, roughly 35 feet out. A common landmark for where a shot becomes dangerous.

- **The slot** — the ice directly in front of the net between the two faceoff circles, from the goalmouth out to the tops of the circles. The **high slot** is its upper half, dots to tops of circles; the **goalmouth** is the immediate net front. **The danger zone** (sometimes "the home-plate area") is the slot plus the ice between the faceoff dots down to the goal line — the area most goals come from, and the area you never move the puck through on a breakout.

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## 1. Controlled Exits vs Clears

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### The two ways out

|                |                                                                                                                            |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Options</b> | Only two categories of zone exit exist — a controlled exit or a clear                                                      |
| <b>Goal</b>    | Controlled exit — leave the zone with the puck on a teammate's stick, carried out or passed out; possession is retained    |
| <b>Action</b>  | Clear — put the puck out of the zone with no particular teammate in mind: off the glass, off the boards, high down the ice |
| <b>Risk</b>    | A clear surrenders possession, and whether you get it back is a coin flip at best                                          |

There are only two categories of zone exit, and they are not the same thing:

- **A controlled exit** — you leave the zone with the puck on a teammate's stick, either carried out or passed out. Possession is retained.
- **A clear (or dump-out)** — you put the puck out of the zone with no particular teammate in mind: off the glass, off the boards, high down the ice. Possession is surrendered, and whether you get it back is a coin flip at best.

## Why controlled exits matter

- Key** An analysis of roughly 230,000 tracked NHL zone exits found controlled exits led to a subsequent zone entry about 89% of the time, unrecovered dump-outs about 20%
- Key** The study's own conclusion is that possession is the explanation, not the method — a dump-out your team recovers performs about as well as a controlled exit
- Goal** A clean breakout is what gives you a carried entry; a panicked clear is what gives you a dump-in against a set defence

The tracking research is unusually one-sided on this. An analysis of roughly 230,000 tracked NHL zone exits from the 2016-17 and 2017-18 seasons, published on Hockey Graphs, found that **controlled exits (carry-outs and pass-outs) led to a subsequent zone entry about 89% of the time, while unrecovered dump-outs did so about 20% of the time** — controlled exits were close to four times more likely to produce the next attack. Crucially, the study's own conclusion is that *possession* is the explanation, not the method: a dump-out your team recovers performs about as well as a controlled exit. It is losing the puck that hurts, not the shape of the play.

That connects to the other half of the transition chain. The reference work on zone *entries* is Eric Tulsky, Geoffrey Detweiler, Robert Spencer and Corey Sznajder, *Using Zone Entry Data To Separate Offensive, Neutral, And Defensive Zone Performance* (2013 MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference), which hand-tracked 330 NHL games from 2011-12. Their headline finding, in their own words: "*carrying the puck across the blue line generates more than twice as many shots, scoring chances, and goals as dumping the puck in.*" At 5-on-5 their tracked rates were **0.53-0.62 shots per carry-in against 0.22-0.28 per dump-in** — and "shots" there means **unblocked shot attempts** (shots on goal plus misses), not shots on goal, so do not set those figures against a shots-on-goal rate. Zone Entries owns the numbers and that qualification. A clean breakout is what gives you a carried entry; a panicked clear is what gives you a dump-in against a set defence. Full treatment, including the break-even maths on when a dump is genuinely correct, in Zone Entries.

## When a clear is the right play

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mindset</b>  | Clearing is a decision, not a reflex                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Read</b>     | Clear when you are outnumbered low with no outlet, when the alternative is a turnover in the slot, when you need a line change, or late in a game you are leading |
| <b>Priority</b> | A clear costs you possession; a slot turnover costs you a goal — that trade is never close                                                                        |
| <b>Rule</b>     | A shorthanded team may ice the puck freely — NHL Rule 81.1, "equal or superior in numerical strength"                                                             |
| <b>Rule</b>     | NHL Rule 81.6 withdraws it from a team short by a major with an empty penalty bench                                                                               |
| <b>Rule</b>     | IIHF Rule 81.6 has no such clause, so in Britain — which plays the IIHF book — the shorthanded exemption is not withdrawn; see UK and England Rules               |
| <b>Rule</b>     | USA Hockey grants it only from Youth 15-Only, Girls 16U, High School and Adult upward (Rule 624(b)(1))                                                            |
| <b>Action</b>   | Default to the controlled exit; take the clear when the read says take it                                                                                         |
| <b>Never</b>    | Clear by default and attempt control only when the ice is already empty — most amateur teams have this backwards                                                  |

None of that makes clearing wrong. It makes clearing a **decision** rather than a reflex. Get the puck out without possession when:

- **You are outnumbered low** and no outlet exists — three forecheckers, two of you, nobody free.
- **You are beaten and the alternative is a turnover in the slot.** A clear costs you possession; a slot turnover costs you a goal. That trade is never close.
- **You are on the penalty kill** — in most rule sets. A shorthanded team may ice the puck freely (NHL Rule 81.1 applies icing only to a team "equal or superior in numerical strength"), and where that holds, clearing is the entire strategy. **It does not hold everywhere:** USA Hockey grants the 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. **The IIHF's 81.6 — the rule British hockey plays under — carries neither restriction.** Its two paragraphs cover only numerical strength and the timing of an expiring penalty; there is no major-penalty clause, and IIHF Rule 20.3 attaches no icing sanction to the requirement to keep a substitute in the penalty box. Special Teams owns the rule; check yours before the kill's whole plan rests on it, and see UK and England Rules for which book is yours.

- **You need a line change.** Getting the puck the length of the ice away — the rink is 200 feet long (Rule 1.2) — buys you time to get tired legs off. (*How much time depends entirely on how quickly they retrieve and regroup; there is no measured figure for it, so this document does not offer one.*) See Game Management.
- **Late in a game you're leading.** Risk tolerance drops; simple gets you the two points. See Risk Management.

**The habit to build:** default to the controlled exit, take the clear when the read says take it. Most amateur teams have this backwards — they clear by default and attempt control only when the ice is already empty.

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## 2. The Five Roles in Every Breakout

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Whatever play is called, five jobs exist. Knowing which one is yours *before* the puck is retrieved is most of the battle.

### 1. The puck-retriever D (D1)

|                  |                                                                                                                 |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | The defenceman who goes back for the puck — your job starts before you touch it                                 |
| <b>Action</b>    | Look over your inside shoulder on the way back, while you still have time to change your plan                   |
| <b>Technique</b> | Arrive at an angle, not straight on — curl in so your first touch already has your body opening toward the ice  |
| <b>Action</b>    | Take the puck to a decision point — behind the net or up the wall — rather than stopping on it                  |
| <b>Never</b>     | Through the slot — not with a pass, not with your feet                                                          |
| <b>Risk</b>      | A stationary defenceman is the easiest target in hockey, and at the puck with your back turned you are guessing |

The defenceman who goes back for the puck. Your job starts before you touch it:

- **Look over your inside shoulder on the way back.** You need to know where the forecheck is coming from while you still have time to change your plan. Once you're at the puck with your back turned, you're guessing. See Scanning and Anticipation.

- **Arrive at an angle, not straight on.** Approaching the puck square to the end boards leaves you facing the wall with a forechecker arriving in your back. Curl in so your first touch already has your body opening toward the ice.
- **Take the puck to a decision point** — behind the net or up the wall — rather than stopping on it. A stationary defenceman is the easiest target in hockey.
- **Never through the slot.** Not with a pass, not with your feet. See Defender.

## 2. The support D (D2)

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | Usually the opposite side of the net from your partner, level with or slightly above the goal line, so a pass behind the net reaches you cleanly                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Action</b>    | Be an option, not a spectator — and be the second wave, because if the first option fails the puck comes back to you                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Key</b>       | You are usually the one who makes the call — "up", "over", "wheel", "reverse", "rim", "time", "man on" — because you can see the forecheck arriving behind your partner                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Action</b>    | Occupy the net front for the wheel by getting to your spot early and holding it; already standing there lengthens a forechecker's route across the slot                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Rule</b>      | NHL Rule 56.1 — "a player is always entitled to use his body position to lengthen an opponent's path to the puck", but only "provided his stick is not utilized... his free hand is not used and he does not take advantage of his body position to deliver an otherwise illegal check" |
| <b>Rule</b>      | NHL Rule 56.1 — "moving laterally and without establishing body position, then making contact with the non-puck carrier is not permitted and will be penalized as interference", and moving into an opponent's path without initially having body position is a pick, a minor           |
| <b>Technique</b> | Stick in tight and vertical, hands to yourself, no bump as he goes past                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Never</b>     | Drift across to meet him — a stick stuck out sideways across the slot is interference even though your feet never moved                                                                                                                                                                 |

The partner. This is the least-understood job on the ice and the one that makes breakouts work.

- **Be an option, not a spectator.** Position yourself so a pass behind the net reaches you cleanly — usually on the opposite side of the net, level with or slightly above the goal line.
- **You are usually the one who makes the call.** You can see the forecheck arriving behind your partner. "Up", "over", "wheel", "reverse", "rim", "time", "man on" — those calls are mostly yours. More in section 9.

- **Occupy the net front for the wheel — and understand exactly what that is and is not.** If your partner is carrying it around the net, being *already standing* in front of the net lengthens a forechecker's route across the slot. Rule 56.1 is explicit that this is legal: "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," and "a player is always entitled to use his body position to lengthen an opponent's path to the puck." **Read the rest of that sentence, because at the net front it is the part that gets called** — the entitlement holds only "*provided his stick is not utilized (to make himself 'bigger' and therefore considerably lengthening the distance his opponent must travel to get where he is going); his free hand is not used and he does not take advantage of his body position to deliver an otherwise illegal check.*" So: stick in tight and vertical, hands to yourself, and no bump as he goes past. A stick stuck out sideways across the slot is interference even though your feet never moved. **And what is not legal is moving into him.** The same rule: "Moving laterally and without establishing body position, then making contact with the non-puck carrier is not permitted and will be penalized as interference" — and a player who "moves into an opponent's path without initially having body position" is delivering a **pick**, which is a minor. So: **get to your spot early and hold it. Do not drift across to meet him.** The difference between a free two seconds for your partner and a two-minute penalty is whether your feet were already planted.
- **Be the second wave.** If the first option fails, the puck comes back to you. Don't be somewhere it can't.

### 3. The strong-side winger

|                  |                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | The winger on the same side as the puck — the primary outlet                                                                    |
| <b>Position</b>  | You start high, up on the opposing point man, while the other team still has the puck                                           |
| <b>Action</b>    | Come down the wall as the breakout starts, to the boards between the hash marks and the goal line on the puck side              |
| <b>Key</b>       | Those two spots are about 40 feet apart and belong to two different moments — the trip between them, and its timing, is the job |
| <b>Action</b>    | Present a target and time your movement into the pass                                                                           |
| <b>Technique</b> | Receive with your body open to the ice, not with your nose against the glass                                                    |

The winger on the same side as the puck — the primary outlet, and the most commonly botched job in hockey. Full detail in section 4.



- **You start high, not low.** While the other team still has the puck you are up on the opposing point man, covering him — that is your defensive-zone job, and Defensive Zone Coverage is the authority on it.
- **You come down the wall as the breakout starts.** The moment your team wins the puck — or your defenceman gets to it with time — you leave the point and drop to the wall **between the hash marks and the goal line**, on the same side as the puck. Those two spots are about 40 feet apart and they belong to two different moments. The trip between them, and its timing, *is* the job; neither end of it is a place to live.
- **Present a target and time your movement into the pass.**
- **Receive with your body open to the ice**, not with your nose against the glass.

## 4. The weak-side winger

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | The far winger — what you do here is genuinely system-dependent                                                                                                  |
| <b>Convention</b> | Under the standard swing breakout, come across or up the middle as the second option and the outlet for a cross-ice or over play, then get out ahead of the puck |
| <b>Convention</b> | Under a "slash" or flying-winger structure, leave early through the middle toward the strong side or up ice, stretching the opposing defence vertically          |
| <b>Convention</b> | Under a rim-heavy structure, you are the rim's target and you stay low on your own wall to collect it                                                            |
| <b>Action</b>     | Find out which your team runs                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Leaving early in a system that expects you low is the reason the breakout has no second option                                                                   |

The far winger. What you do here is genuinely system-dependent:

- **Under the standard swing breakout** (assumed throughout this document), you come across or up the middle as the second option and the outlet for a cross-ice or over play, then get out ahead of the puck.
- **Under a "slash" or flying-winger structure**, you leave early through the middle toward the strong side or up ice, stretching the opposing defence vertically and creating space behind you. This is deliberately more aggressive and leaves you less available defensively.
- **Under a rim-heavy structure**, you are the rim's target and you're staying low on your own wall to collect it.

**Find out which your team runs.** A weak-side winger who leaves early in a system that expects you low is the reason the breakout has no second option.

## 5. The centre

|                   |                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | Low support, underneath the puck — the pivot the whole structure turns on                                                                                 |
| <b>Convention</b> | The five-role structure is itself a coaching choice — the conventional swing breakout, taught by most development programmes and assumed throughout       |
| <b>Options</b>    | The centre fly — the centre leaves the zone early up the middle to stretch the ice, and the weak-side winger drops in to take the low support job instead |
| <b>Options</b>    | Flat or spread breakouts — both wingers hold higher near the blue line and the exit is made with longer passes rather than short support                  |
| <b>Action</b>     | Ask your coach which one you play                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Risk</b>       | A centre flying in a system where the wingers hold high leaves nobody underneath the puck at all — the failure that produces most weekend breakdowns      |

Low support, underneath the puck. This is the pivot the whole structure turns on, and it is covered in full in section 5.

**This five-role structure is itself a coaching choice.** What's described above is the conventional **swing breakout** taught by most development programmes and assumed throughout. The two alternatives you will actually meet:

- **The centre fly** (sometimes "centre high", or the "weak-side-wing-support" breakout): the centre deliberately leaves the zone early up the middle to stretch the ice, and the **weak-side winger drops in** to take the low support job instead.
- **Flat or spread breakouts:** both wingers hold higher, near the blue line, and the exit is made with longer passes rather than short support.

Ask your coach which one you play. The failure that produces most weekend breakdowns is a centre flying in a system where the wingers hold high near the blue line — the flat/spread structure above — leaving nobody underneath the puck at all. (Note this is a different sense of "high" from the defensive-zone instruction to a winger to *stay high on the point*: that one expires as soon as your team wins the puck, and in the swing breakout the strong-side winger comes down the wall.)

### 3. The Named Breakout Options

Each option below gets the same treatment: **setup**, **the read** that calls for it, **execution**, **the risk**, and **how the opposition defeats it**.

Two warnings on names before you start. First, teams disagree about these names — badly. Second, one collision is so common it deserves its own heading, and it is covered under "Over" below.

#### Up

|              |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Action       | Direct pass from the puck-carrying defenceman to the strong-side winger on the wall — the fastest exit in hockey                                                                             |
| Position     | D1 below the goal line or on the wall, the winger on the boards between the hash marks and the goal line, the centre low in the middle as the bail-out                                       |
| Read         | The forecheck has committed behind the net or to the middle, leaving the wall lane open — or F1 is arriving fast on the wrong side, so pass before F1 can influence the lane                 |
| Technique    | Pass firmly and to the winger's stick, not to the boards behind them; head up first, and aim where the winger will be, not where they were                                                   |
| Risk         | The wall pass travels through the most heavily patrolled lane on the ice — intercepted at the hash marks, it is a scoring chance from the top of the circle                                  |
| Countered by | Any forecheck with a designated wall-sealer — F2 in a 2-1-2, the strong-side half-wall player in a 1-2-2 — or a weak-side defenceman stepping down on the winger the instant the pass leaves |

The direct pass from the puck-carrying defenceman to the strong-side winger on the wall. The fastest exit in hockey and, when it's there, the right one.

- **Setup:** D1 has the puck below the goal line or on the wall. The strong-side winger is on the boards between the hash marks and the goal line. The centre is low in the middle as the bail-out.
- **The read:** Take it when the forecheck has committed *behind* the net or to the middle, leaving the wall lane open. It is also the right call when F1 is arriving fast on the wrong side — pass before F1 can influence the lane. D2 typically makes this call, because D2 can see what D1 cannot.

- **Execution:** Pass firmly and *to the winger's stick*, not to the boards behind them — a rim to a stationary winger is a different play and a worse one. Head up first: aim the pass where the winger will be, not where they were.
- **The risk:** The wall pass travels through the most heavily patrolled lane on the ice. Intercepted at the hash marks, it's a scoring chance from the top of the circle.
- **How it's defeated:** Any forecheck with a designated wall-sealer beats it — the second forechecker in a 2-1-2 whose job is exactly this, or the strong-side half-wall player in a 1-2-2. Teams also beat it by having their weak-side defenceman step down on the winger the instant the pass leaves, so the winger has no time even after a good pass.

## Wheel

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>       | The defenceman carries the puck himself, skating behind the net and up the far side                                                                                     |
| <b>Position</b>     | D1 retrieves in one corner and keeps skating; D2 takes the net front early, and the far-side winger and the centre become outlets                                       |
| <b>Read</b>         | You need two things — speed and space: a step on the first forechecker, and no second forechecker waiting on the far side                                               |
| <b>Technique</b>    | Cut tight to the net so the net itself screens you, and come out of the turn with your head up and speed already built                                                  |
| <b>Risk</b>         | You carry the puck through the middle-ish of your own zone with your back briefly to the play; if you are caught, you are caught below your own goal line with the puck |
| <b>Rule</b>         | A partner already standing at the net front is legal, but sliding across into the forechecker's path is an interference minor against your team (NHL Rule 56.1)         |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A second forechecker holding the far side — precisely what F2 does in a 2-1-2 — or a forechecker who takes the back-door route around the net rather than chasing you   |

The defenceman carries the puck himself, skating behind the net and up the far side.

- **Setup:** D1 retrieves in one corner and keeps skating around the back of the net. D2 takes up position in front of the net early — see the interference note in section 2 — and the far-side winger and the centre become outlets.

- **The read:** You need two things: **speed** and **space**. Wheel when you have a step on the first forechecker and there is no second forechecker waiting on the far side. It's excellent against a slow or single-man forecheck, and against a forecheck that has just committed hard to one corner.
  - **Execution:** Cut **tight** to the net — the net itself is your screen, and cutting wide gives the forechecker a straight line to intercept you. Come out of the turn with your head up and speed already built. Your partner, **already standing** at the net front, makes a cross-slot pursuit slower: the forechecker has to go around a player who is entitled to the ice he is on. That is legal. It does not make the pursuit *illegal*, and if your partner slides across into the forechecker's path to make it happen, that is an interference minor against your team (Rule 56.1).
  - **The risk:** You are carrying the puck through the middle-ish of your own zone with your back briefly to the play. If you're caught, you're caught below your own goal line with the puck.
  - **How it's defeated:** A second forechecker holding the far side — precisely what F2 does in a 2-1-2 — turns a wheel into a trap. A forechecker who takes the "back door" route around the net rather than chasing you also kills it. The counter to being caught mid-wheel is the reverse, below.
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## Reverse

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|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>       | Send the puck back against the flow of the forecheck, usually a hard backhand off the boards behind you                                                                          |
| <b>Position</b>     | Moving one direction with the puck — often mid-wheel or up the wall — with a forechecker chasing your hip and D2 or the centre arriving behind you                               |
| <b>Read</b>         | The forechecker has over-committed and skated past you; their momentum is the whole play, because they cannot stop                                                               |
| <b>Technique</b>    | Bank it off the boards firmly and low behind you — soft reverses die in the corner and become turnovers                                                                          |
| <b>Key</b>          | The receiving teammate must call for it — "reverse!" — because D1 is looking the wrong way                                                                                       |
| <b>Risk</b>         | You are putting the puck into a space you cannot see, below your own goal line; if nobody is there, the opposition has it behind your net with your defence facing the wrong way |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A containing F1 who steers rather than chases and is never past you to begin with, or an aggressive F2 who reads the reverse and arrives in the vacated space                    |
| <b>Key</b>          | A rim goes onward around the boards in the direction the puck was already travelling; a reverse goes back against it                                                             |

Sending the puck **back against the flow** of the forecheck, usually a hard backhand off the boards behind you, to a teammate arriving in the space the forechecker just vacated.

- **Setup:** You are moving one direction with the puck — often mid-wheel or working up the wall — with a forechecker chasing your hip. D2 or the centre is arriving behind you.
- **The read:** Reverse beats a forechecker who has **over-committed and skated past you**. The whole play depends on their momentum: they cannot stop, so the puck goes where they've just been. As Defender puts it: rim to beat a forechecker who is sealing you against the boards; reverse to beat one who has over-committed. Reading which of the two you're facing is a core defenceman skill.
- **Execution:** Bank it off the boards firmly and low behind you. Soft reverses die in the corner and become turnovers. The receiving teammate must call for it — **"reverse!"** — because D1 is looking the wrong way.
- **The risk:** You are putting the puck into a space you cannot see, below your own goal line. If nobody is there, the opposition has the puck behind your net with your defence facing the wrong direction.

- **How it's defeated:** Disciplined forechecks defeat reverses by simply not over-committing — the containing F1 of a 1-2-2 steers rather than chases and is never past you to begin with. Aggressive forechecks defeat it with F2 reading the reverse and arriving in the vacated space instead of your teammate.

**Rim and reverse are different plays. Keep them straight:** a **rim** goes *onward* around the boards in the direction the puck was already travelling; a **reverse** goes *back* against it.

## D-to-D

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>       | Pass across to your partner, changing the side the attack comes from and forcing the entire forecheck to reset and shift                                           |
| <b>Position</b>     | D1 with the puck low on one side, D2 available low on the other                                                                                                    |
| <b>Read</b>         | Your side is flooded and the other is not — its real value is that it costs the opposition time, and everything they had covered comes uncovered while they travel |
| <b>Never</b>        | Through the slot — go behind your own net; intercepted below the goal line it means nothing, the same pass in front of the net is a point-blank chance against     |
| <b>Action</b>       | Pass it quickly rather than skating it across — carrying the puck toward your partner drags the pressure with you                                                  |
| <b>Risk</b>         | Executed correctly, one of the lowest-risk plays in hockey; executed through the slot, one of the highest, with very little middle ground                          |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A 2-1-2 with two forecheckers arriving on separate sides, or a 1-2-2 whose F1 takes away the D-to-D lane as their first responsibility                             |

The pass across to your partner, changing the side of the ice the attack comes from and forcing the entire forecheck to reset and shift.

- **Setup:** D1 has the puck low on one side; D2 is available low on the other.
- **The read:** Use it when your side is flooded and the other is not. Its real value is that it costs the opposition time: a forecheck built to pressure one side has to travel across the ice, and everything they had covered comes uncovered while they do.
- **Execution — and the absolute rule: Go behind your own net. Never through the slot.** A D-to-D pass below the goal line that gets intercepted means nothing — the puck is behind the net with no shot available. The same pass in front of the net that gets intercepted

is a point-blank chance against, and it is one of the most punished mistakes in the game. Pass it quickly rather than skating it across; carrying the puck toward your partner just drags the pressure with you and hands them your problem.

- **The risk:** Executed correctly, this is one of the lowest-risk plays in hockey. Executed through the slot, it is one of the highest. There is very little middle ground.
- **How it's defeated:** A 2-1-2 with two forecheckers arriving on separate sides beats D-to-D because there's already someone on your partner. A 1-2-2 defeats it by having F1 take away the D-to-D lane as their *first* responsibility — that is often exactly what the containing forechecker is told to do — forcing the puck up the wall into the two waiting forwards.

---

## Rim

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>       | A hard shot along the boards that follows the curve of the rink around to a teammate further along — usually the far-side winger                                         |
| <b>Position</b>     | D1 in the corner or behind the net under real pressure, with a winger positioned around the boards to collect it                                                         |
| <b>Read</b>         | A forechecker has sealed you against the boards and there is no passing lane through them; it is also the standard release valve when you simply have no time            |
| <b>Technique</b>    | Height and pace — low and flat enough to stay on the boards, hard enough to carry all the way around; a soft rim dies in the corner and is a gift                        |
| <b>Technique</b>    | Aim it to arrive where a teammate can meet it, not simply "around"                                                                                                       |
| <b>Risk</b>         | A rim concedes possession more often than any other option except an outright clear — a 50-50 dressed as a play                                                          |
| <b>Countered by</b> | The most-anticipated play in hockey — any forecheck can post a player at the far wall, and skilled teams read the pressure you are under and pre-position without moving |

A hard shot along the boards that follows the curve of the rink around to a teammate further along — usually the far-side winger.

- **Setup:** D1 has the puck in the corner or behind the net under real pressure. A winger is positioned around the boards to collect it.
- **The read:** Rim when a forechecker has **sealed you against the boards** and there is no passing lane through them. It is also the standard release valve when you simply have no time.



- **Execution:** Two things decide whether a rim works. **Height and pace:** keep it low and flat enough to stay on the boards and hard enough to carry all the way around — a soft rim dies in the corner and is a gift. **Target:** aim it to arrive *where a teammate can meet it*, not simply "around". See the trapezoid section (10) — this changes rim targeting fundamentally.
- **The risk:** A rim concedes possession more often than any other option except an outright clear, because the receiver is collecting a moving puck on the wall with a defenceman closing. It's a 50-50 dressed as a play.
- **How it's defeated:** The rim is the most-anticipated play in hockey. Any forecheck can post a player at the far wall to intercept it, and most do — the weak-side defenceman stepping down to the far wall to kill rims is standard. Skilled teams beat rims without even moving: they read the pressure you're under and pre-position.

## Over / cross-ice

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Never</b>        | Use "over" without agreeing which sense — Sense A is this cross-ice pass, the highest-risk option here; Sense B is the D-to-D behind your own net, one of the lowest-risk |
| <b>Action</b>       | Pass from the puck-carrying defenceman across the width of the ice to the far winger, skipping the strong-side structure entirely                                         |
| <b>Position</b>     | D1 with the puck usually a little higher than the goal line; the far-side winger or the weak-side defenceman open across the ice                                          |
| <b>Read</b>         | Only when the forecheck has genuinely over-loaded one side and the middle is empty                                                                                        |
| <b>Technique</b>    | Firm and flat — a cross-ice pass that has to be handled at the receiver's feet has taken so long that the play is over                                                    |
| <b>Risk</b>         | The puck travels laterally in front of your own net at the height of the opposing forwards — intercepted, it is picked off in the middle facing your goal                 |
| <b>Priority</b>     | Where the behind-the-net D-to-D route exists, take it instead — it achieves a similar side-switch with essentially no downside                                            |
| <b>Countered by</b> | Any forecheck with a middle presence — the three-across middle of a 1-3-1, F3 in a 2-1-2 — and it is defeated by the shape existing at all, not by anyone reacting to it  |

**Read this naming warning first.** The word "over" is used for two completely different plays with completely different risk profiles:

- **Sense A — cross-ice "over":** a pass across the width of the ice to the far winger, in front of your own net. **This is the play described in this section**, and it is the highest-risk option in the document.
- **Sense B — D-to-D "over":** the pass behind your own net to your partner. Many playbooks and most **goalie call vocabularies** use "over" to mean this, and it is one of the *lowest-risk* plays in hockey.

**Find out which one your team means before you use the word**, because the two carry opposite instructions. This document labels the sense every time it uses the word: **the option below is Sense A; the goalie's call list in section 9 is Sense B.**

The cross-ice over is a pass from the puck-carrying defenceman across the width of the ice to the far winger or far side, skipping the strong-side structure entirely.

- **Setup:** D1 has the puck, usually a little higher than the goal line. The far-side winger or the weak-side defenceman is open across the ice.
  - **The read:** Only when the forecheck has genuinely over-loaded one side and the middle is empty. The reward is real — one pass and you've beaten three forecheckers, arriving with the far winger already in stride.
  - **Execution:** Firm and flat. A cross-ice pass that has to be handled at the receiver's feet has taken so long that the play is over.
  - **The risk — and why this is the highest-risk option in the book:** the puck travels laterally across the width of the ice, in front of your own net, at the height where the opposing forwards are. If it's intercepted, the interception happens in the middle of the ice facing your goal, with your defence flat-footed and out of position. Compare it to the D-to-D behind the net, which achieves a similar side-switch with essentially no downside. Where the behind-the-net route exists, take it instead.
  - **How it's defeated:** Any forecheck with a middle presence — the three-across middle of a 1-3-1, F3 in a 2-1-2 — is standing in this lane by design. It is defeated not by reacting to it but by the shape existing at all.
-

## Quick-up / counter

|                     |                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>       | The immediate transition off a turnover, before the forecheck has any chance to set up                                                                       |
| <b>Position</b>     | Your team has just won the puck — a blocked shot, a stripped puck at the blue line, a rebound — and the opposition still has bodies below the puck           |
| <b>Read</b>         | Not really a called play but a recognised moment — the two or three seconds immediately after a turnover are the least organised the opposition will ever be |
| <b>Technique</b>    | First look up ice, not down, and move the puck on the first touch if you can — speed of decision matters more than quality of pass here                      |
| <b>Risk</b>         | The habit version is the real risk — playing quick-up when the moment isn't there, forcing a pass into a formed defence                                      |
| <b>Countered by</b> | Counter-pressing — teams that re-attack the puck within a couple of seconds of losing it shorten the fuse rather than removing the play                      |

The immediate transition off a turnover, before the forecheck has any chance to set up.

- **Setup:** Your team has just won the puck — a blocked shot, a stripped puck at the blue line, a rebound your goalie has left. The opposition still has bodies below the puck and their structure is nowhere.
  - **The read:** This isn't really a called play; it's a recognised moment. **The two or three seconds immediately after a turnover are the least organised the opposition will ever be.** If a teammate is available up the ice, that is the moment to move it — before your own structure has formed, before theirs has re-formed.
  - **Execution:** First look up ice, not down. Move the puck on the first touch if you can. Speed of decision matters more than quality of pass here; a five-second wait to make a perfect play has given away the entire advantage.
  - **The risk:** The lowest-risk high-reward play available — the opposition has fewer defenders back and less shape than at any other time. The real risk is the *habit* version: playing quick-up when the moment isn't there, forcing a pass into a formed defence.
  - **How it's defeated:** Counter-pressing. Teams that immediately re-attack the puck within a couple of seconds of losing it are specifically trying to remove your quick-up window. Against those teams the quick-up is still available — it just has a shorter fuse.
-

## Stretch pass

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>       | A long pass from your defensive zone to a forward who has left early and is waiting up ice                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Position</b>     | One forward — usually the weak-side winger — leaves the defensive zone early and stretches high; the retrieving defenceman looks up and hits them                                                                                      |
| <b>Read</b>         | The opposition has committed all three forwards deep on the forecheck and their defencemen have stepped up — that shape leaves a lane and leaves your winger behind coverage                                                           |
| <b>Technique</b>    | Head up before you handle the puck, and lead the receiver so they collect it in stride                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Rule</b>         | NHL Rule 83.1 and IIHF Rule 83.1 are word-for-word — one skate in contact with the blue line, or behind it, keeps your winger onside, and a skate in the air over the neutral zone still counts, because the plane has not been broken |
| <b>Rule</b>         | The airborne skate is the IIHF position, so it is the British one; under USA Hockey Rule 630(a) the skate must have contact with the neutral zone or the line, so an airborne skate is offside                                         |
| <b>Rule</b>         | Neither the NHL nor the IIHF rulebook contains a centre-red-line ("two-line") pass restriction — the long pass is legal, though some rec and youth leagues still play a red-line rule, so check yours                                  |
| <b>Risk</b>         | An intercepted stretch is a full-speed rush the other way with your winger a full zone out of the play — genuinely high-risk/high-reward, and in most amateur hockey not a good default                                                |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A 1-3-1, which exists to kill it; a conservative 1-2-2 with two forwards holding high; or defencemen simply backing off rather than stepping up                                                                                        |

A long pass from your defensive zone to a forward who has left early and is waiting up ice, typically near the neutral zone or the far blue line.

- **Setup:** One forward — usually the weak-side winger — leaves the defensive zone early and stretches high. The retrieving defenceman looks up and hits them.
- **The read:** Take the stretch when the opposition has committed all three forwards deep on the forecheck and their defencemen have stepped up. That is the shape that leaves a lane and leaves your winger behind coverage.
- **Execution:** Head up before you handle the puck, and lead the receiver so they collect it in stride. **Your winger must stay onside at the far blue line, and the rule is worth stating the right way round.** Rule 83.1: "A player is on-side when either of his skates are

*in contact with the blue line, or on his own side of the line, at the instant the puck completely crosses the leading edge of the blue line."* So **one skate touching the line, or behind it, keeps your winger onside**. They are only **offside** if **both** skates are completely over the leading edge before the puck completely crosses it. Read plainly: the puck goes first, or at worst you and the puck arrive together — and a skate in the air over the neutral zone still counts as onside, because the plane has not been broken. **The IIHF's Rule 83.1 says this in the same words**, down to the "plane" of the blue line extending upwards and the skate that "has yet to break the plane" — so if you play anywhere in Britain, the airborne trail skate is legal in your book too. **Under USA Hockey Rule 630(a) it is not:** the skate must have *contact* with the neutral zone or the blue line, so an airborne skate is offside. **Neither the NHL nor the IIHF rulebook contains a centre-red-line ("two-line") pass restriction** — the long pass is legal. Some rec and youth leagues still play a red-line pass rule; check yours.

- **The risk profile — the honest version:** a completed stretch pass is close to a breakaway. An intercepted one is a full-speed rush the other way with your winger a full zone out of the play — call it **sixty to eighty feet behind the puck** — because they left before the exit was secure. This is genuinely a high-risk/high-reward play, and its expected value depends almost entirely on your league's ability to complete a pass of that length: the blue lines sit **64 feet** out from each goal line (Rule 1.5) and the rink is **200 feet** long (Rule 1.2 — Dimensions; note that 1.5 covers the lines and 1.6 only names the three zones), so from your own goal line to the far blue line is **114 feet**, and even a stretch to the centre red line is **89 feet**. Very few amateur players can put a flat, receivable pass through either. In most amateur hockey it is not a good default. **Those are NHL-sheet distances**. The IIHF book specifies a different sheet, and in England and Scotland the In-House Rules authorise rinks smaller again; UK and England Rules has the amendment and Rink Map and Glossary owns the dimensions. Pace the pass to the sheet you are standing on.
  - **How it's defeated:** A 1-3-1 exists to kill it — three players stretched across the neutral zone erase the lane. A conservative 1-2-2 with two forwards holding high does much the same. Teams also defeat it simply by having their defencemen back off rather than step up, which makes the receiving winger easy to cover.
-

## Off the glass and out

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>         | When the alternatives are a turnover in a dangerous area or a play you are not confident in — and when you desperately need a change                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Technique</b>    | Aim high off the glass in the corner or up the wall, not flat up the middle; a flat clear up the middle is both the classic interception and the classic icing                                                                                             |
| <b>Rule</b>         | Hybrid icing turns on "which player would first touch the puck, not which player would first reach the end zone face-off dots" (NHL Rule 81.1; IIHF Rule 81.1 word-for-word) — the dot is the deadline, and a race too close to call by then goes to icing |
| <b>Rule</b>         | After your own icing your line cannot change (Rule 81.4) and cannot take a time-out (Rule 87.1: "No time-out shall be granted to the defensive team following an icing")                                                                                   |
| <b>Rule</b>         | IIHF 81.4 and 87.1 read identically, so both restrictions are yours in Britain; USA Hockey is the outlier — Rule 624 restricts no substitution and 636(f) attaches no icing condition to its time-out                                                      |
| <b>Rule</b>         | Shorthanded you may ice it freely (NHL Rule 81.6), subject to two carve-outs — a major with an empty penalty bench, and USA Hockey's classification limit — owned by Special Teams and Rules Primer; IIHF 81.6 carries neither                             |
| <b>Rule</b>         | Shooting or batting the puck directly out of play from your defending zone is a two-minute delay-of-game minor (NHL Rule 63.2(iii)) — its own exceptions are where there is no glass, into the players' bench, and directly off a faceoff                  |
| <b>Rule</b>         | 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                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Key</b>          | Staying in is fine, and a deflection out is fine                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Key</b>          | Glass clears rarely get intercepted and rarely ice, because they slow the puck and keep it wide — which is why the play is called "off the glass", not "over the glass"                                                                                    |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A defenceman holding the offensive blue line and stopping the puck getting out — a different play from a pinch, which is stepping down from the line into the zone                                                                                         |

No possession, no goal against. Always available and never wrong when you're in trouble.

- **Setup:** You have the puck, you have pressure, and you have no play.
- **The read:** When the alternatives are a turnover in a dangerous area or a play you're not confident in. It is also the correct play when you desperately need a change.

- **Execution:** Aim **high off the glass** in the corner or up the wall, not flat up the middle. Glass clears rarely get intercepted and rarely ice, because they slow the puck and keep it wide. A flat clear up the middle is both the classic interception and the classic icing.
- **Two rules you must know:**
  - **Icing — and it is hybrid icing, which is not quite what most players think.** If you are at even strength or up a skater, and you shoot the puck **from your own half of the ice** (the centre red line divides the halves, Rule 81.1) across the far goal line, the linespersons do not wait for anyone to touch it. **The race is to the puck, and the end-zone faceoff dot is only the deadline for the decision:** Rule 81.1 states that *"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 call is made no later than the instant the first player's skate reaches that dot. If it is too close to call by then, icing is called. So a clear from your own blue line with a defender two strides ahead of your winger is icing whether or not the puck is ever touched. Play stops, the faceoff comes back to your zone, and your line **cannot change** (Rule 81.4) and **cannot take a timeout** (Rule 87.1: *"No time-out shall be granted to the defensive team following an icing"*) — that last part is the real cost, because the tired players who just iced it are stuck out there for a defensive-zone draw. **All of that holds under the IIHF book, and therefore in Britain:** IIHF Rule 81.1 carries the same "which Player would first touch the puck, not which Player would first reach the end zone 'face-off' dots" sentence and the same "too close to determine... 'icing' shall be called" instruction, IIHF 81.4 bans the substitution, and IIHF 87.1 says in terms *"No 'time-out' shall be granted to the defensive team following an icing"*. Do not expect your own book to punish an icing more lightly. **Shorthanded, you can ice it freely** (Rule 81.6) — subject to two carve-outs set out in Special Teams and Rules Primer: a team shorthanded by a *major* that has left nobody on the penalty bench loses the exemption, and USA Hockey only grants it from Youth 15-Only / Girls 16U / High School / Adult upward. **Neither carve-out is in the IIHF's 81.6** — see UK and England Rules. Note the two halves detail: a clear released from *their* side of centre can never be icing no matter how far it travels.
  - **Over the glass is a penalty.** Under NHL Rule 63.2(iii), shooting or batting the puck **directly (non-deflected) out of the playing surface from your defending zone** is a two-minute minor for delay of game. Off the glass and staying in is fine; a deflection out is fine; a clean flip over the glass from your own end is a penalty. The rule's own exceptions: it does not apply "where there is no glass", it does not apply to a puck shot **into** the players' bench (though over the glass *behind* the bench does count), and no penalty is assessed when the puck leaves the playing area **directly off a faceoff**. This is why the play is called "off the glass", not "over the glass".

- **How it's defeated:** By a defenceman **holding the offensive blue line** — staying at the line and stopping the puck getting out. That is a different play from a **pinch**, which is stepping *down* from the line into the zone to attack a puck below you. Holding beats a glass clear; pinching beats a puck already dying in the corner, and costs far more when it misses. Your own defencemen face the same choice at the other end — see Defender.

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## 4. Winger Timing and Positioning on the Wall

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This is the single most common amateur failure in hockey, and it is not a skill problem.

### The failure

- Never** Stand still, flat against the boards at the hash marks, waiting
- Risk** You are uncoverable but useless — your check cannot take the puck off you before you have it, so it feels like you are doing your job
- Risk** You have no speed — the pass arrives and you start from zero with a defenceman closing at speed
- Risk** You have nowhere to go — pinned flat against the wall, your only escape routes are along the boards, the exact lane the opposition is defending
- Key** A moving target with an opening lane is far easier to hit than a still one in a closed one

You stand still, flat against the boards, at the hash marks, waiting. And here's the thing — **you are technically uncoverable there**. Your check can't really take the puck off you before you have it, and you feel available. So it feels like you're doing your job.

You are not. You are **uncoverable but useless**, for three connected reasons:

1. **You have no speed.** The pass arrives and you're starting from zero, with a defenceman closing at speed. You will lose that race every time.
2. **You have nowhere to go.** Pinned flat against the wall, your only escape routes are along the boards — the exact lane the opposition is defending.
3. **You are not actually available.** Standing still against the boards means the passer has to hit a stationary target in a lane an opponent can simply stand in. A moving target with an opening lane is far easier to hit than a still one in a closed one.



## Where to stand

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | On the wall, between the hash marks and the goal line, on the strong side — low enough that the pass is short and safe, high enough that you are moving up ice when you get it          |
| <b>Key</b>        | This is where you arrive, not where you have been standing                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Action</b>     | Under the house-default low zone collapse you spend the defensive shift high, level with the opposing point man, and come down the wall to this spot as your team wins the puck         |
| <b>Never</b>      | Sit above the hash marks once the breakout is under way — it makes the pass longer, flatter and more interceptable, and the pass comes into your back                                   |
| <b>Key</b>        | Being high before that, while they still have possession, is not an error at all — the error is failing to make the trip, not starting from the top                                     |
| <b>Convention</b> | Wall position is system-dependent — a flat/spread structure asks wingers to hold higher toward the blue line, and a stretch or flying-winger structure sends one winger up ice entirely |

The default landmark is **on the wall, between the hash marks and the goal line, on the strong side** — low enough that the pass from behind or beside the net is short and safe, high enough that you're moving up ice when you get it.

**This is where you arrive, not where you have been standing.** Under the house-default low zone collapse you spend the defensive shift *high*, level with the opposing point man on your side, and you come down the wall to this spot as your team wins the puck — the one time in that system a winger leaves the point voluntarily. See Defensive Zone Coverage and Winger. Read anything below about "where the strong-side winger stands" as *where the strong-side winger stands once the breakout has started*.

Being *above* the hash marks **once the breakout is under way** is the more common error: it makes the pass longer, flatter and more interceptable, and it means the pass comes into your back. Being high *before* that, while they still have possession, is not an error at all — it is your coverage. The error is failing to make the trip, not starting from the top.

**Wall position is system-dependent.** The hash-mark wall position described here belongs to the conventional swing breakout. Teams running a **flat/spread** structure ask wingers to hold higher toward the blue line; teams running an aggressive **stretch or flying-winger** structure

send one winger up ice entirely. Find out which one you're in — the failure mode of a winger standing at the hash marks in a stretch system is exactly as bad as the reverse.

## When to move

- Mindset** Time your arrival, don't camp — better a little late than a little early, because it is easy to speed up and very hard to slow down and re-accelerate
- Read** If the puck is contested, come back for it — shorten the pass and skate toward the puck to receive
- Read** If the puck is clean, stay in stride — take a small route away from the puck, then arrive back into the lane with speed
- Action** Either way, keep your feet moving; the player standing still is the player who gets hit

**Time your arrival, don't camp.** The principle borrowed from centre-support coaching applies just as hard to wingers: **it is better to be a little late than a little early**, because it is easy to speed up and very hard to slow down and re-accelerate.

- **Come back for it if the puck is contested.** If your defenceman is in a battle or under real pressure, shorten the pass. Skate *toward* the puck to receive. A short pass to a supporting winger beats a long pass to a distant one every time.
- **Stay in stride if the puck is clean.** If your defenceman has the puck and time, don't stop and wait — take a small route away from the puck and then arrive back into the lane with speed, so you receive the pass already moving up ice. This is what "timing" means in practice.
- **Either way, feet moving.** Even a small shuffle keeps you able to react. The player standing still is the player who gets hit.

## Presenting a target, and receiving open to the ice

|                   |                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Technique</b>  | Stick on the ice, blade flat, angled toward the passer — your blade is the target, so put it where you want the puck                                     |
| <b>Action</b>     | Check your shoulder before the puck arrives, so you already know whether you are skating, passing or eating it                                           |
| <b>Never</b>      | Receive the puck with your chest to the boards — facing the glass you have surrendered every option except a blind chip                                  |
| <b>Technique</b>  | Open your hips to the ice and take a step or two off the boards, so you can skate, pass to the centre, pass back to your defenceman or attack the middle |
| <b>Technique</b>  | If the puck arrives hard on the boards, angle a skate to kill it off the wall onto your stick rather than reaching and missing                           |
| <b>Never</b>      | Shield with your back to the boards, and never duck — skates parallel to the boards, forearm and hip to the wall, head up and chin off your chest        |
| <b>Convention</b> | Whether you also call for it is a team preference — some prefer silence on the wall to avoid tipping the play; the stick is not optional                 |

**Stick on the ice, blade flat, angled toward the passer** — not held up, not dragging behind you. Your blade is the target; put it where you want the puck. Whether you also *call* for it is a team preference (some prefer silence on the wall to avoid tipping the play — see On-Ice Communication); the stick is not optional. And **check your shoulder before the puck arrives**, so you already know whether you are skating, passing or eating it.

**Do not receive the puck with your chest to the boards.** This is the technical heart of the whole job.

- **Open your hips to the ice** as the puck arrives, so you can see the full rink and the puck at once. Facing the glass, you have surrendered every option except a blind chip.
- **Get separation from the wall.** A step or two off the boards means you can skate, pass to the centre, pass back to your defenceman *or* attack the middle. Flush against the wall you can do one of those.
- **Use your skates when you must** — if the puck arrives hard on the boards, angle a skate to kill it off the wall onto your stick rather than reaching and missing.
- **Protect it if you have to.** With a defenceman on your back and no option, "eat it" — shield the puck with your body until support arrives — or chip it off the glass. Both beat a blind turnover. **Safety override:** shield with your **skates parallel to the boards** and your **forearm and hip** to the wall, head up and chin off your chest — **never with your back to**

**the boards, and never duck.** Puck protection never justifies that orientation; see Body Contact and Battles → Receiving a Hit Safely, which owns it.

## The winger's four options — and the order is a coaching choice

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Options</b>    | Four things you can do — skate up ice, pass to the centre, pass back to your defenceman, or eat it / chip it out                                                |
| <b>Convention</b> | Which comes first is a system decision, not a law, and the two common answers point in opposite directions                                                      |
| <b>Convention</b> | Skate-first — taught to young wingers who freeze on the wall, and the safer default when your team's passing is unreliable                                      |
| <b>Convention</b> | Pass-first (quick-up) — what a quick-transition team wants: first look up ice before your feet commit, and skating is what you do when the look is not there    |
| <b>Action</b>     | Find out which one your coach wants                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Key</b>        | Both versions agree on one thing — check your shoulder before the puck arrives; a winger who scans after receiving is left with whichever option has not closed |

Once you have it you have four things you can do: **skate** (feet moving up ice, away from your own net), **pass to the centre** (they should be low and close, at or below your height), **pass back to your defenceman** (if the pressure came from above), and **eat it or chip it out** (last resort, and never a failure).

**Which comes first is a system decision, not a law, and the two common answers point in opposite directions.**

- **Skate-first** is the version taught to young wingers who freeze on the wall, and the safer default when your team's passing is unreliable — a winger moving up ice with the puck cannot throw it away.
- **Pass-first (quick-up)** is what a quick-transition team wants: **first look up ice** before your feet commit, on the reasoning that the two seconds after a retrieval are the least organised the opposition will ever be. This document's own "Quick-up / counter" option and its reading-pressure section lean that way, and Winger states it flatly — *your first look is always up ice*. Under this version, skating is what you do when the look is not there.

**Find out which one your coach wants.** Both versions agree on one thing: **check your shoulder before the puck arrives**, so you already know which of the four you are choosing. A winger who scans after receiving is left with whichever option has not closed.

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## 5. The Centre's Swing

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If the winger's job is the most botched, the centre's is the most misunderstood — and it does more damage when it goes wrong, because the centre being in the wrong place removes the *option* the whole structure relies on.

### The swing, and where exactly it goes

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>     | A low support loop — swing back down into your own zone, stay beneath the puck, and offer a short, safe, middle-lane pass                                                    |
| <b>Position</b> | Inside the faceoff dots and below the hash marks — the strong-side circle, not the wall                                                                                      |
| <b>Key</b>      | Below the hash marks the lane is open and the pass is short, and you receive facing up ice; above them you are level with their forwards and the puck arrives into your back |
| <b>Never</b>    | Drift wide out to the boards — that is the strong-side winger's ice, one opponent then covers you both, and it kills the middle-lane option the structure depends on         |
| <b>Key</b>      | If you can touch the glass, you are in the wrong job                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Key</b>      | You are the bail-out — when the wall is sealed and the wheel is closed, the low centre is what keeps the breakout alive                                                      |

Your job on a breakout is a **low support loop**: you swing back down into your own zone, staying beneath the puck, and offer a short, safe, middle-lane pass. You come low, curl, and leave with speed as the play exits.

**Where exactly: inside the faceoff dots and below the hash marks — the strong-side circle, not the wall.** Two boundaries, for two different reasons:

- **Below the hash marks.** Above them you are level with the opposition's forwards and the passing lane closes; below them the lane is open and the pass is short. Short passes complete and long ones do not — a centre ten feet from the defenceman is a pass that always works, one forty feet away is a hope. Coming from below and beside, you also receive **facing up ice**; coming from above, the puck arrives into your back.
- **Inside the dots, not out on the boards.** Drifting wide puts you in the **strong-side winger's** ice, where one opposing player covers you both, and it kills the middle-lane option the structure depends on. Your swing may arc toward the strong side — it should, that is how you gather speed — but it arcs into the *circle*. If you can touch the glass, you are in the wrong job.

You are **the bail-out**: when the wall is sealed and the wheel is closed, the low centre is what keeps the breakout alive. Without you, your defenceman is down to a rim, a reverse to nobody, or a turnover.

**Note for readers of Center:** the centre's breakout spot is the strong-side circle, **not** the strong-side boards — the boards are the winger's. **This file is the authority for breakout positioning.**

## How a high centre kills the breakout

- Never** Leave early anticipating the rush and end up high in the zone or already in the neutral zone
- Risk** The defenceman is down to two options — the wall or a clear — and the opposition knows it
- Risk** The pass angle is wrong even if it is attempted, because it has to travel up through the middle of your own zone
- Risk** You receive with your back to the play, and every option you gave the play was a decoy, so the forecheck can commit to the wall and the wheel at 100%
- Mindset** Better a little late than a little early — late, you accelerate into the puck; early, you have to stop and restart, and you have already killed the play

The near-universal amateur failure: **the centre leaves early**, anticipating the rush, and ends up high in the zone or already in the neutral zone. The cost is fourfold. **The defenceman is down to two options** — the wall or a clear — and the opposition knows it. **The pass angle is wrong** even if it is attempted, because it now has to travel up through the middle of your own zone, the one place you never want a puck lost. **You receive with your back to the play**, if you receive it at all. And **every option you gave the play was a decoy**, so the forecheck can commit to the wall and the wheel at 100%.

Coaching resources put the failure rate on this at the overwhelming majority of young players — an impression rather than a measured figure. The correction is the wingers': **better a little late than a little early**. Late, you accelerate into the puck. Early, you have to stop and restart, and you have already killed the play.

## Timing the exit

|                   |                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>       | The point of swinging low is not just to be a target — it is to leave with speed                                                                   |
| <b>Technique</b>  | Take a route that has you moving away from the puck briefly, then turning back into it, so you are already at pace as you cross your own blue line |
| <b>Risk</b>       | A centre who receives a pass standing still has technically executed the play and gained nothing                                                   |
| <b>Convention</b> | Centre-low is a coaching choice — the alternative is the centre fly, and both are legitimate                                                       |
| <b>Never</b>      | Fly in a flat/spread system where the wingers hold high near the blue line — then nobody has low support at all                                    |

The point of swinging low is not just to be a target — it's to **leave with speed**. Take a route that has you moving away from the puck briefly, then turning back into it, so that when you receive it or when the play goes up the wall, you're already at pace as you cross your own blue line. A centre who receives a pass standing still has technically executed the play and gained nothing.

**Centre-low is a coaching choice too** — the alternative is the **centre fly**, described in section 2. Both are legitimate. What is never legitimate is a centre flying in a flat/spread system where the wingers hold high near the blue line: then nobody has low support, and that is the breakdown you see most weekends. See Center.

## 6. Breaking Out Against Each Forecheck

The correct breakout is not chosen from a list of favourites; it's chosen by reading the shape in front of you. **What each of these forechecks actually is, and how it is coached, belongs to Forechecking Systems — one line each here, then straight to how you beat it.**

**A note on "most common".** Coaching material widely describes the **1-2-2** as the most-used forecheck in hockey (forecheck systems guide (<https://hoopsking.com/blogs/ice-hockey/hockey-forecheck-systems>)), but **no league-wide count exists, so treat that as an impression, not a measured figure**. It does not conflict with the **2-1-2** being the **house default** throughout: that is a documentation convention — the 2-1-2 is the easiest to teach and the most common at youth and rec level, so it is the shape these documents assume when they need to assume one.

## Against a 1-2-2

|                |                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>    | F1 pressures and steers rather than attacks, two forwards hold the middle-and-wall band behind, two defencemen hold the line — containment, not chaos                    |
| <b>Key</b>     | It takes away the middle, and usually the D-to-D lane; the two F2/F3 forwards sit exactly where a wall pass wants to go                                                  |
| <b>Mindset</b> | You will usually have time — use it; this is the forecheck that punishes rushed decisions most and pressured decisions least                                             |
| <b>Action</b>  | Make F1 commit with a wheel, or simply by skating at F1 — once they pick a side, the other side is genuinely open                                                        |
| <b>Key</b>     | The low centre is your key, because the 1-2-2's two middle forwards are positioned relatively high and the space beneath them is real                                    |
| <b>Never</b>   | Rim into a set 1-2-2 — it hands the puck to two waiting forwards; beat it with numbers up the middle instead                                                             |
| <b>Action</b>  | Against the extreme version, the 1-2-2 trap, take controlled possession and patience, including regrouping in your own zone rather than skating into the wall of players |

**One line:** F1 pressures, two forwards hold the middle-and-wall band behind, two defencemen hold the line. Containment, not chaos — F1 steers rather than attacks.

**What it takes away:** the middle, and usually the D-to-D lane, which F1 is often specifically tasked with closing. The two F2/F3 forwards sit exactly where a wall pass wants to go.

### How to break it:

- **You will usually have time.** Use it. Take the extra second to look — this is the forecheck that punishes rushed decisions most and pressured decisions least.
- **Make F1 commit.** A wheel, or simply skating at F1, forces the containing forechecker to pick a side. Once they pick, the other side is genuinely open.
- **The low centre is your key.** The 1-2-2's two middle forwards are positioned relatively high; the space beneath them is real.
- **Beat it with numbers up the middle,** not with a rim. Rimming into a set 1-2-2 hands the puck to two waiting forwards.
- **Against the extreme version (the 1-2-2 trap),** the answer is usually controlled possession, patience, and forcing them to come to you — including regrouping in your own zone rather than skating into the wall of players. See Neutral Zone Systems.



## Against a 2-1-2

|                |                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>    | Two forwards pressure deep taking a side each, one supports in the middle, two defencemen hold — the most aggressive standard forecheck, and the house default throughout |
| <b>Key</b>     | It takes away time, and both corners                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Action</b>  | Play fast and simple — you do not have time to be clever, and the rushed cross-ice pass here is exactly the goal-against this forecheck is designed to produce            |
| <b>Key</b>     | Reverse and rim come into their own, because two forwards attacking deep are two forwards with momentum, and momentum is what the reverse punishes                        |
| <b>Risk</b>    | The wheel is dangerous here — there is a second forechecker on the far side by design                                                                                     |
| <b>Action</b>  | Beat them behind their pressure — when both their forwards are below your goal line, F3 is alone in the middle and their defencemen are exposed                           |
| <b>Options</b> | Glass and out is a legitimate answer — against sustained hard forechecking, refusing to turn the puck over in the danger zone is itself a strategy                        |

**One line:** two forwards pressure deep taking a side each, one supports in the middle, two defencemen hold. The most aggressive standard forecheck, and the house default throughout.

**What it takes away:** time, and both corners.

**How to break it:**

- **Play fast and simple.** You do not have time to be clever. The rushed cross-ice pass here is exactly the goal-against this forecheck is designed to produce.
- **Reverse and rim come into their own.** Two forwards attacking deep are two forwards with momentum, and momentum is what the reverse punishes.
- **The wheel is dangerous** — there is a second forechecker on the far side by design.
- **Beat them behind their pressure.** When both their forwards are below your goal line, F3 is alone in the middle and their defencemen are exposed. A completed quick-up or a well-timed stretch is devastating against a 2-1-2 for exactly this reason.
- **Glass and out is a legitimate answer.** Against sustained hard forechecking, refusing to turn the puck over in the danger zone is itself a strategy.

## Against a 1-3-1

|                |                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>    | One forward token-pressures, three stretch across the neutral zone, one defenceman anchors behind — less a forecheck than a wall                                                      |
| <b>Key</b>     | It takes away every long pass — the stretch is dead, the cross-ice over is dead, and anything through the middle of the neutral zone is dead                                          |
| <b>Mindset</b> | Lots of time and nowhere to go — the opposite problem to the 2-1-2, and it requires the opposite temperament                                                                          |
| <b>Action</b>  | Skate it out — one token forechecker cannot stop a defenceman carrying with speed, and making the puck-carrier a threat is what forces the wall to break shape                        |
| <b>Action</b>  | Use short passes up the wall and along the boards, not through the middle — the wall lanes are the softest part of the shape                                                          |
| <b>Options</b> | Chip-and-chase is not a defeat — against a genuine trap it is frequently the highest-value option, because forcing a pass into three players turns into an odd-man rush the other way |
| <b>Action</b>  | Attack the width — the 1-3-1 sacrifices lateral coverage to hold the middle, so quick side-to-side movement makes them slide, and sliding creates seams                               |

**One line:** one forward token-pressures, three stretch across the neutral zone, one defenceman anchors behind. Less a forecheck than a wall.

**What it takes away:** every long pass. The stretch is dead, the cross-ice over is dead, and anything through the middle of the neutral zone is dead.

### How to break it:

- **You will have lots of time and nowhere to go.** This is the opposite problem to the 2-1-2 and requires the opposite temperament.
- **Skate it out.** A 1-3-1 with one token forechecker cannot stop a defenceman carrying the puck with speed. Making the puck-carrier a threat is what forces the wall to break shape.
- **Use short passes up the wall and along the boards,** not through the middle. The wall lanes are the softest part of the shape.
- **Chip-and-chase is not a defeat.** Against a genuine trap, putting the puck behind them and racing for it is frequently the highest-value option available, because the alternative — forcing a pass into three players — turns into an odd-man rush the other way.
- **Attack the width.** The 1-3-1 sacrifices lateral coverage to hold the middle. Quick side-to-side movement makes them slide, and sliding creates seams.

## Against a full-ice press

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>     | All-out pressure, all five opponents pushing up, usually late and chasing a goal                                                                                              |
| <b>Key</b>      | A press by definition leaves space behind it — one clean pass through the first layer and you are attacking an outnumbered defence                                            |
| <b>Risk</b>     | A turnover under a press is an immediate high-danger chance                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Priority</b> | First layer first — don't hunt the killer stretch pass; beat the first forechecker with a short, safe play, and the space behind will still be there two seconds later        |
| <b>Options</b>  | Glass and out is completely defensible — take the icing if you have to, because an icing costs you a defensive-zone draw with no change and a press turnover costs you a goal |

**One line:** all-out pressure, all five opponents pushing up, usually late and chasing a goal.

### How to break it:

- **The reward is enormous.** A press by definition leaves space behind it. One clean pass through the first layer and you are attacking an outnumbered defence.
  - **The risk is equally enormous.** A turnover under a press is an immediate high-danger chance.
  - **First layer first.** Don't hunt the killer stretch pass. Beat the first forechecker with a short, safe play, and the space behind will still be there two seconds later.
  - **Glass and out is completely defensible.** Under a press, getting the puck the length of the ice away and forcing them to reset is a win. Take the icing if you have to — an icing costs you a defensive-zone draw with no change; a press turnover costs you a goal.
-

## 7. Breakouts from a Defensive-Zone Faceoff

|                   |                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | The moment after a defensive-zone draw is the most structured situation in hockey, and the single best opportunity for a genuine set play   |
| <b>Options</b>    | Off a won draw — the wheel off the faceoff, or its three variations: win-and-up, win-and-reverse, and the modified wheel                    |
| <b>Technique</b>  | Win-and-reverse works because the centre swings low behind the play after a draw rather than sprinting up ice                               |
| <b>Action</b>     | Decide the play before the puck drops — look at your winger, look at your partner, know what happens next                                   |
| <b>Priority</b>   | Off a lost draw your first job is defensive, not offensive — get to your coverage assignment immediately                                    |
| <b>Convention</b> | Under the house-default low zone collapse, wingers get to the points, because a lost defensive-zone draw usually goes back for a point shot |
| <b>Never</b>      | Chase as a group — that is exactly how the goal gets scored                                                                                 |
| <b>Read</b>       | Once you win it back, treat it as a quick-up — they have just committed to offence and their structure is at its weakest                    |

The moment after a defensive-zone draw is the most structured situation in hockey: everyone's feet are set, everyone knows where everyone is, and nothing is moving yet. It is the single best opportunity for a genuine **set play** — and the point at which your team's lack of one is most obvious.

**Alignment, draw technique and faceoff violations are in Faceoffs.** What follows is only the breakout that comes out of the draw. (The common defensive-zone setup: centre on the dot, one defenceman on the boards side and one in the slot, wingers on the hash marks — though which winger stands where varies by team.)

**Off a won draw**, the classic set play is a **wheel off the faceoff**: the centre pulls the puck back to the defenceman behind and to the side, who collects it and wheels behind the net while the far winger releases up the wall as the primary target and the centre curls low to support. Three variations worth knowing:

- **Win-and-up:** the centre wins it directly to the boards-side winger or defenceman for an immediate wall exit. Fastest, most contested.
- **Win-and-reverse:** wheel is called, the forecheck arrives instantly, and the defenceman reverses to the centre swinging low behind the play. This is why the centre swings low after a

draw rather than sprinting up ice.

- **The modified wheel:** the weak-side winger drives across the middle instead of up their own wall, dragging an opposing defenceman with them and opening the middle for the centre. Depends entirely on all five knowing it is on.

**The one thing that makes any of them work:** the play is decided *before* the puck drops. Look at your winger, look at your partner, know what happens next.

**Off a lost draw**, the opposition has possession in your zone with everyone set — the most dangerous routine situation in hockey. Your first job is **defensive, not offensive**: get to your coverage assignment immediately (man or zone depends on your system — see Defensive Zone Coverage). **Wingers get to the points**, because a lost defensive-zone draw usually goes back for a point shot and under the house-default low zone collapse closing it down is your job. **Do not chase as a group** — that is exactly how the goal gets scored. And once you win it back, treat it as a **quick-up**: they have just committed to offence and their structure is at its weakest.

---

## 8. Delayed Penalties and the 6-on-5 Breakout

### Breaking out under a delayed penalty

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>       | NHL Rule 15.1 — when a penalty is committed by a player of the team not in control of the puck, play stops when the team to be penalised gains control of the puck                                                                         |
| <b>Key</b>        | Control, not touch — control is "the act of propelling the puck with the stick, hand or feet"                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Key</b>        | Control is not lost when the puck is contacted by an opponent, the boards or the net                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Rule</b>       | The offending team cannot score unless the non-offending team shoots the puck into their own net (Rule 78.5(xi)); if you score, the minor penalty is wiped out entirely (Rule 15.2)                                                        |
| <b>Convention</b> | Pulling the goalie here is a coaching choice, not an automatic consequence of the arm going up — plenty of rec, beer-league and youth teams do not, and often should not                                                                   |
| <b>Rule</b>       | A goalie removed for an extra attacker in regular-season overtime must wait for the next stoppage and cannot change on the fly, or it is a bench minor for an ineligible player (NHL Rule 84.2)                                            |
| <b>Rule</b>       | That restriction is NHL-only — IIHF Rule 84.2 is one sentence permitting the pull — and in England and Scotland overtime is played only in NIHL, and SNL where its regulations provide (In-House Rules, Rule 84); see UK and England Rules |
| <b>Never</b>      | Clear the puck — a clear surrenders control and ends the advantage for nothing, and it is the most common delayed-penalty error in amateur hockey                                                                                          |
| <b>Action</b>     | Take the safe possession play every time — D-to-D behind the net, back to the point, hold it in the corner — and buy time for the goalie to reach the bench                                                                                |
| <b>Risk</b>       | The own-goal is the only way you can lose from here, so no blind passes back through your own crease with an empty net behind it                                                                                                           |

**The rule, verified:** under NHL Rule 15.1, when a penalty is committed by a player of the team **not in control of the puck**, the referee raises an arm to signal a delayed penalty; play stops **when the team to be penalised gains control of the puck**. Two crucial refinements:

- **Control, not touch.** The rulebook's glossary defines control of the puck as "the act of propelling the puck with the stick, hand or feet," and specifies that control is **not** lost when the puck is contacted by an opponent, the boards or the net, provided the player in control

keeps propelling it. A deflection off the offending team does not end the delayed penalty; possession does.

- **You cannot be scored on, with one exception.** Rule 78.5(xi): during the delayed calling of a penalty, the offending team cannot score **unless the non-offending team shoots the puck into their own net**. And Rule 15.2: if you *do* score, the minor penalty is wiped out entirely (majors and match penalties are still assessed).

**What that means for your breakout:** if your goalie comes off, you have a few seconds of free 6-on-5 with essentially zero defensive risk.

**Pulling the goalie here is a coaching choice, not an automatic consequence of the arm going up.** It is standard at NHL level and in good junior and senior hockey. **Plenty of rec, beer-league and youth teams do not do it**, and often should not: a goalie who is slow to the bench, a bench that is at the wrong end, or a team that cannot reliably keep the puck for four seconds all turn a free attacker into a live own-goal risk. If your team does not have a called procedure for this, the safe version is simply to keep the puck and let the whistle come.

**One rule trap if it is regular-season overtime.** NHL Rule 84.2: once the goalie has been removed for an extra attacker in regular-season overtime, "he must wait for the next stoppage of play before returning to his position. He cannot change 'on the fly.' If he does, a bench minor penalty shall be assessed for having an ineligible player." So a goalie who comes off on a delayed penalty in overtime and then tries to slip back in when the advantage evaporates has handed the other team a power play in sudden death.

**This trap is NHL-only, and in Britain it mostly does not arise.** The IIHF's own Rule 84.2 is a single sentence — "*A team shall be allowed to pull its goalkeeper in favor of an additional skater in the overtime period*" — with no restriction on the goalie's return. And the In-House Rules amend Rule 84 so that overtime "*is only played in NIHL fixtures and in SNL fixtures where specifically provided for in competition regulations*", so most games in England and Scotland simply end level. See UK and England Rules.

With the goalie off:

- **Do not clear the puck.** Ever. A clear surrenders control and ends the advantage for nothing. This is the most common delayed-penalty error in amateur hockey.
- **Take the safe possession play every time.** D-to-D behind the net, back to the point, hold it in the corner. The goal is to keep control until your sixth attacker is on the ice.
- **Buy time for the change.** Playing the puck back and even out of the attacking zone to let the goalie reach the bench and the extra attacker join is standard and correct.

- **Then attack.** Once you're set, you have a genuine 6-on-5 that cannot be punished. Get a shot on net; the worst outcome is a whistle and a power play.
- **The own-goal is real.** It is the only way you can lose from here — so no blind passes back through your own crease with an empty net behind it. NHL Rule 84.2 spells out the extreme case: in regular-season overtime, if your goalie is off for a delayed penalty and you shoot it into your own net, the game is over and the team that was about to be penalised wins.

## The 6-on-5 breakout with your goalie pulled

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mindset</b>  | A completely different problem to the delayed penalty, because now a mistake ends the game                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Rule</b>     | Icing still applies — with six skaters against five you are not shorthanded (Rule 81.1), so a clear from your own half that reaches the far goal line is icing and prevents your line changing (Rule 81.4) |
| <b>Key</b>      | What that removes is the long clear, not the glass clear — a glass clear is deliberately slow and wide, so it dies in the neutral zone and never reaches the far goal line                                 |
| <b>Action</b>   | Aim the glass clear to land in the neutral zone with a teammate skating onto it                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Priority</b> | Possession over speed — an empty net behind you means any turnover is a goal against, so the controlled exit is now the only correct exit                                                                  |
| <b>Action</b>   | Use the sixth attacker as a low outlet giving you a short, certain pass, not standing in front of their net                                                                                                |
| <b>Goal</b>     | Enter with control — after the effort of a 6-on-5 exit, a dump-in against a five-man box gives you nothing                                                                                                 |

Late in a game, chasing a goal, goalie on the bench. This is a completely different problem to the delayed penalty, because now a mistake ends the game.

- **Icing still applies.** Rule 81.1 applies icing to a team "equal or superior in numerical strength" — with six skaters against five you are not shorthanded, so a clear from your own half that reaches the far goal line is icing, brings the puck back to your own end, and **prevents your line changing** (Rule 81.4). In a 6-on-5 that is close to fatal.
- **What that removes is the long clear, not the glass clear.** A hard, high, length-of-ice dump is off the table. But **off the glass and out is still available**, exactly as described in section 3 — a glass clear is deliberately slow and wide, so it dies in the neutral zone and never reaches the far goal line, which is precisely why it rarely ices. The distinction is worth keeping straight: what you cannot afford at 6-on-5 is *distance*, not *the play*. Aim it to land in the neutral zone with a teammate skating onto it.



- **Prioritise possession over speed.** You must not turn it over — an empty net behind you means any turnover is a goal against. The controlled exit is now the *only* correct exit.
- **Use the extra body as a low outlet.** The sixth attacker is most useful giving you a short, certain pass, not standing in front of their net. Numbers below the puck are what let you exit cleanly against a team that has nothing to lose by pressing.
- **Enter with control.** After the effort of a 6-on-5 exit, a dump-in against a five-man box gives you nothing. See Zone Entries and Game Management.

## 9. Reading Pressure

Every choice in this document depends on one question: **how much time do I have?** Here is how to answer it.

### Reading it yourself

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Priority</b> | Every choice depends on one question — how much time do I have?                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Action</b>   | Look before you have the puck, not after; the shoulder check on the way back to a retrieval is the single highest-value habit for a defenceman                                                         |
| <b>Read</b>     | Count the forecheckers, not the pressure — one means options and probably time to wheel, two means the corners are gone and you are playing wall/reverse/rim, three deep means somebody up ice is free |
| <b>Read</b>     | Watch their feet, not their sticks — a forechecker gliding is containing you, a forechecker striding is committing                                                                                     |
| <b>Read</b>     | Know which way they are steering you; if you can feel yourself being funnelled, go the other way while the option exists                                                                               |
| <b>Key</b>      | Time is a two-second window, not a state — by the time you feel pressure the pass you wanted has usually already closed, so decide early                                                               |

- **Look before you have the puck, not after.** The check over your inside shoulder on the way back to a retrieval is the single highest-value habit for a defenceman. You cannot buy that information back once you're facing the boards.
- **Count the forecheckers, not the pressure.** One forechecker means you have options and probably time to wheel. Two means the corners are gone and you're playing

wall/reverse/rim. Three deep means somebody up ice is free — and also that you may have nothing low.

- **Watch their feet, not their sticks.** A forechecker gliding is containing you; a forechecker striding is committing. The first calls for a play up the wall or a carry; the second is what a reverse eats alive.
- **Know which way they're steering you.** Most forechecks want you on one specific side. If you can feel yourself being funnelled, that's the read — go the other way while the option exists.
- **Time is a two-second window, not a state.** By the time you feel pressure, the pass you wanted has usually already closed. Decide early.

## The goalie's role

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | Your goaltender is standing still, facing the play, with the clearest view of everything behind your defenceman's back — the most under-used information source in amateur hockey |
| <b>Convention</b> | Goalie vocabulary varies by team — agree yours in advance rather than assuming                                                                                                    |
| <b>Key</b>        | "Time" means nobody near you, turn and make a play; "man on" means pressure arriving now, do not turn into it                                                                     |
| <b>Key</b>        | "Up" means the wall lane is open; "wheel" means you have a step; "leave it" or "set" means a rim stopped and left stationary for you                                              |
| <b>Never</b>      | Use "over" without agreeing the sense — this list uses Sense B, go behind the net to your partner; if your team means cross-ice, your goalie must say "D" or "partner" instead    |
| <b>Never</b>      | Take a "man on" call with your back to the boards — skates parallel to the wall, forearm and hip, head up                                                                         |
| <b>Action</b>     | Calls must be early and loud — a call arriving as the forechecker does is worse than no call, because it makes the defenceman hesitate                                            |
| <b>Key</b>        | This is not only the goalie's job — D2, and the winger who can see the weak-side defenceman stepping down, both know things the puck-carrier does not                             |

Your goaltender is standing still, facing the play, with the clearest view on the ice of everything happening behind your defenceman's back. Under pressure, a defenceman is physically and mentally loaded; the goalie is calm. **This is the most under-used information source in amateur hockey.**

The standard goalie vocabulary — your team may vary it, and should agree it in advance.

**General call discipline and the full communication treatment are in On-Ice Communication; what follows is only the breakout set.**

- **"Time"** — nobody near you, turn and make a play.
- **"Man on"** — pressure arriving now; do not turn into it. Some teams add a side: "man on, left". **And never take it with your back to the boards** — skates parallel to the wall, forearm and hip, head up (Body Contact and Battles).
- **"Reverse"** — the forechecker has over-committed past you; the space behind is open.
- **"Up"** — the wall lane is open, hit the winger.
- **"Over"** — **this list uses "over" in Sense B: go behind the net to your partner (D-to-D)**. That is the goalie-call convention and it is the *opposite* risk profile to the cross-ice "over" in section 3. If your team uses "over" to mean cross-ice, your goalie must use a different word here — "D" or "partner" — or someone will eventually throw a puck across their own slot because the goalie shouted it.
- **"Wheel"** — you have a step, take it around.
- **"Leave it" or "set"** — the goalie has stopped a rim behind the net and left it stationary for you. Some coaches prefer "leave" because its sound is harder to confuse with "up" and "over"; two-syllable calls survive a noisy rink better.

**Calls must be early and loud.** A call arriving as the forechecker does is worse than no call, because it makes the defenceman hesitate. And this is not only the goalie's job: D2, and the winger who can see the weak-side defenceman stepping down, both know things the puck-carrier does not.

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## 10. The Trapezoid and Retrieval

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>       | The goaltender may play the puck behind the goal line only inside the marked trapezoid; outside it is a two-minute minor for delay of game, and "the determining factor shall be the position of the puck" (NHL Rules 27.8 and 63.2(viii))    |
| <b>Rule</b>       | Exactly one exception, the NOTE to 63.2(viii) — no minor is assessed "when a goalkeeper plays the puck while maintaining skate contact with his goal crease"; there is no teammate-based exception                                            |
| <b>Never</b>      | Take the geometry from Rule 27.8 — its six-foot figure is stale, describing the pre-2014 trapezoid; Rule 1.8 describes the lines actually painted                                                                                             |
| <b>Rule</b>       | Applies in the NHL, the KHL and under the IIHF book (IIHF Rule 27.7); in England and Wales the status is unsettled — England Ice Hockey's Rules & Regulations 22.3 say it is "not currently enforced", so assume it binds and ask your league |
| <b>Convention</b> | Most rec, beer-league and youth associations do not use it, so check whether the lines are painted behind your net                                                                                                                            |

This rule reshapes the entire retrieval game, and it is the reason rim targeting is a skill rather than a shrug.

**The rule, verified.** The goaltender may play the puck behind the goal line only inside the marked **trapezoid**, and doing it outside that area is a **two-minute minor for delay of game (Rules 27.8 and 63.2(viii))** — 63.2(viii) is the one that assesses it: "*On a goalkeeper who plays the puck outside of the designated area behind the net. The determining factor shall be the position of the puck.*"). **Use Rule 1.8 for the geometry, never 27.8:** the lines begin **eight feet from each goal post** at the goal line and widen to **eleven feet from each post — 28 feet apart — at the end boards**. There is exactly **one** exception, and it is the NOTE to 63.2(viii): "*The minor penalty will not be assessed when a goalkeeper plays the puck while maintaining skate contact with his goal crease.*" There is no teammate-based exception.

*(The two rules give different near dimensions, and 27.8 is simply the older one — it is stale, not self-contradictory. Rule 27.8, which defines the penalty, still reads "six feet from either goal post" — wording left over from before the trapezoid was widened by two feet each side in 2014. Rule 1.8 describes the lines actually painted on the ice, and its eleven-feet-from-post figure is what produces the 28-foot span both rules agree on. Trust Rule 1.8. Handled the same way in Defender and Forechecking Systems.)*

**Where it applies:** the **NHL** (since 2005-06), the **KHL**, and **IIHF play** (since the unified 2021-22 rulebook). **That is not only international hockey — IIHF Rule 27.7** carries the same rule in

the same terms ("A goalkeeper shall not play the puck outside of the designated area behind the net... The determining factor shall be the position of the puck", with the same skate-contact-with-the-crease exception), and the IIHF book is the book British hockey runs on — the In-House Rules adopt it for EIHL, SIHL and BUIHL fixtures, and the corpus reads the Elite League the same way, though its Casebook is unread here. The 2025-26 In-House Rules do not amend the IIHF book on this point. **In England and Wales, though, treat the status as unsettled rather than settled:** England Ice Hockey's own *Rules & Regulations* 22.3 say the restricted area is "*not currently enforced to allow ice rinks the necessary time to make the changes to implement this rule*" — that edition is 2024-25, and the current In-House Rules are silent on it, so the published documents do not resolve whether the suspension still stands. Assume it binds, and ask your league. Most rec, beer-league and youth associations elsewhere do **not** use it — and in Britain the practical question may be the rink rather than the rule, so check whether the lines are actually painted behind your net. UK and England Rules records the same uncertainty.

## What it does to your breakout

|                |                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Never</b>   | Aim a rim straight into the corner — your goalie legally cannot go and get it, so a defenceman has to, under pressure, with his back to the forecheck                        |
| <b>Options</b> | Hard and all the way around, arriving where your winger can meet it in stride — good                                                                                         |
| <b>Options</b> | Tight and short, staying close enough behind the net that your goalie can legally stop it inside the trapezoid and leave it for you — good                                   |
| <b>Risk</b>    | Medium, dying in the corner outside the trapezoid — bad, because nobody can get it safely and the forecheck arrives first                                                    |
| <b>Action</b>  | Agree in advance which of the two good ones you want                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Key</b>     | If your league has no trapezoid your goalie becomes a genuine third puck-handler — they can stop rims anywhere, make the D-to-D for you, and act as an extra breakout option |

The retrieval technique itself is spread across several documents rather than held in one place: Defender covers planning the retrieval route and which way to pivot, Scanning and Anticipation covers the shoulder checks that have to happen before the puck arrives, Skating covers the cutback and lateral escapes off the wall, and Body Contact and Battles covers what happens when a forechecker gets there with you. The goalie's side is in Goaltender. What the rule changes is **where you aim a rim:**

- **Your goalie legally cannot go and get a rim that dies in the corner.** A defenceman has to, under pressure, back to the forecheck — the exact situation that produces turnovers

behind your own net. So a rim aimed straight into the corner is a gift to the forecheck, not because the play is bad but because of who has to retrieve it.

- **Two acceptable rims, one bad one. Hard and all the way around**, arriving where your winger can meet it in stride — good. **Tight and short**, staying close enough behind the net that your goalie can legally stop it inside the trapezoid and leave it for you — good. **Medium, dying in the corner outside the trapezoid** — bad, because nobody can get it safely and the forecheck arrives first. *Agree in advance which of the two good ones you want.*
- **If your league has no trapezoid, your game changes completely.** Your goalie becomes a genuine third puck-handler: they can stop rims anywhere, make the D-to-D for you, and act as an extra breakout option. Find out which rules you are under — it changes what a rim is *for*.

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## Common Mistakes

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Errors the body above does not cover — the ones that survive knowing the system.

- **Sliding across to "screen" for the wheel.** Standing in front of the net and holding the ice you already occupy is legal and useful. **Moving laterally into a forechecker's path is interference** (Rule 56.1) and will cost you two minutes at the exact moment your partner had beaten the forecheck. Get there early or do not do it.
- **Saying "onside means both skates over the line."** That is the definition of *offside*, and players repeat it back inverted every season. **One skate touching the line or behind it keeps you onside.** Say it that way round or you will hesitate on a stretch pass you were entitled to take.
- **Using the word "over" without knowing which "over" your team means.** Cross-ice over is the riskiest play in the document; D-to-D over is one of the safest, and goalie call sheets usually mean the second. Two players with different definitions of one word is a puck through your own slot.
- **Assuming a glass clear is unavailable at 6-on-5.** It is the *length-of-ice* clear that is off the table, because icing applies. A glass clear that dies in the neutral zone cannot be icing and remains a legitimate safety valve.
- **Waiting for a defender to touch the puck before believing it is icing.** Hybrid icing is decided on who would have reached **the puck** first, and the linesperson must call it by the instant the first player's skate reaches the **end-zone faceoff dot** — the dot is the deadline,

not the finish line. A race too close to call at that moment goes to icing. Your clear was iced long before anyone reached the puck.

- **Assuming the goalie automatically comes off on a delayed penalty.** It is a coaching choice, and in rec and youth hockey often the wrong one. Know your team's procedure; if there isn't one, just keep the puck.
- **Pulling the goalie on a delayed penalty in regular-season overtime and then sneaking them back on the fly.** NHL Rule 84.2 makes that a bench minor in sudden death. **This one is NHL-only** — the IIHF's 84.2 imposes no such restriction, and in England and Scotland overtime is played only in NIHL and in SNL where its regulations provide for it.
- **Confusing holding the line with pinching** when talking about how your glass clear got killed. Holding is staying at the blue line; pinching is stepping down inside it. They carry very different consequences when they fail.
- **Quoting Rule 27.8's six feet for the trapezoid.** The painted lines are Rule 1.8's — eight feet from each post at the goal line. Rule 27.8's six feet is not an error in arithmetic; it is an accurate description of the *pre-2014* trapezoid that was never updated.
- **Five players running five different plays.** Not a skill failure. A communication failure, and the root cause of most of the above.

## Key Takeaways

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1. **A controlled exit is worth roughly four times what a dump-out is.** Tracked NHL data puts controlled exits at about 89% follow-on entries versus about 20% for unrecovered dump-outs. Default to possession; clear on a read, not on reflex.
2. **Five roles exist on every breakout** — retriever D, support D, strong-side winger, weak-side winger, centre. Know which is yours before the puck is retrieved.
3. **Never move the puck through your own slot** — not D-to-D, not carrying, not cross-ice unless the read is unmistakable. Behind the net is the safe route across.
4. **Rim beats a forechecker sealing you on the wall; reverse beats one who has over-committed past you.** Reading which you're facing is the core defenceman skill.
5. **Wingers, in the conventional swing breakout: you start high on the point and come down the wall as the exit begins — don't camp at either end.** Cover the opposing defenceman while they have the puck; drop to between the hash marks and the goal line as your team wins it. Time your arrival, be a little late rather than early, take a step off the boards, and receive with your body open to the ice. **This is a system, not a law** — a flat/spread structure holds you higher toward the blue line, and a stretch or flying-winger structure sends one winger up ice entirely. Ask which you play.

6. **Centres, in that same swing structure: stay low, inside the dots and below the hash marks, and leave with speed.** The strong-side circle, not the wall — the wall is the winger's. A high centre removes the option the structure depends on. **The alternative is the centre fly**, and it is equally legitimate; what is never legitimate is flying while your wingers hold high, because then nobody supports the puck at all. **Everything in points 5 and 6 is a coaching choice. Find out which breakout your team runs before you commit to a spot on the ice.**
  7. **Read the forecheck before you pick the play.** A 1-2-2 gives you time and takes the middle; a 2-1-2 takes your time and gives you space behind; a 1-3-1 kills every long pass and can be skated through.
  8. **The goalie has the best view on the ice.** "Time", "man on", "reverse", "up" — early and loud. Agree what each word means before the game, and above all agree which "over" you mean: cross-ice, or D-to-D behind the net.
  9. **Under a delayed penalty you cannot be scored on except by your own hand — so never clear it.** Pulling the goalie there is a coaching choice, not automatic, and in NHL regular-season overtime that goalie cannot come back on the fly (NHL Rule 84.2 — a restriction the IIHF book does not carry). At 6-on-5 with your net empty, icing still applies, so the long clear is gone — though a glass clear dying in the neutral zone still is not icing.
  10. **The trapezoid means a rim that dies in the corner is your problem, not your goalie's.** Rim hard all the way around, or tight enough to leave it behind the net. Never in between. Use Rule 1.8's geometry — eight feet from each post, widening to 28 feet apart at the boards — not Rule 27.8's stale six.
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# Zone Entries

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**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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Rules Primer

UK and England Rules

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Offensive Zone Play

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## Overview

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A **zone entry** is the moment your team brings the puck across the opponent's blue line into the **attacking zone** (the third of the ice containing the goal you are shooting at). The line itself is only twelve inches wide — but the last twenty feet of ice in front of it is where most attacks die.

This document is about getting in and staying in. It covers what the research says the entry is worth, the offside rule in enough detail that you can attack the line harder than someone who only half-knows it, the ways to carry the puck in, the ways to put it in without possession, how to decide between them, and how the other team stops you.

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## 1. Why entries decide games

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### The finding

The reference work is Eric Tulskey, Geoffrey Detweiler, Robert Spencer and Corey Sznajder, *Using Zone Entry Data To Separate Offensive, Neutral, And Defensive Zone Performance*, presented at the 2013 MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference. They hand-tracked 330 NHL games from the 2011-12 season, recording every time the puck went into the attacking zone and how.

Their headline result, in their own words: "*carrying the puck across the blue line generates more than twice as many shots, scoring chances, and goals as dumping the puck in.*"

The 5-on-5 numbers, per entry (each cell in their Table 1 is based on at least 3,000 entries):

|                        | Shots per entry | Goals per entry |
|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Puck <b>carried</b> in | 0.53 – 0.62     | 0.027 – 0.039   |
| Puck <b>dumped</b> in  | 0.22 – 0.28     | 0.010 – 0.018   |

**What "shots" means here.** Not shots on goal. Tulskey's group extracted from the play-by-play *"the number of shots (including those that miss the net) and goals produced in each offensive zone possession"* — so these are **unblocked shot attempts** (shots on goal plus misses, i.e. Fenwick events). Do not compare 0.53–0.62 shots per carry-in against a shots-on-goal rate.

The ranges are across the nine rows of their Table 1 — eight team data sets (Philadelphia, Minnesota, Washington and Buffalo, entries for and against) plus a "rest of league" row. The 0.62 upper bound for shots per carry-in comes from that rest-of-league row, not from any individual team's data set. Every single row showed carrying in as more than twice as productive as dumping in.

### The part everyone gets wrong

The standard objection is: *yes, but a failed carry-in is a turnover at the blue line, and a turnover at the blue line is a rush the other way*. Tulskey's group tested exactly that, tracking failed entry attempts in their Washington sample and following what happened on the **next** entry either team got. Their Table 3, in net expected shots:

| Entry type                            | Shots for on this entry | Net value overall |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Successful carry                      | 0.55                    | <b>+0.50</b>      |
| <b>Failed</b> carry                   | 0.00                    | <b>–0.08</b>      |
| Carry attempt (all attempts averaged) | 0.48                    | <b>+0.42</b>      |
| Dump-and-chase                        | 0.24                    | <b>+0.12</b>      |
| Dump-and-change                       | 0.02                    | <b>–0.10</b>      |

Read that failed-carry row carefully. A blown carry-in cost about **eight hundredths of a shot** on net. It is not free — but it is nowhere near the disaster the folklore says, and it was *cheaper* than dumping the puck in and changing lines. In their sample only **14% of carry attempts** ended in a turnover at all.

Because the downside is small, the break-even point is low. Tulskey's group calculated that with equal teams you only need to be **34% confident** of completing the carry for attempting it to beat dumping it in. If your line is better than the one you are facing — they modelled a team expecting to shoot 9% while allowing 7% — that threshold falls to **26%**. If you are the weaker team it rises to **44%**, which is the honest, data-backed version of "just put it in deep and go to work."

Their conclusion: *"It is likely that players give up the puck far too easily at the blue line."*

## Corroboration

The finding has held up across other data sets. Note that these are figures reported second-hand by analysts summarising their own tracking, not peer-reviewed papers, and not all of the underlying tracking is published:

- **Corey Sznajder**, tracking 2014-16, reported roughly **0.66 shots per carry-in** against **0.29 per dump-in**.
- **Thibaud Chatel**, 2022, reported **47%** of controlled entry attempts led to a shot against **18%** of dump-ins, excluding dump-and-change.
- **PWHPA data (via Sportlogiq)** — from a July 2022 article describing "this last year's PWHPA Secret Dream Gap Tour", so **probably the 2021-22 season, though the source does not say so** — showed the same shape in women's professional hockey: carry-ins **0.73** shots per entry, pass-ins **0.54**, chip-ins **0.21**, dump-ins **0.14** at even strength.

Different trackers, different leagues, different eras, same answer.

## What this actually means for you

- **Possession in is worth roughly double.** Not marginally better. Double.
- **The cost of trying and failing is smaller than it feels**, because it feels dramatic when it goes wrong and invisible when it works.
- **Dumping and changing is the worst play on the board** — it was the only entry type in the study with a worse net value than a failed carry. If you are tired, that is a reason to have changed twenty seconds ago, not a reason to fire the puck away.
- **This is a probability argument, not a licence.** One-third confidence means you should also be putting it in deep a lot of the time. The point is that the bar is much lower than most players behave as if it is.

See Risk Management for how this thinking generalises.

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## 2. The offside rule as a tactical tool

Most players know offside as a thing that gets whistled against them. Learn the exact wording and it becomes a thing you use.

**Rules Primer owns Rule 83** — the full statement, the delayed-offside procedure, the disallowed goal, the faceoff locations and the differences between the three rulebooks. This document owns one thing: the **trail-skate drag** as a technique. Four clauses are what make that technique work, so they are set out here; for anything beyond them, go to the primer.

**If you play in Britain, read the IIHF flags below as your own.** Every level of the game here — the Elite League, the NIHL, the recreational and junior game, university hockey — runs the IIHF Rule Book, and its Rule 83 is the one that will be applied to you. One local amendment touches this rule and is worth knowing: because **on-ice video review is not available in EIH or SIHA competition**, a **Coach's Challenge is not permitted** either (In-House Rules, Rules 37 and 38, amending IIHF Rule 38 and therefore Rule 83.5). A missed offside on the ice is the end of the matter; nobody is going upstairs to wipe a goal off the board twenty seconds later. See UK and England Rules.

### The four clauses the technique rests on

- Rule** You are off-side only when both skates are completely over the leading edge of the blue line (NHL Rule 83; IIHF Rule 83.1 word-for-word)
- Rule** One skate in contact with the line, or on your own side of it, keeps you onside at the instant the puck completely crosses (NHL Rule 83; IIHF Rule 83.1)
- Rule** The whole width of the painted blue line counts as "the line" — a skate touching any of it is onside (NHL Rule 1.5)
- Rule** Your own side of the line is a vertical plane — a skate lifted and held back over the neutral zone is onside (NHL Rule 83; IIHF Rule 83.1, in the same words)
- Rule** For 2025-26 a "skate" is the blade only, so an overhanging boot is irrelevant (NHL Rule 83) — the IIHF book carries no equivalent definition
- Rule** Under USA Hockey Rule 630(a) an airborne trail skate is offside — the blade must have contact
- Rule** British hockey runs the IIHF book at every level, so the IIHF wording here is the rule you play under — see UK and England Rules

Quoted from **NHL Rule 83** in the *NHL Official Rules 2025-2026*:

- **"A player is off-side when both skates are completely over the leading edge of the blue line involved in the play."** Both. Not one. Conversely, *"a player is on-side when either of his skates are in contact with the blue line, or on his own side of the line, at the instant the puck completely crosses the leading edge of the blue line."*
- The **leading edge** is the near edge of the blue line as you approach it. The line is painted **twelve inches wide** (Rule 1.5), and that whole foot of paint counts as "the line" — a skate touching any of it is onside.
- **Your own side of the line is a vertical plane** rising from the leading edge. *"If a player's skate has yet to break the plane prior to the puck completely crossing the leading edge, he is deemed to be on-side for the purpose of the off-side rule."* A skate lifted in the air, held back over the neutral zone, is onside.
- For 2025-26 the NHL clarified that **"a 'skate' is to be considered the blade of the skate only."** Your boot overhanging the line is irrelevant; the blade is what is judged. **This sentence is an NHL clarification and has no counterpart in the IIHF book**, which says only "skates" — so treat the blade-only reading as certain in the NHL and as the sensible expectation, not a quoted guarantee, elsewhere.

**The first three clauses are the IIHF's own words, not a borrowing.** IIHF Rule 83.1 reads: *"A Player is 'off-side' when both skates are completely over the leading edge of the blue line involved in the play. A Player is on-side when either of their skates are in contact with the blue line, or on their 'own side' of the line, at the instant the puck completely crosses the leading edge of the blue line. On their 'own side' of the line shall be defined by a 'plane' of the blue line which shall extend from the leading edge of the blue line upwards. If a Player's skate has yet to 'break the plane' prior to the puck completely crossing the leading edge, they are deemed to be 'on-side'."* **If you play anywhere in Britain, that is your rule** — the In-House Rules make no amendment to Rule 83.

**⚠ The third clause is NHL and IIHF, and USA Hockey reverses it.** Under **USA Hockey Rule 630(a)** a player is offside when they do *"not have skate contact with any part of the Neutral Zone or the blue line when the puck crosses the determining edge of the blue line"*, and the Note confirms that *"a player only needs to have skate contact with one skate with the blue line to be considered 'onside'."* So an airborne trail skate is **onside under the NHL and the IIHF — and therefore in Britain — and offside under USA Hockey**, where most North American rec and youth hockey is played. This changes step 2 below. It is the single most important rule-set difference in this document.

## The trail-skate drag

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | Far-side winger flying at the line, a stride ahead of a carrier about to put the puck over                                                                                                       |
| <b>Technique</b> | Attack the line at full speed with your inside foot leading                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Technique</b> | Stop pushing with the trail leg and let that blade glide so it stays touching the paint                                                                                                          |
| <b>Action</b>    | Keep your body, hands and stick already in the zone — only the trail blade is holding you onside                                                                                                 |
| <b>Action</b>    | The instant the puck completely crosses, put that blade down and push                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Key</b>       | The judgement is made at one instant — time your glide to it, don't glide for two seconds                                                                                                        |
| <b>Rule</b>      | Lifting the trail skate is legal under the NHL and under the IIHF book, so it is legal in Britain (IIHF Rule 83.1) — USA Hockey Rule 630(a) requires skate contact, so keep the blade down there |

This is the single most useful piece of applied rules knowledge for a forward, and it comes straight out of the wording above.

You are the far-side winger. You are flying. The puck carrier is a stride behind you and about to put the puck over the line. If you simply skate, both blades cross, the puck crosses second, and the linesman's arm goes up.

Instead:

1. Attack the line at full speed with your **inside foot leading**.
2. As you reach it, **stop pushing with the trail leg** and let that blade glide so it stays touching the paint — or, **under NHL and IIHF rules**, lift it and hold it back over the neutral zone without breaking the plane. **In Britain that lift is legal**, because the IIHF book is the one in force at every level here (IIHF Rule 83.1). **Under USA Hockey the blade must stay in contact** (Rule 630(a)), so keep it on the paint.
3. Keep your **body, hands and stick already in the zone**. Only the trail blade is holding you onside.
4. The instant the puck completely crosses, **put that blade down and push**.

You have arrived at the line at top speed, you have your stick in the zone ready to receive, and you are legal. A player who does not know the rule has to slow down and check their feet. You do not.

Three details that separate people who *sort of* know this from people who use it:

- The judgement is made at **one instant** — the moment the puck fully crosses. Before that instant nothing you do matters; after it, nothing you did matters. So the skill is timing your glide to that instant, not gliding for two seconds.
- Because only the **blade** counts, you can be leaning most of your body over the line. Aggressive body position is free.
- **Which rule book you are under changes step 2.** Gliding the blade along the paint is legal everywhere. *Lifting* the trail skate is legal under the **NHL and the IIHF** — and since British hockey runs the IIHF book at every level, it is legal here. **USA Hockey Rule 630(a)** requires "*skate contact with any part of the Neutral Zone or the blue line*", so a raised trail skate is offside there. Most North American rec and youth hockey runs on USA Hockey rules; if that is you, keep the blade down.

## Delayed offside and tagging up — three consequences for the entry

|               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>   | On a delayed offside the linesman raises a non-whistle arm and play continues (NHL Rule 83.3; IIHF Rule 83.3 in the same terms)                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Under USA Hockey Rule 630(d) delayed offside and tag-up exist only at Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult — below that the whistle is immediate                                                                                            |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Tagging up needs actual skate contact with the line; the vertical plane does not apply — "'3D' judgement is not used in this situation" (IIHF Rule 83.3(I), the wording British hockey plays under; NHL 83.3(i) says "skate contact with the blue line" without the gloss) |
| <b>Action</b> | Get everybody out at once — one straggler keeps the arm up, so shout it                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Never</b>  | Forecheck during a delayed offside — touching the puck, going for a loose puck, forcing the carrier deeper, or being about to hit him all stop play                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Action</b> | Retreat to the line, tag up, come again                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

A **delayed offside** is what happens when attackers precede the puck but the defending team can bring it out without interference: the linesman raises a non-whistle arm and play continues (Rule 83.3). **The IIHF's 83.3 is the same rule in the same order** — the arm comes down when "*All Players of the offending team clear the zone at the same instant (skate contact with the blue line, '3D' judgement is not used in this situation)*" or when "*the defending team passes or carries the puck into the neutral zone*" — so this whole subsection describes the British game as written. Rules Primer has the full procedure — what nullifies the arm, what turns it into a whistle, and the IIHF wording on clearing. Three things change what you do at the line:

-  **First, check that you have a delayed offside at all.** Under **USA Hockey Rule 630(d)** the delayed offside and the tag-up exist only "*(For all Youth 15-Only levels and above, all Girls 16U levels and above, High School and Adult classifications **only**)*". Below those levels there is no raised arm and no recovery — the whistle goes the moment you precede the puck in. Most North American minor hockey sits below that line, so for a lot of readers this whole subsection describes a rule they do not have, and the entry simply has to be right first time.
- **Tagging up needs actual skate contact with the line.** The vertical plane above does not apply here — the IIHF text says so in terms, "*3D' judgement is not used in this situation*" (Rule 83.3(I)). **That is the British rule book being explicit about it**, and it is the sharper wording of the two: NHL 83.3(i) says only "*(skate contact with the blue line)*" and leaves the rest to interpretation. Either way, the airborne trail skate that keeps you onside on the entry does **not** clear you on a delayed offside. Touch the paint.
- **Everybody has to be out at once.** One straggler keeps the arm up. This is a communication job — see On-Ice Communication. Shout it.
- **Forechecking during a delayed offside is not a grey area — it is a whistle.** Touching the puck, trying to gain possession of a loose puck, forcing the defending carrier deeper into his own zone, or being about to make contact with him all stop play. Retreat to the line, tag up, come again.

## The territorial asymmetry — why the safe play isn't

- Rule** A botched carry-in draws only to the neutral-zone spot outside the blue line (NHL Rule 83.6; IIHF Rule 83.6(I) the same)
- Rule** A botched dump-in or stretch pass draws back at the spot the shot or pass came from, which can be your own end (NHL Rule 83.6; IIHF Rule 83.6(II) the same)
- Rule** A shot that creates a delayed offside and then goes in is a disallowed goal, whether or not you cleared the zone first (NHL Rule 83.4; IIHF Rule 83.4 word-for-word)
- Key** Under pressure at the line, failing to carry costs you less than failing to dump

A botched **carry-in** is punished lightly: the draw goes to the neutral-zone spot outside the blue line and you barely lose anything. A botched **dump-in or stretch pass** is punished back **at the spot the shot or pass came from**, which can be your own end (Rule 83.6). And a shot that creates a delayed offside and then goes in is a **disallowed goal** whether or not you cleared the zone first (Rule 83.4). Both rules are set out in full in Rules Primer. **Both read the same way in the IIHF book** — 83.6 gives the same four faceoff locations in the same order, and 83.4 is word-



for-word with the NHL, including *"The fact that the attacking team may have 'cleared the zone' prior to the puck entering the goal has no bearing on this ruling."*

The entry consequence is the one worth carrying: under pressure at the line, **failing to carry costs you less than failing to dump**. That asymmetry runs the same direction as the shot-rate evidence in section 1, and it is worth remembering the next time the safe play looks safe.

### 3. Carry-in entries

A **carry-in** (also called a controlled entry) is any entry where your team has the puck on a stick as it crosses. A **pass-in** — a completed pass across the line to a teammate — counts as controlled too, but it is not equivalent. In the PWHPA data cited above, pass-ins produced **0.54** shots per entry at even strength against **0.73** for carry-ins: still far better than any uncontrolled entry, but about a quarter less productive than carrying it in yourself. Pass-ins only draw level with carries **on the power play** (0.96 against 0.91).

#### Attack the outside shoulder

|                     |                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>         | The defender's weakest moment is the pivot — turning from backwards to forwards, or opening their hips to one side                               |
| <b>Action</b>       | Aim at the outside shoulder, the one nearest the boards on your side, with pace and your eyes up                                                 |
| <b>Read</b>         | The moment their hips open outward the inside lane is available — cut back into the middle, slip it between their feet, or hit the middle driver |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A defender who refuses to open and stays square — then you have the outside lane for real, so take it and get to the goal line                   |
| <b>Key</b>          | You are not trying to beat them, you are trying to make them commit                                                                              |

The defender's job is to stay between you and the middle of the ice. Their weakest moment is the **pivot** — the instant they turn from skating backwards to skating forwards, or open their hips to one side.

Aim at the **outside shoulder** of the defender: the shoulder nearest the boards on your side. Do it with pace and with your eyes up. You are threatening the outside lane, which is the lane they are least worried about but most physically awkward to defend, because covering it means opening their hips toward the boards.

The moment their hips open outward, the **inside lane is available** — that is when you cut back into the middle, or slip the puck between their feet, or hit the middle driver. If they refuse to open and stay square, you have the outside lane for real: take it and get to the goal line.

The principle underneath: **you are not trying to beat them, you are trying to make them commit.** A defender who has committed to one lane cannot defend the other.

## Attack the space between two defenders, not one of them

- Action** Skate at the seam between two defenders — the two defencemen, or a defenceman and a backchecking forward
- Never** Skate directly at a defender — you have handed them an easy job, because they only have to deal with you
- Action** On a 3-on-2, the middle attacker drives the space between the two defencemen, not either one
- Action** On a 2-on-1 wide, angle your route so the single defender is forced to choose between you and your partner
- Read** The moment two defenders both think the other one has it — a fraction of a second long, and where entries are won

This is the most important idea in this section.

Skate directly at a defender and you have handed them an easy job: they only have to deal with you. Skate at the **seam between two defenders** — between the two defencemen, or between a defenceman and a backchecking forward — and you have created a problem neither of them owns. Both have to decide whether to step or hold. Whichever one steps opens the space they were covering.

Practically: on a 3-on-2, the middle attacker should drive at the **space between the two defencemen**, not at either one. On a 2-on-1 wide, angle your route so the single defender is forced to choose between you and your partner rather than being able to face both.

You are looking for the moment two defenders both think the other one has it. That moment is a fraction of a second long and it is where entries are won.

## The wide entry

|                |                                                                                                              |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>  | Take the puck down the boards outside the defenceman and get to the goal line or below it                    |
| <b>Goal</b>    | Make the defender turn and skate — every stride toward the boards is a stride away from the front of the net |
| <b>Targets</b> | A support player driving the net, plus a third player high for the back-door or point option                 |
| <b>Risk</b>    | Going wide with nobody behind you is not an attack — it is a slow dump-in with extra steps                   |

Take the puck down the boards outside the defenceman and get to the goal line or below it.

- **Why it works:** the defender must turn and skate, and every stride they take toward the boards is a stride away from the front of the net.
- **What you need:** a support player driving the net so that when you reach the goal line you have somewhere to put it, and a third player high for the back-door or point option.
- **When it fails:** when you go wide with nobody behind you. Then you are alone below the goal line with three defenders between you and the net, which is not an attack, it is a slow dump-in with extra steps.

## The middle drive

|                 |                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b> | A teammate without the puck, skating hard through the seam between the defencemen, at the net                          |
| <b>Goal</b>     | Freeze the defencemen so they cannot step up on the carrier — one route, at speed, buys the carrier several extra feet |
| <b>Key</b>      | The middle driver usually does not get the puck, and that is not the point                                             |
| <b>Never</b>    | Drive half-heartedly — that is a player standing in the slot, which frees the defence rather than freezing it          |

A **middle drive** is a teammate without the puck skating hard through the middle of the ice, through the seam between the defencemen, at the net.

The middle driver usually does not get the puck. That is not the point. The point is that a defenceman who ignores a player skating at their net will get scored on, so they cannot ignore

them — which means they cannot step up on the puck carrier either. One player, running one route, at speed, buys the carrier several extra feet of space.

Middle drives only work if they are **committed**. A half-hearted middle drive is a player standing in the slot, which frees the defence rather than freezing it.

## Using a teammate as a screen

- Action** Cross with a teammate near the line so the defender tracking the carrier has to go around them
- Key** Skate your own route to the net and let the defender's chosen path be the one that gets tangled
- Never** Stop, stand, or step into a defender to make the pick — deliberately body-blocking a non-carrier is interference
- Read** Officials at every level judge it on whether you were going somewhere

Two attackers crossing near the line can be used so that the second one runs interference — the defender tracking the carrier ends up having to go around your teammate.

**Be careful with this one.** Deliberately body-blocking a defender who is not the puck carrier is **interference**. What is legal is skating your own route to the net and letting the defender's chosen path be the one that gets tangled. What is not legal is stopping, standing, or stepping into them to make the pick. The distinction is whether you are playing hockey or setting a screen; officials at every level judge it on whether you were going somewhere. See Body Contact and Battles.

## One thing that is not a rule

- Convention** Crossing patterns, who takes the wide lane, whether the centre or a winger carries — all coaching choice, and it varies enormously
- Options** Some teams demand strict lane discipline (left wing stays left); some are built entirely on crossing and swinging
- Options** Some want the best puck carrier on the ice touching every entry
- Action** Ask your coach what your team wants before you decide you know

Crossing patterns, who takes the wide lane, whether the centre or a winger carries — all of this is **coaching choice**, and it varies enormously. Some teams demand strict lane discipline (left wing

stays left). Some are built entirely on crossing and swinging. Some want the best puck carrier on the ice touching every entry. Ask your coach what your team wants before you decide you know.

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## 4. Speed and timing

---

### The puck carrier should be the last to the line

- Position** As the carrier, reach the line half a stride to a full stride behind your wingers
- Position** As a winger, be at the line, at speed, onside, before the puck gets there
- Goal** Make the defence respect three threats at once, so the carrier arrives into a picture already pulled apart
- Risk** If the carrier arrives first the supports are behind the play, and the defence collapses on one player

This is the timing principle that makes entries work. If the carrier arrives first, the supports are behind the play and the defence can collapse on one player. If the supports arrive first and the carrier arrives a beat later, the defence has to respect three threats at once and the carrier arrives into a picture that has already been pulled apart.

Concretely: as the carrier, you want to reach the line **half a stride to a full stride behind** your wingers. As a winger, you want to be **at the line, at speed, onside, before the puck gets there** — which is exactly what the trail-skate drag above is for.

### Arriving with speed is not the same as arriving early

- Goal** Have your acceleration peak as the puck crosses the line
- Action** Be slower thirty feet out so you can be faster at the line
- Never** Arrive early and wait — standing still is easy to cover, and curling away loses your route
- Key** Self-check — slowed down after crossing means you were early; crossing while accelerating into open ice means you were on time

Arriving early means you get to the line and then have to wait. Waiting at the line means either standing still — useless, because a stationary player is easy to cover — or curling away and losing

your route.

Arriving with speed means your acceleration peaks **as** the puck crosses. To do that you often need to be *slower* thirty feet out so you can be faster at the line. This is counter-intuitive and it is the difference between a forward who looks fast and a forward who is dangerous. See Skating for how to build the change of pace, and Time and Space for the general principle.

A useful self-check: if you crossed the line and then had to slow down to stay with the play, you were early. If you crossed the line accelerating into open ice, you were on time.

## Timing all three forwards to hit the line together

|                   |                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>       | Three attackers crossing within about a second of each other, in three different lanes — one wide each side, one middle          |
| <b>Action</b>     | The middle lane player sets the clock — shortest route, so they adjust, usually by slowing or curling                            |
| <b>Action</b>     | Wide players run their route full out and use the trail-skate drag to hold at the line if they beat the puck there               |
| <b>Read</b>       | Two supports on time and one not — go anyway; none of them on time — delay                                                       |
| <b>Convention</b> | On the power play coaches often want four across the line, two wide and two inside-dot — a common structure, not a universal one |

The picture you want is **three attackers crossing the line within about a second of each other, in three different lanes** — one wide on each side, one in the middle.

How to get there:

- **The middle lane player sets the clock.** They are on the shortest route, so they must be the one who adjusts, usually by slowing or curling.
- **The wide players run their route full out** and use the trail-skate drag to hold at the line if they beat the puck there.
- **The carrier reads the picture and decides the moment.** If two supports are on time and one is not, go anyway; if none of them are, delay (see below).

On the power play, coaches often push this further and want **four across the line** — two wide lanes and two inside-dot lanes filled — so that the carrier always has an option. That is a common structure, not a universal one.

---

## 5. The delay / curl-back

Turning away from the blue line, keeping the puck, and coming back at the line once your support has caught up.

**This is the single most valuable and least used skill at amateur level.** Almost every wasted entry at rec and youth level is a player who arrived at the line alone and did *something* — forced a carry into two defenders, threw a hopeful pass, fired a dump-in with nobody chasing — rather than turning away and waiting one second.

### How to do it

|                  |                                                                                                                |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Never</b>     | Stop — approaching the line alone or outnumbered, stopping kills you                                           |
| <b>Action</b>    | Turn away from the pressure and curl back toward the neutral zone, body between defender and puck              |
| <b>Never</b>     | Take contact with your back to the boards — curl in open ice, not against the wall                             |
| <b>Technique</b> | Near the wall, skates parallel to the boards, take it on your forearm and hip, head up and chin off your chest |
| <b>Action</b>    | Look back up ice as you curl — eyes to where support is coming from, not to the defender                       |
| <b>Action</b>    | Slow the play deliberately for one or two seconds, which is how long late support takes to arrive at speed     |
| <b>Action</b>    | Attack the line again with the puck on whoever has the best angle and the most speed — often not you           |

1. Approaching the line alone or outnumbered, **do not stop**. Stopping kills you.
2. **Turn away from the pressure** and curl away from the line, back toward the neutral zone, protecting the puck with your body between defender and puck.

 **One safety override, and it outranks the play.** Curl in open ice, not against the wall. **Never take contact with your back to the boards.** Near the wall the orientation to aim for is **skates parallel to the boards**, taking it on your **forearm and hip**, head up and chin off your chest; squaring your chest to the wall is the fallback for when you cannot turn, and your back is never an option. Turning your back to an oncoming checker near the boards is the behaviour most associated with catastrophic spinal injury in hockey, and it

can happen at walking speed. Protecting the puck never justifies it. Full treatment in Body Contact and Battles, which owns this.

3. **Look back up ice** while you curl. Your eyes go to where support is coming from, not to the defender.
4. **Slow the play** deliberately for one or two seconds, which is how long it takes your late support to arrive at speed.
5. **Attack the line again** with the puck now in the hands of whoever has the best angle and the most speed — often not you.

## Why it works

You have converted a bad entry into a **fresh entry with support**. In the numbers from Section 1, you have moved yourself off the failed-carry row and back onto the successful-carry row. You also drag defenders toward you as you curl, which stretches the space behind them for the teammate arriving late.

## Why people don't do it

Because turning away from the offensive zone feels like retreating, and because a delay puts the puck on your stick for an extra second with a defender on your back, which feels dangerous. It is not. Losing the puck at the top of the circles on a forced entry is far worse than losing it in the neutral zone with everyone in front of you.

## When *not* to delay

- Read** Numbers now that will be gone in a second — take the odd-man rush instead
- Never** Delay with nobody behind you — a delay only works if support is genuinely coming
- Action** If your line is caught out and the bench is calling, get it in deep and change
- Never** Delay back over the blue line while a teammate is deep in the zone — you will create a delayed offside and freeze them

- When you have numbers now and they will be gone in a second — take the odd-man rush.
- When you have nobody behind you at all. A delay only works if support is genuinely coming. If your line is caught out and the bench is calling, get it in deep and change.



- When a delay would drag you back over the blue line while a teammate is deep in the zone — you will create a delayed offside and freeze them.

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## 6. Drop passes

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A **drop pass** is a pass backwards, usually left behind you as you cross paths with a trailing teammate, so that the trailer picks it up moving forward at speed while the defence's attention is still on you.

### How it works

|                  |                                                                                                                      |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>    | Attack the line to draw the defenders' eyes and weight, then leave the puck in the space the trailer is skating into |
| <b>Technique</b> | Drop to a space, not to a stick — you leave the puck, the receiver skates onto it                                    |
| <b>Action</b>    | Keep going hard into the zone as though you still have it, so you take a defender with you                           |
| <b>Key</b>       | There must be a speed differential — the trailer moving faster than the defenders can adjust                         |
| <b>Options</b>   | On the power play, attack straight at the first penalty killer to freeze them, then drop underneath into space       |

The carrier attacks the line, drawing the defenders' eyes and weight toward the puck. A teammate arrives from behind and slightly to one side. The carrier leaves the puck stationary or gently rolling into the space the trailer is skating into, then keeps going — hard — into the zone as though they still have it.

Three things make it work:

1. **The drop is to a space, not to a stick.** You leave the puck; the receiver skates onto it.
2. **The carrier's route after the drop is the whole point.** If you drop the puck and coast, the defence simply switches to the new carrier and nothing has changed. If you drive the net, you take a defender with you.
3. **There is a speed differential.** The trailer must be moving faster than the defenders can adjust. On the power play this is the classic use — the puck carrier attacks straight at the first penalty killer to freeze them, then drops underneath into space.

## When it's right

- Read** A passive neutral zone that backs off and gives you the red line for free — the trailer gets a running start at a stationary wall
- Read** Breakouts and power-play entries, where you can choreograph the timing in advance
- Read** A defence that has over-committed to the carrier's side

- Against a passive neutral zone that backs off and gives you the red line for free — the trailer gets a running start at a stationary wall.
- On breakouts and power-play entries where you can choreograph the timing in advance.
- When the defence has over-committed to the carrier's side.

## Why it fails so often

- Risk** The drop goes backwards into nobody — the worst turnover in hockey, collected by a defender facing your net
- Never** Let both players slow down — a drop pass at low speed is a gift
- Risk** A receiver with no lane, no support and no speed is the lone attacker the drop was supposed to avoid creating
- Never** Use it as a reflex — it answers one picture, a trailing teammate with speed and space behind you
- Key** See the trailer before you drop it; if you are dropping it blind and hoping, throw it away instead

- **The drop goes backwards into nobody.** The trailer is not there yet, or is on the wrong side, and the puck sits in the neutral zone for a defender to collect facing your net. This is the worst turnover in hockey.
- **Both players slow down.** A drop pass at low speed is a gift.
- **The receiver has no plan.** They pick it up with no lane, no support and no speed and are now the lone attacker the drop was supposed to avoid creating.
- **It is used as a reflex, not a read.** A drop pass is a specific solution to a specific picture — a trailing teammate with speed and space behind you. Used because you didn't know what else to do, it is just a turnover facing the wrong way.

Rule of thumb: **you should see the trailer before you drop it.** If you are dropping it blind and hoping, throw it away instead.

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## 7. Dump-ins: five types and the read that calls for each

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Putting the puck in without possession is not one play. It is at least five, and choosing the wrong one is most of why dump-ins get a bad name. The unifying rule is the same in all cases: **the puck goes to a place your teammate is already going.** A dump-in without a chaser is a change of possession you chose.

### 1. The hard rim

|               |                                                                                                                  |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b> | Fire the puck low and hard around the boards, following the curve of the corner, onward in the direction of play |
| <b>Read</b>   | Pressure on you from the inside, and a teammate coming down the far wall or the far corner                       |
| <b>Goal</b>   | Beat the defenceman stepping up on you and arrive at the far side before their partner can rotate                |
| <b>Key</b>    | A rim is not a reverse — a reverse goes back against the flow, behind you, for a different purpose               |
| <b>Risk</b>   | Too soft and it dies behind the net; too hard and it comes off the far boards to the weak-side defenceman        |

Fire the puck low and hard around the boards, following the curve of the corner, so it travels **onward around the boards** in the direction of play.

- **The read:** pressure is on you from the inside, and you have a teammate coming down the far wall or the far corner.
- **Why:** the rim beats the defenceman who is stepping up on you, and it arrives at the far side before their partner can rotate.
- **Careful:** a rim is not a **reverse**. A reverse goes *back against the flow* of the play, behind you, and it is a different play with a different purpose. Be precise about which one you are calling for.
- **Risk:** a rim that is too soft dies behind the net; a rim that is too hard comes off the far boards straight to the weak-side defenceman.

## 2. The soft area dump

|               |                                                                                                               |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b> | Place the puck gently into a specific area, usually a corner, so it dies there rather than rebounding         |
| <b>Read</b>   | A forechecker arriving in roughly two seconds, and a defence that has to turn and retrieve                    |
| <b>Goal</b>   | Give your chaser a stationary puck and a body to hit, and give the retriever no help from the puck's momentum |
| <b>Never</b>  | Use it when your chaser is four seconds away — you have just given the puck to their defenceman with time     |

Place the puck gently into a specific area — usually a corner — so that it dies there rather than rebounding.

- **The read:** you have a forechecker arriving in roughly two seconds, and the defence has to turn and retrieve.
- **Why:** the value is entirely in the race. A soft dump gives your chaser a stationary puck and a body to hit, and gives the retrieving defenceman no help from the puck's momentum.
- **When it's wrong:** when your chaser is four seconds away. Then you have just given the puck to their defenceman with time.

## 3. The chip past a pinching defenceman

|                  |                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>      | A defender committing hard and early, with space behind them on the wall                                                                            |
| <b>Action</b>    | Lift or push the puck past them down the wall and skate around the other side to collect it yourself                                                |
| <b>Technique</b> | Chip early, off the boards if you need to lift it over a stick, and change your line before you release so you are already accelerating around them |
| <b>Key</b>       | This is a possession play, not a surrender — you are using the defender's own momentum against them                                                 |
| <b>Mindset</b>   | Giving up the puck for a second at full speed feels wrong; it is one of the highest-value plays against an aggressive gap                           |

The defenceman steps up to meet you at or before the line. You lift or push the puck **past them, down the wall**, and skate around the other side to collect it yourself.

**This is a possession play, not a surrender.** You are not giving the puck up; you are using the defender's own momentum against them. They are moving toward you; the puck is going behind them; you are going around them. If your feet are moving, you get it back and you are behind their defence with speed.

- **The read:** a defender committing hard and early, and space behind them on the wall.
- **The technique:** chip it early, off the boards if you need to lift it over a stick, and change your line **before** you release so you are already accelerating around them.
- **Why it's under-used:** it requires you to give up the puck for a second while going full speed at someone, which feels wrong. It is one of the highest-value plays in the game against an aggressive gap.

Note the terminology: a **pinch** is a defenceman stepping down from the *offensive* blue line. A defenceman challenging you in the neutral zone or at their own line is **stepping up**. Both are commonly called pinches in conversation; be precise when you are describing what happened.

#### 4. The cross-corner (north-south) dump

- |               |                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b> | Shoot the puck hard diagonally into the far corner, or straight north down your own side, depending on where your speed is                |
| <b>Read</b>   | The retrieving defenceman is on your side, or the strong-side corner is crowded                                                           |
| <b>Goal</b>   | Force their weak-side defenceman into a long retrieval on his backhand facing his own boards — the most uncomfortable retrieval in hockey |
| <b>Never</b>  | Dump cross-corner into nobody — your far-side winger has to have read it and be going there                                               |

From one side of the ice, shoot the puck hard **diagonally** across into the far corner, or straight north down your own side depending on where your speed is.

- **The read:** the retrieving defenceman is on your side, or the strong-side corner is crowded.
- **Why:** it moves the puck away from the defender best placed to get it and forces their weak-side defenceman into a long retrieval on their backhand, facing his own boards. That is the single most uncomfortable retrieval in hockey.
- **What you need:** your far-side winger to have read it and be going there. Cross-corner dumps into nobody are pure giveaways.

## 5. The flip / area dump over a trap

|                  |                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>      | The opposition congesting the neutral zone — a trap, most commonly a 1-3-1 — and no route along the ice                                                      |
| <b>Action</b>    | Lift the puck high off the ice so it travels over sticks and bodies and lands in open space behind the defence                                               |
| <b>Technique</b> | Open the blade, get under the puck, and land it past the defence but before the goal line                                                                    |
| <b>Goal</b>      | Go over the three-man wall rather than through it, and hang it long enough for your forwards to run underneath                                               |
| <b>Risk</b>      | Overshoot it and, unless you are shorthanded, a puck crossing the goal line untouched from behind the centre red line is icing — Rules Primer owns that rule |

Lift the puck high off the ice so it travels over sticks and bodies and lands in open space behind the defence.

- **The read:** the opposition are congesting the neutral zone — a **trap**, most commonly a **1-3-1** neutral zone structure with one forechecker, three players across the middle and one back — and there is no route along the ice.
- **Why:** a flip does not have to get through the three-man wall; it goes over it. It also hangs long enough for your forwards to run underneath it.
- **How:** open the blade, get under the puck, and aim to land it **past** the defence but **before** the goal line so it does not carry through for icing. Beware: if your team is not shorthanded and the puck crosses the goal line untouched from behind the centre red line, that is **icing**. See the Rules Primer for the full icing rule, including hybrid icing.

## How the trapezoid shapes where you aim

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>       | A goalkeeper may not play the puck outside the designated area behind the net — a two-minute delay-of-game minor (NHL Rules 27.8 and 63.2(viii))                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Rule</b>       | What is judged is the position of the puck, not the goalie's; the only exception is playing it while maintaining skate contact with his crease (NHL Rule 27.8)                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Rule</b>       | The trapezoid applies in the NHL, the KHL and under the IIHF book (IIHF Rule 27.7); in England and Wales the status is unsettled — England Ice Hockey's Rules & Regulations 22.3 say it is "not currently enforced" — so plan as though their goalie may come for a dumped puck, and ask your league |
| <b>Convention</b> | Most rec, beer-league and youth associations do not use it                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Action</b>     | Dump to the corners, not to the goalie — the corners are legally out of bounds for him, straight behind the net is not                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Action</b>     | If you must put it behind the net, put it there hard — a rocketing puck is far harder to stop and distribute cleanly                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Action</b>     | Where there is no trapezoid, rim it hard and low so he cannot set up on it, or dump to the corner furthest from his stick hand                                                                                                                                                                       |

Under **NHL Rule 27.8**, *"a goalkeeper shall not play the puck outside of the designated area behind the net."* Playing the puck outside it, behind the goal line, is a **two-minute minor for delay of game** (Rules 27.8 and 63.2(viii)).

**Take the dimensions from Rule 1.8, never from 27.8.** Rule 1.8 specifies the lines actually painted: they begin **seven feet outside each goal crease — eight feet from each goal post** — at the goal line and run back to points **eleven feet from each post** at the end boards, giving **22 feet across at the goal line widening to 28 feet at the boards**. Rule 27.8's own "six feet from either goal post" is stale wording from before the 2014-15 widening — it describes the **old** trapezoid (18 feet at the goal line widening to the same 28 at the boards), which is a coherent shape, just not the one painted today.

Two details that matter tactically:

- **"The determining factor shall be the position of the puck."** Not the goalie's position. He may stand wherever he likes; what is judged is where the puck is when he plays it.
- **The only exception is skate contact with the crease** — the minor is not assessed *"when a goalkeeper plays the puck while maintaining skate contact with his goal crease."* There is no teammate-based exception.

So: **the corners are legally out of bounds for the goaltender, and the area directly behind the net is not.**

That gives you a simple aiming rule where the trapezoid applies. **Dump to the corners, not to the goalie.** A puck that dies straight behind the net is a puck the goalie can legally stop and set for his defenceman, which is exactly the help you were trying to deny him. A puck in the corner has to be retrieved by a skater with a forechecker arriving.

If you must put it behind the net, put it there **hard** — the goalie can play it, but stopping a rocketing puck and distributing it cleanly is a much harder job than corralling a soft one.

**Where the trapezoid applies:** the NHL (since 2005-06), the KHL, and IIHF play (IIHF Rule 27.7, with the area defined as 6.80 m along the goal line widening to 8.60 m at the boards). **In England and Wales, treat it as unsettled.** The IIHF book is the one in force and the 2025-26 In-House Rules do not amend Rule 27 — but England Ice Hockey's own *Rules & Regulations* 22.3 say the restricted area is "*not currently enforced to allow ice rinks the necessary time to make the changes to implement this rule*", and that edition is 2024-25 while the current In-House Rules are silent on 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. **Most rec, beer-league and youth associations outside Britain do not use it.** In those leagues a puck-handling goalie can go anywhere behind his goal line, which flips the advice: rim it hard and low so he cannot set up on it, or dump to the corner furthest from his stick hand.

*Flagged:* two NHL rules give different trapezoid dimensions at the goal-line end — Rule 27.8 says the lines "*begin six feet from either goal post*", while Rule 1.8 describes the markings as seven feet outside each goal crease (eight feet from each goal post). Rule 1.8 matches the IIHF's 6.80 m figure, so 27.8's text appears to be stale. Nothing about how you play changes either way; the corners are outside it under any reading.

---

## 8. Chasing a dump properly

---

A dump-in is only as good as the chase. Most amateur chases fail before they start because the chaser skates at the puck.



## Angle, don't chase

|                  |                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Never</b>     | Skate at the puck — your route should take away the easy escape, not shorten the distance                                                         |
| <b>Read</b>      | The easy escape is up the boards or a reverse behind the net to their partner; the hard one is being hemmed on the wall or forced to his backhand |
| <b>Action</b>    | Skate to a point between the retriever and where they want to go, arriving at the puck at an angle rather than head-on                            |
| <b>Action</b>    | Approach on the retriever's backhand side where you can — that is where turnovers come from                                                       |
| <b>Position</b>  | Keep your route on the inside, between the puck and the middle, so if they escape they escape to the boards, not into the slot                    |
| <b>Technique</b> | Stick first — leading, on the ice, in the passing lane you are eliminating, before your body arrives                                              |
| <b>Key</b>       | The measure of a good chase is whether the retriever's only remaining option was one you had covered                                              |

The retrieving defenceman has two escapes: the **easy** one (usually turning up the boards toward the neutral zone, or reversing behind the net to their partner) and the **hard** one (getting hemmed on the wall, or being forced to their backhand into traffic).

Your route should **take away the easy escape**, not shorten the distance to the puck.

- Skate to a point that puts you **between the retriever and where they want to go**, arriving at the puck at an angle rather than head-on.
- **Approach on the retriever's backhand side** where you can. A defenceman forced to make a backhand play under pressure, facing his own boards, is where turnovers come from.
- **Take a route that keeps you on the inside** — between the puck and the middle of the ice — so if they escape, they escape to the boards, not into the slot.
- **Stick first.** Your stick should be leading, on the ice, in the passing lane you are trying to eliminate, before your body arrives.

The measure of a good chase is not whether you got the puck. It is whether the retriever's only remaining option was one you had covered.

## F1, F2 and what they owe each other

|                   |                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | F1, F2 and F3 are roles, not people — defined by order of arrival, not by position                                                                |
| <b>Convention</b> | Under the house default 2-1-2 forecheck, F1 goes to the puck and takes away the easy escape; F1's job is to force a decision, not to win the puck |
| <b>Convention</b> | F2 reads F1's angle and covers the side F1 forced them toward — F1 creates, F2 collects                                                           |
| <b>Convention</b> | F3 stays high, around the top of the circles, protecting against the breakout pass up the middle and the counter-attack                           |
| <b>Options</b>    | In a 1-2-2 F1 pressures but F2 and F3 hold higher, funnelling the puck to one side — fewer pucks recovered low, far fewer odd-man rushes          |
| <b>Options</b>    | In a 2-1-2 aggressive/overload both F1 and F2 attack the same side hard; in a 1-3-1 F1 pressures and three lock the neutral zone, which is a trap |
| <b>Action</b>     | Find out which one your team plays — the same dump-in requires a different second man in each                                                     |

**F1, F2 and F3 are roles, not people.** They are defined by order of arrival, not by position — whichever forward gets there first is F1, whoever is next is F2, regardless of whether they are the centre or a winger.

Under the **house default used throughout this guide — a 2-1-2 forecheck** — the relationship on a dump-in retrieval is:

- **F1** goes to the puck and takes away the easy escape as described above. F1's job is to force a decision, not necessarily to win the puck.
- **F2** reads F1's angle and covers **the side F1 forced them toward** — usually the strong-side wall or the area behind the net. F2 is the one who actually recovers most pucks; F1 creates, F2 collects.
- **F3** stays high, generally around the top of the circles, protecting against the breakout pass up the middle and the counter-attack.

**Other systems assign this differently.** In a **1-2-2**, F1 pressures but F2 and F3 both hold higher, funnelling the puck to one side rather than chasing it; you will recover fewer pucks below the goal line but concede far fewer odd-man rushes. In a **2-1-2 aggressive/overload**, both F1 and F2 attack the same side of the ice hard. In a **1-3-1 forecheck** F1 pressures and three players lock the neutral zone, which is barely a forecheck at all — it is a trap. **Find out which one your team plays**, because the same dump-in requires a different second man in each.

See Forechecking Systems for the full treatment.

## 9. Deciding: carry, dump, or delay

You have roughly half a second. Read these four things in this order.

### 1. Gap

- |                   |                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>       | Gap is the distance between you and the nearest defender — Defending the Rush owns the scale to read it against                  |
| <b>Read</b>       | Large gap, defender well off and backing in — carry. They have given you the line, so take it and get to the dots                |
| <b>Read</b>       | Normal gap, closing — you need a move or an angle: attack the outside shoulder, or chip past them if they are committing         |
| <b>Read</b>       | Tight gap, stick on you, standing up at the line — carrying is a low-percentage play. Chip past, dump, or delay                  |
| <b>Convention</b> | The tighter gap figure you will also hear is a deliberate coaching choice carried by Neutral Zone Systems, not the default scale |

**Gap** is the distance between you and the nearest defender.

Read these against the defender's own scale, which Defending the Rush owns: **two to three stick lengths is a normal neutral-zone gap**, about a stick and a half at the red line, and about a stick length is what a defender aims for at their own blue line. The tighter **one to one and a half stick lengths** you will also hear is not part of that owned scale — it is the coaching description of a *tight* gap carried by Neutral Zone Systems, and it is a deliberate choice rather than the default.

- **Large gap (defender more than about three stick-lengths off, backing in):** carry. They have given you the line. Take it and get to the dots.
- **Normal gap (two to three stick-lengths, closing):** you need a move or an angle. Attack the outside shoulder, or chip past them if they are committing.
- **Tight gap (one to one and a half stick-lengths, stick on you, standing up at the line):** carrying is a low-percentage play. Chip past, dump, or delay.

## 2. Support

- Read** Two or more teammates at the line with you, at speed — carry, or pass in
- Read** One teammate arriving late — delay. One second of curl usually converts this into the case above
- Read** Nobody — dump to a place someone can get to, or delay if anyone at all is coming
- Never** Dump and change unless genuinely nobody is coming — and recognise you have already lost this shift

- **Two or more teammates at the line with you, at speed:** carry, or pass in. This is what all the timing work in Section 4 was for.
- **One teammate, arriving late:** delay. One second of curl usually converts this into the case above.
- **Nobody:** dump to a place someone can get to, or delay if anyone at all is coming. If genuinely nobody is coming, put it in deep and change — but recognise you have already lost this shift, because dump-and-change was the worst-valued play in the data.

## 3. Score and time

- Read** Tied, or early — play the percentages and be aggressive
- Read** Protecting a one-goal lead late — dump it in, forecheck, burn clock, because a goal against costs more than a goal for gains
- Read** Chasing a goal late — carry almost regardless; a dump-in with ninety seconds left surrenders possession you cannot afford to lose
- Read** On a line change — the entry decision is secondary; get the puck deep or out of danger and change cleanly
- Key** This is the one place where the analytics argument bends

This is the one place where the analytics argument bends. See Game Management.

- **Tied, or early:** play the percentages. The break-even is around one-third confidence; be aggressive.
- **Protecting a one-goal lead late:** the cost of a turnover is asymmetric — a goal against costs you more than a goal for gains you. Dump it in, forecheck, burn clock.

- **Chasing a goal late:** carry almost regardless. A dump-in with ninety seconds left surrenders possession you cannot afford to lose.
- **On a line change:** the entry decision is secondary. Get the puck deep or out of danger and change cleanly.

## 4. Who you are

- Read** The carry/dump threshold moves with team strength — Tulskey's group modelled this directly
- Action** A skilled line against a weaker pair should be attempting carries at nearly any excuse (their 26% figure)
- Action** A fourth line against a top pair genuinely does have a higher bar (their 44% figure)
- Key** Both of those are still well below "only carry when it's certain"

Tulskey's group modelled this directly: the carry/dump threshold moves with team strength. A skilled line against a weaker pair should be attempting carries at nearly any excuse (their 26% figure). A fourth line against a top pair genuinely does have a higher bar (their 44% figure). **Both of those are still well below "only carry when it's certain."**

## The one-sentence version

*Carry if you have the line or the support; chip if they are committing; delay if support is one second away; dump only to a place a teammate is already skating to; and never dump and change if you can help it.*

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## 10. Entering against specific structures

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### Against a standing-up defence

- Read** They hold the blue line, take away the middle, and dare you to go around
- Action** Chip and chase past them — a defenceman standing still has no momentum to recover, so this is the ideal chip situation
- Action** Attack the seam between the two of them — two defenders holding a line have a gap between them by definition
- Action** Use a late player — standing up requires them to watch the puck, so a fourth attacker arriving behind the play is often unmarked
- Action** Change the entry point — swing the puck to the far side and enter on the weak side

They hold the blue line, take away the middle, and dare you to go around.

- **Chip and chase past them.** A defenceman standing still at the line has no momentum to recover. This is the ideal chip situation.
- **Attack the seam between the two of them.** Two defenders holding a line have a gap between them by definition.
- **Use a late player.** Standing up requires them to watch the puck; a fourth attacker arriving behind the play is often unmarked.
- **Change the entry point.** Cross the line where they aren't — swing the puck to the far side and enter on the weak side.

## Against a 1-3-1 neutral zone

- Read** One forechecker, three across the middle, one back — the three-across layer is designed to kill the puck at the red line
- Never** Skate into the three — that is the trap working
- Action** Use the flip / area dump over the wall — this is what it exists for
- Action** Move the puck side to side quickly — the three-man layer is strong facing forward and slow rotating laterally
- Action** Attack the outside of the wall — the 1-3-1 concedes the boards to protect the middle, so take what it gives
- Action** Use a stretch player held high behind their three, which forces the back player to stay honest and thins the wall

One forechecker, three across the middle, one back. The three-across layer is designed to kill the puck at the red line.

- **Do not skate into the three.** That is the trap working.
- **Use the flip / area dump over the wall** described in Section 7. This is what it exists for.
- **Move the puck side to side quickly** — the three-man layer is strong facing forward and slow rotating laterally.
- **Attack the outside of the wall.** The 1-3-1 concedes the boards to protect the middle; take what it gives.
- **Use a stretch player.** A forward held high behind their three forces the back player to stay honest, which thins the wall.

See Neutral Zone Systems.

## Against an aggressive gap

|                  |                                                                                                                          |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>      | They close hard and early, well before their own line                                                                    |
| <b>Action</b>    | Chip past them — an aggressive gap is a defender with committed momentum, and this is the best possible situation for it |
| <b>Action</b>    | Get the puck off your stick early; make the play a stride before they arrive                                             |
| <b>Action</b>    | Use the space behind them — send someone into it and hit them                                                            |
| <b>Technique</b> | Change of pace beats a move — hard deceleration then re-acceleration ruins a defender who is closing hard                |

They close hard and early, well before their own line.

- **This is the best possible situation for the chip past.** An aggressive gap is a defender with committed momentum.
- **Get the puck off your stick early.** Do not skate into a closing defender; make the play a stride before they arrive.
- **Use the space behind them.** Aggressive gap means there is ice behind them by definition. Send someone into it and hit them.
- **Change of pace beats a move.** A hard deceleration then re-acceleration ruins a defender who is closing hard, because their speed is now a liability.

## On the power play

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | Four across the line, two wide lanes and two inside-dot lanes, so the carrier always has an option                                                                |
| <b>Convention</b> | Attack middle ice first — get the first pass to the dot line or the middle rather than pushing wide early                                                         |
| <b>Options</b>    | The drop entry against a kill that sits back — attack the first killer to freeze them, then drop underneath                                                       |
| <b>Options</b>    | Placement entries — a planned puck below the goal line, by chip or cross-corner, with the support routes already running                                          |
| <b>Options</b>    | Rim entries when pressure is all on the strong side; without a weak-side support player a rim is just a slow turnover                                             |
| <b>Key</b>        | Controlled entry still produces roughly two and a half times the shots of a dump-in on the power play, but the extra man narrows the penalty for getting it wrong |



Entries on the power play are a distinct skill, and the most common failure of a bad power play is not the setup — it is that it cannot get in.

Common coaching structures (these are choices, not laws):

- **Four across the line**, two wide lanes and two inside-dot lanes, so the carrier always has an option and the kill has to defend four threats.
- **Attack middle ice first**. Pushing the puck wide too early invites pressure and forces a chip. Get the first pass to the dot line or the middle.
- **The drop entry**, especially against a penalty kill that sits back: the carrier attacks straight at the first killer to freeze them, then drops underneath into the space that creates.
- **Placement entries** — a *planned* puck put below the goal line, by chip or cross-corner, into an area where you have a recovery advantage. Not a panic dump; the difference is that the support routes were already running when the puck was released.
- **Rim entries** when pressure is all on the strong side: a long rim to a weak-side support player. Without that support player, a rim is just a slow turnover.

The PWHPA data cited in Section 1 gives power-play figures too — carry-ins **0.91** shots per entry and pass-ins **0.96**, against **0.38** for dump-ins. **Read those carefully, because they do not say what they are usually said to say.** Against the even-strength figures in Section 1 (carry-ins 0.73, dump-ins 0.14), the carry-in advantage **narrows** on the power play, not widens: the gap falls from 0.59 to 0.53 shots per entry, and the ratio collapses from more than five-to-one to under two-and-a-half-to-one. Dump-ins get *better* with the extra man — 0.14 to 0.38, which makes sense, because a four-man kill is worse at retrieving a puck than a five-man defence.

What survives is the direction, not a widening margin: **controlled entry still produces roughly two and a half times the shots of a dump-in on the power play**, so getting in with control still matters — but the extra man narrows the penalty for getting it wrong rather than raising it. If your unit cannot enter cleanly against a set kill, a dump-in on the power play is a less costly fallback than it is at even strength.

See Special Teams.

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## 11. Defending the entry

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Everything above, from the other side. This is the summary; Defending the Rush is the full document.

## Gap control

|                   |                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | Gap is the space between you and the puck carrier, and it is the whole game                                                           |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Too much gap and they enter with speed, get their head up and make a play — you have conceded the controlled entry                    |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Too little gap and one move or one chip beats you, and now they are behind you                                                        |
| <b>Convention</b> | The general target taught by most coaches is a gap that shrinks the whole way and never grows — Defending the Rush owns the distances |
| <b>Key</b>        | Your gap should be whatever lets you match their next change of speed                                                                 |
| <b>Action</b>     | Skate backwards fast enough that you never have to turn — the moment you turn and run, the attacker chooses everything                |

**Gap** is the space between you and the puck carrier, and it is the whole game.

- **Too much gap** and they enter with speed, get their head up, and make a play. You have conceded the controlled entry the data says is worth double.
- **Too little gap** and one move or one chip beats you, and now they are behind you.
- **The general target** taught by most coaches, and the scale Defending the Rush owns, is **two to three stick lengths through the neutral zone, about a stick and a half at the red line, and about one stick length by your own blue line** — shrinking the whole way, never growing. But the number is less important than the principle: **your gap should be whatever lets you match their next change of speed.**
- **Skate backwards fast enough that you never have to turn.** The moment a defender turns and runs, the attacker chooses everything.

## Standing up at the line

|               |                                                                                                                           |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b> | Meet the entry at your own blue line rather than backing in                                                               |
| <b>Goal</b>   | Kill controlled entries outright — if they cannot cross with the puck, they cannot get the controlled-entry shot rate     |
| <b>Risk</b>   | If you are beaten you are beaten badly — flat-footed at your own line with a forward behind you and only your goalie left |
| <b>Key</b>    | It needs good reads, your forwards back, and a partner who slides with you rather than staying deep                       |

Meeting the entry at your own blue line rather than backing in.

- **Upside:** it kills controlled entries outright. If they cannot cross with the puck, they cannot get the 0.5-shot entry.
- **Downside:** if you are beaten, you are beaten badly — you are flat-footed at your own line with a forward behind you and only your goalie left. It also needs your forwards to be back, because standing up assumes support behind you.
- **Needs:** good reads, and a partner who slides with you rather than staying deep.

## Forcing wide, and "receiving the entry"

|                   |                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | The traditional approach — the defencemen stay roughly between the faceoff dots, mark the carrier and the slot, and steer the play outside |
| <b>Goal</b>       | Make the entry happen where it is least dangerous                                                                                          |
| <b>Key</b>        | Very hard to beat cleanly, and it keeps the middle protected                                                                               |
| <b>Risk</b>       | It concedes the entry — the attacker gets in with the puck, gets time on the wall, and can shoot with purpose looking for rebounds         |

The traditional approach, often taught as **receiving the entry**: the defencemen stay roughly between the faceoff dots, mark the carrier and the slot, and steer the play to the outside so the entry happens where it is least dangerous.

- **Upside:** very hard to beat cleanly, and it keeps the middle protected.
- **Downside:** it concedes the entry. The attacker gets in with the puck, gets time on the wall, and can shoot with purpose looking for rebounds.

## More aggressive alternatives — name them

|                   |                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Options</b>    | F1 pressure with the D holding the dots — the first forward back pressures the carrier while the defencemen hold their depth      |
| <b>Options</b>    | Squash-and-slide — the defenceman, not the backchecker, forces the carrier outside while the first forward back protects the slot |
| <b>Technique</b>  | In squash-and-slide the two defencemen hold the same depth and slide across together like a foosball bar                          |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Squash-and-slide demands a great deal from the forwards — one lazy backcheck and the weak side is wide open                       |
| <b>Convention</b> | These are systems, not laws — which one your team plays changes whether you step up, hold the dots, or take the puck              |
| <b>Action</b>     | Ask, and then talk to your partner about it before the puck drops                                                                 |

- **F1 pressure with the D holding the dots:** the first forward back pressures the carrier while the defencemen hold their depth. Requires the defencemen to talk and to step on the cross-ice pass.
- **Squash-and-slide** (as described publicly of Bruce Cassidy's Boston Bruins around 2018-19): the defenceman — not the backchecker — forces the carrier outside, while the first forward back protects the slot. The two defencemen hold the same depth and slide across together like a foosball bar, "squashing" the play against the wall if it goes wide and pinching in if it goes inside. It buys time and space back at the cost of demanding a great deal from the forwards; one lazy backcheck and the weak side is wide open.

**These are systems, not laws.** Which one your team plays changes your job completely — whether you step up, whether you hold the dots, whether the first forward back takes the puck or the slot. Ask, and then talk to your partner about it before the puck drops.

## The defender's version of the offside rule

|               |                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>    | You do not have to prevent the entry, only make it uncontrolled — a stick in the passing lane that forces a dump has done the same job as a hit                          |
| <b>Action</b> | Force them to cross before the puck — stepping up at exactly the right instant can make an onside attacker offside                                                       |
| <b>Rule</b>   | The defending team passing or carrying the puck into the neutral zone nullifies a delayed offside and resets everything (NHL Rule 83.3(ii); IIHF Rule 83.3(II) the same) |
| <b>Rule</b>   | The shot that caused the delayed offside cannot score — not directly, not off you, the goalie, the boards or an official (NHL Rule 83.4; IIHF Rule 83.4 word-for-word)   |
| <b>Never</b>  | Assume nothing can go in — the one way they score is you putting it in your own net, and that counts (NHL Rule 83.4; IIHF Rule 83.4)                                     |

Everything in Section 2 works for you too:

- **You do not have to prevent the entry, only make it uncontrolled.** A stick in the passing lane that forces a dump has done the same job as a hit.
- **Force them to cross before the puck.** A defender who steps up at exactly the right instant can make an onside attacker offside, because the judgement happens at the moment the puck crosses.
- **On a delayed offside, get the puck out of the zone.** Rule 83.3(ii) — passing or carrying the puck into the neutral zone nullifies it and resets everything.
- **Know the disallowed-goal rule, and its one exception.** If they shot it in on a delayed offside, that shot cannot score — Rule 83.4 disallows it "*either directly or off the goalkeeper, a player, the boards, the glass, a piece of equipment or an official*", and clearing the zone first makes no difference. So do not panic. **But read the rest of 83.4:** "*The only way an attacking team can score a goal on a delayed offside situation is if the defending team shoots or puts the puck into their own net without action or contact by the offending team.*" You are the one person on the ice who can still put that puck in. Play it out, and play it out cleanly. **The IIHF's Rule 83.4 carries both halves in exactly those words**, so this is the British rule as well as the NHL one. (Rules Primer owns this rule.)

# Common Mistakes

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- **Dumping the puck in because it feels responsible.** On Tulskey's *net value* column the average carry attempt was worth more than three times the average dump-and-chase (+0.42 against +0.12); on raw shots for it was double (0.48 against 0.24). Either way, failed carries cost far less than everyone assumes. Dumping is a tool, not a default.
- **Dumping and changing.** In Tulskey's tracking this was the *only* entry type with a worse net value than a failed carry-in. If you need a change, change before you get the puck.
- **Dumping to nobody.** A dump-in with no chaser is not a dump-in, it is a pass to their defenceman. Look before you release.
- **Arriving at the line early and having to stop.** Being fast to the line is worthless if you have to wait there. Be slower thirty feet out and faster at the line.
- **The puck carrier arriving first.** Then there is no support, and one player against two defenders is a turnover with extra confidence.
- **Never delaying.** The curl-back is free and almost nobody uses it. If you are alone at the line, turning away is not retreating; it is the difference between a wasted entry and a real one.
- **Blind drop passes.** If you cannot see the trailer, do not drop it. A drop pass to an empty patch of neutral ice is the worst turnover in the game because everybody on your team is facing the wrong way.
- **Skating straight at the puck on the forecheck.** Angle to take away the escape, not to shorten the distance.
- **Dumping straight behind the net where the trapezoid applies.** You have just handed the goalie a legal touch and let him set the puck up for his defenceman. Use the corners.
- **Coasting over the line on a delayed offside.** Tagging up needs **skate contact with the blue line**. Being in the air over it does not clear you, and one player not tagging keeps the whole team frozen. (And check your book: under USA Hockey Rule 630(d) there is no tag-up below Youth 15-Only, Girls 16U, High School and Adult — the whistle goes immediately.)
- **Forechecking during a delayed offside.** Touching the puck, going for a loose puck, forcing the carrier deeper, or being about to hit him all stop play immediately. Hold at the line.
- **Attacking straight at a defender.** Attack the space between two of them and make somebody choose.
- **Treating your team's entry rules as universal.** Lane discipline, who carries, whether you stand up at the line — these vary. Find out yours.

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## Key Takeaways

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1. **Carrying the puck in is worth about twice as much as dumping it in.** Comparing like with like — every carry *attempt*, successes and failures averaged together — Tulskey's tracking put it at 0.48 shots per entry against 0.24 for dump-and-chase, and that result has replicated across multiple trackers, leagues and eras.
2. **A failed carry costs far less than you think.** In the tracked data it was worth about  $-0.08$  net shots, cheaper than dumping and changing. You only need about one-third confidence for the carry to be the better bet — 26% if your line outmatches theirs, 44% if it does not.
3. **You are onside as long as one skate has not completely crossed**, judged at the exact instant the puck completely crosses the line. Drag that trail skate and you can attack the line at full speed while everyone else is checking their feet. **Under NHL and IIHF rules the trail skate may even be in the air; under USA Hockey Rule 630(a) it must be touching**, so keep the blade down if that is your book. Tagging up on a delayed offside is stricter: it needs actual **skate contact with the blue line**, from every attacker in the zone, at the same instant — and under **USA Hockey Rule 630(d)** tagging up does not exist at all below Youth 15-Only, Girls 16U, High School and Adult, where the offside is whistled straight away. And a goal scored off the puck that caused the delayed offside is disallowed no matter how cleanly you tagged.
4. **Attack the space between two defenders, not at one of them.** One defender has an easy job. Two defenders sharing a seam have a problem.
5. **The puck carrier should be the last to the line and the support should be first** — and arriving with speed is not the same as arriving early.
6. **The delay is the most under-used skill in amateur hockey.** Alone at the line, turn away, protect the puck, look up ice, and re-attack one second later with support.
7. **A dump-in is a decision about where, not just whether.** Hard rim, soft area dump, chip past a pinching defender, cross-corner, flip over a trap — each answers a different read, and all of them require a chaser who is already going there.
8. **The chip past a committing defenceman is a possession play, not a surrender.** Their momentum is what makes it work.
9. **Where the trapezoid applies, dump to the corners.** Only the puck's position matters, and the goalie's only exception is keeping a skate in contact with the crease. Most **North American** rec and youth leagues have no trapezoid at all, which removes the whole point of the corner dump — but British recreational and junior hockey runs the IIHF book, where the

status is unsettled rather than absent — in England and Wales England Ice Hockey's *Rules & Regulations* 22.3 say it is not currently enforced. For you as the attacking team, plan as though their goalie may come for it, and ask your league.

10. **Chase the escape route, not the puck, and remember the entry is a two-sided coin.** Angle so the retriever's easiest option is the one you have already taken away; F1/F2/F3 are roles defined by arrival order, not positions. Defending the line, your gap should be whatever lets you match their next change of speed — and whether you stand up, receive the entry, or squash-and-slide is a system your coach chooses, not a law of the game.
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# Offensive Zone Play

**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**

Zone Entries

Forechecking Systems

Shooting

Passing and Receiving

Faceoffs

Puck Support and Spacing

Defensive Zone Coverage

Body Contact and Battles

UK and England Rules

## Overview

- Position** You already have the puck in the offensive zone — getting there is Zone Entries, winning it back is Forechecking Systems
- Goal** You are not trying to take a shot — you are trying to take a shot from a dangerous place, with the goalie out of position
- Key** The cycle, the low-to-high and the net-front battle are machinery for producing that one moment
- Risk** Almost every amateur team can get the puck into the offensive zone; far fewer turn possession there into a dangerous shot

This document is about what to do **once you already have the puck in the offensive zone** — the zone at the far end of the ice, where the other team's goal is. Getting there is covered in Zone Entries; winning it back is covered in Forechecking Systems.

Almost every amateur team can get the puck into the offensive zone. Far fewer can turn possession there into a *dangerous* shot. The gap between those two things is what this document is about: how five players move the puck, and move the goalie, so that when a shot finally happens it comes from somewhere the goalie cannot cover.

The organising idea is simple and it runs through every section below: **you are not trying to take a shot. You are trying to take a shot from a dangerous place, with the goalie out**

**of position.** Everything else — the cycle, the low-to-high, the net-front battle — is machinery for producing that one moment.

---

## 1. The Goal: Shot Quality, Not Shot Quantity

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### The scoring area — "home plate"

- |                 |                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b> | Home plate runs from the tops of the two faceoff circles, in along the tops, down to the dots, then angles in to the goalposts                   |
| <b>Key</b>      | Shots inside home plate are counted as scoring chances; those from the inner part, close to the net and between the dots, as high-danger chances |
| <b>Position</b> | The slot is straight out in front of the net between the circles; the high slot runs from the dots up to the tops of the circles                 |
| <b>Position</b> | The goalmouth is the immediate net front; the point is up at the blue line; the half-wall is the boards level with the faceoff dot               |
| <b>Key</b>      | The faceoff circles and the goal crease are your on-ice ruler for everything below                                                               |

Analysts describe the dangerous part of the offensive zone as a **home-plate shaped area** (as in the baseball plate). It runs from the tops of the two faceoff circles, in along the tops of the circles, down to the faceoff dots, and then angles in to the two goalposts. Shots inside it are counted as **scoring chances**; shots from the inner part of it, close to the net and between the dots, are counted as **high-danger chances**.

Some geography, in plain terms:

- **The slot** is the area straight out in front of the net, between the two faceoff circles.
- **The high slot** is the upper part of it, roughly from the level of the faceoff dots up to the tops of the circles.
- **The goalmouth** is the immediate net front — the few feet either side of the blue paint.
- **The point** is up at the blue line, where defencemen usually stand.
- **The half-wall** is the boards area level with the faceoff dot, between the corner and the point.

For reference, the end-zone faceoff circles have a **15-foot radius** (NHL Rule 1.9) and the goal crease — the blue paint — extends **six feet out from the goal line** at its deepest, with straight

side lines one foot outside each post (Rule 1.7). Those two markings are your on-ice ruler for everything below.

## Why location matters so much

The numbers are not close:

- Distance from the net is **"the single most important feature by a wide margin"** in expected-goals models — models that assign every shot a probability of becoming a goal based on where and how it was taken (Hockey Graphs (<https://hockey-graphs.com/2019/08/15/expected-goals-model-with-pre-shot-movement-part-4-variable-importance/>)).
- Shooting percentage from **outside** the dangerous area has been **under 5%** across a decade of NHL data (Micah Blake McCurdy / HockeyViz, 2007–2017, via The Coaches Site (<https://members.thecoachessite.com/article/the-problem-with-point-shots-according-to-analytics>)).
- Point shots specifically convert at roughly **3% with traffic in front and about 1% without** (Clear Sight Analytics, same source). ⚠️ **Attributed but uncheckable** — this comes from the same proprietary tracking as the Valiquette figures above and has never been independently replicated, so treat it as illustrative. **Shooting owns shot-location value**, and gives a separately sourced point-shot conversion of roughly 1–3%; take the number from there rather than from here.
- Shots taken from the middle of the ice are more dangerous than shots from sharp angles, and danger climbs steeply as you close the distance: the NHL.com summary of Sportlogiq data charts *"the percentage of goals that have been scored from the past three seasons by distance in 10-foot increments from the net"*, and says of it that *"even the tiniest bit further in can make a 5% improvement in your chances to score"* (NHL.com (<https://www.nhl.com/kraken/news/seattle-kraken-analytics-with-alison-high-danger-chances-328378484>), Alison Lukan, 27 November 2021). **Be careful with that sentence: the underlying chart is a distribution of where goals came from, so the 5% is a step between ten-foot bands of that distribution, not five percentage points added to your own shooting percentage.** The article's own phrasing blurs the two; the figure tells you the direction and steepness of the effect, not its per-shot size.

So a clean look from the slot is worth several times an unscreened shot from the blue line — not a bit more, several times. This is why "just get pucks to the net" is incomplete advice. Volume from the perimeter is not a plan; it is what a team does when it has no plan.

## The two levers you actually have

|                 |                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>      | There are only two ways to make a shot dangerous — be able to name which one you are pulling at any moment                                       |
| <b>Action</b>   | Move the puck to a dangerous place — carry it, pass it or drive it into the home-plate area before you shoot                                     |
| <b>Action</b>   | Move the goalie — take away their eyes with a screen, make them move laterally with a pass across the middle, or make them commit with a rebound |
| <b>Priority</b> | The best chances do both at once — a pass across the slot to a player already in the home-plate area                                             |

There are only two ways to make a shot dangerous, and you should be able to name which one you are pulling at any moment:

1. **Move the puck to a dangerous place.** Get it into the home-plate area before you shoot — by carrying it there, passing it there, or driving it there off a rebound.
2. **Move the goalie so a shot from anywhere becomes dangerous.** Take away their eyes with a screen, make them move laterally with a pass across the middle, or make them commit with a rebound.

The best chances do both at once: a pass across the slot to a player already in the home-plate area. That is the subject of the next section, and it is the most valuable thing you can do with a puck.

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## 2. The Royal Road — The Most Valuable Action in Offensive Hockey

### What it is

- Key** The royal road is an imaginary line down the centre of the ice, lengthwise, from the middle of one net to the middle of the other
- Key** A royal road pass — also called a slot-line, seam or cross-slot pass — crosses that line in the offensive zone immediately before a shot
- Key** Valiquette's split: green shots follow movement across the road, deflections, one-timers, screens and broken plays; red shots are clean looks with none of that
- Risk** His percentages are attributed but uncheckable — treat them as illustrative, not as data; the effect itself has been replicated on public data
- Risk** Published descriptions of where the line runs disagree — the net-to-net version used here is kept for being the more conservative instruction, not the better supported one

The **royal road** is an imaginary line running down the centre of the ice, lengthwise, from the middle of one net to the middle of the other. The term was popularised by former NHL goaltender **Steve Valiquette**, who separated shots into "green" (high-probability — preceded by movement across the road, plus deflections, one-timers, screens and broken plays) and "red" (low-probability — clean looks with no such movement).

⚠ **Attributed but uncheckable — treat as illustrative, not as data.** Green shots are reported as accounting for roughly **76% of NHL goals**, with red shots the other 24%. The figure does have a named source, contemporaneous with the data: NHL.com's Kevin Woodley reported in December 2014 that *"Valiquette said 76 percent of goals in the NHL this season have been scored off Green Shots, including 30 percent on plays that involved either a pass or possession moving across the Royal Road,"* and Ken Campbell repeated it in *The Hockey News* in February 2015. Chris Boyle, writing for the OMHA, gives the sample — Valiquette *"reviewed 100 games during the 2014/15 NHL season"* — and breaks the 76% into seven categories.

**What is missing is not the attribution but the data.** The shot-by-shot tracking, the classification rules and the counts have never been published; Clear Sight Analytics' public glossary carries none of it. Woodley's own 2014 article concedes the point: *"There is no database, at least not one available to the public, tracking every shot in the NHL with that kind of detail."* Two further cautions. The **24% is a residual**, not a measured quantity — nobody reports it directly. And the retellings do not reconcile: Boyle's seven green categories sum to 74%, not 76%,

and he puts direct red-shot goals at 18% rather than 24%. The direction of the finding is coaching consensus and survives independent testing on public data (see below); the specific number cannot be checked. Shooting carries the same figure with the same label.

**The effect itself, unlike the number, has been replicated on public data.** Alan Wells' analysis of Ryan Stimson's Passing Project — volunteer-tracked and publicly released, "51,308 shots at 5v5" counting all attempts rather than shots on goal — puts shooting percentage on attempts preceded by a royal road pass at **15.50%**, far above every other pass type tracked. More importantly, Alex Novet's public expected-goals model built on Corey Sznajder's tracking (~72,000 shots) tested whether the royal road effect is just shot location in disguise, and found it is not: "*there is a big jump in Shapley value when the pass is royal road.*" So the mechanism is real and independently supported. It is Valiquette's particular percentages that are not checkable.

 **Published descriptions of where the line actually runs do not agree.** This document uses the **net-centre-to-net-centre** version above, because it is the more common description and gives the more conservative coaching instruction. But **both** of the sources closest to Valiquette's own figures describe something narrower and zone-limited: Blue Seat Blogs has it running only from the centre bar of the net to the top of the circles, and NHL.com describes "*a line that halves the offensive zone in two below the tops of the faceoff circles*". On that reading the road stops at the top of the circles rather than spanning the rink — and it is **two-to-one against the popular version**, so the net-to-net geometry used here is kept for being the more conservative coaching instruction, not for being better supported. The framework is proprietary and the exact geometry has never been published, so the disagreement cannot be resolved from public sources. Shooting sets this out in full.

A **royal road pass** — also called a **slot-line pass**, **seam pass** or **cross-slot pass** — is a pass that crosses that centre line in the offensive zone immediately before a shot.

## Why it beats everything else

|               |                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>    | A goaltender's save is mostly positioning, not reflexes — a set goalie is already covering most of the net before the shot leaves           |
| <b>Action</b> | Make them move sideways — crossing the road forces a lateral push across the crease to re-square to the new puck position                   |
| <b>Read</b>   | They must also re-establish depth and angle, re-find the puck visually, and reset their stick and pads — which is where the five-hole opens |
| <b>Goal</b>   | Get the shot away before they finish that sequence — then it is a desperation save, not a positioning save                                  |

Because a goaltender's save is mostly *positioning*, not reflexes. A set goalie has already squared up to the puck, cut down the angle, and sealed the ice. They are, in effect, already covering most of the net before the shot leaves.

Now make them move sideways. Crossing the royal road forces the goalie to:

- **Push laterally across the crease** to re-square to the new puck position;
- **Re-establish depth and angle** on the new line, which takes time they may not have;
- **Re-find the puck visually** — their sightline was set to one side of the ice and the puck is now on the other;
- **Reset their stick and pads**, which is where technical errors creep in and the five-hole opens.

If the shot comes before they finish that sequence, they are not making a positioning save — they are making a desperation save. That is a completely different, and much worse, proposition for them.

## The evidence

- Shots following a **royal road / cross-slot pass** finished at **15.50%** — the highest-value pass type measured, roughly double the next one (Alan Wells' analysis of **Ryan Stimson's** Passing Project data, via NHL.com (<https://www.nhl.com/kraken/news/analytics-with-alison-dangerous-passes-327627898>); **volunteer-tracked, 51,308 shots at 5v5, counting all attempts rather than shots on goal** — see the sourcing note above, and carry that qualification wherever you quote the figure).
- Royal road passes are the **most important pre-shot movement variable** in expected-goals modelling — shots are much more likely to score when preceded by a pass moving

across the ice in front of the goalie (Hockey Graphs (<https://hockey-graphs.com/2019/08/15/expected-goal-s-model-with-pre-shot-movement-part-4-variable-importance/>)).

**A note on numbers you will hear quoted.** The "33% versus 3%" figure does have a traceable origin, and it is not what most people who quote it think. It comes from Chris Boyle, writing for the OMHA, reporting Valiquette's study: "*Valiquette's study identifies a shot from above the face-off circles and no lateral movement will results in around a 3% chance to score. If the attacking forward is able to cross the Royal Road through the slot, his chances increase to 33%.*" Read that carefully. Both numbers are shooting percentages, and the 3% baseline is **a distant shot from above the circles**, not the same shot taken without the crossing. It is not a clean crossed-versus-not-crossed comparison — shot distance is doing a great deal of the work, and quoting it as "cross the road and you triple your chances" overstates what was measured. Beyond that the underlying study is unpublished, and the **20-30%** range you will see in coaching material — which Special Teams does not quote but flags for exactly this reason — has no published primary source behind it at all, so treat both as illustrative rather than exact. **The 15.50% figure above is the best-sourced number here and is the one to quote.** It is an all-situations measurement of one pass type in one tracking project; nobody has published a separate power-play-only conversion rate, so if you see a higher number attached to power-play seam passes, it is not a different measurement of the same thing — it is an unsourced one.

## How to actually create one

|                  |                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>    | Look across before you look along — your first scan off the wall is the far side of the slot, the backdoor and the weak-side dot   |
| <b>Never</b>     | Scan up the wall first — most players do, and never see the seam                                                                   |
| <b>Technique</b> | Pass to where the shooter is going, not where they are — a pass into the feet costs the extra touch the goalie needed              |
| <b>Options</b>   | Carry it across yourself — the half-wall into the high slot, or curling out from behind the net into the slot, both cross the line |
| <b>Options</b>   | Use the player behind the net — a pass out from below the goal line crosses the road almost by definition                          |
| <b>Read</b>      | Expect the seam to be defended, and expect it to open only briefly                                                                 |

Knowing the concept is worthless without the habits that produce it. Four practical ones:

- **Look across before you look along.** When you receive the puck on the wall, your first scan is the far side of the slot — the **backdoor** (the far post, behind the defence) and the



weak-side dot. Only when that is dead do you look at the safe option up the wall. Most players scan in the opposite order and never see the seam.

- **Pass to where the shooter is going, not where they are.** A seam pass into a player's feet takes an extra touch, and the extra touch is exactly the time the goalie needed.
- **Carry it across yourself.** A puck carrier who cuts through the middle drags the goalie laterally the same way a pass does. Driving from the half-wall into the high slot, or curling out from behind the net into the slot, both cross the line.
- **Use the player behind the net.** A pass out from below the goal line to the slot crosses the royal road almost by definition, and the goalie has to turn their head to track it. See section 8.

**The corresponding defensive truth:** taking away the middle of the ice is the whole point of most defensive-zone systems. Expect the seam to be defended, and expect it to open only briefly. See Defensive Zone Coverage.

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### 3. Offensive Zone Structure — The Five-Man Shape

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**This section describes a coaching choice, not a law of hockey.** The structure below — three forwards rotating in an **attack triangle**, both defencemen holding the blue line, the strong-side defenceman free to pinch — is the **house default** for these documents. It is the most widely taught amateur structure. Realistic alternatives are named at the end of the section. **Find out which one your team plays.**

## F1, F2, F3 are roles, not people

|                   |                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | F1, F2 and F3 are roles defined by order of arrival — first, second and third to the puck — not by whether you are a centre or a winger |
| <b>Key</b>        | Where arrival order and depth in the zone do not coincide, arrival order is what decides the label                                      |
| <b>Convention</b> | "Hunt, help, high" is the forecheck shorthand — F1 hunts the puck, F2 helps F1, F3 stays high                                           |
| <b>Position</b>   | One player below the puck — the outlet that lets it go backwards to safety, and the one who can attack the net from behind              |
| <b>Position</b>   | One player level with the puck — close support a short pass away, in the inside lane rather than flat on the boards                     |
| <b>Position</b>   | One player above the puck — the shooting option on a low-to-high and the first line of defence if you lose it                           |
| <b>Goal</b>       | Give the puck carrier at least two options at all times; players without the puck keep moving to provide them                           |

**F1, F2 and F3 are roles defined by order of arrival — who gets to the puck first, second and third — not by whether you are a centre or a winger.** They rotate constantly, and they are reassigned every time the sequence of arrival changes. If the left winger is first in on the puck below the goal line, they are F1; if the centre is the last of the three to arrive and ends up at the top of the circle, they are F3. A common shorthand for the forecheck version is "**hunt, help, high**" — F1 hunts the puck, F2 helps F1, F3 stays high.

In an established possession, order of arrival and depth in the zone usually coincide — the first forward in is the deepest — which is why the roles map so neatly onto the below / level / above shape described next. When they do not coincide, arrival order is what decides the label.

In an established offensive-zone possession, the three forwards should always be arranged so there is:

- **One player below the puck** — deeper toward the goal line than the puck carrier. This is the outlet that lets the puck go backwards to safety, and the player who can attack the net from behind. Without them, every loss of the puck is a clean escape for the defence.
- **One player level with the puck** — close support, usually a short pass away, in the inside lane rather than flat on the boards. This is the player who receives the bump and keeps the possession alive.

- **One player above the puck** — higher in the zone, toward the top of the circles or the point. This player is the shooting option on a low-to-high pass *and* the first line of defence if you lose it.

That "below / level / above" arrangement is what forms the **attack triangle**, and it is the actual content of the advice "keep the triangle." The triangle gives you **width and depth at once**, which means the puck carrier always has at least two passing options at different angles.

Coaching material states the requirement plainly: the puck carrier should have **at least two options** at all times, and players without the puck should keep moving to provide them (Creating Offense with a 5-Man Unit ([https://cdn1.sportngin.com/attachments/document/dfc7-2294372/Creating\\_Offense\\_5\\_man\\_unit\\_Oct\\_20.pdf](https://cdn1.sportngin.com/attachments/document/dfc7-2294372/Creating_Offense_5_man_unit_Oct_20.pdf))).

## Rotation: the triangle moves, the shape does not

- |              |                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>   | The three forwards hold no fixed spots — as the puck moves, everyone rotates so the shape is preserved                                  |
| <b>Read</b>  | Puck from the half-wall down to the corner → the corner player is now F1, the old carrier rotates up, the high player holds             |
| <b>Read</b>  | Puck low-to-high to the point → the low forwards attack the net and the slot; the high forward screens or gets to the top of the circle |
| <b>Read</b>  | Puck behind the net → the net-front player becomes level support at the far post; the far-side forward slides into the slot             |
| <b>Never</b> | Let the triangle sit entirely on the perimeter — at least one forward is always in or attacking the home-plate area                     |

The three forwards do not hold fixed spots. As the puck moves, everyone rotates so the *shape* is preserved:

- Puck goes from the half-wall down to the corner → the corner player is now F1 (below/level), the old carrier rotates up, the high player holds.
- Puck goes low-to-high to the point → the low forwards attack the net and the slot; the high forward screens or gets to the top of the circle.
- Puck goes behind the net → the player who was net-front becomes the level support at the far post; the far-side forward slides into the slot.

The one non-negotiable: **at least one forward is always in or attacking the home-plate area**. A triangle that is entirely on the perimeter is just three players passing the puck around the outside of a defence that is perfectly happy about it.

## The defencemen's three depths

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | On the blue line is the default — the low-to-high outlet, the shooting threat that stops the defence collapsing, and the safety net                                    |
| <b>Technique</b> | Stay a stride inside the line, not on it — if the puck completely crosses out, the zone is gone and everyone has to re-enter                                           |
| <b>Rule</b>      | A puck leaving with attackers still inside is a delayed off-side, cleared by tagging up — offside under NHL Rule 83.1 is about skates preceding the puck into the zone |
| <b>Position</b>  | Down to the top of the circle is the activated position — shoot from a better angle, walk the line, or receive in the high slot, and still recover                     |
| <b>Risk</b>      | Below the circles is always a commitment — below the hash marks you are effectively a fourth forward                                                                   |
| <b>Never</b>     | Go that deep before someone has taken your job at the blue line — before you go, not after                                                                             |

An offensive-zone defenceman is always at one of three depths, and the difference between them is the difference between a good defenceman and a liability:

1. **On the blue line (the point).** The default. You are the outlet for low-to-high, the shooting threat that stops the defence collapsing entirely, and the safety net against a counter-attack. Stay a stride *inside* the line, not on it — if the puck completely crosses out, the zone is cleared and everyone has to re-enter. (To be precise, that is not "offside": offside under Rule 83.1 is about attackers' skates preceding the puck *into* the zone. A puck leaving with attackers still inside creates a **delayed off-side**, which your teammates clear by tagging up — see Rules Primer. The practical cost is the same, though: you have lost the zone.)
2. **Down to the top of the circle.** The activated position. You step down to shoot from a better angle, to walk the line toward the middle, or to receive a pass in the high slot. You are still recoverable: you can turn and get back to the line before most counter-attacks develop.
3. **Below the circles — too deep.** Not always wrong, but always a commitment. If you go below the hash marks (the short lines at the sides of the faceoff circles), you are effectively a fourth forward and someone must take your job at the blue line *before* you go, not after.

## Who covers for whom

|                   |                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | If one defenceman leaves the blue line, the other stays — two on the line at all times is the house default, not a law           |
| <b>Options</b>    | Teams running a five-man rotation, or green-lighting both defencemen, cover the line with whichever player is highest instead    |
| <b>Action</b>     | If a defenceman goes below the line and gets the puck, they play as a forward until the play ends — F3 fills in at the blue line |
| <b>Action</b>     | If a defenceman goes down and does not get the puck, recover defensive position first, then look to attack again                 |
| <b>Never</b>      | Chase after a failed activation — that is how odd-man rushes against you start                                                   |
| <b>Action</b>     | Say it out loud — "I'm going", "I've got you", "hold"; silent rotations are the ones that leave the blue line empty              |

These are the house default's rules, not laws of hockey, and they are short and worth memorising:

- **If one defenceman leaves the blue line, the other stays.** You want two players on the line at all times. This is the near-universal amateur default and the assumption to play on if nobody has told you otherwise — but teams running a **five-man rotation**, or giving both defencemen a standing green light, deliberately break it and cover the line with whichever player is highest. See the pinch note at the end of section 10 and Forechecking Systems.
- **If a defenceman goes below the line and gets the puck**, they play as a forward until the play ends — and **F3 must fill in at the blue line for them**.
- **If a defenceman goes down and does *not* get the puck**, their first job is to recover defensive position, then look to attack again. Chasing after a failed activation is how odd-man rushes against you start.
- **Say it out loud.** "I'm going," "I've got you," "hold." Silent rotations are the ones that leave the blue line empty. See On-Ice Communication.

## Realistic alternatives

- Options** Overload / strong-side load — four players on the puck side, one weak-side outlet; wins board battles, gives up the weak-side seam
- Options** Five-man rotation — defencemen rotate into forward spots and forwards cover the line as routine rather than emergency
- Options** 1-3-1 spread — one at the point, two half-walls, one bumper in the middle, one net front; common on the power play
- Risk** The five-man rotation requires everyone to be comfortable at the blue line
- Never** Confuse the bumper with the net-front player — two different jobs at two different depths

- **Overload / strong-side load.** Four players are loaded onto the puck side, with only one weak-side outlet. Wins board battles and grinds teams down; gives up the weak-side seam and the quick change of point.
- **Five-man rotation ("position-less" or high cycle).** Defencemen rotate into forward spots and forwards cover the line as a matter of routine rather than emergency. This is how modern NHL teams with skating defencemen play. It requires everyone to be comfortable at the blue line.
- **1-3-1 spread.** One at the point, two on the half-walls, one **bumper** in the middle of the ice between them, one net front. Common on the power play (see Special Teams) and occasionally used at even strength. **The bumper is not the net-front player** — they are two different jobs at two different depths.

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## 4. Cycling

### What it is

- Key** A cycle rotates the forwards around the low offensive zone — corner, half-wall, behind the net — protecting the puck from the defence
- Action** Move the puck short distances, a few feet at a time, and rotate through the positions
- Goal** Make the defence keep re-solving the same problem

A **cycle** is a possession tactic in which the forwards rotate around the low offensive zone — corner, half-wall, behind the net — passing the puck short distances to each other while protecting it from the defence. Think of a wheel: the puck moves a few feet at a time, the players rotate through the positions, and the defence has to keep re-solving the same problem.

## Why it works

- Goal** Force defenders to move and decide repeatedly — every rotation asks "collapse low or hold the slot?", and over 30 or 40 seconds someone answers wrong
- Key** It is a low-turnover way to hold the puck — board passes that fail do not become odd-man rushes; passes through the middle do
- Goal** Tire the defenders — they skate without the puck and cannot change, and tired coverage shrinks toward the puck, which opens the slot
- Goal** Buy time for your defencemen and late forwards to join and get set

- **It forces defenders to move and decide, repeatedly.** Each rotation asks the defence "do you collapse low or hold the slot?" Over 30 or 40 seconds of this, someone answers wrong.
- **It is a low-turnover way to hold the puck.** Passes along the boards, away from the middle of the ice, do not become odd-man rushes when they fail. Passes through the middle do.
- **It tires the defenders.** They are skating without the puck, which is far more exhausting than skating with it, and they cannot change lines. A tired defender's coverage shrinks toward the puck, which opens the slot.
- **It buys time for your defencemen and late forwards to join.** A cycle that lasts eight seconds is often just a cycle that lasted long enough for your point men to get set.

## The mechanics

|                  |                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Technique</b> | Low-to-low — pass backwards and down to a teammate arriving behind you, then rotate up into the space they just left                     |
| <b>Read</b>      | If the checker is still in front of you, rim it — onward around the boards, past the player sealing you to the wall                      |
| <b>Read</b>      | If the checker has skated past you, reverse it — back against the flow, into the space they have just vacated                            |
| <b>Risk</b>      | Picking the wrong one of those two is the most common cycle turnover                                                                     |
| <b>Technique</b> | Bump pass — fire the puck hard at a spot on the wall, not at your teammate, and call it; a bump nobody expects is a turnover             |
| <b>Technique</b> | Pivot / cutback — cut back up the wall you came down; a defender committed toward the corner cannot turn as fast as you                  |
| <b>Options</b>   | Scissor / switch — carrier and support skate at each other and cross, support passing on the outside; the carrier may drop it or keep it |

**Low-to-low (the true cycle).** The puck carrier on the half-wall or in the corner passes the puck **backwards and down** to a teammate arriving behind them, then rotates up into the space their teammate just left. Two variants matter and they are not the same play:

- **Rim** — the puck goes *onward* around the boards, following the curve of the rink, past the checker who is sealing you against the wall. Beats pressure that has you pinned.
- **Reverse** — the puck goes *back against the flow*, into the space a checker has just skated out of. Beats pressure that has over-committed and gone past you.

Picking the wrong one is the most common cycle turnover. The rule of thumb: **if the checker is still in front of you, rim it; if they have skated past you, reverse it.**

**The bump pass off the wall.** Rather than passing to a teammate directly, you fire the puck hard into the boards so it caroms to a spot. It is unblockable by a stick in the passing lane and it does not care about a defender standing between you. Aim at a *spot on the wall*, not at your teammate, and call it — a bump nobody expects is a turnover.

**The pivot / cutback.** You skate down the boards, run out of space, and cut back to skate back up the wall where you came from. This is the single most effective individual cycle move, because a defender who has committed their momentum toward the corner cannot change direction as fast as you can. It buys you two or three seconds and it usually opens the low-to-high pass.



**Low-to-high.** The puck goes up to the point or the top of the circle. Covered in full in section 5.

**The scissor / switch.** The puck carrier and a supporting teammate skate towards each other and cross, with the support player passing on the outside. The carrier can drop the puck or keep it. Defenders who are switching assignments during a scissor are defenders who are briefly covering nobody.

## When to cycle and when to attack the net

- Read** Cycle when the defence is set, structured and between you and the net, and no dangerous shot exists
- Read** Cycle when your defencemen are not yet established at the line, or you are protecting a lead and burning clock with possession
- Read** Attack immediately when a defender turns their back to the puck, or a defenceman pinches and the ice behind them opens
- Read** Attack immediately when the slot is unoccupied by a defender, or the goalie is moving or unset
- Read** Attack immediately when your net-front player has beaten their check to the inside

### Cycle when:

- The defence is set, structured and between you and the net;
- No dangerous shot exists and forcing one means a low-percentage attempt or a turnover;
- Your defencemen are not yet established at the line;
- You are protecting a lead or trying to burn clock with possession (see Game Management).

### Stop cycling and attack immediately when:

- A defender turns their back to the puck;
- A defenceman pinches or over-commits and the ice behind them opens;
- The slot is unoccupied by a defender;
- A goalie is moving or unset;
- Your net-front player has beaten their check to the inside.

## The failure: cycling for its own sake

- Key** A cycle is a set-up, not an outcome
- Never** Cycle for its own sake — three or four rotations that never threaten the net burn thirty seconds at zero risk to the defence
- Goal** End the cycle in one of four things — a shot from home plate, a royal road pass, a low-to-high with a screen, or a net drive
- Risk** Nobody in front of the net means even a good shot has no tip, no screen and no rebound support
- Read** If the puck never goes above the goal line and never goes to the middle, you are passing around the outside of a box with no reason to move

This is the defining amateur error in the offensive zone. A team gets the puck low, cycles it around three or four times, looks organised and busy, and never once threatens the net. The defence is entirely content — you have used up thirty seconds of your own shift, in their zone, at zero risk to them.

**A cycle is a set-up, not an outcome.** If a cycle does not end in one of: a shot from the home-plate area, a royal road pass, a low-to-high with a screen, or a net drive, it did not accomplish anything. Two clear symptoms:

- **Nobody is in front of the net.** Cycling with an empty goalmouth means even a good shot has no tip, no screen and no rebound support.
  - **The puck never goes above the goal line and never goes to the middle.** You are passing along the outside of a box that has no reason to move.
-

## 5. Low-to-High

### The play

|                  |                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>    | Pass from a low position — corner, half-wall, behind the net — up to a defenceman at the point or the top of the circle, who shoots |
| <b>Read</b>      | The standard way to generate a shot when the defence has collapsed low and taken away everything in tight                           |
| <b>Action</b>    | The passer feeds the point then supports toward the strong-side hash marks — bail-out outlet and rebound position                   |
| <b>Technique</b> | The defenceman walks the puck toward the middle before shooting — it changes the angle, moves the goalie laterally and opens a lane |
| <b>Position</b>  | One forward to the net front to screen and tip; one supporting in the high slot to form a triangle with the point                   |
| <b>Read</b>      | The weak-side defenceman reads for a rebound squirting to their side and is ready to jump on it                                     |
| <b>Options</b>   | D-to-D across the top first — the goalie has to slide and the shot comes from the other side                                        |

**Low-to-high** means passing the puck from a low position (corner, half-wall, behind the net) up to a defenceman at the point or the top of the circle, who shoots. It is the standard way to generate a shot when the defence has collapsed low and taken away everything in tight.

The sequence, with everyone's job named:

1. **The passer** feeds the point and then **supports** — skating toward the strong-side hash marks, both to be an outlet if the defenceman needs a bail-out and to be in position for a rebound.
2. **The defenceman** receives it and **walks the puck toward the middle** before shooting. This matters enormously: walking the line changes the angle, forces the goalie to track laterally, and often opens a lane through the shot-blockers.
3. **One forward gets to the net front** to screen and tip.
4. **One forward supports in the high slot**, giving the defenceman a second option and forming a triangle with the point — meaning the puck can be moved again quickly instead of being fired into a shin pad.

5. **The weak-side defenceman** reads for a rebound squirting to their side and is ready to jump on it.

A common addition is **D-to-D across the top** before the shot: the strong-side defenceman moves it to their partner, the goalie has to slide across, and the shot comes from the other side. On the net-centre-to-net-centre geometry this document uses, that is a royal road crossing at the top of the zone — less valuable than one in the slot, but far better than a static point shot. *(Under the narrower, zone-limited description of the road noted in Section 2, a lateral pass out at the blue line would not cross it at all. The coaching point survives either way: the goalie still has to slide, and a shot arriving before they are set is worth more than one arriving after.)*

## Why it beats a cycle that never shoots

- Goal** Release the puck — a screened point shot produces a rebound, a tip, a scramble, a whistle in your favour and a line change for you
- Key** Even at a low conversion rate with traffic, the shot generates chaos in the home-plate area — and that is where goals live
- Never** Cycle without ever releasing — it produces none of that

Because a shot from the point with a screen and a net-front presence produces things a cycle does not: a **rebound**, a **tip**, a **scramble**, a **whistle in your favour**, a **line change for you** and none for them. Even at a 3% conversion rate with traffic, the shot generates chaos in the home-plate area, and chaos in the home-plate area is where goals live. A cycle that never releases produces none of that.

## The honest caveat

- Key** Low-to-high is a means, not an end — point shots are the lowest-percentage shots on the ice and are blocked more often than any others
- Risk** They also generate fewer rebounds than shots from lower in the zone
- Priority** Low-to-high is only worth doing when the net front is occupied — a screen, a tip threat and two players hunting the rebound
- Never** Fire it from the point with nobody in front — the identical shot is a giveaway with extra steps

Low-to-high is a *means*, not an end. Remember the numbers from section 1: point shots are the **lowest-percentage shots on the ice**, they are **blocked more often** than shots from anywhere else, and analysis by Alex Novet found they **generate fewer rebounds** than shots from lower in the zone (via The Coaches Site (<https://members.thecoachessite.com/article/the-problem-with-point-shots-according-to-analytics>)).

There is a real-world cautionary tale here. The Seattle Kraken under Dave Hakstol built an offensive-zone scheme heavily around low-to-high and generated the third-most point shots per sixty minutes in the league — while producing shots with the **lowest expected value per shot of any team** (Sound of Hockey (<https://soundofhockey.com/2022/03/30/kraken-coach-dave-hakstols-scheme-and-philosophies-offensive-zone-plays-part-7/>), 2021-22 season). **Both quoted phrases were checked against that page verbatim on 28 July 2026 — but neither number is Sound of Hockey's own.** The article credits the point-shot rate to **Corey Sznajder's** manual tracking and the expected-value figure to **TopDownHockey/JFreshHockey**, which it labels "paid access". Neither underlying dataset is public, so this is a secondary source restating two private ones; treat it as a reported anecdote about one team in one season, not as a checkable statistic.

The lesson is not "don't go low-to-high." It is: **low-to-high is only worth doing when the net front is occupied.** A point shot with a screen, a tip threat and two players hunting the rebound is a good play. The identical shot with nobody in front is a giveaway with extra steps.

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## 6. Net-Front Play

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The net front is the least glamorous and most productive real estate in hockey. It is also the place where players most often do the job badly while believing they are doing it.

## Screening

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | At the edge of the blue paint, inside the faceoff dots — roughly six to eight feet out, living just beyond the arc                                                            |
| <b>Technique</b> | Stand between the goalie's eyes and the puck, not between the goalie and the net — slide with the point man as they walk the line                                             |
| <b>Technique</b> | Chest up and square to the shooter, hips low, feet wide, knees bent — the posture of a squat, not of a bow                                                                    |
| <b>Action</b>    | Be still at the moment of release — constant shuffling gives the goalie flashes of the puck through the gaps                                                                  |
| <b>Never</b>     | Watch the shot — look at the puck through your legs or over your shoulder, then get your eyes back to the ice in front of you                                                 |
| <b>Rule</b>      | A screen from outside the crease without contact is normally legal, but NHL Rule 69.1 disallows a goal where positioning alone impairs the goalie's ability to move or defend |

A **screen** is standing in the goaltender's line of sight so they cannot see the puck. **A screen from outside the crease, without contact, is normally legal**, and referees allow it constantly. The one qualification — see the rules section below — is that Rule 69.1 lets a goal be disallowed where an attacker impairs the goalie's ability to move freely or defend the goal "*either by his positioning or by contact*", so positioning alone can cost you the goal if you crowd him tightly enough. Short of that, standing in front of a goaltender is a legitimate play.

The mechanics of doing it well:

- **Stand between the goalie's eyes and the puck, not between the goalie and the net.** These are different lines, and they change as the puck moves. If the point man walks the line, you must slide with them to stay on the line. A screen that was correct three seconds ago is now just a player standing near the net.
- **Tall chest, low hips — the two halves do different jobs.** Keep your **chest up and square to the shooter** so you present the biggest possible obstruction to the goalie's sightline; crouching, turning sideways or ducking away from the shot all shrink the surface you are blocking and let the goalie find the puck around you. At the same time keep your **hips low and your feet wide, knees bent** — that is what stops a defenceman moving you. Standing tall *and* narrow, with straight legs, is why players get shoved out of the paint; folding at the waist is why goalies see the shot. You want the posture of a squat, not of a bow.

- **Be still at the moment of release.** Plant and obstruct. Constant shuffling gives the goalie flashes of the puck through the gaps.
- **Do not watch the shot.** Look at the puck through your legs or over your shoulder, then get your eyes back to the ice in front of you. Turning your body to follow the flight of the shot is how you both un-screen the goalie and miss the rebound.
- **Position: at the edge of the blue paint, inside the faceoff dots — roughly six to eight feet out from the goal line.** Deep enough to obstruct the goalie's view and to reach rebounds, far enough out to stay clear of the crease. Note the geometry, because it is easy to get wrong: the crease is **8 feet wide at the goal line and 6 feet deep**, because the arc that closes it is struck with a **six-foot radius from the centre of the goal line** (Rule 1.7) — the six feet is the *depth*, not the half-width. So "three feet out from the goal line" is *inside* the paint, not clear of it. Live just beyond the arc.

## Tips and deflections

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Technique</b> | Blade on the ice, always — the overwhelming majority of tippable pucks come in low                                                                                              |
| <b>Key</b>       | You are redirecting, not shooting — ten to thirty degrees beats a set goalie, and a big swing usually misses the puck entirely                                                  |
| <b>Technique</b> | Angle the blade, absorb slightly, do not follow through — hard hands send it into the glass                                                                                     |
| <b>Action</b>    | Present a target — hold the blade out in the lane where you want the puck, and shout for it                                                                                     |
| <b>Rule</b>      | A puck contacting an attacking player's stick above the height of the crossbar is not a goal (NHL Rules 80.3 and 78.5(vi)) — where it hits the stick is what counts, so tip low |
| <b>Rule</b>      | A puck deflected in off your skate or body is a good goal with no distinct kicking motion (NHL Rules 78.4 and 78.5(ii)) and no deliberate hand or body bat (78.5(i))            |

A **tip** or **deflection** is changing the direction of an incoming shot with your stick blade. It is devastating because it destroys the goalie's read: they have tracked and set for a puck travelling one way, and it is now travelling another way from six feet out.

- **Blade on the ice, always.** The overwhelming majority of tippable pucks come in low. A stick held off the ice at the net front is a stick doing nothing.
- **You are redirecting, not shooting.** A small change of angle — ten to thirty degrees — is enough to beat a set goalie. A big swing usually misses the puck entirely.

- **Angle the blade, absorb slightly, do not follow through.** Soft hands change direction; hard hands send it into the glass.
- **Present a target.** Shooters at the point aim at the tipper's stick. Hold the blade out in the lane where you want the puck, and shout for it.

**Two rules to know before you tip.** Both are in the NHL rulebook and both cost teams goals every season:

- **A puck that enters the net after contacting an attacking player's stick above the height of the crossbar is not a goal** (Rules 80.3 and 78.5(vi)). Rule 80.3 is the fuller statement: *"When an attacking player causes the puck to enter the opponent's goal by contacting the puck above the height of the crossbar, either directly or deflected off any player or official, the goal shall not be allowed. The determining factor is where the puck makes contact with the stick. If the puck makes contact with the stick at or below the level of the crossbar and enters the goal, this goal shall be allowed."* It is where the puck contacts the stick that matters, not where your hands are. Tip low.
- **A puck deflected into the net off your skate or body is a good goal** — provided there is **no "distinct kicking motion"** (Rules 78.4 and 78.5(ii)), and provided you did not deliberately bat it in with your hand or body (Rule 78.5(i)). So you may absolutely turn your skate to redirect a puck; you may not kick it.

## Hunting rebounds

|                |                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>    | Anticipate where it goes — a pad tends to squirt back toward the corner it came from, a blocker to the shooter's off side, a chest to drop in the paint |
| <b>Risk</b>    | Treat those as tendencies, not rules — a goalie angling their surfaces deliberately will break all three on purpose                                     |
| <b>Action</b>  | Shoot it back immediately — do not settle it, do not look up; the window is one or two seconds while the goalie is down                                 |
| <b>Options</b> | Go to the far post when you get tied up — nobody is covering it and it opens the weak-side chance                                                       |
| <b>Key</b>     | The defending team recovers roughly 60% of rebounds (Alex Novet, via The Coaches Site) — you win that race by being there before the shot               |

- **Anticipate where it goes, don't react to where it went.** The rough tendencies: a puck hitting a pad tends to squirt back toward the corner it came from, a puck hitting the blocker toward the shooter's off side, a puck hitting the chest to drop in the paint. **Treat these as**



**tendencies, not rules** — they are coaching craft, not measured rebound distributions, and a goalie who is angling their surfaces deliberately (which is what Goaltender teaches them to do) will break all three on purpose. Know where the shot is coming from, pre-load your feet that way, and be ready to be wrong.

- **Shoot it back immediately.** Do not settle it, do not look up. The window is one or two seconds, while the goalie is down and out of position.
- **Go to the far post when you get tied up.** If your check has sealed you off from the near side, the far post is a rebound location nobody is covering and it opens the weak-side chance.
- **Understand the odds.** The defending team recovers roughly **60% of rebounds** (Alex Novet, via The Coaches Site). That is exactly why the net-front job is a *job* and not a bonus — you have to be there, deliberately, before the shot, or you lose that race by default.

## Goaltender interference — the actual standard

- |              |                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>  | NHL Rule 69.1 — an attacker's position, inside or outside the crease, should not by itself determine whether a goal is allowed                                                        |
| <b>Rule</b>  | NHL Rule 69.1 — a goal is disallowed where you impair the goalie's ability to move freely within the crease or defend the goal, by positioning or by contact                          |
| <b>Rule</b>  | NHL Rule 69.1 — a goal is disallowed where you initiate intentional or deliberate contact with the goalie, in or out of the crease; 69.2 penalises it whether or not a goal is scored |
| <b>Rule</b>  | Outside the crease (NHL 69.1, 69.4), incidental contact is permitted and the goal stands, provided you made a reasonable effort to avoid it                                           |
| <b>Rule</b>  | Inside the crease (NHL 69.3), contact you initiate voids the goal, and a significant vision-obstructing position voids it with no contact at all                                      |
| <b>Rule</b>  | NHL Rule 69.7 — on a rebound, or a simultaneous race for a loose puck, incidental contact is permitted in or out of the crease and the goal is allowed                                |
| <b>Rule</b>  | USA Hockey Rule 625(b) is a flat position rule — no goal with an attacking player in the crease unless the puck preceded them in, and standing in it costs you the zone               |
| <b>Never</b> | Plant your feet in the blue paint — staying out keeps your goal under NHL rules, and your possession under IIHF and USA Hockey rules                                                  |

This is the most misunderstood rule in the offensive zone, so here is what **NHL Rule 69** actually says.

**The governing premise (69.1):** an attacking player's *position*, whether inside or outside the crease, **should not by itself** determine whether a goal is allowed. Goals are disallowed only if:

1. an attacking player, **by positioning or by contact, impairs the goalkeeper's ability to move freely within the crease or defend the goal**; or
2. an attacking player **initiates intentional or deliberate contact** with the goalkeeper, inside or outside the crease.

"Contact" means any contact between goalie and attacker, **by stick or by any part of the body**.

**Outside the crease (69.1, 69.4): incidental contact is permitted and the goal stands**, provided you made a **reasonable effort to avoid** the contact. Contact that is more than incidental disallows the goal. A goalie outside the crease is explicitly **not "fair game"** — but incidental contact is permitted when they are playing the puck outside the crease and you tried to avoid it.

**Inside the crease (69.3):** this is much stricter. If you **initiate contact with a goalie who is in the crease — incidental or otherwise — and a goal is scored, the goal is disallowed**. Further, if you **establish a significant position within the crease so as to obstruct the goalie's vision and impair their ability to defend the goal**, the goal is disallowed even with no contact at all. "Significant position" means your body, or a substantial part of it, in the crease for **more than an instantaneous period**.

**This is the practical line to remember: screening from outside the blue paint, without contact, is normally legal and you should do it constantly. Screening from inside the blue paint is not** — and even outside it, clause (1) above means positioning alone can void a goal if it stops the goalie moving or defending. Some coaching resources say you may stand in the crease as long as you are "playing the puck" — that overstates it, and Rule 69.3 is explicit that a sustained vision-obstructing position inside the crease will void a goal. Keep your feet out of the paint.

### **Three more provisions worth knowing:**

- **Rebounds and loose pucks (69.7):** in a rebound situation, or where you and the goalie are simultaneously going for a loose puck, **incidental contact is permitted inside or outside the crease and the goal is allowed**. This is the exception that lets net-front players do their job in a scramble.

- **Pushed into the goalie (69.1):** if a **defender** pushes, shoves or fouls you into the goalie, that is **not treated as contact initiated by you** — provided you made a reasonable effort to avoid it. Conversely, if **you** push a defender into their own goalie, that **counts as contact initiated by you** and the goal is disallowed.
- **Penalty (69.2):** intentional or deliberate contact with a goalie draws a penalty **whether or not a goal is scored**.

**Rule-set note — USA Hockey is materially stricter, and it changes how you play the net front.** Everything above is the NHL standard. **USA Hockey Rule 625(b)** does not run the NHL's "position alone is not determinative" test at all. It reads: *"No goal may be scored with an attacking player in the goal crease unless the puck has preceded the player(s) into the goal crease or the goalkeeper is out of the goal crease area."* That is a flat position rule — no contact and no impairment required. The same clause also stops play before you get that far: *"A face-off shall be conducted at the nearest neutral zone face-off spot any time an attacking player stands, holds their stick, or skates through the goal crease provided the puck is in the attacking zone, the attacking team has possession of the puck and the goalkeeper is in contact with the crease."* So under USA Hockey rules a foot in the paint does not just risk the goal — it costs you the zone. The crease for this purpose includes the crease lines themselves and the space above, up to the height of the goal frame. The one relief: if a **defender** physically interferes with you and that is what puts you in the crease, play continues and a legal goal counts.

**The IIHF standard is the NHL's, with one addition. IIHF Rule 69** carries the same number and substantially the same text as the NHL's: the same "position alone should not by itself determine whether a goal is allowed" premise, the same two disallowing conditions, the same incidental-contact allowance outside the crease, the same "significant position within the goal crease" test in 69.3 (body or a substantial part of it in the crease for "more than an instantaneous period of time"), and the same rebound exception in 69.7. Two differences worth knowing. The IIHF text says *"relevant contact"* where the NHL says *"contact"*, and tells the referee to weigh *"the degree and nature of the relevant contact with the goalkeeper"* over the goalie's exact location. And IIHF Rule 69.1 adds a provision the NHL does not have: *"If an attacking Player is in the goal crease and does not leave immediately, the Referee has the possibility to stop the game and the subsequent 'face-off' shall take place at the nearest neutral zone face-off spot outside the attacking zone of the offending team."* So internationally, as under USA Hockey, loitering in the paint can cost you the zone without anyone needing to score first.

**The practical consequence is the same instruction under all three, only harder as you go: stay out of the blue paint.** Under NHL rules that keeps your goal; under IIHF and USA Hockey rules it also keeps your possession.

Many rec and beer leagues impose a stricter house rule still — commonly "no contact with the goaltender at all, ever, and any goal with a player in the crease is waved off." That is not just hearsay: the **CARHA Hockey Official Rule Book**, which a large number of Canadian adult leagues play under, writes it into **Rule 66(b)**: "*Unless the puck is in the goal crease area, a player of the attacking side may not stand in the goal crease. If the puck should enter the net while such conditions prevail, the goal shall not be allowed.*" Same clause makes any physical contact that impedes the goalkeeper's movement a minor, with no incidental-contact allowance of the kind the NHL and IIHF give you. The one relief is the same as USA Hockey's: if a defender put you there, the goal counts. **Read your own league's rule before you plant yourself in the goalmouth.**

## 7. Working the Half-Wall

The **half-wall** is the boards area level with the faceoff dot, between the corner and the point. It is the winger's home base in the offensive zone (see Winger) and the most common place from which offensive-zone possessions are organised.

It is a good place to hold the puck because you have the boards protecting one side, you can see the whole zone, and you are equidistant from four different plays.

### The four options from the half-wall

- Action** Know all four before the puck arrives, and know which one is on
- Options** Low — to the corner or behind the net; the safe continuation that feeds the cycle and resets the defence's problem
- Options** High — to the point; the low-to-high shot generator, best when the defence has collapsed and left the point unpressured
- Options** Middle — the seam pass into the slot or the backdoor; highest value, highest risk, shortest window
- Options** Yourself — drive the net or cut to the middle, best when your check is flat-footed or has turned their hips
- Never** Arrive on the half-wall with only one option in mind — you will play it regardless of whether the slot was open

Know all four before the puck arrives, and know which is on:

1. **Low — to the corner or behind the net.** The safe continuation. Feeds the cycle, keeps possession, resets the defence's problem.
2. **High — to the point.** The low-to-high shot generator. Best when the defence has collapsed low and left the point unpressured.
3. **Middle — the seam pass into the slot or the backdoor.** The royal road pass. Highest value, highest risk, shortest window.
4. **Yourself — drive the net or cut to the middle.** Attack the inside off the wall. Best when your check is flat-footed, has turned their hips, or has over-committed to taking away a pass.

The failure is having only one of these in mind. A player who arrives on the half-wall intending to pass to the point will do that regardless of whether the slot was open.

## Buying time

|                  |                                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Technique</b> | Cut back — skate a few feet toward the corner and cut back up the wall; the defender's momentum has to reverse, yours does not                      |
| <b>Technique</b> | Delay and curl — turn away from pressure, protect the puck and curl toward the middle into open ice, coming out facing the ice                      |
| <b>Technique</b> | Receive with your body between checker and puck, then spin off — turning into pressure immediately is how you get pinned                            |
| <b>Never</b>     | Put your back to the boards, and never duck — skates parallel to the wall, forearm and hip to the wall, head up; this outranks everything else here |
| <b>Options</b>   | Bump it to the level-support player and take an immediate return pass — it resets the defender's read entirely                                      |
| <b>Action</b>    | Feet moving, always — a stationary player on the wall gets pinned; one with momentum can go three directions                                        |

You often need two more seconds than you have. Ways to manufacture them:

- **Cut back.** Skate a few feet toward the corner and cut back up the wall. The defender's momentum has to be reversed; yours does not.
- **Delay and curl.** Turn away from the pressure, protect the puck, and curl toward the middle — into open ice, never with your back against the wall; the safety qualifier two bullets down governs this one too. Coming out of the curl you will be facing the ice with your options refreshed.

- **Don't turn into pressure first.** When you receive the puck under pressure, take it with your body between checker and puck, then spin off. Turning into pressure immediately is how you get pinned. **Safety qualifier that outranks all of this:** the orientation to aim for at the wall is skates parallel to the boards, forearm and hip to the wall, head up — never your back to the boards, never duck. Chest-square to the wall is the fallback, not the target. See Body Contact and Battles.
- **Bump it and get it back.** A short pass to the level-support player and an immediate return pass re-sets the defender's read entirely, and often you get the puck back in more space than you gave it away in.
- **Feet moving, always.** A stationary player on the wall gets pinned. A player with momentum can go three directions.

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## 8. Behind the Net as an Attacking Position

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Behind the net is not where the puck goes to die. It is one of the best attacking positions on the ice, and most amateur teams treat it as a place you end up rather than a place you go on purpose.

### Why it is so good

- Key** From behind the goal line you look up at the whole zone with all five defenders and the goalie in front of you
- Key** You cannot be checked from behind — a defender can only pressure you from one of two sides, and you see them coming
- Read** Every time the puck crosses behind the net the goalie must pick a post and rotate — every rotation is a moment they are not square
- Key** Passes from below the goal line finished at 6.73%, second only to royal road passes — volunteer-tracked Passing Project data, 51,308 shots at 5v5, all attempts

- **You can see everything and nobody can see you the same way.** From behind the goal line you are looking *up* at the whole zone with all five defenders and the goalie in front of you. You have the best view on the ice and the defence has to defend with their backs to their own net.

- **You cannot be checked from behind.** There is nothing behind you but the end boards. A defender can only pressure you from one of two sides, and you can see them coming.
- **The goalie has to turn their head.** Every time the puck crosses behind the net, the goalie must decide which post to seal and rotate to track you. Every rotation is a moment when they are not square to a shot.
- **Passes out to the slot are exceptionally dangerous.** Passes originating below the goal line finished at **6.73%** — the second-most dangerous pass type measured, behind only royal road passes (Alan Wells' analysis of **Ryan Stimson's** Passing Project data, via NHL.com (<https://www.nhl.com/kraken/news/analytics-with-alison-dangerous-passes-327627898>); **volunteer-tracked, 51,308 shots at 5v5, counting all attempts rather than shots on goal**).

## What to do from there

|                |                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>  | Pass out to the slot — the primary play, not the last resort; look for the high-slot forward or the backdoor player                                                    |
| <b>Options</b> | The wrap-around — carry round the post and stuff it far side before the goalie seals; best as a threat, because sealing hard opens the slot pass                       |
| <b>Options</b> | The walkout — come out into the slot yourself on your forehand, crossing the royal road with the puck                                                                  |
| <b>Options</b> | The bank off the goalie — from a tight angle behind the goal line, off the back of their pads into the net; legal, and occasionally free                               |
| <b>Options</b> | Reverse or rim to restart the cycle if nothing is on — possession retained is a perfectly good outcome                                                                 |
| <b>Rule</b>    | The goalkeeper's restricted area restricts only the goaltender (geometry NHL Rule 1.8, penalty 27.8 / 63.2(viii)) — skaters may go anywhere behind the net at any time |
| <b>Read</b>    | In England and Wales the restricted area's status is unsettled (Rules & Regulations 22.3) — plan as though their goalie may retrieve a dumped puck                     |

- **Pass out to the slot.** This is the primary play, not the last resort. Look for the high-slot forward or the backdoor player. Because the pass comes from below the goal line, it crosses the royal road and arrives at a player already inside the home-plate area — the two most valuable properties a pass can have.
- **The wrap-around.** Carry the puck around the post and try to stuff it in on the far side before the goalie can push across and seal. It works when the goalie has committed to the near post, and it is at its best as a *threat*: a goalie who fears the wrap seals hard to the post, which opens the pass to the slot.

- **The walkout.** Come out from behind the net into the slot yourself, on your forehand, with the puck. You cross the royal road carrying the puck and you arrive in the most dangerous area on the ice.
- **The bank off the goalie.** Legal, and occasionally free. From a tight angle behind the goal line you can bank the puck off the back of the goalie's pads into the net.
- **Reverse or rim to restart the cycle.** If nothing is on, feed it back out to the corner you came from or rim it to the far corner and rotate. Possession retained is a perfectly good outcome.

**Rules note — the trapezoid does not apply to you.** The **goalkeeper's restricted area** (the trapezoid behind the net — geometry from NHL **Rule 1.8**, penalty from **Rules 27.8 / 63.2(viii)**; never take dimensions from 27.8, whose "six feet from either goal post" is stale pre-2014 wording) restricts only the **goaltender's** ability to play the puck behind the goal line. Skaters may go anywhere behind the net at any time. Also note that the trapezoid exists in the NHL, KHL and IIHF play but **not** in most rec, beer-league and youth associations — which changes the calculus of dumping the puck in, because their goalie may be allowed to retrieve it anywhere. 🇬🇧 **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. 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.

---

## 9. Attacking Off the Rush vs Attacking Off a Set Possession

---

These are two different games and most amateur teams have only one of them.



## Off the rush

|                |                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>    | You enter with speed and attack before the defence is set — the chance comes from numbers and momentum                                                |
| <b>Key</b>     | Chances appear in the first three or four seconds and then vanish; speed and the moment of entry are the resource                                     |
| <b>Options</b> | The late-arriving trailer into the high slot, the drive to the net that occupies a defender, and the delay — curling back to let a second wave arrive |
| <b>Key</b>     | Shots off the rush are more dangerous than equivalent shots from a set possession, because the goalie is also moving and re-establishing depth        |

You enter the zone with speed and attack before the defence is set. The chance comes from **numbers and momentum** — a 2-on-1, a 3-on-2, a trailer arriving late into space.

- The defining resource is **speed and the moment of entry**. Chances appear in the first three or four seconds and then vanish.
- The high-value plays are the **late-arriving trailer** into the high slot, the **drive to the net** that occupies a defender, and the **delay** — curling back up toward the blue line to let a second wave arrive.
- Shots off the rush are more dangerous than equivalent shots from a set possession, because the goalie is also moving and re-establishing depth.
- Full treatment of getting into the zone in the first place is in Zone Entries.

## Off a set possession

|                |                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>    | The defence is established, everyone is back and nothing is open — the chance comes from movement and patience                        |
| <b>Key</b>     | The defining resource is time on the puck and the willingness to hold it                                                              |
| <b>Options</b> | Cycle, low-to-high with a screen, seam pass, net-front chaos, behind-the-net feed                                                     |
| <b>Read</b>    | Coverage lapses arrive after a long shift of defending — a defence that has been chasing for forty seconds is about to make a mistake |

The defence is established, everyone is back, and nothing is open. The chance comes from **movement and patience** — cycling, rotating, forcing the defence to move until coverage breaks.

- The defining resource is **time on the puck and the willingness to hold it**.

- The high-value plays are the ones in sections 4 to 8: cycle, low-to-high with a screen, seam pass, net-front chaos, behind-the-net feed.
- Coverage lapses tend to arrive after a long shift of defending — a defence that has been chasing for forty seconds is a defence about to make a mistake.

## Why having only one is a problem

- Risk** A rush-only team has nothing once the rush is denied at the blue line — they enter, lose it, and go back the other way
- Risk** A cycle-only team never threatens quickly, so the defence gets set every time and the cycle only ever produces perimeter shots
- Action** Have a plan for the second wave — a chip past the defenceman, a soft area dump, or a controlled retreat and re-attack
- Action** When a cycle produces a neutral-zone turnover, somebody must be anticipating and going the other way with speed

- **A rush-only team** dies against any structured defensive team, because when the rush is denied at the blue line they have nothing. They enter, lose the puck, and go back the other way. Their offensive-zone time is measured in seconds.
- **A cycle-only team** is easy to defend because it never threatens quickly. The defence gets set every single time, and the cycle only ever produces perimeter shots.

**How to have both:** the practical test is what your team does on the *second* wave. When the rush is stopped at the blue line, do you have a plan to establish possession — a chip past the defenceman, a soft area dump, a controlled retreat and re-attack? And when a cycle produces a turnover in the neutral zone, is anyone anticipating and going the other way with speed? See Risk Management and Scanning and Anticipation.

## 10. Regaining Possession After a Shot

**Treat the seconds immediately after a shot as the most dangerous moment in a possession — and this one is measured.** The NHL's public play-by-play feed timestamps every shot and every goal, so the hazard can be read straight off it. Across games 2024020001–2024020400 of the 2024-25 regular season ( [api-web.nhle.com/v1/gamecenter/{id}/play-by-play](https://api-web.nhle.com/v1/gamecenter/{id}/play-by-play) ), a team that put a shot on goal scored again within the next **three seconds 1.37%** of the

time, against roughly **0.26%** for a three-second window picked at random — about **five times** the base rate. Put the other way round: **11.4% of all goals came within three seconds of a preceding shot on goal by the same team**, and 19.7% within ten. These are figures derived from the raw feed rather than published statistics, but the direction is not in doubt, and it agrees with the rebound-recovery figure quoted earlier in this document and with the shot-location values Shooting owns. The goalie has committed, is often down, and is out of position. The puck is loose in the most dangerous area on the ice. Every defender has just been pulled toward the shot.

This is also the moment most amateur teams stop playing — the shot goes in, everyone watches, and the defence walks out with it.

## F3's job

|                   |                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | In the house-default structure F3 is the high forward — a coaching choice, not a law                                                       |
| <b>Position</b>   | Be the safety — at or near the top of the circle, so a rebound straight out is yours and a counter-attack has to go through you            |
| <b>Action</b>     | Cover the vacated point if a defenceman activates — F3 takes the blue line in the house-default shape, which wants two on the line         |
| <b>Options</b>    | Under a five-man rotation whichever player is highest covers; a third variant slides the weak-side defenceman across to the middle instead |
| <b>Read</b>       | If the rebound squirts to the high slot, jump — you are the closest player with forward momentum                                           |
| <b>Position</b>   | The other two forwards go to the net — one to the front for the screen and tip, one hunting the strong-side rebound                        |

In the house-default structure, **F3 is the high forward** and their responsibilities on a shot are, in order:

1. **Be the safety.** Sit at or near the top of the circle so a rebound that comes straight out is yours, and so a counter-attack has to go through you.
2. **Cover the vacated point if a defenceman activates.** If the strong-side defenceman pinches or dives to the middle, **F3 takes the blue line** — in the house-default five-man shape described earlier, which wants two players on the line at all times. This is a coaching choice, and a common alternative is the **five-man rotation**, where nobody has a fixed line job and whichever player is highest at that moment covers, defenceman or forward. A third variant simply accepts one player on the line while the D is down and asks the *weak-side*

defenceman to slide across to the middle instead. Find out which your team plays — the five-man shape described earlier in this document is a default, not a law.

3. **Read the rebound and jump.** If the puck squirts to the high slot, you are the closest player with forward momentum. That is a high-danger chance handed to you.

The other two forwards go **to the net**: one to the front for the screen and tip, one hunting the strong-side rebound.

## The defenceman's pinch

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>       | Pinch when you can arrive on contact — "if you can't arrive on contact, don't go"; on an uncontested race for a loose puck or a rim, arrive clearly first                    |
| <b>Read</b>       | Pinch when the winger is flat-footed or facing the glass, when a forward can rotate high to cover your line, or on a loose puck, a bobble or a tired line                    |
| <b>Never</b>      | Pinch when your forwards are already below you, when the opponent has turned up ice with speed, when protecting a narrow lead late, or when your partner has not seen you go |
| <b>Technique</b>  | Stick in the passing lane before your feet commit; angle the winger into the boards, never toward the middle; close with short explosive steps                               |
| <b>Priority</b>   | Take the player or take the puck — achieve neither and you have created an odd-man rush against your own team                                                                |
| <b>Rule</b>       | NHL Rule 56.2(iii) is a minor on any player who deliberately checks an opponent not in possession of the puck — once the puck is gone, so is your check                      |
| <b>Action</b>     | If the pinch fails, retreat toward the slot, not along the boards — following the puck down the wall abandons the middle                                                     |
| <b>Convention</b> | How aggressively defencemen pinch is a coaching choice — some green-light both, some only the strong side, some forbid going below the circles; ask                          |

A **pinch** is stepping down from the offensive blue line to keep the puck in the zone or to win a puck on the wall. **Do not confuse it with a step-up**, which is challenging an attacker in the neutral zone or at your own line — different play, different zone.

The decision criteria, which are consistent across coaching sources:

### Pinch when:

- You can **arrive on contact** — you and the puck get there at the same time. "If you can't arrive on contact, don't go." That is the test when an opposing player is arriving too: getting

there level lets you play the puck or seal them against the wall, and arriving a beat late is the failure, because once the puck is gone you may not hit the man (Rule 56.2, below). On an **uncontested race for a loose puck or a rim**, the bar is higher — you need to arrive **clearly first**, since there is nobody to seal and second place just means your back is to the play. Forechecking Systems applies the same two-part test.

- The opposing winger is **flat-footed or facing the glass**, not already turned up ice with speed.
- A forward is **able to rotate high** and cover your line.
- It is a **loose puck, a bobble or a tired line** — the best windows.

### Do not pinch when:

- Your forwards are already below you and nobody can cover the line;
- The opponent has already turned up ice with speed and their head up;
- You are protecting a narrow lead late (see Game Management);
- Your partner has not seen you go.

**Technique:** stick in the passing lane *before* your feet commit; angle the winger into the boards, never toward the middle; use the boards to box them out; close with short explosive steps. The governing principle is **"take the player or take the puck"** — if you achieve neither, you have created an odd-man rush against your own team.

**"Take the player" has a legal limit.** You may finish a check on the player who *has* the puck, and you may use your body to seal them against the wall while contesting a puck you can both reach. You may **not** hit a player who has already moved the puck: NHL Rule 56.2(iii) makes it a minor *"on any player who deliberately checks an opponent, including the goalkeeper, who is not in possession of the puck."* On a pinch this happens constantly — the winger chips it past you and you arrive a beat late. Once the puck is gone, so is your check. Play the puck instead.

**If the pinch fails:** retreat toward the **slot**, not along the boards. Skating back down the wall follows the puck and abandons the middle; cutting to the slot re-establishes your gap and delays the attack until support arrives.

**How aggressively defencemen pinch is a coaching choice.** Some teams give both defencemen a green light in the offensive zone; some allow the strong-side defenceman only; some instruct defencemen never to pinch below the top of the circles. **Ask.** A defenceman

pinching in a system that does not expect it is the single most common source of odd-man rushes against amateur teams.

## 11. When to Shoot and When Not To

### Shoot when

- Read** Inside the home-plate area with any kind of look — almost any shot from there beats almost any pass from there
- Read** The goalie is unset, moving or screened
- Read** You have a lane — a genuine one, not the memory of one
- Read** There is someone at the net front — a tip threat and a rebound hunter make it a different play
- Read** A rebound is available and the goalie is down — shoot immediately, do not settle it

- You are **inside the home-plate area** with any kind of look. Almost any shot from there beats almost any pass from there.
- The goalie is **unset, moving, or screened**.
- You have **a lane** — a genuine one, not the memory of one.
- There is **someone at the net front**. A shot with a tip threat and a rebound hunter is a different play from the same shot with nobody there.
- **A rebound is available and the goalie is down**. Shoot immediately. Do not settle it.

## Do not shoot when

- Never** Fire into a shin pad from the point with the lane blocked — a blocked point shot usually goes the other way with your team spread out
- Never** Shoot when a better shot is one pass away — specifically, a pass across the royal road
- Never** Shoot with nobody at the net front — you are giving the puck to the goalie and starting their breakout
- Never** Shoot from a sharp angle with no traffic — goalies seal the post, and there is nothing to hit and no rebound to chase
- Never** Treat the cross-slot finishing rate and the point-shot conversion rate as a before-and-after pair — different studies, measuring different things
- Priority** Act on the direction — a shot after the goalie has had to move across is worth materially more, so the half-second is usually worth it

- The lane is blocked and you are firing into a shin pad from the point. A blocked point shot is worse than no shot: it usually goes the other way, and your team is spread out.
- A **better shot is one pass away** — specifically, a pass across the royal road. **Do not put the two numbers side by side, though**, however tempting it is: the **15.50%** is a finishing rate on shots following a cross-slot pass, measured all-situations in the Passing Project, while the **3%** is a Clear Sight Analytics figure — whether you read it as Boyle's *distant shot from above the circles with no lateral movement* or as this document's point-shot-with-traffic rate in Section 1, it comes from the proprietary tracking that Sections 1 and 2 flag as attributed-but-uncheckable. They are different studies measuring different things, and Section 2 explains at length why treating them as a before-and-after pair overstates what was measured — on the Boyle reading, most of that gap is shot distance rather than the crossing. The direction is what you should act on: **a shot taken after the goalie has had to move across is worth materially more than the same-ish shot taken before**, so the half-second is usually worth it.
- **Nobody is at the net front.** You are giving the puck to the goalie and starting their breakout.
- You are on a **sharp angle with no traffic**. Goalies seal the post; there is nothing to hit and no rebound to chase.

## What to shoot for

|                  |                                                                                                                        |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mindset</b>   | From the perimeter you are not trying to score — you are trying to manufacture a second chance                         |
| <b>Technique</b> | Shoot for a rebound — low, to the far pad, or off the pads; chest and glove get swallowed and the whistle goes         |
| <b>Technique</b> | Shoot for a tip — low, hard, along the ice, through the screen, at the tipper's stick, and say who you are shooting at |
| <b>Options</b>   | Shoot to be missed — a hard shot off the end boards to a spot for a teammate is a legitimate pass; say it first        |
| <b>Never</b>     | Pick corners against a set, sighted goalie — aim for a corner only when they cannot see it or cannot get there         |

This is the part most players never think about. From the perimeter, **you are not trying to score. You are trying to manufacture a second chance.**

- **Shoot for a rebound.** Pucks aimed low, to the far pad, or off the pads generally produce controllable rebounds. Pucks aimed at the goalie's chest and glove do not — they get swallowed and the whistle goes.
- **Shoot for a tip.** Low, hard, along the ice, through the screen, at the tipper's stick. Say who you are shooting at. The tipper's job is to present a blade; yours is to hit it.
- **Shoot to be missed.** A shot deliberately aimed to miss wide can be a play — a hard shot off the end boards to a specific spot for a teammate is a legitimate pass. Say it first.
- **Aim for a corner only when the goalie cannot see it or cannot get there.** Picking corners against a set, sighted goalie is the lowest-percentage thing you can do with a puck.



## Getting pucks through from the point

|                  |                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>       | Your job is not to shoot harder, it is to shoot through — point shots are blocked more than shots from anywhere else on the ice |
| <b>Technique</b> | Walk the line first — two or three strides toward the middle changes the angle and moves the shot-blocker's feet                |
| <b>Technique</b> | Change the release point — a quick snap from a different spot beats a blocker who has already dropped                           |
| <b>Technique</b> | Take something off it — a slower, lower shot that gets through and gets tipped beats a 95 mph slapshot into a shin pad          |
| <b>Options</b>   | Fake the shot — a blocker on the ice opens the lane for the real one, and often opens the seam pass instead                     |
| <b>Options</b>   | Take the D-to-D first — it drags both the blocker and the goalie, and you shoot into a lane just vacated                        |

Point shots are blocked more than shots from anywhere else on the ice. If you are a defenceman, your job is not to shoot harder — it is to shoot *through*:

- **Walk the line first.** Two or three strides toward the middle changes the angle and moves the shot-blocker's feet. A defenceman who receives and fires from the same spot is shooting at a stationary wall.
- **Change the release point.** A quick snap shot from a different spot than the one they set up for beats a blocker who has already dropped.
- **Take something off it.** A deliberately slower, lower shot that gets through and gets tipped beats a 95 mph slapshot into a shin pad, every time.
- **Fake the shot.** A shot fake that puts a blocker on the ice opens the lane for the real one, and often opens the seam pass instead.
- **Take the D-to-D first.** Moving it across the top drags both the blocker and the goalie, and you shoot into a lane that has just been vacated.

More detail on mechanics is in Shooting.

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## 12. Offensive-Zone Faceoffs

An offensive-zone faceoff is the only moment in the game where you get to arrange all five players exactly where you want them, with the puck about to arrive at a known place. It is the closest hockey gets to a free kick, and most amateur teams waste it entirely.

Full treatment of the draw itself — technique, stick placement, the violations that get your centre ejected — is in Faceoffs. What matters here is what happens in the second *after* the draw.

### Set plays off a win

|                |                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>     | The point of a set play is that four players start moving on the drop, before anyone knows who won it                                                       |
| <b>Options</b> | Win back to the point and screen immediately — inside winger straight to the net front, outside winger to the strong-side rebound spot                      |
| <b>Options</b> | Win back to a winger set up for a one-timer — they must be aligned as a shooter before the drop, not as a defender                                          |
| <b>Options</b> | Win it forward — attack directly; high reward, but it puts your centre below the puck and fails badly if the draw is lost                                   |
| <b>Options</b> | Tie up the opposing centre's stick and let a winger sweep in for the loose puck — useful when their centre is dominant on draws                             |
| <b>Options</b> | Delay for the screen — the defenceman skates laterally for a beat first; a shot half a second late with a screen beats one on time without                  |
| <b>Risk</b>    | A winger creeping into the circle before the drop is encroachment, and it gets your centre thrown out of the draw                                           |
| <b>Never</b>   | Reach the whistle without everyone knowing the play — the common failures are a net-front player arriving after the shot and a shot into the first shin pad |

The point of a set play is that four players start moving on the drop, before anyone knows who won it. Common families:

- **Win back to the point, screen immediately.** The centre draws the puck back to the strong-side defenceman; the inside winger goes straight to the net front to screen; the outside winger takes the strong-side rebound position. Simplest, most reliable, and it converts because everyone was already moving.
- **Win back to the winger for a one-timer.** The centre draws it back to a winger set up in the shooting position (usually a left shot on the right circle, or vice versa) who shoots first-

time. Requires the winger to be aligned as a shooter before the drop, not as a defender.

- **Win it forward / "quick strike."** The centre draws the puck forward or to the inside and attacks directly. High reward if the opposing centre is slow to react, but it puts your centre below the puck and it fails badly if the draw is lost.
- **Tie up and let a winger take it.** The centre does not try to win the puck cleanly but locks up the opposing centre's stick, and a winger sweeps in for the loose puck. Useful when the opposing centre is dominant on draws. Watch the **encroachment** rule — a winger creeping into the circle before the drop gets your *centre* thrown out of the draw.
- **Delay for the screen.** The defenceman receives the win but skates laterally for a beat before shooting, giving the net-front player time to establish. A shot half a second late with a screen beats a shot on time without one.

Whatever your team runs, **everyone must know it before the whistle**, and the two most common failures are a net-front player who arrives after the shot and a defenceman who fires it into the first shin pad.

## Structure off a loss

|                   |                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mindset</b>    | Assume you will lose roughly half the draws — structuring for the loss is the other half of the plan, not defeatism               |
| <b>Action</b>     | One forward pressures immediately, usually the winger nearest the puck, to deny the clean breakout pass and force a rim or a chip |
| <b>Action</b>     | The other two forwards turn and skate rather than watch — a forward who is stationary when the puck is lost is beaten             |
| <b>Read</b>       | The defencemen hold the line and read — is this a rim to be intercepted, or a clean exit to be retreated against?                 |
| <b>Convention</b> | The strong-side defenceman is the one most likely to pinch on a rim; the weak-side one covers the middle                          |
| <b>Key</b>        | Having a defined assignment for the loss is what lets you be aggressive on the win                                                |

Assume you will lose roughly half the draws. Structure for the loss is not defeatism, it is the other half of the plan.

- **One forward pressures immediately** — usually the winger nearest the puck — to deny the clean breakout pass and force a rim or a chip.
- **The other two forwards get defensive momentum going**, turning and skating rather than watching. A forward who is stationary when the puck is lost is beaten.

- **The defencemen hold the line and read:** is this a rim to be intercepted, or a clean exit to be retreated against? The strong-side defenceman is the one most likely to pinch on a rim; the weak-side one covers the middle.
- **Nobody is a spectator.** The most common goal against off an offensive-zone draw is not a great play by the other team; it is four players still processing the fact that they lost the puck.

The general principle is worth stating plainly: **having a defined assignment for the loss is what lets you be aggressive on the win.** Teams play tentatively on offensive-zone draws precisely because they have no plan for losing them.

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## Common Mistakes

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- **Treating "get pucks to the net" as a strategy.** Volume from the perimeter converts at under 5%, and about 1% from the point without traffic (that point-shot figure is attributed but uncheckable — see section 1; Shooting owns shot-location value). Shot volume without shot quality is busywork.
- **Cycling with nobody in front of the net.** The single most common offensive-zone failure. A cycle that never produces a net-front presence or a shot from the home-plate area has accomplished nothing except tiring out your own line.
- **Scanning up the wall before scanning across the middle.** By the time you have looked at the safe option, the seam has closed. Look across first, always.
- **Passing to a teammate's current position instead of where they are going.** In the slot, the extra touch is the difference between a goal and a save.
- **Standing still on the half-wall.** A stationary player against the boards gets pinned and stripped. Cutbacks and curls are what buy the two extra seconds you need.
- **Watching your own shot from the net front.** Turning to follow the flight un-screens the goalie and takes you out of the rebound. Look at the puck, then get your eyes back down.
- **Standing in the blue paint to screen.** Legal screening happens *outside* the crease. Rule 69.3 will void a goal when an attacker establishes a significant vision-obstructing position inside the crease, even with no contact.
- **Tipping with a high stick.** A puck contacting your stick above the height of the crossbar is not a goal (Rule 80.3). Keep the blade on the ice — which is where most tippable pucks are anyway.

- **Two defencemen leaving the blue line at once.** Or one leaving and no forward filling in. This is the mechanism behind most odd-man rushes against attacking teams.
  - **Pinching without arriving on contact.** "Take the player or take the puck." Half-hearted pinches create 3-on-2s going the other way.
  - **Retreating along the boards after a failed pinch.** Cut to the slot instead. Following the puck down the wall abandons the middle of the ice.
  - **Quitting after the shot.** The two seconds after a shot are the most dangerous moment of your entire possession. Most teams spend them watching.
  - **Having exactly one way to attack.** Rush-only teams are shut down by any structured defence; cycle-only teams never threaten before the defence is set.
  - **Not knowing your team's rules for defenceman activation.** Whether your defencemen pinch, and how deep they may go, is a coaching decision that varies enormously. Ask before your first shift.
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## Key Takeaways

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1. **You are not trying to shoot — you are trying to shoot from a dangerous place with the goalie out of position, and location is worth more than anything else.** Distance from the net is the single biggest factor in whether a shot becomes a goal; shooting percentage from outside the home-plate area is under 5% (a decade of NHL data), and roughly 1% from the point with no traffic — that point-shot figure being **attributed but uncheckable** proprietary tracking, so treat it as illustrative, and take shot-location value from Shooting, which owns it.
2. **The royal road pass is the most valuable action in offensive hockey.** A pass crossing the centre line of the ice before a shot finished at 15.50% — far ahead of any other pass type — because the goalie cannot re-square, re-find the puck and reset their stick in the time available. **That figure carries its qualification wherever it goes:** it is volunteer-tracked Passing Project data, 51,308 shots at 5-on-5, counting all attempts rather than shots on goal, so it is **not** comparable with the shooting percentages in point 1.
3. **Look across the middle before you look up the wall.** The seam is open briefly and closes permanently. Scanning in the wrong order is why most players never see it.
4. **A cycle is a set-up, not an outcome, and low-to-high is only worth doing when the net front is occupied.** If the cycle doesn't end in a shot from the slot, a seam pass, a

screened point shot or a net drive, it did nothing — and the same point shot is a good play with a screen and two rebound hunters, a giveaway without them.

5. **Screening the goalie without contact, from outside the blue paint, is normally legal — and you should do it constantly.** Two limits: inside the paint, a significant vision-obstructing position voids the goal; and anywhere, positioning that impairs the goalie's ability to move freely or defend the goal can void it too, contact or not (Rule 69.1).
  6. **Behind the net is an attacking position, not a dead end.** You have the best view on the ice, you cannot be checked from behind, and passes from below the goal line finished at 6.73% — second only to royal road passes, and measured the same way, in the same volunteer-tracked 5-on-5 Passing Project sample of all shot attempts.
  7. **The seconds immediately after a shot are the most likely time to score, and the defending team recovers about 60% of rebounds.** You win that race by deciding to be there before the shot, not by reacting after it.
  8. **Keep the shape: one player below the puck, one level with it, one above it, and two on the blue line.** That two-on-the-line rule is the house default in this document, and under it a forward fills in when a defenceman leaves — without being asked. Other teams run a five-man rotation with no fixed line job, or slide the weak-side defenceman across instead; find out which yours plays.
  9. **Build both attacks.** Rush offence lives on speed and numbers in the first three seconds; set offence lives on patience and rotation over thirty. Teams that only have one get shut down by anyone competent.
  10. **Almost everything in this document is a coaching choice, not a law.** Triangle rotation versus overload, whether defencemen pinch, who takes the net front — all vary by team. Find out what your team plays before you decide someone else is out of position.
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# Forechecking Systems

**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**

Breakouts

Neutral Zone Systems

Zone Entries

Defensive Zone Coverage

Body Contact and Battles

Game Management

Center

Winger

Defender

UK and England Rules

## Overview

|                   |                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | Forechecking is the pressure your team applies in the opponents' end when they have the puck and you don't — the opposite of backchecking |
| <b>Key</b>        | It is the first thing your team does after losing the puck in the attacking end, and the biggest lever a coach has over how a game feels  |
| <b>Convention</b> | There is no single correct forecheck — there is a family of named systems, each buying pressure at the price of risk                      |
| <b>Action</b>     | Ask your coach which forecheck your team runs, and which one you switch to with a lead — most teams have at least two                     |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Guessing which one you are in is how odd-man rushes happen                                                                                |

**Forechecking** is the pressure your team applies in the *opponent's* defensive zone — your offensive zone — when they have the puck and you don't. It is the opposite of **backchecking**, which is racing back towards your own net to defend. Forechecking is the first thing your team does after it loses the puck in the attacking end, and it is the single biggest lever a coach has over how a game feels: an aggressive forecheck makes a game chaotic and fast, a passive one makes it slow and structured.

There is no single correct forecheck. There is a family of named systems, each of which buys pressure at the price of risk. This document explains what each one is, what it gives you, what it costs you, and how to tell which one you are facing.

**Ask your coach which forecheck your team runs, and which one you switch to with a lead.** Most teams have at least two. If nobody has told you, the answer is usually written into the drills you already do at practice — but guessing is how odd-man rushes happen.

## A Note on Language

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | High means closer to the blue line, low means closer to the goal line — in the offensive zone, high is back towards the line you came in over                                  |
| <b>Key</b>       | Strong side is the side of the ice the puck is on; weak side is the other                                                                                                      |
| <b>Key</b>       | A rim sends the puck onward around the boards, a reverse sends it back against the flow — a rim beats a forechecker sealing you in, a reverse beats one who has over-committed |
| <b>Never</b>     | Treat a pinch and stepping up as the same play — a pinch steps down from the offensive blue line, stepping up challenges an attacker in the neutral zone                       |
| <b>Technique</b> | Angling is forcing an opponent to go in a desired direction, normally towards the boards or the outside — Hockey Canada's own definition                                       |
| <b>Action</b>    | Steer by shadowing the carrier; seal by arriving second and closing the escape route the first forechecker has forced them towards                                             |

Terms used throughout, defined here so this document stands alone. See Rink Map and Glossary for the full set.

- **High** = closer to the blue line and further from the goal line. **Low** = closer to the goal line, nearer the net. (In the offensive zone, "high" means back towards the line you came in over.)
- **Strong side** = the side of the ice the puck is on. **Weak side** = the other side.
- **The point** = the area just inside the blue line where defencemen stand. **Half-wall** = the boards roughly level with the faceoff dot.
- **Breakout** = the opponents' organised attempt to carry or pass the puck out of their own zone. Your forecheck exists to break it. See Breakouts.
- **Dump-in** = deliberately putting the puck deep into the opponents' zone without possession, then chasing it.
- **Rim** = a hard puck sent *onward* around the boards. **Reverse** = a puck sent *back* against the flow. These are different plays and both are used to beat forecheckers — a rim beats a forechecker sealing you in, a reverse beats one who has over-committed past you.



- **Pinch** = a defenceman stepping down from the *offensive* blue line to keep a puck in. Not the same as **stepping up**, which is challenging an attacker in the neutral zone.
  - **Angling** = Hockey Canada's own definition is "the ability to force an opponent to go in a desired direction," normally towards the boards or the outside. It is the foundation of everything below.
  - **Steering** = shadowing the carrier to push them into an area where you can take away their time and space.
  - **Seal** = arriving second and closing the escape route the first forechecker has forced them towards.
- 

## What Forechecking Is For

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A forecheck has exactly two possible wins. Everything in every system serves one of them.

**Win 1 — take the puck back deep in their zone.** This is the jackpot. A turnover below the opposing hash marks is a scoring chance almost immediately, because by the time their defenceman has the puck down there their forwards have already released **above** it — climbing towards their blue line looking for the exit — and they cannot get back below the puck in time. You win it with the net 20 feet away and only one or two defenders between you and it. This is what aggressive forechecks are hunting.

**Win 2 — force a bad exit you collect in the neutral zone.** You never touch the puck in their end. Instead you take away every good option until they chip it out blindly, and one of your players is standing where blind chips go. This is a quieter win but it is far more common, and it hands you the puck moving forward with speed — which is worth more than a turnover in the corner that leaves you standing still.

Passive systems are not "not forechecking." They are systems that have decided Win 2 is the better bet.

## The fundamental trade-off

|                |                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>     | Pressure and risk are the same dial — every player you send below the top of the circles is one fewer between the puck and your goalie |
| <b>Options</b> | One forechecker is easy to beat but almost never costs you anything                                                                    |
| <b>Risk</b>    | Two forecheckers win a lot of pucks and occasionally leave you 3-on-2 going the other way                                              |
| <b>Risk</b>    | Three forecheckers plus a pinching defenceman win pucks constantly and, when they fail, produce a breakaway                            |
| <b>Action</b>  | Say it out loud — "I've got F1" or "I'm high" prevents two players doing the same job while nobody does the other one                  |

There are five of you on the ice. Every player you send below the top of the circles to hunt the puck is one fewer player between the puck and your goalie.

- **One forechecker** is easy to beat but almost never costs you anything.
- **Two forecheckers** win a lot of pucks and occasionally leave you 3-on-2 going the other way.
- **Three forecheckers plus a pinching defenceman** win pucks constantly and, when they fail, produce a breakaway.

That is the whole subject in three lines. Pressure and risk are the same dial. A coach picks a forecheck by deciding where on that dial the game currently sits — score, time remaining, how good the other team's defencemen are with the puck, and how much gas your legs have left.

**Say it out loud on the bench and on the ice.** "I've got F1" or "I'm high" takes half a second and prevents the most expensive forechecking error there is — two players doing the same job while nobody does the other one. See On-Ice Communication.

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## F1 / F2 / F3 — Roles, Not People

This is the most misunderstood idea in team hockey, so it gets its own section.

**F1, F2 and F3 are defined by order of arrival at the puck. Nothing else.**

- **F1** is whichever forward gets there first.

- **F2** is whichever forward arrives second.
- **F3** is the one who is left, and who stays high.

They are **not** positions. F1 is not "the centre." F2 is not "the strong-side winger." If your left winger is closest when the puck goes in the corner, your left winger is F1 and your centre is F2 — immediately, without discussion, without waiting for anyone to swap back.

Some coaches do assign them by position as a teaching shortcut for beginners, and the Center and Winger documents describe the common case where the centre is F1. Treat that as the *typical* case, not the rule. At any real speed the puck will not wait for the correct person to arrive.

## The roles rotate mid-shift

|               |                                                                                                                        |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>   | When the opponents move the puck defenceman-to-defenceman, your F1 has just been beaten and is now behind the play     |
| <b>Action</b> | The forward closest to the new puck carrier becomes the new F1 and attacks; everyone else adjusts one slot             |
| <b>Never</b>  | Turn around and chase after you have been beaten — take the vacated support role, usually the new F3, high in the zone |
| <b>Risk</b>   | Chase every puck you touch and you are doing three players' jobs — you will be dead by the second shift                |
| <b>Key</b>    | Accept demotion to F3 when you get beaten and you get a rest built into the system                                     |

The labels change during a single possession. When the opponents move the puck defenceman-to-defenceman across the ice, your F1 has just been beaten and is now behind the play. What should happen next is:

1. The forward closest to the new puck carrier becomes the new **F1** and attacks.
2. The old F1 does **not** turn around and chase. They take the vacated support role — usually dropping in as the new **F3**, high in the zone.
3. Everyone else adjusts one slot.

This is why forechecking is exhausting when done badly and sustainable when done well. If you chase every puck you touch, you are doing three players' jobs and will be dead by the second shift. If you accept demotion to F3 when you get beaten, you get a rest built into the system.

## The three jobs, in general terms

|                   |                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>     | F1 — arrive fast, arrive on an angle, take away one side of the ice and make the carrier's decision for them                                       |
| <b>Convention</b> | Whether F1 also hunts the puck is a coaching choice — steering in the 1-2-2, 1-3-1 and 1-4, hunting in a 2-1-2 or press; ask which your team wants |
| <b>Key</b>        | F1's first job is to make the next play predictable — nothing works if the carrier still has three good options when you arrive                    |
| <b>Action</b>     | F2 — skate to where the puck is about to be forced, not to the puck, and stay far enough from F1 that one deke cannot remove both of you           |
| <b>Position</b>   | F3 — stay high, take away the middle of the ice, and be the first man back if the puck escapes                                                     |

The *shape* of these three jobs holds across most systems; what changes is *where* F2 and F3 stand, and — importantly — **how hard F1 is told to go**.

- **F1 — take away options.** Arrive fast, arrive on an angle, take away one side of the ice, and make the carrier's decision for them.

**Whether F1 is also trying to win the puck is a coaching choice, and it is the single biggest difference between the systems below.** In the **containment** systems (1-2-2, 1-3-1, 1-4) F1's job is explicitly *not* to win the puck — F1 steers, and somebody else collects. In an **aggressive 2-1-2 or full-ice press**, F1 goes hard at the puck carrier with the intent of taking it, and the Center document describes exactly that, because the house default throughout is a 2-1-2. Both are correct within their own system, and getting it backwards is expensive: F2 reads off F1, so a steering F1 with a sealing F2 wins pucks, and a hunting F1 with a sealing F2 leaves the middle wide open. **Ask which one your team wants.**

What *is* common to both: F1's first job is to make the next play predictable. Winning the puck outright is a bonus in one system and the plan in the other, but neither works if the carrier still has three good options when you arrive.

- **F2 — read F1 and seal.** Do not skate to the puck. Skate to where the puck is about to be forced. Keep enough distance from F1 that you can still react if F1 is beaten — arriving in the same square metre as F1 means one deke removes both of you.
- **F3 — be patient and be the insurance.** Stay high, take away the middle of the ice, and be the first man back if the puck escapes. F3 is the most disciplined job on the forecheck

and the least rewarding. It is also the one that decides whether a failed forecheck costs you nothing or costs you a goal.

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## Angling: The First Forechecker's Job

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If you only improve one thing about your forechecking, improve this. Hockey Canada places **positioning and angling as Step 1 of its four-step checking progression** — before stick checks, before body contact, before body checking — precisely because it is the skill that makes all the others unnecessary most of the time.

**The goal of angling is to eliminate options, not to make a hit.** A hit that separates the carrier from the puck is a bonus. A hit that you miss, or that you get by flying past the carrier, has removed you from the play and turned a 5-on-5 into a 4-on-5.

### Approach angle

|                   |                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>     | Skate at the space you want to deny, not at the puck                                                                               |
| <b>Convention</b> | The common default is taking away the middle and forcing them to the boards — a coaching choice, not a law; some coaches invert it |
| <b>Action</b>     | Find out which way your team angles before your first shift, not during it — F2 seals the route F1 leaves open                     |
| <b>Technique</b>  | Curve your approach so your body is between them and the centre of the ice and your momentum runs along the wall, not across it    |
| <b>Never</b>      | Approach in a straight line — it commits you to a single point in space and any change of direction beats you                      |

Do not skate at the puck. Skate at the **space you want to deny**.

Pick a side before you get there and take it away, so the carrier's only remaining route is the one your teammates are covering. The common default is **taking away the middle and forcing them towards the boards**, because the boards are a wall that helps you and the middle of the ice is where they can go anywhere.

**That default is a coaching choice, not a law.** Some coaches invert it and have F1 take away the boards to force the play into the middle, where three of their players are waiting. Either can be right; what cannot be right is F1 and F2 disagreeing about which one it is, because F2 seals the

route F1 leaves open. **Find out which way your team angles before your first shift, not during it.**

Concretely: if the carrier is behind their net and about to come up the left side, you approach on a curve that puts your body between them and the centre of the ice, arriving so that your momentum carries you *along* the wall in the same direction they are travelling — not across it.

The reason this works is that a curved approach keeps you in a position to react. A straight-line approach commits you to a single point in space, and any change of direction by the carrier beats you.

## Stick position

|                  |                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | Stick out front, blade on the ice, in the passing lane you are taking away — not tucked beside your skates, not raised                |
| <b>Technique</b> | Aim the blade at the puck as you close                                                                                                |
| <b>Goal</b>      | A stick in the lane back to the far defenceman removes that pass without costing you any body position                                |
| <b>Key</b>       | Even if you never make contact, the carrier has to protect the puck and has to look at you — so they are not looking for their outlet |

**Stick out front, blade on the ice, in the passing lane you are taking away.** Not tucked beside your skates, not raised.

The stick is the cheap part of angling — it takes away a pass without costing you any body position. If your stick is in the lane back to the far defenceman, that pass simply does not get made, and you have removed an option without doing anything athletic.

Aim the blade at the puck as you close. A USA Hockey ADM drill shared by **Roger Grillo**, an ADM Regional Manager, at the 2021 USA Hockey Level 5 Coaches Symposium puts it as "**good angling and stick on puck to force the defending player to the boards**", with the F1 key point given as "*timing, angling and body/stick positioning*". (The write-up is a single *Drill of the Week* post from **Minnesota Hockey and CoachThem**, 4 January 2022, not a USA Hockey publication — the drill is ADM, the sheet is not.) the fuller coaching phrase you will hear on benches, "**stick on puck, stick on stick, body on body**", comes from team playbooks rather than from USA Hockey's own material. Two things then happen even if you never make contact: the carrier has to protect the puck, which slows them down, and they have to look at you, which means they are not looking for their outlet.

## Speed control — the part everybody gets wrong

|                  |                                                                                                                           |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>    | Arrive under control, not at maximum speed                                                                                |
| <b>Technique</b> | Get to top speed on the way in, then get your feet under you in the last two or three strides so you can change direction |
| <b>Key</b>       | The test — could you stop and pivot right now? If not, you are going too fast                                             |
| <b>Risk</b>      | A forechecker who arrives flat out has one option, a straight line; one turn and you are 40 feet behind the play          |

### Arrive under control, not at maximum speed.

Get to top speed on the way in — you want to arrive early, because early pressure is what forces the rushed decision. But in the last two or three strides, get your feet under you so you can change direction. A forechecker who arrives flat out has exactly one option: continue in a straight line. Every experienced defenceman in the world beats that with a single turn, and you are now 40 feet behind the play.

The test: **could you stop and pivot right now?** If not, you are going too fast.

## Why "eliminate options" beats "make a hit"

|              |                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>  | Angle a player into a spot where they have one bad pass available — your F2 is already standing on it                            |
| <b>Risk</b>  | A hit takes two players out of the play, you and them; containment takes out only them                                           |
| <b>Key</b>   | At rec and beer-league level body checking is usually not permitted at all, so angling is the whole of your forechecking toolkit |
| <b>Never</b> | Treat angling as the beginner's version of hitting — it is the actual skill                                                      |

- A hit you land does not reliably win you the puck — it just as often ends with the puck loose and both of you out of the play. Angling a player into a spot where they have one bad pass available wins the puck far more often, because your F2 is already standing on that pass. *(Neither claim is a measured figure; there is no public tracking of hits-versus-angling outcomes. Treat it as coaching consensus, not statistics.)*
- A hit takes two players out of the play — you and them. Containment takes out only them.
- At rec and beer-league level, body checking is usually not permitted at all. Angling is entirely legal there and is the *whole* of your forechecking toolkit. Do not treat it as the beginner's

version of hitting; it is the actual skill.

See Body Contact and Battles for the mechanics of angling, pinning and stick lifts, and Time and Space for the general principle of taking space away.

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## The Named Systems

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Forechecks are named by counting players from the goal line outwards: a **2-1-2** has two deep, one in the middle, two high. The numbers are always three groups and always add to five.

**Where the naming convention breaks.** That count only works while the shape actually sits inside the opponents' end. Three of the systems below — the passive 1-3-1, the 1-4, and the retreated version of the 1-2-2 — are usually played as **neutral-zone** structures, with the back layers at or near *your own* blue line. For those, the same digits are counted from the opponents' end outwards across the whole sheet, not from their goal line, and a "1-4" describes four skaters standing about 114 feet from the net they are supposedly forechecking. They appear here because coaches call them forechecks and because a team's offensive-zone forecheck collapses into them, but the shape they describe lives in the middle third. **Neutral Zone Systems is the authority on all of them.**

**Which document owns what. This document owns the offensive-zone version** of each system — the shape while the opponents still have the puck in their own end, and the jobs of the forwards hunting it. **Neutral Zone Systems owns the neutral-zone version** — the same names used for the wall your five players hold across the middle third, plus gap control, regrouping and how to break a trap. Where a system exists in both places, each file covers its own half and points at the other rather than repeating it.

**The house default throughout is a 2-1-2 forecheck** (paired with a low zone collapse in the defensive zone). It is the default here because it is the easiest to teach and because the position documents here are written around it.

**On "the most common forecheck".** You will see that phrase attached to both the 2-1-2 and the 1-2-2, including in this document, and there is **no published count of what teams actually run** — nobody tracks it. The honest version, and the one used from here on: the **2-1-2** is the one most commonly *taught first* in North American youth and rec hockey, which is why it is the default here; the **1-2-2** is the one most commonly described in coaching material as a team's



base structure, largely because the same shape covers both the offensive zone and the neutral zone. Both statements are coaching-material consensus, **not verified data**, and they are not in conflict — they are about different things.

## 2-1-2 — the aggressive standard

|                     |                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | Two forwards deep, one forward high at roughly the top of the circles, both defencemen at the offensive blue line                                          |
| <b>Convention</b>   | F1 goes hard at the puck carrier, angling them to one side — usually towards the boards, but ask, because F2 reads off it                                  |
| <b>Convention</b>   | F2 attacks the first passing option, not the puck                                                                                                          |
| <b>Convention</b>   | F3 stays high in the middle — weak-side by default here, strong-side in the stacked variant, so find out which your team runs                              |
| <b>Rule</b>         | After their own icing the offending team may not change lines or take a time-out under NHL and IIHF rules (81.4, 87.1) — under USA Hockey they may do both |
| <b>Read</b>         | Pick it when trailing, off an offensive-zone faceoff, against a defence pair that is slow or panics, and any time they have just iced the puck             |
| <b>Risk</b>         | A successful breakout against it is frequently a 3-on-2 or worse, and it is the most physically expensive system to run                                    |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A quick first pass before F2 arrives, a reverse into the space F1 has vacated, and above all a rim past the pinching defenceman                            |

**Shape:** Two forwards deep in the zone, one forward high (roughly the top of the circles), two defencemen at or just inside the **offensive** blue line — the opponents' line, the one you are pinching down from.

**Two positions, two phases — both are correct.** The blue line the defencemen stand on changes as the sequence does, and this is the commonest source of confusion between this document and Neutral Zone Systems. **While the forecheck is live and the puck is still in their end**, your defencemen are at the *offensive* blue line, holding it and pinching selectively — that is the shape described here. **Once the opponents get the puck out and the play turns into a neutral-zone sequence**, those same two defencemen have retreated and are holding a deliberately tight gap in the middle third, back toward *your own* blue line, with the strong-side D

ready to step up. That second phase is Neutral Zone Systems' "Pressure" section and it owns it. Same two players, same system, roughly 100 feet apart, two different moments.

### The jobs:

- **F1** goes hard at the puck carrier, angling them to one side. Usually towards the boards, though some coaches teach F1 to take away the boards and force the play into the middle where three of your players are waiting — ask which your team does, because F2 reads off it and getting it backwards means F2 seals an empty lane.
- **F2** attacks the first passing option. Not the puck — the *option*. If F1 has forced the carrier towards the strong-side wall, F2 takes the strong-side winger or the wall itself. The intent is that the puck is under pressure from two players until you get it back.
- **F3** stays high, covering the middle of the ice and ready to be the first man back. **Which side F3 sits on is a genuine coaching split, so find out which your team runs:** the common default — and the one the position documents here assume — is that F3 is the **weak-side** forward, high and away from the puck, covering the cross-ice breakout option and the middle lane. In the **strong-side (stacked) variant** below, F3 shades to the puck side instead, so that all three forwards overload one corner and the far-side breakout is conceded deliberately. Weak-side F3 protects against the cross-ice escape; strong-side F3 maximises pressure on one wall. See Center and Winger, which describe the weak-side default.
- **Defencemen** hold the **offensive** blue line and pinch selectively on rims and loose pucks. With two forwards already deep, their pinches must be *right*, not brave. Once the puck is out, they become the tight-gap pair described in Neutral Zone Systems — see the phase note above.

**What it's good at:** Sustained offensive-zone time, forcing turnovers close to the net, physically wearing down a defence pair over three periods, and pinning a tired line in their own end so they cannot change. This is why teams forecheck aggressively immediately after the opposition ices the puck — under NHL and IIHF rules the offending team **cannot change lines and cannot use a timeout** after their own icing, so you have a guaranteed mismatch to attack. (Under USA Hockey they can do both — see the rule-set note further down.)

**What it concedes:** Everything behind it. Two forwards deep plus a pinch means a successful breakout is frequently a 3-on-2 or worse. It is also the most physically expensive system to run.

**When a coach picks it:** When trailing; on the first shift after an offensive-zone faceoff; against a defence pair that is slow or panics under pressure; after a dump-in when your forwards have a head start on the retrieval; and any time the opposition has just iced the puck.

**How it is beaten:** A quick first pass before F2 arrives; a **reverse** behind the net into the space F1 has just vacated; and above all a **rim** past the pinching defenceman — the single highest-value counter, because a pinch that misses turns two deep forecheckers into two players who are irrelevant. A defence pair that can make one clean pass under pressure destroys a 2-1-2.

**Variants worth knowing:** the **strong-side (stacked) 2-1-2**, where F1 and F2 both come from the same side to overload one corner, and the **spread 2-1-2**, where they come from opposite sides to cover both. Edmonton's 1980s dynasty is the classic historical example of the aggressive 2-1-2 generally. *(The spread version is attributed to John Tortorella's New York Rangers teams, and that attribution does hold up in contemporaneous writing: Blue Seat Blogs' systems breakdown, published while he was coaching them, says the Rangers "generate most of their 5-on-5 offense from an aggressive 2-1-2 spread forecheck and transitional offense, meaning offense generated from the rush" — the second half matters, because it means the forecheck was never being claimed as the sole source of that offence — and explicitly contrasts it with the variant "where F1 and F2 approach from the same lane, rather than spread out" (The Suit, 21 February 2012 (<https://blueseatblogs.com/2012/02/21/overview-of-john-tortorellas-system/>)).* **That is a fan-analytics site, not a coaching manual or a team source** — well attested, not official.)

## 1-2-2 — the containment default

|                     |                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | One forward deep, two forwards across the middle of the zone, two defencemen high                                                                         |
| <b>Convention</b>   | F1 (the "dog") pressures but does not commit to winning the puck — cut the ice in half, then stay inside so it cannot come back across                    |
| <b>Convention</b>   | F2 (the "fox") sits on the strong-side wall and creates the turnover by jumping the outlet F1 has made predictable                                        |
| <b>Convention</b>   | F3 (the "hawk") roams the high middle, committed to neither side; on a puck across, F3 becomes the new fox and everyone shifts one role                   |
| <b>Goal</b>         | Never being out of position — concede the retrieval and build a wall they have to pass through                                                            |
| <b>Read</b>         | Pick it protecting a lead, against a fast transition team, when your forwards are tired, or as the forgiving rec-league default                           |
| <b>Countered by</b> | D-to-D to shift the wall then a quick-up to a winger coming underneath the fox, or a stretch pass past the defencemen — they are the deepest layer it has |

**Shape:** One forward deep, two forwards across the middle of the zone, two defencemen high.

Widely described in coaching material as the most common *base* structure in hockey — see the caveat on "most common" above — and the natural choice when you want to be organised rather than chaotic.

**The jobs:** Some coaches teach these with animal names — F1 the "dog," F2 the "fox," F3 the "hawk" — which is a useful memory hook.

- **F1 (dog)** pressures the carrier but **does not commit to winning the puck**. F1's whole purpose is to cut the ice in half: force the play to one side, then stay on the inside so it cannot come back across.
- **F2 (fox)** sits on the strong-side wall, taking away the pass to their winger. F2 is the one who actually creates the turnover in this system, by jumping an outlet pass that F1 has made predictable.
- **F3 (hawk)** roams the high middle, protecting the centre lane. Not committed to either side.
- **Defencemen** hold the line; the strong-side D pinches on rims, the weak-side D stays home in the middle as the safety.

**The rotation is the clever part.** When the puck goes back across to the far side, F3 slides over and becomes the new fox on that wall, F2 becomes the hawk, and F1 covers the middle. The shape survives; the people inside it change. This is the clearest illustration of why F1/F2/F3 are roles and not people.

**What it's good at:** Never being out of position. The 1-2-2 concedes the initial retrieval and instead builds a wall the opponent has to pass through. It is excellent against teams that want to carry the puck out with speed, because there is no space to skate into.

**What it concedes:** Time. You are letting their defencemen pick the puck up unmolested and choose a play. Against a defence pair that moves the puck well, you will spend a lot of the night defending clean zone entries.

**When a coach picks it:** Protecting a lead; against a fast transition team; when your forwards are tired; when your team is undisciplined and keeps getting caught deep; as the standard rec-league answer, because it is forgiving.

**How it is beaten:** Patience and puck movement. D-to-D passes to shift the wall, then a quick-up to a winger who has come *underneath* the fox rather than standing on the wall in front of them. Also the simple stretch pass or chip past all four players above F1, because **the two defencemen are the deepest layer the 1-2-2 has** — the weak-side D is the safety *inside* the

shape, covering the middle behind the forwards, not a fifth man stationed behind the pair. Get a puck past the D line and there is nobody at all in behind it.

### The 1-2-2 as a neutral-zone structure

|                |                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>     | The same three numbers describe two things — all three layers inside their end, or the same layers held back across the middle third                |
| <b>Never</b>   | Assume a neutral-zone 1-2-2 is "the trap" — the trap is one particular setting of it, funnelling the carrier into a kill zone at the red line       |
| <b>Key</b>     | The neutral-zone shape is what the forecheck collapses into, so nobody has to sprint anywhere — the main practical argument for it as a base system |
| <b>Options</b> | The 1-1-3 is the conservative cousin — the third forward drops in line with the defencemen to make a three-man wall                                 |

The same three numbers describe two different things, which confuses almost everyone the first time.

- As an **offensive-zone forecheck** — the version this document owns — the numbers count outward from the opponents' goal line, and all three layers sit inside their end.
- As a **neutral-zone forecheck**, the same layers are held further back: one forward pressuring near their blue line, two forwards across the middle third, two defencemen at your own blue line.

**A neutral-zone 1-2-2 is not automatically "the trap."** The trap is one particular setting of it — the layers dropped back further still and, more importantly, the *intent* changed from contesting the exit to funnelling the carrier into a kill zone at the red line. A team can play a neutral-zone 1-2-2 that genuinely contests the puck and is not trapping at all. Neutral Zone Systems draws that distinction properly and is the authority on both.

The two versions connect because **the neutral-zone shape is what the forecheck collapses into**. When your 1-2-2 forecheck fails and the opposition exits their zone, your five players are already spaced correctly — F1 retreats to become the lone pressure, F2 and F3 form the middle band, the defencemen back off. Nobody has to sprint anywhere. That seamlessness is the main practical argument for the 1-2-2 as a team's base system.

The New Jersey Devils' 1990s and 2000s teams are the standard reference for building a whole identity around this. See Neutral Zone Systems for the trap proper and how to break one.

**A closely related variant is the 1-1-3**, where the third forward drops all the way in line with the defencemen to make a three-man wall. Treat it as the 1-2-2's more conservative cousin.

## 1-3-1 — the modern trap-adjacent forecheck

|                     |                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | One forward pressuring, three players spread in a line across the width of the ice, one player behind them as the last man                |
| <b>Convention</b>   | The single forechecker does not chase — steer, take away the middle and shepherd the breakout to one side                                 |
| <b>Convention</b>   | The line of three is F2, F3 and one defenceman, the defenceman in the middle as the read-maker; it shifts across as a unit with the puck  |
| <b>Convention</b>   | The single high player is the safety, responsible for anything that gets behind the line of three                                         |
| <b>Goal</b>         | Take away lanes rather than players — against a team exiting on three short passes there is nowhere to put the puck                       |
| <b>Read</b>         | Pick it against short controlled breakouts, when you cannot get pressure on in time such as against a line change, and to protect a lead  |
| <b>Risk</b>         | You concede the initial puck entirely, and a great deal of ice if the line of three is beaten in one pass — this is not a beginner system |
| <b>Countered by</b> | Chipping past the flat line and beating it with speed, banking a pass off the boards, and moving the puck side to side before committing  |

**Shape:** One forward pressuring, three players spread across the width of the ice in a line, one player behind them as the last man.

Popularised in the NHL by Guy Boucher's Tampa Bay teams around 2010-11 — famously so, because it produced games where the opposing team simply stood still with the puck rather than skate into it.

### The jobs:

- **The single forechecker** (usually the centre, but again — whoever gets there) does not chase. They **steer**. They take away the middle and shepherd the breakout to one side, then keep angling so the puck cannot come back to the defence partner or through the middle.
- **The line of three** — conventionally **F2, F3 and one defenceman**, with the defenceman in the middle as the read-maker and the two forwards on the walls — spreads across the ice

and erases the passing lanes. (It cannot be three forwards: F1 is already a forward, and there are only three on the ice.) As the puck commits to one side, the whole line shifts with it, so the puck-side player becomes an immediate second attacker while the others cover the retreat.

- **The single high player** is the safety, responsible for anything that gets behind the line of three.

**What it's good at:** Taking away *lanes* rather than *players*. Against a team that wants to make three short passes to exit, the 1-3-1 is miserable to play against because there is nowhere to put the puck. It is also flexible: it can be pushed up aggressively into the offensive zone — the version described here — or dropped back and run passively as a neutral-zone shape, which is the far more common use and is covered in Neutral Zone Systems. Note that dropped back it is no longer a forecheck in any literal sense; only the name survives.

**What it concedes:** The initial puck, entirely, and a great deal of ice in behind if the line of three is beaten in one pass. It also demands very good lateral skating and reading from three players simultaneously — this is not a beginner system.

**When a coach picks it:** Against a team that breaks out with short controlled passes; when you cannot get pressure on the puck in time — for example against a line change, where the 1-3-1 lets you set up rather than chase; and as a lead-protecting shape.

**How it is beaten:** Three well-documented counters. **Chip it past the line of three and beat it with speed** — the line is flat, so anything behind it is behind all three at once. **Bank a pass off the boards** to a teammate who has already got behind the line. And **move the puck side to side** before committing, because the line has to shift as a unit and the shift is where the seams open.

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## 1-4 — the full retreat

|                     |                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | One forward applying token pressure, the other four flat across the ice at or near their own blue line                              |
| <b>Key</b>          | This is a neutral-zone structure, not an offensive-zone forecheck — Neutral Zone Systems is the authority on it                     |
| <b>Convention</b>   | The lone forechecker steers and slows the exit rather than pressuring; nobody pinches and nobody gambles                            |
| <b>Goal</b>         | Preventing odd-man rushes and high-danger chances, full stop                                                                        |
| <b>Risk</b>         | It concedes any realistic chance of getting the puck back in their end, and therefore any offence                                   |
| <b>Read</b>         | A situational tool only — a one-goal lead in the last two minutes, the end of a period, no legs left, or a far better opponent      |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A hard chip past the flat line and a race for it — not a stretch pass, which is offside against a wall sitting on its own blue line |

**Shape:** One forward applying token pressure; the other four in a flat line across the ice at or near **their own** blue line.

**This is a neutral-zone structure, not an offensive-zone forecheck**, and Neutral Zone Systems is the authority on it. It is listed here only because coaches call it a forecheck and because it is the shape a failed forecheck retreats into. The short version:

- **The jobs:** the lone forechecker steers and slows the exit rather than pressuring. The four behind form a wall whose only purpose is that nothing gets through it with speed. Nobody pinches. Nobody gambles.
- **What it's good at:** preventing odd-man rushes and high-danger chances, full stop.
- **What it concedes:** any realistic chance of getting the puck back in their end, and therefore any offence.
- **When it's correct:** as a *situational* tool only — protecting a one-goal lead in the last two minutes, killing the final seconds of a period, surviving the tail end of a long shift with no legs, or against a team so much better than you that opening the game up loses 6-1. No serious team runs it for 60 minutes.

**How it is beaten:** patience and a willingness to dump the puck in and forecheck it. A 1-4 dares you to enter the zone with control; the counter is to stop trying, put the puck behind them, and turn the game into a series of retrievals. Concretely, **a hard chip past the flat line and a race**



**for it** — because the line is flat, nobody is deeper than anybody else, so anything put behind them is a genuine footrace with only the goalie beyond. Note that a *stretch pass* is the wrong tool here: a 1-4 sits on its own blue line, so a receiver already behind the wall would be offside. Chip it past and skate onto it. See Zone Entries.

## 2-3 and the left-wing lock

|                   |                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | Two forwards forechecking aggressively, three players across the ice behind them                                                           |
| <b>Convention</b> | In the left-wing lock the centre and right winger forecheck as F1 and F2, and the left winger drops back to the half-boards                |
| <b>Convention</b> | If the puck is not won, the left winger slides into line with the two defencemen — effectively a third defenceman going the other way      |
| <b>Goal</b>       | Two-man pressure, nearly as good as a 2-1-2, with three players always between the puck and your net                                       |
| <b>Read</b>       | Pick it when you want pressure but cannot afford to bleed rush chances, or to nurse a lead without going fully passive                     |
| <b>Risk</b>       | It demands a left winger with total positional discipline and the skating to back-check, and gives up the fifth attacker so you cycle less |

**Shape:** Two forwards forechecking aggressively, three players across the ice behind them.

The **left-wing lock** is the famous version. The centre and right winger forecheck hard as F1 and F2. The **left winger "locks"** — instead of joining the attack, they drop back to the half-boards and, if the puck is not won, slide into line with the two defencemen to form a three-man wall across the ice. The left winger is effectively a third defenceman whenever the puck is going the other way.

**What it's good at:** Genuinely aggressive forechecking with a genuinely solid back end. You get two-man pressure — nearly as good as a 2-1-2 — while never being outnumbered on the counter-attack, because there are always three players between the puck and your net.

**What it concedes:** Less than most systems, which is why it was so successful. The real costs are structural rather than tactical: it demands a left winger with total positional discipline and the skating to back-check, and it puts less offensive weight on that player. It also gives up the fifth attacker in the offensive zone, so you cycle less.

**When a coach picks it:** When you want pressure but cannot afford to bleed rush chances — a strong two-way team's default, or a team trying to nurse a lead without going fully passive.

**Where the left-wing lock actually came from.** The two origin stories usually told about the lock are **complementary, not competing**. It was developed in **Czechoslovak hockey in the 1970s** as a way to cope with the dominant Soviet teams, and was used in various forms across Swedish and Finnish hockey before it reached North America. It was then **adapted for the narrower North American rink by Barry Smith**, an assistant on the Detroit Red Wings' staff, where Scotty Bowman adopted it; Detroit's teams from the mid-1990s onward made it famous. Invention in Europe and adaptation in Detroit are separate events roughly twenty years apart, and there is no conflict between them — Detroit did not invent it, and Barry Smith never claimed to. The lock is much rarer in the modern NHL than it was in 1997, largely because contemporary systems ask wingers to be more involved offensively — but it remains a common structure at junior, college and European club level.

**Where the lock lives once possession changes** — the three-man wall across the neutral zone, and the modern "lock whichever winger is highest" variant — is covered in Neutral Zone Systems.

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## The full-ice press — maximum pressure

|                     |                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | Three forwards deep or nearly deep, both defencemen pinching at the offensive blue line, effectively no safety at all                                    |
| <b>Convention</b>   | All three forwards hunt the puck and both defencemen pinch on anything, on the understanding that a puck past them is a breakaway                        |
| <b>Action</b>       | Call it a full-ice press or an all-out forecheck — "2-2-1" is basketball terminology and is not an established hockey forecheck name                     |
| <b>Read</b>         | Almost exclusively late and trailing — down a goal in the last two or three minutes, or with the goaltender pulled for the extra attacker                |
| <b>Rule</b>         | On a delayed penalty play stops only when the offending team gains control, not when it merely touches the puck (NHL Rule 15.1) — play until the whistle |
| <b>Risk</b>         | A single clean exit is a breakaway or an empty-net goal against                                                                                          |
| <b>Countered by</b> | One pass — you are betting they cannot make it in the time you allow them                                                                                |

**Shape:** Three forwards deep or nearly deep, both defencemen at the offensive blue line and pinching aggressively, effectively no safety at all.

**A note on the name.** The label "2-2-1" is sometimes used for this in casual discussion, but it does not appear as an established named forecheck anywhere in hockey coaching literature — it is standard terminology in basketball, not hockey. Coaching sources describe this as a **full-ice press**, an **all-out forecheck**, or simply "an aggressive 2-1-2 with both D pinching." Use one of those names with your team so everyone means the same thing.

**The jobs:** All three forwards hunt the puck. Both defencemen hold the line and pinch on anything, on the understanding that a puck getting past them is a breakaway. The goaltender, in a delayed-penalty or empty-net situation, may be out of the equation entirely.

**What it's good at:** Not letting the opposition breathe. It is not really a system so much as a decision to accept unlimited risk in exchange for keeping the puck in the zone.

**What it concedes:** Literally everything. A single clean exit is a breakaway or an empty-net goal against.

**When a coach picks it:** Almost exclusively late and trailing.

- Down a goal in the last two or three minutes.
- With the goaltender pulled for the extra attacker, where you are already six skaters and giving up the empty net anyway.
- During a **delayed penalty**, when the whistle blows as soon as the offending team **gains control** of the puck — not merely touches it (Rule 15.1: "*When the team to be penalized gains control of the puck, the Referee will blow his whistle to stop play*"). The distinction matters on the ice: a deflection, a blocked pass or a puck that glances off a defender does **not** stop play, so a team that eases off after any contact concedes a live puck while its own goalie may be on the bench. Keep playing until the whistle actually goes. This is still the one situation where an all-out press is nearly free, and the classic error is failing to press hard enough during it.

**How it is beaten:** One pass. That is the point of it — you are betting that they cannot make that pass in the time you allow them.

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## The Defencemen on the Forecheck

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Forwards get most of the attention here, but the defencemen decide whether a forecheck is worth running. If they hold the zone, a failed forecheck becomes a second forecheck. If they get it

wrong, a failed forecheck becomes a 2-on-1.

## Holding the line

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                           |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | At or just inside the offensive blue line, feet moving, on your toes                                                                                                      |
| <b>Never</b>     | Stand still — stationary, you can neither reach a rim coming around nor retreat                                                                                           |
| <b>Technique</b> | Small forward-and-back adjustments keep you able to do both                                                                                                               |
| <b>Rule</b>      | You are offside only once both skates have completely crossed the blue line before the puck completely crosses it (NHL Rule 83) — one skate on or behind keeps you onside |
| <b>Rule</b>      | A skate raised over the neutral zone is still onside under NHL and IIHF rules; USA Hockey Rule 630(a) requires skate contact, so there it is offside                      |

Your default position as a defenceman on the forecheck is **at or just inside the offensive blue line**, feet moving, on your toes.

Standing still is the mistake. If you are stationary when a rim comes around, you cannot get to it, and you cannot retreat either. Small forward-and-back adjustments keep you able to do both.

Note the offside rule while you are up there: **both of your skates must completely cross the blue line before the puck completely crosses it** for you to be offside. One skate on or behind the line keeps you onside, and a skate in the air over the neutral zone still counts as onside — **under NHL and IIHF rules only; USA Hockey Rule 630(a) requires skate contact, so a raised skate is offside there.** This is why a defenceman can keep one heel touching the line and still reach a long way into the zone.

## When to pinch, and when not to

- Read** Pinch when you can arrive on contact — "if you can't arrive on contact, don't go" — so you can play the puck or legally seal the winger
- Read** On a pure race for a loose puck or a dying rim with nobody to seal, you need to arrive clearly first, not "probably"
- Read** Pinch when the puck is on the wall and slowing down, not zipping past you
- Read** Pinch only when F3 is high and in position to rotate back and cover the point you are vacating
- Rule** A player may be checked after losing the puck only if the check is "rendered immediately following his loss of possession" (NHL Rule 56.1); later is interference (56.2)
- Never** Pinch when you are reaching, when you would turn your back to the play, when they have speed through the middle, when protecting a lead late, or after being beaten once this shift

A **pinch** is stepping down from the blue line along the wall to kill a rim or a chipped clear before it escapes.

### Pinch when:

- **You can arrive on contact — and on an uncontested puck, clearly first.** The standard coaching test, used identically in Offensive Zone Play, is "*if you can't arrive on contact, don't go*": you and the puck reach the wall at the same moment, so you can either play the puck or legally seal the opposing winger against the boards. You do not have to beat the puck there — you must not be *late*, because there is only a narrow window once the puck is gone: Rule 56.1 allows the player deemed in possession to be "*checked legally, provided the check is rendered immediately following his loss of possession*" — a beat later and you may not hit the player who no longer has it (Rule 56.2) and you have turned an even rush into an odd-man one. Where the bar is higher is a **pure race for a loose puck or a dying rim with nobody contesting it**: there you need to arrive clearly first, not "probably", because there is no man to seal and second place just means you have turned your back on the play.
- The puck is on the wall and **slowing down**, not zipping past you.
- Your **F3 is high and in position** to rotate back and cover the point you are vacating. This is the exchange that makes pinching safe: you go down, F3 comes back. If F3 is in the corner, the exchange is not available.
- The score and clock allow it. See below.

## Do not pinch when:

- You are reaching for it, or you would have to turn your back to the play.
- The opposition has speed coming through the middle already.
- You are protecting a lead late.
- You have already been beaten once on the same shift — the second gamble is how one mistake becomes two.

## The weak-side defenceman is the safety

|                   |                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | At 5-on-5 in every forecheck above, only one defenceman pinches at a time — very widely taught, but a coaching choice rather than a law                   |
| <b>Position</b>   | The weak-side defenceman holds the middle and does not join in — the reason a failed pinch is a 2-on-1 rather than a breakaway                            |
| <b>Read</b>       | Both defencemen go only on a called situation — a full-ice press, a delayed penalty, or 6-on-5 with your goalie pulled                                    |
| <b>Convention</b> | Some teams run a five-man rotation or a standing green light for both defencemen instead, with the highest forward covering the line — ask which yours is |
| <b>Action</b>     | Look for your partner before you commit — if they are already down the wall, you are the safety                                                           |
| <b>Convention</b> | When the strong-side D pinches, the common default is F3 recovering to the point; some teams slide the weak-side D across instead                         |

**The default, at 5-on-5 in every forecheck described above: only one defenceman pinches at a time.** This is a very widely taught coaching choice rather than a law of hockey, but it is close to universal, and if nobody has told you otherwise it is the assumption to play on.

The **weak-side defenceman** — the one away from the puck — holds the middle of the ice and does not join in. They are the last line of defence and the reason a failed pinch is a 2-on-1 rather than a breakaway. Both defencemen pinching simultaneously is described in coaching material as a last resort, because it leads directly to breakaways.

## The situations where even a one-at-a-time team sends both defencemen on purpose:

- **The full-ice press** described above — the whole point of it is that the safety has been given up deliberately.

- **A delayed penalty**, when play cannot continue past the moment the offending team gains control, so there is no counter-attack to be exposed to.
- **6-on-5 with your goalie pulled**, where the empty net is already conceded and the only currency left is time in the zone.

Every one of those is a decision to accept a breakaway as the price. None of them is a thing you do because the puck looked gettable.

**And the list above is situational, not exhaustive** — some teams simply run a different default. A team playing a **five-man rotation** or giving both defencemen a standing green light in the offensive zone has decided to carry that risk as a matter of routine rather than in named moments, and whichever forward is highest covers the line. That is a real system, not a mistake; it just is not the one this document assumes. Offensive Zone Play sets out the same choice from the attacking side. Ask which yours is before you decide your partner is out of position.

The practical version, for you personally: **look for your partner before you commit**. If they are already down the wall, you are the safety unless the bench has called one of the situations above. That decision does not depend on how tempting the puck looks.

When the strong-side defenceman does pinch, somebody has to fill the point they left. **The common default is that F3 recovers towards the middle and replaces them at the blue line** — this is the single most commonly missed job on the forecheck. It is not the only arrangement: some coaches instead have the **weak-side defenceman slide across** to cover both points and accept a hole on the far side, and some teams pinch only when F3 has already called that they are high and ready, so no rotation is needed at all. Ask which of the three your team runs. See Defender and Risk Management.

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## Off a Dump-In vs Off a Turnover

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These are two completely different situations and most players forecheck them identically. They should not.

## Off a dump-in — you control the clock

|                   |                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | You chose when the puck went in and you know where it is going — you arrive at full speed with a head start                                              |
| <b>Action</b>     | Leave before the puck does — F1 should be accelerating as the dump is released, not after it                                                             |
| <b>Targets</b>    | Aim the dump at a person, not a zone — put it where their defenceman must retrieve it facing their own end boards                                        |
| <b>Never</b>      | Finish into the back of a player facing the wall — take the puck, take the ice, or angle them off it; the onus is entirely on you as the arriving player |
| <b>Convention</b> | F1 takes the retrieval and F2 commits early to the passing lane rather than following F1 into the corner                                                 |
| <b>Options</b>    | Three kinds of dump — a hard rim, a soft chip behind the defenceman, and a cross-corner dump; your line should agree in advance                          |

When you dump the puck in, **you chose when it went in and you know where it is going**. You get to arrive at full speed with a head start, and their defenceman has to turn their back on the play to retrieve it.

What that means for you:

- **Leave before the puck does.** The forward who is going to be F1 should be accelerating as the dump is released, not after it. The whole advantage of a dump-in is the head start, and players routinely throw it away by watching the puck first.
- **Aim the dump at a person, not at a zone.** Put it where their defenceman has to retrieve it facing their own end boards, with their back to you. **Then understand what you have just created.** A player facing the end boards with a forechecker closing on their back is the exact scenario the checking-from-behind and boarding rules exist for, and the onus is entirely on you as the arriving player. Take the puck, take the ice, or angle them off it — do not finish into their back, and do not drive a player who is facing the wall. The checker's obligations are in Body Contact and Battles, §5.
- **F1 takes the retrieval, F2 takes the outlet.** Because you know where the puck is going, F2 can commit early to the passing lane rather than following F1 into the corner.
- **F3 and the D can be aggressive,** because your team is organised and coming forward as a unit.



There are broadly three kinds of dump — a **hard rim** around the boards, a **soft chip** into the corner behind the defenceman, and a **cross-corner** dump that changes the side of retrieval. Which you use is a Zone Entries topic, but the forecheck timing differs for each and your line should agree in advance.

## Off a turnover — you are behind the play

|                 |                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mindset</b>  | You are recovering, not hunting — you are disorganised and they are not                                                                     |
| <b>Action</b>   | The closest player pressures immediately, whoever they are — two seconds of pressure buys the rest of your team time to sort themselves out |
| <b>Priority</b> | Everyone else's first job is to find their layer, not the puck — a second and third chaser is how a lost puck becomes a goal against        |
| <b>Never</b>    | Pinch off a turnover unless the puck is genuinely dying on the wall — you do not have the structure behind you that a dump-in gives you     |
| <b>Goal</b>     | Accept the lower ambition — slow them down and collect it in the neutral zone                                                               |

When you lose the puck in the offensive zone, **you are disorganised and they are not**. Somebody is out of position, at least one of your players is skating the wrong way, and the opposition has a numbers advantage for about two seconds.

What that means for you:

- **The closest player pressures immediately, whoever they are.** This is the purest F1-is-a-role situation there is. Two seconds of pressure buys the rest of your team the time to sort themselves out.
- **Everyone else's first job is to find their layer, not the puck.** The instinct after a turnover is to chase and win it back. The correct instinct is to look at where your teammates are and take the empty role. A second and third chaser after a turnover is how a lost puck becomes a goal against.
- **Do not pinch off a turnover** unless the puck is genuinely dying on the wall. You do not have the structure behind you that a dump-in gives you.
- **Accept a lower ambition.** Off a turnover, the realistic win is Win 2 — slow them down and collect it in the neutral zone. Trying for Win 1 with three players out of position is how odd-man rushes are made.

The distinction in one line: **off a dump-in you are hunting; off a turnover you are recovering.**

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# The Trapezoid — Why Dump-and-Chase Works At All

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This is the rule that makes the entire forechecking game viable, and most players do not know it applies to them.

**The rule, in two halves — and you have to cite each half from the right place.**

**NHL Rule 1.8 (the markings painted on the ice) gives the dimensions.** The trapezoid's lines begin **eight feet from each goal post** at the goal line and widen to **eleven feet from each post** at the end boards — which, across a six-foot net, works out at **28 feet apart**. (Rule 1.8 gives the per-post figures; the 28-foot total is arithmetic from them, and is printed as a number only in Rule 27.8.)

**NHL Rule 27.8 (Restricted Area) gives the offence and the penalty.** The goalkeeper may not play the puck behind the goal line **outside** that trapezoid.

*(Cite them that way round deliberately, because the two rules give different near dimensions. Rule 27.8 still reads six feet from either goal post — wording left over from before the trapezoid was widened by two feet each side in 2014. It is **stale, not self-contradictory**: six feet a side gives 18 feet at the goal line, which diverges coherently to the same 28 feet at the boards. (**27.8 is the only one of the two that prints "28 feet" as a number**; in 1.8 that total is arithmetic from its eleven-feet-from-each-post figure. Both books agree on the far end and differ only at the goal line.) It is simply the old shape. **Never take dimensions from 27.8.** See Rules Primer and Rink Map and Glossary.)* Playing the puck outside the trapezoid is a **two-minute minor for delay of game** (Rules 27.8, 63.2(viii)). The determining factor is the position of the puck. **The sole exception is a goalkeeper playing the puck while maintaining skate contact with their crease** — there is no teammate-based exception and no "they were about to get hit" exception.

**Where it applies:** the **NHL** (since 2005-06), the **KHL**, and **IIHF play** — the IIHF integrated the trapezoid into its unified rulebook for the 2021-22 season, explicitly to create more offensive play. **Most rec, beer-league and youth associations outside Britain do not use it.** Check your league's rink and look behind the net for painted lines — but treat an unmarked sheet as a hint rather than a ruling, because IIHF 27.7 turns on "*the position of the puck*", not on the markings.

 **In England and Wales, that check is not optional — the status is genuinely unsettled there.** The IIHF book carries the rule, numbered **27.7** rather than the NHL's 27.8, and the 2025-26 In-House Rules do not amend it. But England Ice Hockey's own *Rules & Regulations* **22.3** say the Goalkeepers' Restricted Area is "*not currently enforced to allow ice rinks the necessary time to make the changes to implement this rule*" — and that edition is 2024-25, so the published

documents do not settle whether the suspension still stands. **For a forechecking team the safe assumption is that their goalie may retrieve the puck**, which is the case in which dump-and-chase loses most of its value. Look behind the net for painted lines, and ask your league before you build a forecheck on it. UK and England Rules records the same uncertainty.

## Why this matters so much to a forechecker

- Risk** Without the trapezoid a puck-handling goaltender is a third defenceman — no pressure is permitted on them and dump-and-chase becomes nearly pointless
- 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
- Key** With it, the corners belong to you: their defenceman has to go and get it, turning their back to a forechecker arriving at speed
- Goal** That exchange is the whole engine of modern forechecking

Without the trapezoid, a puck-handling goaltender is a third defenceman. They stand in the corner, collect the dump-in with no forechecking pressure permitted on them, and hand it to a defenceman who is already facing up ice. Dump-and-chase becomes nearly pointless.

With the trapezoid, **the corners belong to you**. Their defenceman has to go and get it, turning their back to a forechecker arriving at speed. That is the whole engine of modern forechecking.

## How to aim your dump-ins to exploit it

- Targets** Dump into the corners — the "soft" areas the goalie cannot legally touch
- Never** Dump straight down the middle behind the net — that is inside the trapezoid, exactly where the goalie is allowed to play it and will be waiting
- Technique** A rim that dies in the corner is the highest-value dump there is — a defenceman must skate all the way over for it, under pressure, facing the boards
- Options** A cross-corner dump forces the retrieval on the far side from where their defencemen are set up, adding a second or two of travel
- Read** Watch the goalie's stick side — many are far better on their forehand, so dumping to the backhand buys time even inside the trapezoid
- Action** In a league with no trapezoid, carry it in, dump where the goalie must leave the net entirely, or forecheck the outlet instead of the retrieval

- **Dump into the corners, not straight behind the net.** Directly behind the net is inside the trapezoid — that is exactly where the goalie is allowed to play it and where they will be waiting. The corners are the "soft" areas the goalie cannot legally touch.
- **A rim that dies in the corner is unretrievable by their goalie.** A defenceman has to skate all the way over for it, under pressure, facing the boards. This is the highest-value dump there is.
- **Cross-corner dumps** force the retrieval to happen on the far side from where their defencemen are set up, which adds a second or two of travel — often the difference between them making a pass and you sealing them in.
- **A dump straight down the middle behind the net is a gift.** The goalie stops it, sets it for their defenceman, and your forecheck has achieved nothing. If you must go there, at least make it hard enough to come off the end boards and out to a corner.

Watch the goalie's stick side as well: many goalies are far better at handling and setting the puck on their forehand, so dumping to their backhand side buys extra time even inside the trapezoid.

**In a league with no trapezoid, change the plan.** Dump-and-chase loses most of its value against a puck-handling goalie. The alternatives are to carry the puck in with control, to dump it to areas the goalie has to leave the net entirely to reach, or to forecheck the *outlet* rather than the retrieval — position F1 on the defenceman who is about to receive the goalie's pass instead of racing to the corner. Note also that a goaltender outside their crease is still not a legitimate target for a check; see Goaltender and Rules Primer.

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## Choosing a Forecheck by Game State

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This is the coach's decision, but you should understand the logic, because you will be expected to switch mid-game on a bench call — often just a shout of "back off" or "we're on the 1-2-2 now."

| Situation                                       | Typical choice                   | Why                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Leading late</b> (last 5 minutes)            | 1-2-2, 1-3-1 or 1-4              | The value of one more goal is small; the cost of conceding one is enormous. Take zero risk.                                                                               |
| <b>Trailing late</b>                            | 2-1-2, then full-ice press       | The cost of conceding is now near zero. Maximise the chance of a turnover in their end.                                                                                   |
| <b>Tied, early</b>                              | Your team's base system          | No reason to distort.                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Against a strong puck-moving defence</b>     | <b>Genuine split — see below</b> | Coaches go both ways on this one, and the two answers solve different halves of the problem.                                                                              |
| <b>Against a defence that panics</b>            | 2-1-2                            | Two-man pressure produces turnovers immediately.                                                                                                                          |
| <b>After their icing</b>                        | 2-1-2 or press                   | Under NHL and IIHF rules they cannot change lines or call a timeout, so you are attacking tired players. <b>Check your own book first — see the note below the table.</b> |
| <b>Your line is tired / long shift</b>          | 1-2-2 or 1-4                     | A passive shape is far cheaper to skate. Survive to a whistle or a change.                                                                                                |
| <b>Immediately after a long defensive shift</b> | Passive, then change             | Do not chase. Get the puck deep, get off the ice.                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Killing a penalty</b>                        | Separate structures entirely     | Penalty-kill forechecks are their own topic. See Special Teams.                                                                                                           |

⚠ **The "after their icing" row does not travel to every book.** The mismatch that row is built on comes from two rules: **Rule 81.4** stops the offending team substituting and **Rule 87.1** says "No time-out shall be granted to the defensive team following an icing."

- **IIHF — the whole thing applies, and it is the book that matters for British league hockey.** Rule 81.4 matches the NHL: a team in violation "*shall not be permitted to make any Player substitutions prior to the ensuing 'face-off'*", with exceptions only for a goalkeeper who had been pulled for an extra attacker, an injured player, a broken skate, or a penalty affecting on-ice strength. **IIHF Rule 87.1 carries the icing restriction too**, in the NHL's own words: "*No 'time-out' shall be granted to the defensive team following an icing, following the goalkeeper causing a stoppage of play from a shoot-in from beyond the center red line, or when a defending Player accidentally dislodges the net causing a stoppage of play.*" So against an IIHF-rules opponent — English, Welsh and Scottish league hockey included — press after their icing exactly as you would in the NHL.

- **USA Hockey — neither half applies.** Rule 624 contains no line-change restriction at all, and Rule 204(a) gives both teams their normal five-second substitution windows after *any* stoppage. Rule 636(f) puts no icing condition on time-outs either. So a team that ices the puck under USA Hockey rules changes its tired line off and may still call a time-out.

If you play North American rec or youth hockey, there is no mismatch to attack here — press after their icing because you like the shape, not because they are stuck out there.

## The one row coaches genuinely disagree on: facing an elite puck-mover

- Read** Pressure (2-1-2) if your forwards are fast and fit, or you are chasing the game — deny the time and the skill never gets used
- Read** Contain (1-2-2 or 1-3-1) if you cannot be confident of arriving first, your forwards are tired, or you are protecting a lead
- Risk** Pressure gives an elite puck-mover exactly what they want — a committed forechecker and space behind them
- Key** The tiebreaker is not the opponent, it is you — pressure only beats a skilled passer if you actually arrive before the pass
- Action** Ask which your bench wants, because the two produce opposite F1 routes

This is worth spelling out, because you will be told both things by different coaches and both are defensible. **Neutral Zone Systems carries the same split, worded the same way.**

- **The case for pressuring (2-1-2).** A defenceman who can pass is dangerous because of the *time* they get. Deny the time and the skill never gets used — you force the puck out early, before their forwards have read the play. This is the answer if your forwards are fast and fit, and it is the usual choice when you are chasing the game.
- **The case for containing (1-2-2 or 1-3-1).** Pressure gives a genuinely elite puck-mover exactly what they want: a forechecker who has committed, and space behind them. One pass past your F1 and your structure is worse off than if you had never gone. This is the answer if you cannot be confident of arriving first, if your forwards are tired, or if you are protecting a lead.

**The tiebreaker is not the opponent — it is you.** Pressure only beats a skilled passer if you actually arrive before the pass. If you cannot, containment is not the cowardly option; it is the only one that works. Ask which your bench wants, because the two produce opposite F1 routes.

## At rec level: simpler is better

|                   |                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | Run the forecheck everybody actually remembers at 10:45pm on a Tuesday                                                                |
| <b>Convention</b> | A 1-2-2 is usually the right default for your league — a recommendation for rec hockey, not a claim about what most teams play        |
| <b>Convention</b> | The house default throughout is a 2-1-2 because the position documents are written around it; run it if your team can sustain it      |
| <b>Action</b>     | Agree only that "one goes, one supports, one stays high" and you have most of the benefit of a real system                            |
| <b>Never</b>      | Send both defencemen unless the bench has explicitly called an all-out press — that is where most rec-league odd-man rushes come from |
| <b>Mindset</b>    | An aggressive forecheck is a conditioning decision as much as a tactical one                                                          |

If you play beer league or adult rec, the honest answer to "which forecheck should we run?" is **the one everybody actually remembers at 10:45pm on a Tuesday.**

- **A 1-2-2 is usually the right default** — note that this is a recommendation for *your* league, not a claim about what most teams play. It is forgiving, it does not require anyone to sprint, and its failure mode is "we didn't get the puck back," not "breakaway." The house default throughout is a 2-1-2 because that is what the position documents are written around; if your team can sustain it, run it.
- **Two players on one puck is the practical version of every aggressive system.** If your line agrees only that "one goes, one supports, one stays high," you have most of the benefit of a real system.
- **The habit that matters most is not a shape — it is that only one defenceman goes,** unless the bench has explicitly called an all-out press. Most rec-league odd-man rushes come from both defencemen deciding to be heroes at the same moment.
- Be realistic about fitness. An aggressive forecheck is a conditioning decision as much as a tactical one. See Conditioning and Recovery.

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## Reading the Opposition's Forecheck

You will spend as much time breaking a forecheck as running one. Recognising which one you are facing takes about a second and changes what you should do with the puck.

**Look at three things the moment your defenceman touches the puck behind your net.**

**1. Count the forwards below the top of the circles.**

- **Two or more deep** → aggressive: a 2-1-2 or a 2-3/lock. Expect immediate contact.
- **One deep** → containment: 1-2-2, 1-3-1 or 1-4. Expect space now and a wall later.

**2. Watch F1's route.**

- **Straight at the puck, at speed** → they want the puck. They are committed and therefore beatable by a reverse or a quick D-to-D.
- **Curving to one side and slowing down** → they are steering, not attacking. They want you to go one way. Going that way is walking into the trap; the counter is to change the side of the ice before you commit.

**3. Watch their far-side defenceman.**

- **Standing inside their offensive blue line, feet moving** → they intend to pinch. A rim past them is your best play, and there is a great deal of ice behind them.
- **Backing towards the red line** → they are conceding the zone. Do not force a rim into a defenceman who is retreating; you have time to make a controlled play instead.

**One more tell, one pass later: what happens after a D-to-D pass?** If a new forechecker immediately attacks the receiving defenceman, they are running a rotating aggressive system and D-to-D will not save you. If the whole shape simply shifts across and holds its distance, you are facing containment and D-to-D is a free reset you can use repeatedly.

**What to do about each**

|                |                                                                                                                          |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>  | Against an aggressive forecheck, move the puck early — before pressure arrives, not after                                |
| <b>Options</b> | Reverse against an over-committed F1, rim against a sealing one                                                          |
| <b>Targets</b> | Your winger should come underneath the pressure to receive, not stand still on the wall                                  |
| <b>Action</b>  | Against containment, use D-to-D and controlled regroupes to make the wall shift, then chip past the line and race for it |
| <b>Options</b> | Bank passes off the boards to teammates who have already got behind the line                                             |
| <b>Never</b>   | Skate into the middle of three players — the one thing that never works                                                  |



- **Against an aggressive forecheck:** move the puck early — before pressure arrives, not after. Use the reverse against an over-committed F1 and the rim against a sealing one. Attack the space behind their pinching defencemen; a rim or a chip that gets past the point is worth more than a pretty pass. Your winger should be coming *underneath* the pressure to receive, not standing still on the wall.
- **Against a containment forecheck or trap:** stop trying to force it. Use D-to-D and controlled regroups to make the wall shift, chip the puck past the line of players and race for it, and use bank passes off the boards to teammates who have already got behind the line. The one thing that never works is skating into the middle of three players.

Full detail on the counters lives in Breakouts and Neutral Zone Systems. The skill of reading the shape before the puck arrives is covered in Scanning and Anticipation.

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## Common Mistakes

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- **Treating F1/F2/F3 as fixed people.** Waiting for the centre to arrive so they can "be F1" hands the opposition two free seconds. Whoever is closest goes. Now.
- **F2 following F1 into the same corner when the system did not ask for it.** Two players in one square metre are beaten by one turn, and in most shapes F2's job is the escape route, not the puck. The exception is deliberate and called from the bench: a **stacked 2-1-2** sends both at the same corner on purpose. Know which you are running before you decide someone is out of position.
- **Arriving at full speed with no ability to stop.** You get one straight line and they get everything else. Sprint in, then get your feet under you for the last two strides.
- **Forechecking to hit rather than to take away options.** A missed hit removes you from the play. A completed hit that doesn't win the puck removes you too. Angling removes only them.
- **Skating at the puck instead of at the space you want to deny.** Chasing the puck is the beginner's version of forechecking and every defenceman in the league beats it.
- **Chasing after you have been beaten.** When the puck goes D-to-D past you, your job is to take the high role, not to turn and sprint. Chasing burns your legs and leaves the middle of the ice empty.
- **Both defencemen pinching when nobody called for it.** The commonest source of breakaways against at every level. There are situations where both *should* go — a full-ice

press, a delayed penalty, 6-on-5 — but they are called from the bench, not decided individually. Look for your partner before you commit.

- **F3 drifting low.** F3 is the insurance policy. When F3 gets bored and joins the cycle, a failed forecheck becomes a rush against.
  - **Forechecking a dump-in and a turnover the same way.** Off a dump-in you have a head start and can be aggressive. Off a turnover you are behind the play and should be recovering shape, not hunting.
  - **Dumping the puck straight behind the net in a trapezoid league.** That is precisely the area their goalie is allowed to play. Aim for the corners. In England and Wales, check first whether you are in one — the restricted area's status is unsettled there.
  - **Not knowing which forecheck your team runs, or which one you switch to with a lead.** If F1 is angling the carrier to the boards and F2 is sealing the middle, both players are doing their job correctly and neither is doing anything useful.
  - **Running an aggressive forecheck you are not fit enough to sustain.** A 2-1-2 for the first ten minutes and nothing after that is worse than a 1-2-2 for sixty.
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## Key Takeaways

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1. **F1, F2 and F3 are roles set by order of arrival — not positions and not people.** If you get there first, you are F1, whatever your position, and the labels rotate again the moment the puck moves.
2. **A forecheck has two ways to win:** take the puck back deep in their zone, or force a rushed exit you intercept in the neutral zone. Passive systems are not lazy — they have chosen the second one.
3. **Every extra forechecker increases pressure and increases the cost of failure.** Pressure and risk are the same dial, and the game state decides where it should be set.
4. **Angling is the whole skill.** Take away one side on the approach, arrive under control, stick on the ice in the passing lane, and force the carrier into the one option your F2 is standing on. The goal is to eliminate options, not to make a hit.
5. **F1 makes the play predictable; F2 finishes it.** Whether F1 also goes for the puck is system-dependent — hunting in a 2-1-2, steering in a 1-2-2 or 1-3-1 — and a stacked 2-1-2 deliberately sends both at the same corner. What stays constant is the division of labour: F2 is there to take the *next* play, so if F2 is simply chasing the puck F1 is already on, the forecheck has failed.

6. **At 5-on-5, the default is that only one defenceman pinches.** That is a near-universal coaching choice rather than a law. The weak-side D is the safety and the reason a failed pinch is a 2-on-1 rather than a breakaway; when the strong-side D pinches, somebody — usually F3 — covers the point they left. The situational exceptions are called from the bench — a full-ice press, a delayed penalty, 6-on-5 — and a minority of teams run a different default outright, giving both defencemen a green light. Ask which yours is.
  7. **The trapezoid is why dump-and-chase works.** In the NHL, KHL and IIHF play the goalie may only play the puck behind the goal line inside it, so dump into the corners — never straight behind the net. Most rec leagues have no trapezoid, which changes the plan entirely.  **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. 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.
  8. **Off a dump-in you are hunting; off a turnover you are recovering.** Leave before the puck does on a dump-in. After a turnover, the closest player pressures and everyone else finds a layer rather than chasing.
  9. **Read the forecheck you are facing in one second:** count the forwards below the circles, watch whether F1 attacks or steers, and watch whether their far-side D is pinching or retreating.
  10. **None of this is a law of hockey — find out which forecheck your team runs and which one it switches to with a lead.** Aggressive forechecks are beaten by moving the puck early; traps are beaten by chipping past the line and skating onto it. Never try to stickhandle through the middle of three players.
-

# Neutral Zone Systems

**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

**Key** The team that controls the neutral zone decides what kind of game gets played

**Risk** A turnover in the middle third does the most damage relative to the risk you thought you were taking

**Goal** Control it and you choose whether the night is a track meet of rushes or a grinding slog — lose it and your opponent chooses for you

The **neutral zone** is the middle third of the ice, between the two blue lines. It is where possession changes hands most often, where odd-man rushes are manufactured, and where a turnover does the most damage relative to the risk you thought you were taking. This document covers how teams defend it, how teams attack through it, and how to read which is happening while you are carrying the puck toward it.

The core idea, and the thing to hold onto if you remember nothing else: **the team that controls the neutral zone decides what kind of game gets played.** Control it and you choose whether the night is a track meet of rushes or a grinding, dump-and-forecheck slog. Lose it and your opponent chooses for you.

# What the neutral zone actually is

- Key** A strong skater crosses the neutral zone in about three seconds — that is the entire window for every decision in this document
- Rule** Offside needs both an attacker's skates completely over the line before the puck; an airborne trail skate stays onside under NHL and IIHF, but not under USA Hockey 630(a), which requires skate contact
- Rule** The centre red line is still the icing line — the shorthanded exemption carries carve-outs (NHL 81.6, USA Hockey 624(b)(1)); see Special Teams, which owns it
- Rule** The two-line pass is gone — NHL Rule 83 (Off-side) has no two-line provision, and neither do the IIHF, USA Hockey or CARHA books (CARHA Rule 73(d))
- Never** Rebuild your attack around a local two-line pass rule unless somebody shows it to you in writing
- Read** On a shorter sheet every structure here collapses faster — passive traps work better on small ice, aggressive pressure on big ice

**The neutral zone** is the area between the two blue lines. On a regulation NHL sheet (200 feet by 85 feet) the blue lines sit 75 feet from each end board, which leaves **50 feet of neutral zone**. Fifty feet is not much. A strong skater covers it in about three seconds. That is the entire window in which every decision in this document has to be made.

Three lines govern what happens there, and you need all three in your head at once:

- **Your defensive blue line** — the line your opponents must not precede the puck across. **Offside** requires **both** of an attacker's skates to completely cross the 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 still counts as onside **under NHL and IIHF rules — but not under USA Hockey, whose Rule 630(a) requires skate contact with the neutral zone or the blue line**.
- **The centre red line** — no longer relevant to passing (see below), but still the **icing line**. If you shoot the puck from your own half of the ice and it crosses the opponent's goal line untouched, that is icing, unless you are shorthanded or one of the other wave-offs applies. The shorthanded one has two carve-outs — NHL Rule 81.6 (a team shorthanded by a *major* with nobody on the penalty bench) and USA Hockey Rule 624(b)(1), which grants the exemption only at Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult; see Special Teams, which owns the rule. This is why "get it past the red line first" is still shouted on every bench in the world.

- **Their blue line** — where your entry either works or dies. Covered in full in Zone Entries.

**The two-line pass rule is gone.** Until 2005 a pass could not cross both your own blue line and the centre red line without being touched. The NHL removed it coming out of the 2004-05 lockout, at the same time as the obstruction crackdown and the introduction of the trapezoid. **NHL Rule 83 — Off-side** is now the only restriction on where a pass may go, and it contains no two-line provision at all. Everything in this document about stretch passes only exists because of that change. The rule is also absent from the current IIHF and USA Hockey books, so at every level with a published rulebook the long pass is legal. That now includes the rec level: the **CARHA Hockey Official Rule Book** — the standalone book a large number of Canadian adult leagues play under — abolishes it in as many words at **Rule 73(d)**: *"For the purpose of 2-line passes, the red line will not be in play. It will still be in effect for icing."* Worth knowing, though, is why the folklore persists. That same CARHA book still prints a **"Red Line Off-Side Pass"** referee signal in its signals appendix (*"arm extended at shoulder level pointing toward the centre red line"*) and still cross-references *"an off-side pass over the centre red line"* in its delayed-penalty rule (39(b)) — dead text left behind when the rule went. If your league's book reads like that, the signal is a fossil, not a rule. **Flagged as unverified:** it is often said that a few older recreational-association rulebooks still run a two-line pass rule locally, but there is no published rulebook to confirm it. If somebody on your team insists your league has one, ask to see it in writing before you rebuild your attack around it.

**Rec and youth note:** on a shorter sheet the neutral zone is proportionally smaller and the closing speed is the same, so every structure in this document collapses faster. Passive traps work better on small ice; aggressive pressure works better on big ice.

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## Why the neutral zone decides games

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- Risk** A turnover at centre ice is the most expensive kind — it is the one that becomes a 2-on-1
- Key** Odd-man rushes are manufactured in the middle third, not in the offensive zone
- Read** How a defending team manages its blue line shapes the opponent's offence more than the opponent's own entry strategy does
- Goal** Win the neutral zone and you choose whether the game is rushes or a grind — neither is better, but the choice must be yours

Four reasons, and they compound.

**1. It is where possession actually changes.** Defensive-zone battles and offensive-zone cycles feel like the important parts of hockey, but most of the time in those zones one team simply has the puck. The neutral zone is the handover. Every breakout that succeeds and every entry that fails resolves there.

**2. A turnover there is the most expensive kind.** Think about the cost gradient. A turnover deep in the offensive zone costs you 180 feet of the opponent's skating before they threaten. A turnover in your own corner is dangerous but your whole team is already home. A turnover at centre ice catches two or three of your players moving the wrong way at speed and puts the puck in open ice with your defence flat-footed. **The neutral zone turnover is the one that becomes a 2-on-1.**

**3. Odd-man rushes are made here, not in the offensive zone.** A 2-on-1 is not a lucky bounce. It is a forward caught on the wrong side of the puck, a defenceman who stepped up and missed, or a winger who left the zone early. All three happen in the middle third.

**4. The defending team, not the attacking team, sets the terms.** Public tracking work on NHL zone entries — Eric Tulsky and colleagues' paper presented at the 2013 MIT Sloan conference, which hand-tracked **330 games from the 2011-12 season**, and Corey Sznajder's later tracking (**2014-16**, reported second-hand and flagged as indicative in Zone Entries) — found that **controlled entries (carrying or passing the puck in) produce roughly twice the shot volume per entry of dump-ins**, and that how a defending team manages its blue line shapes the opponent's offence more than the opponent's own entry strategy does. In other words, the neutral zone structure you play is one of the biggest levers you have on how many chances the other team gets. (Figures vary between studies; treat "roughly double" as the honest number rather than any single decimal.)

**The strategic consequence.** A team that wins the neutral zone gets to choose the game. Force the other side to dump the puck in every time and you have turned the game into a series of forechecking battles and defensive-zone retrievals — a grind. Move through the neutral zone with control and the game becomes rushes, odd-man looks and broken play. Neither is better in the abstract. **What matters is that it is your choice and not theirs.** See Game Management for when to want which.

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## A note on language

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- **F1, F2 and F3 are roles, not people.** They are defined by order of arrival at the puck, not by whether you are a centre or a winger. The forward who gets there first is F1 for that sequence, whoever they are. Wherever this document uses them, read them that way.
- **D1 and D2** likewise mean the strong-side and weak-side defenceman for that sequence, not left and right D.
- **Strong side** = the side of the ice the puck is on. **Weak side** = the other side.
- **Step up** = challenging an opponent forward, in the neutral zone or at your own blue line. This is *not* a **pinch**, which specifically means stepping down from the *offensive* blue line to keep a puck in. Different areas, different risk.
- **Forecheck** = pressure applied in the opponent's end. **Neutral zone forecheck** = the structure your five players hold in the middle third while the opponent tries to break out. **Backcheck** = racing back toward your own end. A neutral zone forecheck is not a forecheck in the strict sense, but the name is universal, so it is used here.
- **Gap** = the distance between a defender and the attacker they are responsible for.
- **The wall** = a line of teammates strung across the ice denying a lane.
- **Rim** = a hard puck sent *onward* around the boards, following the curve of the rink to the next teammate along. **Reverse** = a puck sent *back* against the flow, into the space a forechecker has just skated out of. They are different plays for different problems: a rim beats a forechecker sealing you against the boards, a reverse beats one who has over-committed past you. Do not use the words interchangeably.
- **High slot** = the middle of the ice from the faceoff dots up to the top of the faceoff circles — one layer further out than the **goalmouth**, which is the immediate net front. Most of the dangerous neutral-zone passes are aimed at somebody arriving into the high slot.



## How to read the numbers

|                   |                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | Structures are named from the puck outward — the first number is the layer closest to the opponent's net             |
| <b>Key</b>        | A 1-2-2 is one pressuring, two across the middle, two at the back; a 1-4 is one pressuring and four in a line behind |
| <b>Never</b>      | Read a neutral zone number as its offensive-zone twin — a 2-1-2 forecheck inside their end is a separate animal      |
| <b>Never</b>      | Confuse the neutral zone 1-3-1 with the power play 1-3-1 — different zone, different shape, same three digits        |

Neutral zone structures are named from the **puck outward** — the first number is the layer closest to the opponent's net, the last number is the layer closest to your own. A **1-2-2** is one player pressuring, two across the middle, two at the back. A **1-4** is one pressuring and four in a line behind.

Two traps for the unwary:

- **The offensive-zone forecheck uses the same numbers for different things.** The house default throughout is a **2-1-2 forecheck in the offensive zone** — that is a forechecking system inside their end, not a neutral zone structure. A 2-1-2 *neutral zone* structure is a separate animal. See Forechecking Systems for the offensive-zone versions and keep them mentally separate.

**Which document owns what. This document owns the neutral-zone version** of every shared system name — the wall your five players hold across the middle third — plus gap control, regrouping, and how to break a trap. **Forechecking Systems owns the offensive-zone version** of the same names: the shape and the forwards' jobs while the opponents still have the puck in their own end, plus the history of the left-wing lock. Where a system exists in both places, each file covers its own half and points at the other rather than repeating it.

- **1-3-1 also names a power play formation** — one point, two half-walls, one bumper, one net front. That is a completely different shape in a different zone. Context tells you which. See Special Teams.

# Neutral zone defensive structures

**Everything in this section is a coaching choice, not a law of hockey.** Every structure below is played by good teams, and the same team will often play two or three of them depending on the score, the shift and the personnel on the ice. **Find out which one your team plays, and find out what the switch signal is** — most teams have a call for "we're pressuring this shift" versus "we're holding".

## 1-2-2 — the classic containment structure

|                     |                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | F1 pressures near their goal line or hash marks, F2 and F3 sit across the middle, both defencemen hold the back layer around your own blue line |
| <b>Goal</b>         | F1 takes the middle away and forces the carrier to one side — the turnover is a bonus, dictating the side is the job                            |
| <b>Action</b>       | F2 steps up on the winger receiving on the strong-side wall; F3 holds the middle and weak side; D2 stays home as the safety valve               |
| <b>Risk</b>         | D1 stepping up on the wall is the most dangerous decision in the structure                                                                      |
| <b>Countered by</b> | Quick D-to-D behind the net to change the side, a middle-lane forward supporting low under F2 and F3, and simple patience                       |
| <b>Convention</b>   | Coaching material calls it the most widely played neutral zone structure, but nobody publishes a count — consensus, not a verified fact         |

**The shape.** One forward (F1) pressures near the opponent's goal line or hash marks. Two forwards (F2 and F3) sit across the middle of the neutral zone, usually near the opposing blue line or between it and the red line. Two defencemen hold the back layer, around your own blue line.

### The roles.

- **F1** is not primarily trying to steal the puck. **F1's job is to take away the middle and force the puck carrier to one side of the ice.** F1 skates a curved route that shows the puck carrier the boards and takes away the D-to-D pass behind the net. Getting the turnover is a bonus; dictating the side is the job.
- **F2** covers the strong-side wall. Once F1 has forced the play to a side, F2 steps up on the winger receiving on the boards.
- **F3** holds the middle and weak side, reading for the cross-ice pass or the seam.
- **D1** (strong side) steps up on the wall if the puck gets past F2 — this is the most dangerous decision in the structure.

- **D2** (weak side) stays home, holds the middle, and is the safety valve against everything going wrong.

**Strengths.** Balanced. It never gives up numbers behind the play, it is forgiving of one player's mistake, and it works with any personnel because it does not demand exceptional skating from anyone. It is the safest structure to teach a new team, and coaching material routinely describes it as the most widely played neutral zone structure — *though nobody publishes a count of what teams actually run, so treat that as consensus rather than a verified fact.*

**Weaknesses.** It concedes the first pass. A calm defence with time will break out cleanly against it most of the time, because F1 alone cannot generate real pressure. It also depends completely on F1 taking away the middle — if F1 chases the puck instead of steering it, the whole structure is playing the wrong side of the ice.

**How it is beaten.** Quick D-to-D behind the net to change the side before F1 can re-establish the angle; a middle-lane forward supporting low to receive under F2 and F3; and simple patience — the 1-2-2 rewards you for panicking and punishes you very little for waiting.

## The 1-2-2 trap ("the neutral zone trap")

|                     |                                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | A 1-2-2 with the layers dropped back — F1 high and splitting the ice, F2 and F3 at or just inside the red line, the defence on your own blue line  |
| <b>Goal</b>         | Do not stop the attack — funnel it to a wall and kill it at the red line, with their forwards ahead of the puck and behind the play                |
| <b>Read</b>         | Layers up near their blue line with F1 actually closing is containment; layers back at the red line with F1 gliding is a trap                      |
| <b>Convention</b>   | The pure passive trap is no longer a viable full-time system at high levels — it survives as a situational tool and as DNA inside newer structures |
| <b>Countered by</b> | Quick puck movement, the boards, the stretch pass behind the wall, and a willingness to dump it in rather than force a low-percentage entry        |

**What makes it a trap rather than a containment.** The trap is a 1-2-2 with the layers dropped back and the intent changed. Instead of F1 pressuring deep, F1 sits high in the opponent's zone or at their blue line, still splitting the ice in half, and **the entire structure retreats to defend the centre red line rather than the opponent's blue line.** F2 and F3 sit at or just inside the red line on the walls. The defence holds **your own** blue line.

**Not every neutral-zone 1-2-2 is a trap**, and the distinction matters when you are reading one. A containing 1-2-2 still intends to contest the exit; a trap has given that up and is funnelling you somewhere instead. The tell is F2's depth and F1's speed: layers up near their blue line with F1 actually closing is containment, layers back at the red line with F1 gliding is a trap.

The result is a funnel. The puck carrier is allowed to skate — the trap does not want the puck at the start — and is steered to a wall, where they arrive at the red line into F2 stepping up, D1 behind F2, and no passing lane through the middle because F1 took it away 40 feet earlier. The turnover happens at the red line, with the opponent's forwards ahead of the puck and behind the play. That is the whole design: **you do not stop the attack, you invite it into a place where killing it produces an immediate counterattack.**

**History and why it dominated.** The trap's famous modern incarnation is Jacques Lemaire's New Jersey Devils, who won the 1995 Stanley Cup playing it and were then blamed for a decade of low-scoring hockey. The Devils did not invent the trap; they perfected it and proved it could win a Cup with a roster that was not the most talented in the league — which is exactly why everyone copied it.

**The two older lineages, and why only one of them holds up.** The trap is commonly said to have roots both in European international hockey and in the Montreal Canadiens teams Lemaire himself played on in the 1970s. Those two claims are not in the same evidential position.

**The Montreal one is documented, and contemporaneously.** Michael Farber's *Sports Illustrated* report from the middle of the 1995 final — written at the moment the trap became notorious — says of Lemaire that he "*hardly grew the trap in a petri dish. The forechecking scheme, which can be used whenever an opponent has to clear from deep within its own zone, has been around for decades.*" Farber then quotes **Pierre Page**, the former Nordiques coach and general manager, then scouting for Toronto: "*Montreal's been trapping for 40 years. Montreal always forced you to the boards and locked the middle. But people forgave them because they had great offensive players and they won 24 Stanley Cups.*" Lemaire has since confirmed his own part in it, with a qualifier that matters: "*We didn't use it as a whole team, but I was always talking with my linemates [Steve Shutt and Guy Lafleur mostly], trying to think of ways we could be better defensively. And so our line would use that [trap] system.*" So the accurate version is not that the 1970s Canadiens played the trap as a coached team system. It is that Montreal had a long habit of forcing wide and locking the middle, and that Lemaire's line trapped on its own initiative — which is a much better explanation of where the Devils' version came from than "he invented it".

**(The European lineage is a different matter, and stays flagged as unverified.** The claim that Czechoslovak and Swedish teams of the 1970s and 80s played the trap traces to a single

sentence that disclaims itself — "Much of it is anecdotal evidence, but many old-timers from Europe will tell you..." — and there is no primary source behind it. Farber's 1995 piece does not connect the trap to European hockey anywhere. What Czechoslovak hockey demonstrably did contribute is the **left wing lock**, a related but distinct system invented there to counter the Soviet teams of the 1970s and brought to the NHL by Barry Smith in Detroit — after the Devils, so it cannot be the trap's ancestor. Conflating the two looks like where the story actually comes from.)

One further correction to the usual telling: the Devils were not even the first NHL team to run it. **Roger Neilson used the same system with the 1992-93 Rangers**, and it was unpopular enough with his players — captain Mark Messier in particular — that he lost the job over it. (*The secondary source this comes from says Neilson "was fired after the season"; that detail is wrong. Hockey Reference's 1992-93 Rangers page records two coaches that season — Neilson at 19-17-4 and Ron Smith at 15-22-7 — so he was dismissed partway through it, not at the end. This is a reminder that the trap's folk history travels through blogs.*) Treat the Devils as the team that proved the trap, not the team that invented it.

**Why it worked so well then.** Three things, all of which have since changed:

1. **The two-line pass rule.** You could not pass from your own end past the red line. That made the long ball illegal and forced every attack to skate through the trap's teeth. (Nothing of it survives in the current Rule 83.)
2. **Obstruction was tolerated.** A hook, a hold or a subtle interference on a forward cutting through the middle was very often not called. The trap's four-man wall could be four-man in practice as well as on the whiteboard.
3. **Less speed and less skill throughout the lineup.** A wall of four is much easier to hold when nobody on the other side can beat one of the four in a footrace.

**What changed.** Coming out of the 2004-05 lockout the NHL removed the two-line pass rule (leaving **Rule 83 — Off-side** as the only constraint on a pass), ordered officials to call obstruction, and added the trapezoid restricting where goalies may play the puck (markings in **Rule 1.8**; penalty in **Rules 27.8 / 63.2(viii)**). Stretch passes became legal, the wall could no longer be held with sticks and bodies, and the goalie could no longer be a free third defenceman on retrievals. Combined with the rise of players who can skate, **the pure passive trap is no longer a viable full-time system at high levels.** It survives as a situational tool — protecting a lead, killing the last two minutes, defending a shift when your best defenceman is off — and as the DNA inside the more modern structures below.

**How it is beaten.** See the dedicated section on beating a trap below. Short version: quick puck movement, the boards, the stretch pass behind the wall, and the willingness to just dump it in

rather than force a low-percentage entry.

## 1-3-1 — the modern standard

|                     |                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | F1 pressures, three players stand spread in a line across the ice, one defenceman sits behind them as the last man                               |
| <b>Convention</b>   | Conventionally F2 and F3 on the walls with a defenceman in the middle — but never three forwards across, because F1 is already one of your three |
| <b>Key</b>          | A 1-3-1 does not try to take the puck from you — it offers you the puck on terms you will not like                                               |
| <b>Action</b>       | The three across hold their lanes and slide as a unit; their job is not to attack the puck but to leave no lane through them                     |
| <b>Goal</b>         | Deny the middle lane and concede no odd-man rushes — the back defenceman stays uncommitted and retrieves every dumped puck                       |
| <b>Risk</b>         | One of the three leaving his lane opens a seam instantly, and the single back defenceman cannot cover two lanes                                  |
| <b>Countered by</b> | Getting behind the flat wall with a stretch pass, chip-and-chase past it, or quick lateral movement — a sliding wall has gaps                    |

**The shape.** One forward (F1) pressures. **Three players stand spread across the ice in a line** — conventionally **F2 and F3 on the walls with one defenceman in the middle**, and the middle man is the read-maker, because he is the one who decides which way the whole line slides. One defenceman sits behind them as the last man. (Some coaches put a forward in the middle and a defenceman on a wall; what does not happen is three forwards across, because F1 is already one of your three.)

### The roles.

- **F1** does what F1 always does: splits the ice, takes the middle away, forces a side. In the most passive versions F1 barely leaves the red line.
- **The three across** are a wall. Each is responsible for a lane, and they slide as a unit toward whichever side the puck is on. Their job is not to attack the puck but to make sure there is no lane through them.
- **The single back defenceman** is the safety. They handle anything that gets through and, crucially, retrieve every dumped puck and start the breakout.

**Strengths.** It denies the middle lane better than anything else. It is very hard to enter with control against a well-drilled 1-3-1, because there is no seam to skate or pass through — the three-man line spans the full 85 feet, and F1 has already taken the middle away behind it. It protects a slower defence pairing, and because the back defenceman is uncommitted, it almost never gives up odd-man rushes. It is the reason so many teams switch to it with a one-goal lead in the third period.

**The famous demonstration.** In a November 2011 game, Guy Boucher's Tampa Bay Lightning held their 1-3-1 and Peter Laviolette's Philadelphia Flyers responded by simply refusing to advance the puck — a Flyers defenceman stood still with it in his own zone, repeatedly, daring Tampa to come and get it. Neither coach blinked, Tampa won 2-1, and the league spent a week arguing about it. The episode is the clearest illustration of the 1-3-1's actual proposition: **it does not try to take the puck from you. It offers you the puck on terms you will not like.**

**Weaknesses.** It hands the opponent's defencemen complete freedom with the puck in their own end, which is a real cost against a defence that can pass. It requires strict lane discipline — if one of the three across leaves their lane to chase the puck, a seam opens instantly, and the single back defenceman cannot cover two lanes. And it is passive by nature: if you are trailing, a 1-3-1 will not get you the puck back.

**How it is beaten.** Attack it wide and behind. Because the wall is flat, a forward who gets **behind** the three-man line is immediately in a footrace with only one defenceman — this is what the stretch pass exists for. Chip-and-chase past the wall also works, because there is only one man back to retrieve. Above all, quick lateral puck movement forces the whole wall to slide, and a wall that is sliding has gaps in it.

## Pressure — the neutral zone under an aggressive forecheck

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | Two forwards are gone hunting the puck in their end, leaving F3 as the only layer between the puck and your defence                                              |
| <b>Action</b>       | F3 holds the middle, level with or slightly ahead of the puck, and does not drift to a wall — the pass that hurts you comes up the middle                        |
| <b>Action</b>       | The strong-side defenceman steps up hard on a pass to the wall; the weak-side defenceman stays home as your only genuine safety                                  |
| <b>Key</b>          | Where the defencemen stand depends on the phase — up at the offensive blue line while the forecheck is live, back toward your own blue line once the puck is out |
| <b>Goal</b>         | The only approach here that reliably takes the puck back rather than waiting for a mistake — the right choice when you are chasing a goal                        |
| <b>Risk</b>         | One pass past the two forecheckers leaves F3 alone against three with your defence stepping up — that is how a 3-on-2 becomes a 3-on-1                           |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A crisp first pass past the two pressuring forwards, a reverse or rim behind an over-committed F1, and the stretch pass                                          |

The aggressive option is not really a neutral-zone *structure* at all. It is what the middle third looks like when your team is running a **2-1-2 forecheck inside the opponent's end** and the neutral zone is simply the space behind it. **Forechecking Systems owns that system**; what belongs here is what the other three players do while it happens.

**The shape from the neutral zone's point of view.** Two of your forwards are gone — they are in the opponents' end hunting the puck. That leaves **one forward holding the middle of the neutral zone as the only layer between the puck and your defence**, and two defencemen holding a deliberately tight gap, both prepared to step up.

**Where the defencemen actually stand depends on the phase, and both answers are right. While the forecheck is still live and the puck is in their end**, your two defencemen are up at the **offensive** blue line, holding it and pinching selectively — that is the shape Forechecking Systems describes and owns. **The moment the opponents move the puck out and this becomes a neutral-zone sequence**, the same pair has retreated and is holding its tight gap back toward **your own** blue line, which is the shape described here. Same system, same two players, about 100 feet apart, two different moments. If you read the two documents side by side, read the blue line each names.



**What the three remaining players actually do** once the puck is coming out and the play is in the middle third.

- **F3 holds the middle**, level with or slightly ahead of the puck, and is the first line of protection if the two-man pressure is beaten. In this phase F3 should not drift towards a wall; the pass that hurts you comes up the middle. *(This describes F3's neutral-zone job. **Where F3 sits while the forecheck is still live in the offensive zone is a separate coaching split** — weak-side high in the common default, puck-side in the stacked/strong-side variant, which deliberately concedes the far-side breakout. Forechecking Systems owns that choice; whichever your team runs, F3's job on the way back is the middle.)*
- **The strong-side defenceman** steps up hard on a pass to the wall — this is the aggressive gap that makes the whole thing work, and it is the riskiest decision on the ice.
- **The weak-side defenceman stays home.** With two forwards deep, they are the only genuine safety your team has.

**Strengths.** It is the only approach here that reliably *takes* the puck back rather than waiting for a mistake. It shortens the game, tires out defences that cannot handle pressure, and is the correct choice when you are chasing a goal.

**Weaknesses.** Beat the two forecheckers with one pass and your F3 is alone against three attackers with your defence stepping up into them — that is how a 3-on-2 becomes a 3-on-1. It demands enormous fitness; you cannot pressure at this level for 60 minutes. And it is punished badly by a team with good breakout structure and one skilled defenceman.

**How the opposition beats it.** A crisp first pass past the two pressuring forwards; a reverse or a rim behind an over-committed F1; and the stretch pass, which turns your aggression into their odd-man rush. See Breakouts.

## 1-4 — the full retreat

|                     |                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | One forechecker and four skaters in a flat line across your own blue line — the most conservative structure in hockey                           |
| <b>Read</b>         | Use it protecting a lead in the last minute or two, killing time with an exhausted stranded unit, or defending a 6-on-5 against a pulled goalie |
| <b>Goal</b>         | Let almost nothing through — controlled entries against a disciplined 1-4 are close to impossible and odd-man rushes are eliminated             |
| <b>Risk</b>         | It concedes the whole neutral zone and generates no offence, so you spend the shift in your own end and clearing becomes dumping                |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A hard chip past the flat line and a race for it — nobody in a flat line is deeper than anybody else                                            |
| <b>Never</b>        | Play it as your default — some youth teams do and should not                                                                                    |

**The shape.** One forechecker, and **four skaters in a flat line across your own blue line**. It is the most conservative structure in hockey.

**When it is used.** Protecting a lead in the last minute or two. Killing time at the end of a shift when your unit is exhausted and stranded. Defending a 6-on-5 with the opposing goalie pulled. Some youth teams play it as a default and should not.

**Strengths.** Almost nothing goes through it. Controlled entries against a disciplined 1-4 are close to impossible, and odd-man rushes are eliminated because everyone is already home.

**Weaknesses.** It concedes the entire neutral zone and both blue lines. The opponent gets to enter with speed at a spot of their choosing, and they get to do it repeatedly, because a 1-4 generates no offence and therefore no relief. **You will spend the whole shift in your own end.** It also means that when you do win the puck, all five of you are back at or inside **your own** blue line with nobody ahead of the puck to pass to — clearing becomes dumping, and dumping means they come again.

**How it is beaten.** Enter with a hard chip past the flat line and hunt it — because the whole line is flat, nobody is deeper than anybody else, so a puck put behind them is a genuine race. Failing that, gain the line, set up, and make them defend for two full minutes; a 1-4 has no counterpunch.

## The left-wing lock

|                   |                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | Two forwards forecheck aggressively in their end; the moment possession is lost the left wing drops into line with the two defencemen       |
| <b>Goal</b>       | Forecheck without paying the odd-man price — three across the back, each responsible for roughly a third of the width of the ice            |
| <b>Convention</b> | Conventionally the centre and right wing forecheck, steering the puck to the opponent's right side — a coaching choice, not a law           |
| <b>Risk</b>       | It takes one player out of the counterattack and asks him to do a job most wingers are not trained for — costly if he is your best attacker |
| <b>Read</b>       | A left wing who reads transitions early makes it work; one who reacts late gives you the worst of both systems                              |
| <b>Options</b>    | Many teams now lock whichever winger is highest in the zone instead, which needs a loud and immediate in-game call                          |

**The shape.** A hybrid of a forecheck and a neutral zone structure. Two forwards — conventionally the centre and the right wing — forecheck aggressively in the opponent's end, often deliberately steering the puck toward the opponent's right side. **The moment possession is lost, the left wing drops back into line with the two defencemen**, making a three-man defensive line, each responsible for roughly one third of the width of the ice.

The effect is a 2-3: aggressive up front, three across the back. Structurally it lands somewhere between a 2-1-2 and a trap — you get real forechecking pressure without the odd-man risk that normally comes with it, because the third man back is already there.

**History.** Contrary to the common belief that Detroit invented it, the lock came out of European hockey — and the two stories you will hear are **complementary, not competing**. It was **invented in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s** as an answer to the dominant Soviet national side, and then **adapted for the narrower North American rink by Barry Smith**, an assistant to Scotty Bowman, who brought it to the Detroit Red Wings. Detroit played it heavily from 1994-95 and won the Presidents' Trophy with it, ran into Lemaire's trap in the 1995 Final, and did not win a Cup with the system until 1997. Invention in Europe and adaptation in Detroit are separate events about twenty years apart; neither claim displaces the other. Forechecking Systems carries the same account of the lock's history.

**Strengths.** You get to forecheck without being punished for it. It is genuinely simple to teach — "left wing, you're the third D" — and it works at every level, which is why you still see it in youth hockey.

**Weaknesses.** It asks one specific player to do a job most wingers do not want and are not trained for, and it takes that player out of the counterattack. If your left wing is your best offensive player, the lock costs you more than it saves. It also assumes a left wing who reads transitions early; a left wing who reacts late gives you the worst of both systems.

**Modern variant.** Many teams now play a **"lock" on whichever winger is highest in the zone** rather than always the left wing, which removes the personnel problem at the cost of requiring a clear in-game call. If your team does this, the communication has to be loud and immediate — see On-Ice Communication.

Which one should you be playing?

|            |                                                                                                                        |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Convention | Which structure you play is your coach's call, and the honest answer is usually more than one                          |
| Read       | Trailing and needing the puck, or with a fast, fit forward group → pressure behind a 2-1-2 forecheck                   |
| Read       | Protecting a one-goal lead → a 1-3-1 or a 1-2-2 trap; last 90 seconds against a pulled goalie → a 1-4                  |
| Read       | A slow defence pairing on the ice → 1-3-1; facing fast wingers who stretch → something with two men back               |
| Options    | Facing a team with one elite puck-moving defenceman is a genuine split — pressuring and containing are both defensible |

That is your coach's call, and the honest answer is usually "more than one". Some rough guidance on what drives the choice:

| Situation                                           | Tends toward                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Trailing, need the puck                             | Pressure (behind a 2-1-2 forecheck) |
| Protecting a one-goal lead                          | 1-3-1 or 1-2-2 trap                 |
| Last 90 seconds, opponent's goalie pulled           | 1-4                                 |
| Slow defence pairing on the ice                     | 1-3-1                               |
| Fast, fit forward group                             | Pressure (behind a 2-1-2 forecheck) |
| Facing a team with one elite puck-moving defenceman | <b>Genuine split — see below</b>    |
| Facing a team with fast wingers who stretch         | Something with two men back         |

## **The one row coaches genuinely disagree on: facing an elite puck-mover**

This is worth spelling out, because you will be told both things by different coaches and both are defensible. **Forechecking Systems carries the same split, worded the same way — the three paragraphs below are word-for-word identical in both files, and any edit to one should be applied to the other.**

- **The case for pressuring (2-1-2).** A defenceman who can pass is dangerous because of the *time* they get. Deny the time and the skill never gets used — you force the puck out early, before their forwards have read the play. This is the answer if your forwards are fast and fit, and it is the usual choice when you are chasing the game.
- **The case for containing (1-2-2 or 1-3-1).** Pressure gives a genuinely elite puck-mover exactly what they want: a forechecker who has committed, and space behind them. One pass past your F1 and your structure is worse off than if you had never gone. This is the answer if you cannot be confident of arriving first, if your forwards are tired, or if you are protecting a lead.

**The tiebreaker is not the opponent — it is you.** Pressure only beats a skilled passer if you actually arrive before the pass. If you cannot, containment is not the cowardly option; it is the only one that works. Ask which your bench wants, because the two produce opposite F1 routes.

**Ask your coach two questions:** which structure is the default, and what is the signal to change it. Most neutral zone breakdowns are not effort failures — they are two players on the same shift operating on different assumptions about whether the team is pressuring or holding.

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# Gap control as a team concept

|                   |                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | Gap is a five-man outcome, not a two-man one — the single biggest thing amateur teams get wrong about the neutral zone                        |
| <b>Position</b>   | A tight gap is roughly one to one and a half stick lengths — close enough to touch their stick with yours if you reach                        |
| <b>Read</b>       | Three forwards above the puck and tracking back → your D can step up and squeeze; one forward gliding and two coasting → your D must back off |
| <b>Action</b>     | As a forward, get on the defensive side of your check immediately and track home through the middle, not along the wall                       |
| <b>Never</b>      | Stop at the red line to wait for the counterattack — it is the most expensive habit in amateur hockey                                         |
| <b>Convention</b> | In the near-universal default the late man belongs to the backchecking forwards, not the defencemen — Defending the Rush owns that assignment |
| <b>Convention</b> | Both defencemen taking a step up inside the dots is an aggressive-gap cue, not universal — and a step up is not a pinch                       |

Gap control is normally taught as a defenceman's skill, and Defending the Rush covers the individual technique in detail. But **gap is a five-man outcome, not a two-man one**, and this is the single biggest thing amateur teams get wrong about the neutral zone.

**What gap means.** The distance between you and the attacker you are responsible for. Coaching resources typically describe a tight gap as roughly **one to one and a half stick lengths** — that value is this document's, and it is the one to quote. The ordinary, untightened neutral-zone figure is **two to three stick lengths**, which belongs to Defending the Rush along with the rest of the ladder (a stick and a half at the red line, one stick length at your own blue line); take it from there rather than from here. Concrete version: at a tight gap you can touch their stick with yours if you reach.

**Why forwards determine the gap.** A defenceman can only hold a tight gap if being beaten is not fatal. Being beaten is not fatal when there is a forward arriving from behind — **backpressure** — because the attacker who beats the D skates straight into a second defender. So:

- **Three forwards above the puck and tracking back → your D can step up and squeeze.** The attacker has no time, must make a decision early, and usually chips it in.
- **One forward gliding and two coasting → your D must back off.** They have to respect the possibility of being beaten clean, because there is nobody behind them. The attacker

gets to build speed, pick a lane and enter with control.

**The same defencemen, on the same night, will look elite or hopeless depending entirely on what the forwards did 40 feet earlier.** If your defence is constantly getting entered on with speed, the fix is usually not the defence.

**What this means for you as a forward.** When your team loses the puck in the offensive zone or the neutral zone:

1. **Get on the defensive side of your check immediately.** Not "skate hard toward your own end" — get between them and your net. A backchecker who is level with the attacker is worth much more than one who is faster but on the wrong side.
2. **Track through the middle, not along the wall.** The middle is where the dangerous pass goes and it is the shorter route home.
3. **Take the late man.** A trailing attacker arriving unmarked into the high slot is one of the cheapest goals a team gives up off a rush — that is coaching consensus rather than a tracked figure; nobody publishes a breakdown of rush goals by cause. In the near-universal default the late man belongs to the **backchecking forwards**, not to the defencemen, who are occupied with the first wave; Defending the Rush owns that assignment and states it the same way. If your coach hands the trailer to the weak-side defenceman instead, that is a real alternative and you need to know which you are playing.
4. **Do not stop at the red line to wait for the counterattack.** This is the most expensive habit in amateur hockey. One forward hanging at the red line means the D must back off, which means a controlled entry against you, which means you are in your own zone for 40 seconds instead of the counterattack you were fishing for.

**What this means for you as a defenceman.** On a change of possession in the offensive zone, one common coaching cue — **used by teams playing an aggressive-gap system such as the pressure structure above, and not by everyone** — is for both defencemen to **take a step up and inside the dots**, closing the gap and taking the middle of the ice to buy the time your forwards need to get back. Backing off before you need to is what turns a manageable rush into a 3-on-2 with speed.

**Read the caveats on that cue carefully, because two other documents here tell you the opposite and they are describing different things:**

- **A step up is not a pinch.** This cue is about closing space in the neutral zone with your feet still moving backwards, keeping the attacker in front of you. It is *not* a licence to attack the puck. Defender is right that you should not step up to *challenge* in the neutral zone unless you are certain you can win it — miss, and your partner is alone in a 2-on-1.

- **Stepping up together is not pinching together.** Forechecking Systems says only one defenceman pinches at a time, and that still holds: a pinch is at the *offensive* blue line with the puck already behind you if you miss. Both defencemen tightening a neutral-zone gap by ten feet is a much smaller bet than both defencemen stepping down the offensive wall.
- **It requires backpressure to be safe**, which is the whole point of the section above. With one forward gliding at the red line, one defenceman holds the middle and the other stays home. **Ask which your team wants, because the cue is genuinely not universal.**

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## Denying the blue line: stand up or back off

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At your own blue line you have two broad options, and they are genuinely a trade-off rather than one being correct.

### Standing up at the line

|                     |                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>       | Meet the attacker at or just inside your blue line, refuse to give ground, and force a dump, a pass or a turnover                 |
| <b>Goal</b>         | Turn carries into dump-ins, keep the play 60 feet from your net rather than 20, and let your forwards recover                     |
| <b>Read</b>         | Right when you have backpressure, when the attacker is wide rather than in the middle, or when they are already fighting the puck |
| <b>Risk</b>         | Beaten standing up is beaten completely — your feet are stopped, theirs are not, and you have surrendered the middle              |
| <b>Countered by</b> | The chip-and-chase — the attacker puts the puck past your hip and runs around you, and stopped feet cannot win that race          |

**What it is.** You meet the attacker at or just inside your blue line, refusing to give ground, and try to force them to dump the puck, pass it, or turn it over.

**Why it works.** A carried entry is worth roughly twice a dumped one in shot terms. If you can turn every carry into a dump-in, you have made your night much easier. Standing up also keeps the play 60 feet from your net rather than 20, and it lets your forwards recover.

**What it costs.** If you are beaten standing up, you are beaten completely — there is no recovery, because your feet are stopped and theirs are not, and you have surrendered the middle. Standing



up also invites the **chip-and-chase**: a smart attacker will simply put the puck past your hip and run around you, and if your gap has your feet stopped at the line you cannot turn and win that race.

**When it is right.** When you have backpressure. When the attacker is wide rather than in the middle. When the attacker is at a bad angle or already fighting the puck. When your team needs to protect a lead and forcing dump-ins is the plan.

## Backing off

- Action** Skate backwards matching their speed, keeping the attacker in front of you and never giving up the middle or your body position
- Goal** Funnel the attacker outside where the shot is low-percentage — you cannot be beaten wide by pure speed
- Read** Right when you have no backpressure, when the attacker has a clear speed advantage, on a 2-on-1 or worse, or when a mistake is a breakaway
- Risk** You concede the entry — they come in with speed and possession and you defend with your feet moving toward your own net

**What it is.** You skate backwards, keeping the attacker in front of you and matching their speed, giving up the blue line but never giving up the middle or your body position.

**Why it works.** You cannot be beaten wide by pure speed, and you funnel the attacker to the outside where the shot is low-percentage. It is the safe play and it is very hard to make a catastrophic error doing it.

**What it costs.** You concede the entry. They come in with speed and possession, and now you are defending in your own zone with your feet moving backwards toward your own net, which is exactly the scenario the attacking team wanted.

**When it is right.** When you have no backpressure. When the attacker has a clear speed advantage. When it is a 2-on-1 or worse, where holding the middle matters far more than the blue line. When you are the last defender and a mistake is a breakaway.

## The honest summary

**Standing up is a bet that you have help. Backing off is the play when you do not.** The skill is not picking one and living there — it is reading, in the second before you commit, whether

your forwards got back. Check over your shoulder as you retreat. Talk: "I'm up!" or "I've got nothing, back!" is one of the highest-value calls in the game.

**This is a coaching choice too.** Some coaches want the blue line held aggressively as a team identity; others want everything funnelled outside and defended in the zone. Find out which your team wants before you decide to be a hero at the line.

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## Regroups — the most under-used tool in amateur hockey

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### What a regroup is

|            |                                                                                                                                        |
|------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Goal       | In possession with no good way forward, turn the puck back toward your own end, reset, and come again                                  |
| Key        | You are not retreating — you still have the puck, and you are declining a bad entry to buy a better one                                |
| Never      | Treat a backwards pass as a failure, or feel obliged to go forward every time you receive in the neutral zone                          |
| Risk       | Forcing it forward instead produces low-percentage entries, dumped pucks nobody chases, and turnovers that become rushes the other way |
| Convention | Professionals regroup two or three times a shift and amateurs barely do — coaching observation, not a tracked figure                   |

A **regroup** is when your team, in possession but with no good way forward, **turns the puck back toward your own end, resets, and comes again**. You are not retreating in the sense of giving anything up. You still have the puck. You are declining a bad entry and buying a better one.

At professional level this is routine — a team will regroup two or three times in a shift without anybody thinking twice. At amateur level it barely exists, because every player who receives the puck in the neutral zone feels obliged to go forward with it. *(That professional-versus-amateur comparison is coaching observation, not a tracked figure — nobody publishes regroup counts at either level. It is repeated across coaching material and it matches what you will see watching a game, but do not treat "two or three a shift" as a measurement.)* **The result is a stream of low-percentage entries, dumped pucks nobody chases, and turnovers at the opposition blue line that become rushes the other way.**

## Why a regroup beats a forced entry

|             |                                                                                                                                |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Risk</b> | A forced entry into a set structure ends your possession — a turnover at the line, a dump-in you do not recover, or an offside |
| <b>Goal</b> | Keep the puck and make their forecheck reset, which takes time and skating                                                     |
| <b>Read</b> | Their forwards were coming toward you and now have to turn — turning is the slowest thing anybody does on skates               |
| <b>Key</b>  | Your forwards arrive at the line with speed instead of receiving standing still — that is the real prize                       |

A forced entry into a set defensive structure has three likely outcomes: a turnover at the line, an uncontrolled dump-in you probably do not recover, or an offside. All three end your possession. A regroup keeps the puck, and while you hold it:

- Their forecheck has to reset, and resetting a five-man structure takes time and skating.
- Their forwards, who were coming toward you, now have to turn and go the other way — and turning is the slowest thing anybody does on skates.
- **Your forwards get to build speed toward the line instead of receiving the puck standing still.** This is the real prize. Speed through the neutral zone with the puck already moving is what beats structure.

## The D-to-D regroup

|                  |                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>    | A forward who cannot advance turns and passes back to a defenceman skating backwards or opened up to receive                           |
| <b>Technique</b> | Receive with your hips open up the ice, not facing your own net, so you can see the whole sheet                                        |
| <b>Action</b>    | If the strong side is covered, move it D-to-D — the pass across changes the point of attack and forces the whole structure to slide    |
| <b>Action</b>    | As the puck travels D-to-D, all three forwards change lanes and build speed, curling back toward it and then turning up ice            |
| <b>Technique</b> | Keep the D-to-D flat and hard, and hit whichever forward has the most speed and the most ice                                           |
| <b>Never</b>     | Make it blind across the middle with a forechecker between you — an interception is an instant 2-on-1 with both defencemen wrong-sided |

The standard form.

1. A forward, unable to advance, turns and passes back to a defenceman who is skating backwards or has opened up to receive.
2. That defenceman receives with **hips open up the ice** — not facing their own net — so they can see the whole sheet.
3. If the strong side is covered, they move it **D-to-D** across to their partner. This is the pivot of the whole tactic: the pass across changes the point of attack and forces the entire opposing structure to slide.
4. As the puck travels D-to-D, **all three forwards change lanes and build speed**, curling back toward the puck and then turning up ice.
5. The receiving defenceman hits whichever forward has the most speed and the most ice.

**The one hard rule.** A D-to-D pass in the neutral zone should be flat and hard, and it should never be made blind across the middle with a forechecker between you. An intercepted neutral-zone D-to-D is an instant 2-on-1 with both your defencemen wrong-sided. If the lane is not clean, hold the puck or take it back yourself.

## The low regroup

|               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b> | Take the puck all the way back below your own blue line, sometimes behind your own net, and restart as if from a breakout                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Read</b>   | Use it when a neutral zone reset is not enough — their forecheck has re-formed across the middle, or your forwards need time to sort themselves out                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Risk</b>   | A turnover below your own goal line is a scoring chance — the low regroup is a possession play, not a panic play                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Never</b>  | Use it when you are panicking — off the glass and out is the correct answer instead                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Under NHL, KHL and IIHF rules your goalie may not play the puck behind the goal line outside the trapezoid (NHL Rule 1.8; penalty 27.8 / 63.2(viii)) — most rec and youth leagues have none                                                                                          |
| <b>Rule</b>   | 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 |

A deeper version: the puck goes all the way back below your own blue line, sometimes behind your own net, and your team restarts as if from a breakout.

**Use it when** the neutral zone reset is not enough — when their forecheck has already re-formed across the middle, or when your forwards are out of position and need time to sort themselves out. It costs more territory but buys more time, and it converts the problem into a breakout, which your team already has a system for. See Breakouts.

**Be aware of the trade.** Taking the puck below your own goal line invites their forecheck to come with you, and a turnover down there is a scoring chance. The low regroup is a possession play, not a panic play. If you are panicking, **off the glass and out** is the correct answer instead.

**Trapezoid note:** if you play under NHL, KHL or IIHF rules, your goaltender cannot handle the puck behind the goal line outside the trapezoid — the markings are specified in **NHL Rule 1.8** and the two-minute delay-of-game minor in **Rules 27.8 and 63.2(viii)** — which limits how much help you get on a low regroup that gets rimmed into the corner. Most rec, beer-league and youth associations do not use the trapezoid, in which case your goalie is a genuine extra option on a low regroup. Know which you are playing under.  **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. Assume it binds, 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.

## Timing the forwards' swing

|                  |                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Never</b>     | Stand still and call for it — a forward receiving a regroup pass at a standstill has wasted the regroup                           |
| <b>Never</b>     | Leave too early — turn up ice before your D controls the puck and you are offside or the puck is behind you                       |
| <b>Technique</b> | Curl back in the same direction the puck is going, staying below the puck, then turn up into your lane as the D-to-D pass is made |
| <b>Goal</b>      | Receive the puck already moving forward at close to top speed, facing the play                                                    |
| <b>Position</b>  | Three forwards at three depths — one close for the short outlet, one wide for the outside lane, one high as the stretch option    |

The regroup is a defenceman's pass but a forward's tactic, and forwards get it wrong in two ways.

**Wrong way one — standing still and calling for it.** You are a static target, you have no speed when you receive it, and you will be closed down instantly. A forward receiving a regroup pass at a standstill has wasted the regroup.

**Wrong way two — leaving too early.** You turn up ice before the D has the puck under control, the pass has to be perfect, and if it is not you are offside or the puck is behind you.

**The right way — swing with the puck, turn up as it moves across.** As your defenceman receives, curl back **in the same direction the puck is going**, staying below the puck so you are always a legal, supportable option. As the D-to-D pass is made, turn and drive up ice into your lane. You want to receive the puck **already moving forward at close to top speed**, facing the play. Elite Hockey Canada's coaching material makes the same point in one line: on a regroup, *"forwards should move in the same direction as the defensemen... move down the ice to support the defensemen and to then up the ice again."* **(Note the name: Elite Hockey Canada is a private coaching site, not Hockey Canada, the national governing body. It is decent coaching material and nothing more; do not cite it as a governing-body position.)**

**Three forwards, three different depths.** They should not all curl at the same time to the same place. One supports close for the short outlet, one swings wide for the outside lane, one stays high as the stretch option. This is lane discipline, which is the next section.

## When not to regroup

- Read** You have numbers — take a developing 3-on-2 rather than throwing it away
- Read** Your change is due — a hard dump past the red line and a line change is a legitimate tactic, not a failure
- Read** The pass back is not clean — a regroup into pressure is just a turnover in a worse place

- **When you have numbers.** If you have a 3-on-2 developing, take it. A regroup that throws away an odd-man rush is not clever hockey.
  - **When your change is due.** A regroup with tired legs just means you enter the zone with nothing left. Sometimes the right play is a hard dump past the red line and a line change. That is a legitimate tactic, not a failure — see Game Management.
  - **When the pass back is not clean.** A regroup into pressure is just a turnover in a worse place.
-

# Attacking through the neutral zone

## Lane discipline: three lanes, three forwards

|                   |                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | Divide the ice lengthways into left wall, middle and right wall, and put one forward in each lane                                         |
| <b>Goal</b>       | Three separated forwards are three separate passing options — defenders cannot cover three lanes with a flat wall unless they spread thin |
| <b>Never</b>      | Put two forwards in the same lane — one defender then covers both and you have made it 5-on-4 against yourself                            |
| <b>Action</b>     | When the puck is in a lane that is not yours, hold your lane and stay level or ahead of the puck instead of going to help                 |
| <b>Key</b>        | Support in the neutral zone means being available in a different place, not being close                                                   |
| <b>Convention</b> | Lanes are positions, not people — you will swap constantly, so call it: "I've got middle"                                                 |

Divide the ice lengthways into three lanes: **left wall, middle, right wall**. The base rule of neutral zone attack is **one forward in each lane**.

**Why.** Three separated forwards mean three separate passing options, and defenders cannot cover three lanes with a flat wall unless they spread thin. Two forwards in the same lane means one defender covers both — you have voluntarily made it 5-on-4 against yourself.

**Why it goes wrong.** Everybody chases the puck. The puck goes to the left wall, and suddenly your centre is on the left wall too, and your right wing has drifted to the middle-left to "support". Now the entire right side of the ice is empty, the defence has slid over, and there is nowhere to go.

**What to actually do.** When the puck is in a lane that is not yours, **your job is to hold your lane and stay level or ahead of the puck**, not to go and help. Support in the neutral zone means being available in a different place, not being close. See Puck Support and Spacing.

**Lanes are positions, not people.** You will swap lanes constantly — a winger who ends up in the middle stays in the middle and somebody else takes the wall. Call it. "I've got middle."

## The stretch pass

|                  |                                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | A forward stays high — near or beyond the far blue line — and the pass bypasses the neutral zone entirely                                              |
| <b>Rule</b>      | Legal only because the two-line pass rule went in 2005; NHL Rule 83 now contains no two-line provision                                                 |
| <b>Read</b>      | It counters a flat line still holding out in the neutral zone — a trap at the red line or a 1-3-1 — but not a 1-4, which leaves no legal ice behind it |
| <b>Rule</b>      | Stay onside — both skates must not completely cross the far blue line before the puck does (NHL Rule 83.1)                                             |
| <b>Technique</b> | Flat and hard, into the space they are skating into — a stretch pass to a stationary player is a turnover                                              |
| <b>Risk</b>      | Leaving a forward high means defending 4-on-5 while you do it — a coaching decision, so ask                                                            |

**What it is.** A long pass from your own end or the neutral zone to a forward who has stayed high — near or beyond the far blue line — bypassing the neutral zone entirely.

**Why it exists.** It is legal only because the two-line pass rule was removed in 2005; **Rule 83** now contains no two-line provision. It is the counter to a flat line **that is holding out in the neutral zone** — a 1-2-2 trap sitting at the red line, or the three-man line of a 1-3-1 — because there is real ice behind such a line for a receiver to stand in legally.

**It is not the counter to a 1-4.** A 1-4 holds its flat line on **its own blue line**, so there is no legal ice behind it: a receiver already behind that wall has both skates over the line and is offside the moment the puck crosses (Rule 83.1). Against a 1-4 the answer is a **hard chip past the flat line and a race for it** — see the 1-4 section above and Forechecking Systems. The same caution applies to any structure that has retreated all the way to its own blue line, whatever it is called.

### How to do it well.

- **The stretch forward must be behind the wall, not level with it.** Level with the wall is covered. Behind it is a footrace.
- **Stay onside.** Both skates must not completely cross the far blue line before the puck does (Rule 83.1). The stretch forward's job is to time it, not to camp.



- **Pass to space, not to feet.** A stretch pass to a stationary player is a turnover; a stretch pass into the space they are skating into is a breakaway.
- **Flat and hard.** A saucer pass over 60 feet is very difficult to receive at speed. See Passing and Receiving.

**The cost.** Leaving a forward high means playing 4-on-5 defensively while you do it. That is a genuine risk and a coaching decision: some coaches want a stretch option on every possession, others forbid it below a certain score situation. **Ask.**

## The late man

|                   |                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | Delay deliberately, staying 10 to 15 feet behind the play, and arrive into the space the first two attackers have vacated    |
| <b>Goal</b>       | Arrive into the high slot behind a two-man rush — defenders track the puck, so the second man in is the one nobody picked up |
| <b>Convention</b> | Coaching material treats it as one of the most reliable scoring looks in hockey — consensus rather than a tracked figure     |
| <b>Never</b>      | Drift five feet behind — being the late man means a full gap back, so the defence has to choose between you and the puck     |
| <b>Action</b>     | Be the first man back if it turns over — that is the deal                                                                    |

Also called the **trailer** or the **third man high**. One forward deliberately delays, staying 10 to 15 feet behind the play, arriving into the space the first two attackers have vacated.

**Why it works.** Defenders track the puck and the immediate threats. The player arriving second is the one nobody has picked up. On entries, the late man arriving into the high slot behind a two-man rush is treated across coaching material as one of the most reliable scoring looks in hockey — **coaching consensus rather than a tracked figure**, on exactly the same footing as the backchecking responsibility described above, and for the same reason: nobody publishes a breakdown of rush goals by the play that produced them.

**The discipline.** Being the late man means genuinely being late — not drifting five feet behind, but staying a full gap back so the defence has to choose between you and the puck. It also means being the first man back if it turns over, which is the deal.

## Chip-and-chase

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>    | Rather than carrying through a tight gap, chip the puck past the defender into space — off the boards, off the glass, or softly behind them — and skate onto it          |
| <b>Read</b>      | Right against a defenceman standing up at the line, against a 1-3-1 with only one man behind the wall, or when you have a speed advantage                                |
| <b>Technique</b> | The chip is a placement, not a clearance — soft off the wall into the corner you are already skating to, or flat past the defender's stick-side hip                      |
| <b>Never</b>     | Chip without chasing — the difference from dump-and-pray is entirely whether the second and third forwards go                                                            |
| <b>Never</b>     | Chip from your own side of the red line at equal strength — untouched over their goal line it is icing, and under NHL and IIHF rules you lose the faceoff and the change |

**What it is.** Rather than trying to carry through a defender who has a tight gap, you **chip the puck past them into space** — off the boards, off the glass, or softly into a spot behind them — and skate onto it.

**When it is the right play.** Against a defenceman standing up at the line. Against a 1-3-1, where there is only one player behind the wall. When you have a speed advantage on the man you are attacking. When you are on a line change and want the puck deep and safe.

**How to do it well.** The chip is a **placement**, not a clearance. Aim for a spot you can win — soft off the wall so it dies in the corner you are already skating to, or flat past the defender's stick side hip so you can run around them on your forehand. A chip nobody chases is a giveaway, and the difference between chip-and-chase and dump-and-pray is entirely whether the second and third forwards go.

**Icing note:** if you are on your own side of the centre red line at equal strength, a hard chip that crosses their goal line untouched is icing, and you will lose the faceoff position and be unable to change. Get the puck across the red line first, or chip it soft enough to stay in.

## Using the middle to change the point of attack

|                  |                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>      | A puck touched in the middle forces every defender to reset — the structure has to slide twice, and sliding structures have seams                            |
| <b>Action</b>    | Play wall to middle to far wall — a two-pass sequence that takes about a second and is the most reliable way to enter with control against organised defence |
| <b>Technique</b> | Make the middle-lane pass a one-touch relay, not a reception and a look                                                                                      |
| <b>Risk</b>      | The middle is the most expensive place to lose the puck — turn and survey there and you get hit with your team spread across the ice                         |

The reason to put a forward in the middle lane is not usually to shoot from there. It is that **a puck touched in the middle forces every defender to reset.**

A defensive structure is built to defend one side of the ice at a time — the whole thing slides strong side. One quick pass into the middle and back out to the far wall makes the entire structure slide twice, and structures that are sliding have seams. That two-pass sequence, wall to middle to far wall, is the most reliable way to enter with control against organised defence, and it takes about a second.

**The catch.** The middle is also the most expensive place to lose the puck. A middle-lane pass should be a **one-touch relay**, not a reception and a look. If your middle forward turns and surveys, they will get hit and the puck will be going the other way with your team spread across the ice.

---

# Beating a trap

|                |                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>     | The trap beats teams that carry the puck; it does not beat teams that pass it                                                                      |
| <b>Action</b>  | Move the puck faster than they can slide — two quick passes, D-to-D or wall-middle-wall, beat five skaters sliding                                 |
| <b>Action</b>  | Use the boards deliberately — a rim or a chip off the wall to a forward arriving behind the pressure, especially against F2 stepping up            |
| <b>Read</b>    | Stretch a forward behind the wall against a 1-3-1 or a trap, but not against a 1-4 — chip past a 1-4's flat line and race for it instead           |
| <b>Never</b>   | Attempt the seam unless it is obviously there — the highest-risk answer, and the one amateurs try first and should try last                        |
| <b>Options</b> | Dump it past the red line on purpose and hunt it with three forwards when the entry is not on — worth vastly more than a turnover at the blue line |
| <b>Mindset</b> | Be patient — a trap gives you the puck and waits for you to do something stupid with it                                                            |

This deserves its own section because it is the most common problem an amateur team cannot solve. Everything below assumes you are facing a passive structure — a 1-2-2 trap, a 1-3-1, or a 1-4 — that is refusing to come and get the puck.

**1. Move the puck faster than they can slide.** A wall of four defends one side at a time. It cannot re-form faster than a hard pass travels. Two quick passes, especially D-to-D or wall-middle-wall, will always beat five skaters sliding. **The trap beats teams that carry the puck; it does not beat teams that pass it.**

**2. Use the boards deliberately.** A hard rim or a chip off the wall goes past a defender who is playing the ice, not the boards. Chipping the puck along the wall to a forward arriving behind the pressure is unglamorous and extremely effective, particularly against F2 stepping up on your winger.

**3. Stretch a forward behind the wall — against a 1-3-1 or a trap, but not against a 1-4.** Against a 1-3-1 in particular, the whole structure lives ahead of one defenceman. A forward positioned behind the three-man line, receiving a legal stretch pass, is instantly in a 1-on-1 or better. Even the *threat* forces the wall to drop back, which opens the ice in front of it. **This only works while the wall is still out in the neutral zone.** A 1-4 holds its line on its own blue line, so a receiver already behind it is offside — there is no legal ice back there. Against a 1-4, substitute a **hard chip past the flat line and a race for it**: because the line is flat, nobody is

deeper than anybody else, so anything put behind them is a genuine footrace with only the goalie beyond.

**4. Skate it through the seam — but only when it is real.** A trap that has committed to a side has a seam behind the pressure. A skilled carrier who cuts back through the middle behind a stepped-up forechecker breaks the structure completely. This is the highest-reward and highest-risk answer, and it is the one amateur players attempt first and should attempt last. **If the seam is not obviously there, it is not there.**

**5. Dump it and forecheck — on purpose.** The most under-used answer of all. If the entry is not on, **put the puck deep past the red line and go hunt it with three forwards.** You are choosing to play the game as a grind rather than as a rush, and against a trapping team that is often the right choice — a team that has committed five players to the neutral zone has, by definition, structured itself to defend rushes rather than forechecks. A controlled entry is worth roughly twice a dump-in, but **a dump-in is worth vastly more than a turnover at the blue line.** The published analytics work on this suggests a carry attempt is only the better decision when you are somewhere around a third confident of completing it — below that, dump it. Do not treat that as a precise number, but do treat the direction as correct: **amateur players over-attempt the carry by a wide margin.**

**6. Be patient, and make them come.** A trap is designed to punish impatience. It gives you the puck and waits for you to do something stupid with it. Holding the puck in your own end, regrouping twice, and making them either come and forecheck or stand and watch is a completely legitimate response — and if they stand and watch, you have a free 200 feet to build speed into. This is what the Flyers were demonstrating, crudely, in 2011.

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# Neutral zone faceoffs

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>       | Defending — stop a clean win back to their point, take the middle away first, and get the puck out so you can change                                                                               |
| <b>Position</b>   | Defending wingers commonly line up between the opposing wingers and the middle of the ice rather than directly on their man                                                                        |
| <b>Position</b>   | Your centre sets up on the defensive side of the opposing centre, so a lost draw still leaves him between the puck and his net                                                                     |
| <b>Goal</b>       | Attacking — win it clean to a defenceman for an immediate entry or shot, or to the wall to chip it in and forecheck                                                                                |
| <b>Action</b>     | Know before the drop whether you are winning it forward or back, and who your man is if you lose it                                                                                                |
| <b>Rule</b>       | A teammate's encroachment gets your centre ejected and a second team violation is a bench minor — an individual minor under USA Hockey 613(d), only a warning under IIHF (Faceoffs owns the split) |
| <b>Convention</b> | The specific alignments are a coaching choice and vary hugely — ask your coach for yours                                                                                                           |

On a regulation sheet there are **four neutral zone faceoff dots** — two just inside each blue line, **five feet from the blue line and forty-four feet apart** (NHL Rule 1.9), each the same distance from the adjacent boards — plus the centre dot. Forty-four feet apart means each dot sits about twenty and a half feet from its own boards, which is roughly where the end-zone dots sit too. A neutral zone draw is where most offside infractions and many stoppages resolve, and both teams treat it as a set play.

**What each team is trying to do**, in general terms — the specific alignments are absolutely a coaching choice and vary hugely:

**The defending team** (the dot is near their own blue line) is generally trying to:

- **Prevent a clean win back to the opposition point/defenceman**, which would give an immediate shot or a controlled entry.
- **Take away the middle first.** Wingers commonly line up between the opposing wingers and the middle of the ice rather than directly on their man.
- **Get the puck out and change.** A defensive-side neutral zone draw is often about relief as much as offence.

- Have the **centre positioned on the defensive side of the opposing centre**, so that if the draw is lost cleanly the centre is still between the puck and their own net.

**The attacking team** (the dot is near the opponent's blue line) is generally trying to:

- **Win it clean to a defenceman for an immediate entry or shot** before the defence can set.
- **Create confusion with pre-draw movement** — wingers switching sides, a winger swinging behind the circle to receive in a different lane than the defence expects. Coaching resources on NHL faceoff plays describe wingers deliberately taking different lanes to open a passing option.
- **Win the puck to the wall and chip it in**, converting the draw directly into a forecheck.

**What you personally need to know before the puck drops:**

1. **Are we winning it forward or back?** Your centre should say. If you do not know, you are guessing.
2. **Who is your man if we lose it?** Neutral zone draws turn into rushes faster than any other faceoff, because everybody is already facing the right way.
3. **Do not creep. Encroachment by a teammate gets your centre thrown out of the circle** — a winger drifting into the circle before the drop is punished by ejecting the centre, and a second violation by your team on the same draw is a bench minor — an individual minor under USA Hockey Rule 613(d), and under IIHF rules there is no ejection at all for the first violation — but a second by the same team on the same draw is a bench minor for delay of game (IIHF Rules 76.6 and 76.7) (Faceoffs owns the split). Hold your line.

Full detail on technique, positioning and the ejection rules is in Faceoffs.

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# Reading the neutral zone while you carry the puck

- Read** F1 skating straight at you, hard → they are pressuring; the answer is one quick pass past him
- Read** F1 arcing across, showing you the boards, not really closing → containment or a trap; do not go where they are steering you
- Read** F1 standing near the red line doing nothing → 1-3-1 or 1-4; take your time, look up and start a regroup
- Read** Count the bodies across the middle — two means space to attack, three means a 1-3-1, four in a line means a 1-4 or a full trap
- Read** All their forwards on one side means the ice on the other side is real — that is what the D-to-D and the middle-lane relay are for
- Read** Their defencemen's feet stopped or squared up at the line → chip past them; feet moving backwards → carry it, you have the line
- Action** Check your own support before you commit — if both your forwards are in your lane, slow down and let them separate
- Key** Know the clock and the score — a regroup at 2-2 in the second is smart hockey, the same regroup 40 seconds down a goal is a mistake

You are coming out of your own end with the puck and about 1.5 seconds to decide. Here is the read, in the order it is available to you.

**1. Look at their F1's route, not F1's speed.** This is the single biggest tell.

- **F1 skating straight at you, hard** → they are pressuring (2-1-2, or an aggressive 1-2-2). **The answer is one quick pass past them.** Their aggression is your opportunity — beat the first man and you are attacking numbers.
- **F1 arcing across, showing you the boards, not really closing** → this is a containment or trap structure. **Do not go where they are steering you.** Either change the side of the ice with a D-to-D, or accept the wall and prepare to chip past the man stepping up.
- **F1 standing near the red line doing nothing** → 1-3-1 or 1-4. There is no pressure coming. **Take your time, look up, and start a regroup.** Against a **1-3-1** the stretch option is also live, because the three-man line is still out in the neutral zone with ice behind it. Against a **1-4** it is not — their wall is on their own blue line, so a receiver behind it is offside; chip it past them and race instead. Skating straight into the wall is exactly what they want.



**2. Count the bodies across the middle.** Lift your head at your own blue line and count how many opponents are between you and their blue line.

- **Two** → there is space. Attack it.
- **Three across** → 1-3-1. Look behind the wall before you look through it.
- **Four in a line** → 1-4 or a full trap. There is nothing there. Regroup or chip and change.

**3. Check the far side.** If all their forwards are on one side of the ice, the ice on the other side is real. This is what the D-to-D and the middle-lane relay are for.

**4. Check your own support before you commit.** Where are your other two forwards? If they are both in your lane, there is no pass and you are about to be alone against three. Slow down, hold the puck, and let them separate.

**5. Watch their defencemen's feet.** Feet stopped or squared up at the line means they are standing up — **chip past them**. Feet moving backwards means they are backing off — **carry it, you have the line**. This decision is made at about the far red-line dot, not at the blue line.

**6. Know the clock and the score.** A regroup at 2-2 in the second period is smart hockey. The same regroup with 40 seconds left and your team down a goal is a mistake.

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## Common Mistakes

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- **Hanging at the red line waiting for a breakaway.** It is the most damaging single habit in amateur hockey. It removes your backpressure, which forces your defencemen to back off, which concedes controlled entries all night. One player doing this ruins the neutral zone for the other four.
- **Forcing the entry every single time.** Skating into a set structure at the blue line and losing the puck there is the worst outcome available — worse than a dump-in, worse than a regroup, worse than icing it. If it is not open, do not go.
- **Never regrouping.** Treating a backwards pass as a failure. Professional teams regroup constantly; amateur teams almost never do — an observation from coaching material rather than a counted difference, but a very visible one.
- **All three forwards in the same lane.** Chasing the puck as a group means one defender covers three attackers and the ice you needed is on the other side.
- **Receiving a regroup pass standing still.** You must be moving when the puck arrives, or the reset achieved nothing.

- **Blind D-to-D through the middle of the neutral zone.** An interception there is an immediate odd-man rush with both defencemen wrong-sided. Behind the net in your own end is a different pass with a different risk; the neutral zone version needs a clean lane.
  - **Chipping the puck in and not chasing it.** Chip-and-chase is two words. Without the chase it is a giveaway with extra steps.
  - **Dumping from your own side of the red line at equal strength.** Icing. You lose the zone, you lose the draw location, and **you cannot change your line** — a tired unit gets pinned for another 30 seconds.
  - **Standing up at the blue line with no backpressure.** Being aggressive when nobody is behind you turns a rush into a breakaway.
  - **Assuming everyone is playing the same structure.** If half your unit is pressuring and half is trapping, you have created a seam through the middle of your own team. Confirm the plan on the bench, not during the shift.
  - **Confusing the neutral zone 1-3-1 with the power-play 1-3-1.** Different zone, different shape, different job. Same three digits.
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## Key Takeaways

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1. **The neutral zone is 50 feet and about three seconds, and it is where most possession changes happen.** A turnover there is the most expensive kind because it catches players moving the wrong way at speed.
2. **Controlling the neutral zone means choosing whether the game is rushes or a grind.** That choice is worth more than any individual play in it.
3. **Every structure — 1-2-2, trap, 1-3-1, pressure, 1-4, left-wing lock — is a coaching choice, not a law.** Know which one your team plays and what the signal is to change it.
4. **Read the opponent's F1.** Coming at you hard means pressure — beat them with one pass. Arcing across passively means a trap — do not go where they steer you.
5. **Gap control is a five-man job.** Your defencemen can only hold a tight gap if your forwards got back. If you are getting entered on with speed all night, look at the forwards before you blame the D.
6. **Standing up at the blue line is a bet that you have help. Backing off is the play when you do not.** Check over your shoulder before you commit, and say which one you are doing.

7. **Regroup instead of forcing a bad entry.** You keep the puck, their structure has to reset, and your forwards arrive at the line with speed instead of standing still. This is the most under-used tool at amateur level.
8. **Three forwards, three lanes.** Support in the neutral zone means being available somewhere else, not being close to the puck.
9. **A trap is beaten by moving the puck, not by carrying it.** Quick passes, the boards, a forward stretched behind the wall — and if none of those are there, dump it past the red line and forecheck on purpose.
10. **Public NHL tracking work from around 2013 suggests a dump-in is worth roughly half a controlled entry in shots — and a turnover at the blue line is worth close to nothing.** The figures are more than a decade old and vary between studies, so use the direction, not the decimals. The threshold that work implies is about **one-third confidence**: if you think you can complete the carry more often than one time in three, carry it; below that, dump it. Amateur players over-attempt the carry, but "when in doubt, dump it" overshoots in the other direction.

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#### NOTES ON VERIFICATION

- The two-line pass rule's removal for the 2005-06 season, alongside the obstruction crackdown and the trapezoid, is well attested across sources, but it rests on secondary summaries rather than on the NHL rulebook text itself — the current online rulebook sets out the rules as they stand, not their history.
- The **origin of the left-wing lock is settled once the two claims are read as complementary.** Wikipedia traces the invention to 1970s Czechoslovak hockey; The Coaches Site credits Barry Smith with adapting it for the NHL rink and bringing it to Detroit under Scotty Bowman in the mid-1990s. Those are different events twenty years apart, not rival attributions. Detroit's adoption from 1994-95 and their 1997 Cup are not in dispute.
- The **zone entry figures** (a carry-in producing roughly twice the shots of a dump-in; the rough one-third confidence threshold for attempting a carry) come from **public hockey analytics work on NHL data from the 2011-12 season** — Tulskey, Detweiler, Spencer and Sznajder, *Using Zone Entry Data To Separate Offensive, Neutral, And Defensive Zone Performance*, presented at the **2013** MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference (330 hand-tracked games from **2011-12**) — plus Corey Sznajder's separate later tracking (**2014-16**, reported second-hand). Note the two dates the paper carries: **2013 is when it was presented, 2011-12 is when the data was collected.** Zone Entries carries the full table. They are more than a decade old, the exact values differ between studies, and they describe NHL play, not your league. Use the direction of the finding, not the decimals.
- Neutral zone faceoff **dot dimensions** come straight from **NHL Rule 1.9**: "*Two red spots two feet (2') in diameter shall be marked on the ice in the neutral zone five feet (5') from each blue line... The*

*spots shall be forty-four feet (44') apart and each shall be a uniform distance from the adjacent boards."* The 85-foot sheet width gives the roughly twenty-and-a-half feet from the boards quoted in the text; the rulebook itself states only the uniform-distance requirement.

- The specific faceoff alignments described are **generalisations from coaching resources**. There is no standard neutral zone faceoff alignment; ask your coach for yours.
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# Defensive Zone Coverage

**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**

Center

Defender

Winger

Breakouts

Defending the Rush

Forechecking Systems

Neutral Zone Systems

On-Ice Communication

UK and England Rules

## Overview

|                   |                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | Coverage is the agreement your five skaters have about who protects what when the other team has the puck in your end  |
| <b>Convention</b> | The most system-dependent part of hockey — two good teams can play completely different systems and both be right      |
| <b>Risk</b>       | The same instruction — "get to the corner", "stay high" — can be correct on one bench and a firing offence on the next |
| <b>Action</b>     | Work out which system your team plays, so you stop guessing                                                            |

Defensive zone coverage is the agreement your five skaters have about who protects what when the other team has the puck in your end. It is the single most system-dependent part of hockey: two good teams can play two completely different systems and both be right, and the same instruction ("get to the corner", "stay high") can be correct on one bench and a firing offence on the next.

This document is the reference the position documents point to. It explains the main systems, what each is good at, what each gives away, and — most usefully — how to work out which one *your* team plays, so you stop guessing.

# The Problem Every System Solves

|                 |                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>      | Almost all goals come from the house, or home plate — the two goalposts widening to the faceoff dots and up to the top of the circles |
| <b>Goal</b>     | Allocate five bodies so the house is never open, while still being able to take the puck off them and leave                           |
| <b>Priority</b> | Choose which chances you are willing to give up — coverage is not about eliminating them                                              |
| <b>Risk</b>     | Pack all five onto the goal line and nobody is available for the outlet — you win the puck and give it straight back                  |
| <b>Key</b>      | Twenty point shots through no traffic and zero back-door tap-ins is a good night                                                      |

Five of you. Five of them. One net.

But the ice is not equally dangerous. Almost all goals come from a small area in front of your net, known as **the house** or **home plate** — the region bounded by the two goalposts, widening out to the two faceoff dots, and up to the top of the two faceoff circles. Draw those lines and you get a shape like a baseball home plate. That's the area that matters.

Some vocabulary, used consistently throughout this document and the rest of this guide (full definitions in Rink Map and Glossary):

- **The slot** — the lane in front of the net between the two faceoff circles.
- **The high slot** — the upper part of it, from the faceoff dots up to the top of the circles.
- **The goalmouth** — the immediate front of the net, the doorstep. Distinct from the slot; this is where tap-ins and deflections happen.
- **The crease** — the blue paint the goalie works in. Under NHL rules it is eight feet wide (one foot outside each post) and six feet deep at its deepest point.
- **The point** — the area at the blue line where the opposing defencemen stand.
- **The half-wall** — the boards roughly level with the faceoff dot, between the corner and the point.
- **Strong side** — the side of the ice the puck is on. **Weak side** — the other side.
- **Low** — nearer your own goal line. **High** — nearer the blue line.

So the actual problem is: **how do you allocate five bodies so that the house is never open, while still being able to take the puck off them and leave?**

Every system is a different answer, and every answer costs something. There are only five of you, and if you put four in the house then somebody at the point is unmarked. Defensive zone coverage is not about eliminating chances — it is about **choosing which chances you're willing to give up**. A team that concedes twenty point shots through no traffic and zero back-door tap-ins has had a good night.

There is one more constraint people forget. You are not only defending; you are trying to leave. A shape that packs all five players onto the goal line protects the house beautifully and has nobody available to receive an outlet pass, so you win the puck and immediately give it back. Every system trades net-front safety against **breakout readiness**. Keep that tension in mind — it explains most of the design decisions below.

## The Universal Principles

|           |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Priority  | Defend the middle before the outside — it tells you which chance to concede, not which square metre to stand in                                                                     |
| Position  | Stay on the defensive side of the puck — between your man, or your area, and your own net                                                                                           |
| Never     | Both defencemen on the puck without knowing who has taken the goalmouth                                                                                                             |
| Key       | Somebody must always have the goalmouth — the doorstep, not the slot; the person changes, the requirement never does                                                                |
| Technique | Sticks flat in the passing lanes — when you cannot reach the puck you can almost always reach the lane                                                                              |
| Action    | Box out at the net front — inside shoulder ahead of theirs, and lift the stick rather than cross-check the back                                                                     |
| Rule      | A goal can be disallowed where an attacker "by his positioning or by contact" impairs the goalie (NHL Rule 69.1), but that is a judgement after the fact — move the screen yourself |
| Action    | Talk, and talk early — "I've got the corner", "you have the net", "switch", "back door"                                                                                             |

These hold no matter what system your coach runs. If you remember nothing else, remember these — they will keep you roughly right even when you don't know the structure.

**1. Defend the middle before the outside.** A shot from the point through clean ice is a save your goalie expects to make. A pass into the slot is not. Given a choice between taking away a

shot and taking away a pass into the house, take the pass. You are steering the puck to where it is least dangerous, not trying to touch it everywhere.

**What this principle does *not* dictate is where your feet go** — that is the system's job, and different systems honour the same principle in opposite ways. Under **low zone collapse** you sag toward the middle rather than chasing to the boards, and the middle stays full because everybody is standing in it. Under **man-on-man** you follow your check to the boards, and the middle stays protected because the man who would receive the seam pass has someone within a stick length of him. Under a **strong-side overload** you deliberately abandon the weak side and squeeze the puck side, betting that no cross-ice pass gets through. All three are defending the middle before the outside; only the first does it by standing there. The principle is about which *chance* you concede, not about which square metre you occupy — so apply it by asking "which is the more dangerous option to leave open?", not by drifting to the slot in a system that told you to go with your man.

**2. Stay on the defensive side of the puck.** Be between your man (or your area) and your own net. Any time an opponent is between you and your goalie, you are defending nothing — you're just skating behind a play. This is why you angle attackers toward the boards rather than reaching across your body at the puck: reaching turns you, and a turned defender is on the wrong side a half-second later.

**3. Never both defencemen on the puck.** One defenceman engages, the other stays home. If both of you get sucked into the same corner battle, the goalmouth is empty and one pass beats your entire team. Coaches at every level name this as one of the commonest causes of goals against, and it is entirely preventable by talking. *(No published tracking data breaks goals down by cause this way — treat that as coaching consensus, not a statistic.)*

**What is invariant is that somebody is home — not that it is your partner.** Under the house-default low zone collapse it is the weak-side defenceman, and that pairing is what the rest of this document assumes. It is not universal: under **man-on-man** the net front belongs to whoever's check went there, under a **collapsing box** both defencemen are inside the house together, and some aggressive systems will deliberately send **both** defencemen below the goal line on a specific read — normally once a forward has already dropped in to cover the doorstep. The comparison table below sets out who has the net front in each. So the rule is not "never both of you", it is **never both of you without knowing who has taken the goalmouth**. Risk Management states the same principle the same way.

**4. Somebody must always have the goalmouth.** Not "the slot" — the doorstep. The player who is going to score is the one standing at the edge of the blue paint with their stick on the ice.



Under low zone collapse that is the weak-side defenceman; under man-on-man it's whoever's check went there. The person changes. The requirement never does.

**5. Sticks in passing lanes, on the ice.** An active stick lying flat in a lane takes away a pass without committing your body — which means you can still get to the next thing. A stick held off the ice or waving at hip height does nothing. When you cannot reach the puck, you can almost always reach the *lane*.

**6. Box out at the net front.** Get your inside shoulder ahead of theirs, establish position between them and the puck, and lift their stick rather than cross-checking their back. Full technique in Defender and Body Contact and Battles. Two rules-relevant notes:

- **Screening your own goalie is your problem, not the referee's.** An attacker standing outside the crease in your goalie's sightline without touching them is, in the ordinary case, doing something legal. The one lever you have 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 be enough. But that is a referee's judgement after the fact, not a whistle. Nobody is going to remove him for you — you have to move him.
- **Don't shove him into your goalie hoping for a disallowed goal.** Under NHL Rule 69.1, if a *defending* player pushes an attacker into the goalkeeper, that contact isn't treated as attacker-initiated — "*provided the attacking player has made a reasonable effort to avoid such contact*" — and the goal generally stands.

**7. Talk, and talk early.** "I've got the corner." "You have the net." "Switch." "Back door." Coverage is a shared model of who has whom; the only way to keep the model shared is out loud. See On-Ice Communication.

---

## Low Zone Collapse (Zone Coverage) — the house default

---

**This is the system assumed throughout**, and the one coaching material most often describes as taught first in North American minor, junior and rec hockey — *again, consensus from coaching material, not a survey; no count of what teams run exists*. It is also frequently called **sagging zone, zone coverage**, or simply "the collapse". If your coach has never named the system, this is probably what they mean.

The idea: you defend **space**, not people. Each of the five of you owns an area. Whoever skates into your area becomes yours until they leave it. **Three of you — both defencemen and the**

**centre — live below the top of the circles**, which matches their three forwards down there, while the two wingers hold the points so the opposing defencemen never get a clean seam pass into the middle. When the centre goes low to help, the weak-side winger sags into the high slot and you are briefly four down there. Only under maximum pressure — the collapsing box described later — do all five drop below the circles.

**The base shape — puck in the strong-side corner**

Convention

Under low zone collapse, the strong-side defenceman is on the puck in the corner or behind the net — pressure and pin, or angle them away from the net

Convention

The weak-side defenceman owns the goalmouth and boxes out — do not get drawn to the puck

Convention

The centre is the second body into the strong-side corner battle — two on one wins it

Convention

The strong-side winger stays high on the strong-side point, between that defenceman and the net

Convention

The weak-side winger covers the weak-side point and collapses into the high slot when the centre goes low

Rule

Pin the puck, not the player — IIHF women's Rule 101.1 prohibits pinning an opponent along the boards

Rule

Freezing the puck unpressured to buy a stoppage is a minor — NHL Rule 63.2(i), USA Hockey Rule 610(a)

| Player                 | Where                                                                                 | Job                                                                                               |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Strong-side defenceman | On the puck — corner or behind the net                                                | Pressure and pin the <i>puck</i> , or angle them away from the net (see the note below the table) |
| Weak-side defenceman   | Goalmouth                                                                             | Own the doorstep. Box out. Do <i>not</i> get drawn to the puck                                    |
| Centre                 | Low support, strong side                                                              | Second body into the corner battle — two on one wins it                                           |
| Strong-side winger     | High, on the strong-side point                                                        | Between that defenceman and the net; block the lane and the shot                                  |
| Weak-side winger       | High, on the weak-side point — collapsing into the high slot when the centre goes low | Cover the point <i>and</i> the middle, in that order of movement                                  |

**"Pin the puck, not the player."** Body Contact and Battles owns this distinction and it is a rule, not a nicety: **IIHF women's Rule 101.1 prohibits using the boards to eliminate an opponent from the play, push her into the boards, or pin her along the boards.** Pinning the *puck* against the wall with your skate or body while an opponent is contesting it is legal everywhere and is how most board-battle whistles happen; pinning the *opponent* is not. **One qualifier, because "legal everywhere" is too strong on its own:** freezing the puck when nobody is actually pressuring you, purely to buy a stoppage, is itself a minor — **NHL Rule 63.2(i)**, *"On any player, including the goalkeeper, who holds, freezes or plays the puck with his stick, skates or body in such a manner as to deliberately cause a stoppage of play"*, and **USA Hockey Rule 610(a)** in even plainer terms: *"A minor penalty shall be assessed to any player or goalkeeper who deliberately freezes the puck along the boards or goal frame for the purpose of delaying the game."* Under pressure, pin it; unpressured, play it.

Note that the two forwards' jobs are asymmetric. The strong-side winger holds their point; the weak-side winger is the flex player who covers two areas depending on what the centre is doing. That's not sloppiness — it's the defining feature of the system, and the reason it is sometimes called a *sagging* zone.

## The rotations

- Convention** In the collapse, coverage is a set of positions that swap as the puck travels, not jobs bolted to people
- Convention** Corner to behind the net — the defencemen exchange roles at the midline; call it, "I've got him, you've got the net"
- Convention** Corner to up the strong-side wall — the strong-side winger comes down the wall to between the hash marks and the goal line and takes it; that is your breakout starting, not a corner battle
- Convention** Low to high — everyone climbs a level: wingers close on their points, the centre steps up into the high slot, the defencemen recover to the net front and low slot
- Convention** Point to point — both wingers slide across and the shape shifts as a unit; nobody chases across the middle at speed
- Convention** Puck to the far corner — the defencemen exchange again, the centre follows it low, and the wingers swap flex roles

Coverage is a set of positions that swap as the puck travels, not a set of jobs bolted to people.

- **Puck moves corner → behind the net.** The strong-side defenceman follows it to the post and hands it off at the midline. The other defenceman is now the strong-side defenceman

and takes the carrier as they emerge; the first one slides back to the goalmouth. You have exchanged roles without either of you ever leaving the net unattended. Call it: "I've got him, you've got the net."

- **Puck moves corner → up the strong-side wall.** The strong-side winger engages it. That is not a corner battle — that is the start of your breakout, and it is the one time in this system a winger comes off the point voluntarily. **They come down the wall to between the hash marks and the goal line** and take the puck there; the point coverage they are leaving is finished, because the other team no longer has the puck. Take it. See Breakouts.
- **Puck goes low → high, to the point.** Everyone climbs a level. The wingers close on their points, the centre steps up out of the low battle into the high slot, the defencemen recover to the net front and the low slot, and shooting lanes get filled.
- **Puck moves point → point across the top.** Both wingers slide across with it and the whole shape shifts a few feet toward the new strong side. Nobody chases across the middle at speed; you shift as a unit.
- **Puck moves to the far corner.** The defencemen exchange again, the centre follows the puck low, and the wingers swap flex roles — the new weak-side winger becomes the one who collapses.

## The weak-side winger's collapse — the moment that decides the system

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | When the centre goes down to help in the corner, the weak-side winger drops off their point into the high slot to fill it                                                               |
| <b>Action</b>     | Climb straight back up to the point as soon as the puck comes out of the corner                                                                                                         |
| <b>Action</b>     | Anyone with a clear view calls it — the centre, the weak-side defenceman, or the winger; don't wait to be told                                                                          |
| <b>Never</b>      | Both wingers sag at once — the point-to-point pass across the top then gives their defenceman a free walk-in                                                                            |
| <b>Read</b>       | If your weak-side winger has already followed the opposing defenceman down off the point, the collapse is not available — the defencemen or the centre must cover the high slot instead |

This is where low zone collapse succeeds or fails, so it is worth being exact.

When the puck goes into the strong-side corner and **the centre goes down to help**, the high slot is momentarily empty. That is the most dangerous square metre on the ice and it cannot stay

empty. So the **weak-side winger drops off their point into the high slot** to fill it. As soon as the puck comes out of the corner, that winger climbs straight back up to their point.

Two things to get right:

- **Anyone with a clear view calls it** — the centre going down, the weak-side defenceman who can see the whole picture, or the winger themselves. Don't wait to be told; the rotation is late by the time somebody realises it's missing.
- **Only the weak-side winger does this.** The strong-side winger holds their point. If both wingers sag, the point-to-point pass across the top gives their defenceman a free walk-in.

There is one situation where the collapse isn't available: if the **weak-side opposing defenceman has already come down** off the point and your weak-side winger has followed them, that winger is committed. Then the high slot has to be covered by the two defencemen being more vigilant about arrivals, or by the centre choosing not to commit fully to the corner. Read it and call it.

## What low zone collapse is good at

|                 |                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>     | Protect the middle by construction — you don't have to make good reads for the house to be full                     |
| <b>Key</b>      | The easiest system to learn, because the areas are fixed even when the play is chaotic                              |
| <b>Action</b>   | Let them cycle — grinding the wall spends their energy in the least valuable ice while you sit in the most valuable |
| <b>Mindset</b>  | Area coverage doesn't ask a tired player or a mismatched winger to win a footrace                                   |
| <b>Position</b> | Both wingers are already high — two outlets the moment you win the puck                                             |

- **It protects the middle by construction.** You don't have to make good reads for the house to be full; standing in the right place does most of the work.
- **It is the easiest system to learn.** Areas are fixed, so you always know roughly where to be even when the play is chaotic.
- **It is very hard to beat by cycling.** Teams that grind the puck along the wall and behind the net are working in the least valuable part of the ice while you sit in the most valuable part. Let them cycle. They're spending energy on the perimeter.
- **It handles fatigue and mismatches.** When you're tired, or a fourth-line winger is on with their top centre, area coverage doesn't ask you to win a footrace.

- **The wingers are already positioned to break out.** Two forwards high means two outlets the moment you win the puck.

## What it concedes

|                     |                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>          | The walk-down, not the point shot, is the system's actual weakness — every collapse team needs an explicit answer to it                                    |
| <b>Countered by</b> | The opposing defenceman skating down into the top of the circle, roughly halving their distance to the net while a winger guards an area rather than a man |
| <b>Countered by</b> | The seam between areas — skilled attackers stand where each defender assumes the other has them                                                            |
| <b>Risk</b>         | Point shots, conceded on purpose — the bargain gets worse against a defenceman with a genuine shot                                                         |
| <b>Risk</b>         | Extended possession — you are waiting for a mistake, and against a patient team that means tired legs                                                      |

- **Point shots.** Unapologetically. The bargain is that a shot from 55 feet with a stick in the lane is one your goalie should have — and that you'd rather concede it than concede a seam pass. The bargain gets worse as the shooting gets better; at higher levels, and against a defenceman with a genuine shot, "let him shoot" is a real cost.
- **The walk-down from the point.** This is the system's actual weakness, not the point shot. If the opposing defenceman doesn't shoot from the blue line but skates *down* into the top of the circle, a zone winger who is guarding an area rather than a man will often let them go. **The top of the circle is about 35 feet from the goal line** — the end-zone faceoff spots sit 20 feet out and the circles have a 15-foot radius — so they have roughly halved their distance to the net without anybody touching them, and from there they can shoot or feed the slot. That figure, 35 feet, is used consistently for the walk-down throughout this document. Every collapse team needs an explicit answer to this (see Defending Specific Threats).
- **Extended possession.** You will spend long shifts in your own end. You are not generating turnovers; you're waiting for a mistake or a loose puck. Against a patient team this means tired legs and eventually a breakdown.
- **The seam between zones.** Skilled attackers deliberately stand *between* two defenders' areas, where each assumes the other has them. Zone coverage's blind spot is the player nobody feels responsible for.

# Man-on-Man

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Every player is assigned an opponent and covers that opponent everywhere in the zone. Your winger's opposing defenceman goes to the corner — you go to the corner. Their centre goes behind the net — your centre goes behind the net. Nobody is ever unmarked, because "unmarked" is not a state that exists in the system.

## Assignments

- Convention** Under man-on-man, both defencemen normally take the two most dangerous forwards — typically whoever is low and around the net
- Convention** The centre takes the third forward, often the one supporting on the wall or in the slot
- Convention** The two wingers take the two opposing defencemen and follow them, including down into the corner — the sharpest practical difference from low zone collapse
- Action** Switch when two attackers cross, it is clean, and both of you call it out loud; stay when it isn't

- **Both defencemen** normally take the two most dangerous forwards, typically whoever is low and around the net.
- **The centre** takes the third forward, often the one supporting on the wall or in the slot.
- **The two wingers** take the two opposing defencemen — and follow them, including down into the corner if they walk down. This is the sharpest practical difference from low zone collapse and the one that causes most confusion between teammates.
- **Switching** is legal and necessary. When two attackers cross, the two defenders trade checks and say so out loud. The rule is usually: switch when it's clean and both of you call it; stay when it isn't.

## What man-on-man is good at

|                     |                                                                                                                 |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>          | Nobody is ever unmarked — the seam problem zone coverage has simply doesn't exist                               |
| <b>Goal</b>         | Generate turnovers — pressure everywhere means bad passes everywhere; zone coverage waits, man-on-man takes     |
| <b>Countered by</b> | Nothing a cycle can do — if you are glued to a man, moving the puck to someone who beat an area creates nothing |
| <b>Options</b>      | Match up — your best defensive forward can be put on their best player, all shift                               |
| <b>Mindset</b>      | "He's yours" is the easiest instruction in hockey to understand, though not to execute                          |

- **Nobody is ever unmarked.** The seam problem that zone coverage has simply doesn't exist. Every attacker has someone within a stick length.
- **It is excellent against skilled cyclers and set plays.** A cycle works by moving the puck to a teammate who has beaten the *area* — if you're glued to a man, the movement doesn't create anything.
- **It generates turnovers.** Pressure everywhere means bad passes everywhere. Zone coverage waits; man-on-man takes.
- **It lets you match up.** Your best defensive forward can be put on their best player, all shift.
- **Conceptually simple.** "He's yours" is the easiest instruction in hockey to understand — though not to execute.



## What it concedes

|                     |                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Countered by</b> | Picks and screens — one legal collision and your man is gone with a two-stride head start                                             |
| <b>Risk</b>         | Mismatches — a winger in a footrace with a mobile defenceman has no help behind them                                                  |
| <b>Risk</b>         | One beaten player leaves an attacker with the puck and nobody within twenty feet; every breakdown is immediately a high-danger chance |
| <b>Risk</b>         | It is exhausting — a full shift at your opponent's chosen pace, in your own zone                                                      |
| <b>Never</b>        | Follow your check into harmless ice while their teammate walks into the slot you vacated                                              |
| <b>Risk</b>         | Poor breakout readiness — when you win the puck, your five are wherever their five decided to stand                                   |

- **Picks and screens.** Attacking teams beat man coverage by running players into your defenders on purpose. One legal collision and your man is gone with a two-stride head start.
- **Mismatches.** Your winger is now defending a mobile defenceman in a footrace. If they lose that individual battle, there is no help behind them, because everyone else is occupied.
- **Total collapse from one error.** In zone coverage a beaten player leaves a hole; in man-on-man a beaten player leaves an attacker with the puck and nobody within twenty feet. Every breakdown is immediately a high-danger chance.
- **It is exhausting.** You are skating a full shift — 30 to 80 seconds on the measured range, nearer 30–45 when it is well managed; Conditioning and Recovery owns both figures — at your opponent's chosen pace, in your own zone.
- **It pulls you out of the house.** The classic failure is chasing a man into the corner who never had any intention of getting the puck, while their teammate walks into the slot you vacated. Good man-on-man teams have a rule about *not* following a check into harmless ice.
- **Poor breakout readiness.** When you win the puck, your five players are wherever their five players decided to stand, which is rarely a breakout shape.

Man-on-man is much less common as a pure system than it used to be. Coaching resources are consistent that the removal of clutch-and-grab defending after 2004-05 made pure man coverage very hard to execute against modern speed and skill. What survives is the hybrid below.

## Hybrid — man-on-man below the dots, zone above

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | Man-on-man below the dots, zone above them — some teams say the hash marks or the top of the circles, so learn your team's line                                             |
| <b>Convention</b> | The two defencemen and the low forward, usually the centre, go man-on-man on the three attacking forwards: one on the carrier, one on the net front, one on the low support |
| <b>Convention</b> | The wingers play the points by area — but when your point man crosses the line and comes down, he becomes yours and you go with him                                         |
| <b>Convention</b> | Below the goal line the low three stay locked on their men; when the puck comes back to the point, everyone releases and reverts to areas                                   |
| <b>Goal</b>       | Remove the walk-down and the unmarked net front while keeping the wingers high enough to break out                                                                          |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Two players on different sides of "is he below the dots yet?" is exactly the disagreement that produces a goal against                                                      |
| <b>Options</b>    | "Man on the puck, zone off the puck" is the same family — man on the carrier anywhere, area coverage away from it                                                           |

Coaching material routinely describes this as the most common arrangement in professional hockey, and as increasingly common below it. **Nobody publishes a count of what teams actually run**, in this zone or any other — treat that as coaching-material consensus rather than a measured fact, the same way Forechecking Systems treats "the most common forecheck". It is a deliberate compromise: use man coverage where being unmarked is fatal, and zone coverage where it isn't.

**The rule of thumb: man-on-man below the dots, zone above them.** Some teams say "below the hash marks" or "below the top of the circles" — the line varies by a few feet, so learn your team's version. Above that line, you cover an area and pass players off. Below it, you take a body and you stay with it.

How it plays out:

- **The two defencemen and the low forward** (usually the centre) are effectively man-on-man on the three attacking forwards down low. One takes the puck carrier, one takes the net front, one takes the low support.
- **The two wingers play zone up high** on the points — but with a man-on-man trigger: *if your point man crosses the line and comes down, he becomes yours and you go with him.*

This is the direct fix for low zone collapse's biggest weakness.

- **When the puck goes below the goal line**, the low three stay locked on their men rather than rotating by area, which kills cycles far more effectively than a pure zone.
- **When the puck comes back up to the point**, everyone releases and reverts to areas, and the shape re-forms.

**What it's good at:** it removes the walk-down problem and the unmarked-net-front problem while keeping the wingers high enough to break out. It also degrades gracefully — if the low man coverage falls apart in a scramble, you can revert to "protect the house" without changing anything up high.

**What it concedes:** it's the hardest of the three to learn, because it requires everyone to agree on where the line is and to switch mode at the same instant. Two players on different sides of "is he below the dots yet?" is exactly the kind of disagreement that produces a goal against.

There are inverted versions — some teams play man on the puck carrier anywhere and zone away from the puck, which is arguably the true modern default. If your coach says "man on the puck, zone off the puck", that's this family.

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## Box+1 and the Collapsing Box

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### Box+1

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b>   | Four players form a box around the slot — two low near the posts, two higher near the tops of the circles                                                      |
| <b>Convention</b>   | The "+1" is the only player who chases the puck; when the puck moves, the role passes to whoever is nearest and the box rotates one position to fill the space |
| <b>Key</b>          | The standard introductory structure for young players and beginner adults — passive, forgiving of mistakes, and a simple picture of where to stand             |
| <b>Key</b>          | Not a penalty-kill box — that is four players, two high and two low; Box+1 is a five-man even-strength shape                                                   |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A good puck-moving team — one chaser cannot pressure them, so they hold the puck and pick their moment                                                         |

Four players form a box around the slot — two low near the posts, two higher near the tops of the circles — and the fifth player, the "+1", is the only one who chases the puck. When the puck moves, the +1 role passes to whoever is now nearest, and the box rotates one position to fill the space they left.

**Where it actually gets used:**

- **As a teaching system.** It is the standard introductory defensive-zone structure for young players and beginner adults, because it is passive, forgiving of individual mistakes, and gives everyone a simple picture of where to stand. Coaching resources present it explicitly as the stepping stone to sagging zone or hybrid coverage later.
- **In rec and beer league,** where nobody has practised rotations and the priority is that five people are not all chasing the same puck.
- **It is not a penalty-kill box.** A penalty-kill box is four players with two high and two low (see Special Teams). Box+1 is a five-man even-strength shape. Same word, different thing — a distinction worth keeping straight.

**What it concedes:** almost everything on the perimeter. One chaser cannot pressure a good puck-moving team, so they will hold the puck as long as they like and pick their moment. It buys structure at the cost of ever getting the puck back.

**The collapsing box (and the strong-side overload)**

|              |                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Convention   | The collapsing box is a state, not a full system — the box shrinks toward the crease as the puck goes below the goal line, all five inside the house with sticks in lanes            |
| Read         | Use it protecting a lead late, defending 6-on-5 with their goalie pulled, when structure has already gone, or against a team dangerous below the circles but not from its defencemen |
| Risk         | You concede the entire outside by design                                                                                                                                             |
| Options      | The strong-side overload is the opposite adjustment — all five shift to the puck side, cutting the ice in half and squeezing the carrier                                             |
| Countered by | One hard, accurate cross-ice pass — the overload leaves the whole weak side unoccupied by design                                                                                     |

The **collapsing box** is a state rather than a full system: the box shrinks toward the crease as the puck goes below the goal line or into the corner, so all five of you are inside the house, sticks in

lanes, conceding the entire outside. It's what low zone collapse turns into under maximum pressure.

Where it gets used:

- **Protecting a lead late**, when a shot from the point costs you nothing and a seam pass costs you the game. See Game Management.
- **Defending 6-on-5** with the opposing goalie pulled.
- **When you are outnumbered or scrambled** and structure has already gone (see When the System Breaks).
- **Against a team that generates nothing from its defencemen** but is dangerous below the circles.

The **strong-side overload** is the opposite adjustment: instead of collapsing toward the net, all five players shift to the puck side, cutting the ice in half and squeezing the carrier for time and space. It is aggressive, generates turnovers, and dies to one hard accurate cross-ice pass — the whole weak side is unoccupied by design. Some teams use it as their base system; more use it as a situational squeeze when they need the puck back.

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# Comparison Table

|                                      | Low zone collapse (zone)                                                                             | Man-on-man                                                   | Hybrid (man low / zone high)                                                   | Box+1                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Who takes the corner                 | Strong-side D, plus the centre as second body                                                        | Whoever's assigned check went there — often a winger         | Strong-side D and the low forward, locked on their men                         | The "+1 chaser c                                                                                                                                     |
| Who has the net front                | Weak-side D                                                                                          | Whoever's check is standing there                            | Whichever of the low three is matched to the net-front forward                 | The two players the box                                                                                                                              |
| Who covers the points                | Both wingers, high, one per side                                                                     | The two wingers, man-marking the opposing D                  | Both wingers by area — until their man walks down                              | <b>Nobody proper!</b><br>The two high box players at the top of the circles, roughly feet below the point and close only when the puck arrives there |
| Opposing D walks down from the point | <b>The known weakness.</b><br>Winger follows a few feet but doesn't chase; can become a free walk-in | Winger goes with them all the way, including into the corner | Winger tracks them man-on-man as soon as they cross the dots — this is the fix | Box holds the +1 c nearest high player picks them up late                                                                                            |
| Difficulty to learn                  | Low                                                                                                  | Low to understand, high to execute                           | Highest — everyone must agree where the line is                                | Lowest                                                                                                                                               |
| What it concedes                     | Point shots, the walk-down, extended possession, and the seam between areas                          | Picks, mismatches, exhaustion, and total                     | Confusion at the man/zone boundary; demands constant communication             | The entire perimeter you rarely                                                                                                                      |

|                                           | Low zone collapse (zone)        | Man-on-man                                   | Hybrid (man low / zone high) | Box+1             |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
|                                           |                                 | collapse if one player loses their man       |                              | get the puck back |
| <b>Breakout readiness when you win it</b> | Good — two wingers already high | Poor — you're standing wherever they put you | Good                         | Moderate          |

## How to Tell Which System Your Team Plays

Ask the coach. That is genuinely the first answer, and one specific question gets you most of the way: **"When the puck is in our corner, does the winger stay on the point or go help?"** The answer separates zone from man immediately.

If you can't ask, watch one shift with a defensive-zone faceoff and look for these tells:

- **Watch the weak-side winger when the puck goes into the corner.** Do they stay at the blue line and then sag into the high slot? That's low zone collapse. Do they leave with the opposing defenceman? That's man or hybrid.
- **Watch what happens when an opposing defenceman walks down from the point.** Nobody follows past a few feet — zone. Somebody tracks them all the way — man or hybrid.
- **Count your players below the tops of the circles when the puck is behind your net — but count the *wingers*, not the heads.** Both a collapse and a hybrid put three low (two D and the centre), so a raw headcount tells you nothing. What separates them is **where the two wingers are and why**. In a collapse both wingers start on the points and only the weak-side one drops, into the high slot, and only while the centre is low — and it climbs straight back. In man or hybrid a winger leaves the point because a *body* left the point, and goes as far as that body goes, including into the corner. **Five low is neither: that is a collapsing box, which is a situational state rather than a system.**
- **Listen to the talk.** "I've got the net", "you take the corner", "shift over" is zone language. Names and "he's yours", "switch", "stay with him" is man language.
- **Watch the second defenceman.** If they never leave the goalmouth regardless of who is standing there, you're in a zone. If they follow a specific body out to the half-wall, you're in man.

## Most defensive-zone breakdowns are not effort problems

|                 |                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>      | Almost always both players worked hard — they were operating on different assumptions about who had whom, and skated hard in the wrong directions |
| <b>Mindset</b>  | Knowing your system is a skill, not admin — a player who knows the structure and skates at 80% out-defends one who doesn't and skates at 100%     |
| <b>Action</b>   | Announce your intentions, not your observations — "I'm going to the corner, you've got my slot" resolves the ambiguity instead of describing it   |
| <b>Priority</b> | When in doubt, default to the house — get inside, stick in a lane, cover the most dangerous unmarked player                                       |

This is the most important paragraph in this document.

When a goal goes in from the slot, the instinct on the bench is to say someone didn't work hard enough. Almost always, both players worked hard. What happened is that **two players were operating on different assumptions about who had whom** — the centre thought the weak-side winger was collapsing, the winger thought the centre was staying high; the defenceman thought his partner had the net, the partner thought the puck battle needed two. Both skated hard, in the wrong direction, at the same time.

Three consequences follow:

1. **Knowing your system is a skill, not admin.** A player who knows the structure and skates at 80% will out-defend a player who doesn't and skates at 100%.
2. **Announce your intentions, not your observations.** "He's coming down your side" is useful. "I'm going to the corner, you've got my slot" is far better, because it resolves the ambiguity rather than describing it.
3. **When in doubt, default to the house.** If you genuinely don't know whether someone is yours, get inside, get your stick in a lane, and cover the most dangerous unmarked player. You will almost never be badly wrong.

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## Defending Specific Threats

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Systems tell you where to stand. These are the recurring plays you'll actually face, and what to do about each.



## The cycle

|                   |                                                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | Attackers rotate the puck between the corner, the half-wall and behind the net, passing into the space they just left, until somebody chases out of position |
| <b>Never</b>      | Chase the puck around the boards — let it come to you and defend the exit points, not the puck's current location                                            |
| <b>Read</b>       | Take away the next pass, not the current one — the man arriving is the threat                                                                                |
| <b>Position</b>   | Cut it at the goal line — meet a carrier coming out from below the goal line at the post, not in the corner                                                  |
| <b>Convention</b> | Under a collapse, be patient — the house is full and they aren't threatening you; under man or hybrid, stay on bodies                                        |
| <b>Action</b>     | Get one hard win — cycles end when somebody wins a puck battle, so send two, which in the collapse is the strong-side defenceman and the centre              |

**What it is:** attackers rotate the puck between the corner, the half-wall and behind the net, passing to a teammate who is arriving into the space they just left. It's a possession tactic designed to make you chase until someone is out of position.

### Defending it:

- **Don't chase the puck around the boards.** The cycle wins when your five players are strung out following it. Let it come to you and defend the exit points, not the puck's current location.
- **Take away the *next* pass, not the current one.** The cycle is a sequence; the man arriving is the threat.
- **Cut it at the goal line.** The most valuable place to break a cycle is stopping a carrier who is trying to come out from below the goal line to the front of the net. Meet them at the post, not in the corner.
- **Under a collapse, be patient.** The house is full and they aren't threatening you. Time is on your side; they'll eventually force something.
- **Under man or hybrid, stay on bodies.** The cycle is specifically designed to beat area coverage, and man coverage low is the strongest answer to it.
- **Get one hard win.** Cycles end when somebody wins a puck battle. Two of you on one carrier — strong-side defenceman and centre in the collapse system — is how you get that.

## The low-to-high play

- Key** The puck goes low to drag your coverage down, then back up to the point for a shot with your backs turned and traffic in front — it exists to punish low zone collapse
- Never** Get sucked low as the strong-side winger — stay high, in the lane, between that defenceman and the net
- Read** When the puck goes behind the net, expect the low-to-high next — close on your point as it disappears, not when it comes out
- Action** Get out to the shot, don't sit under it — a winger at the hash marks blocks nothing; one closing hard at the top of the circle does
- Action** As the puck goes high, the low players stop looking at it and start boxing out — the danger is the tip and the rebound

**What it is:** the puck goes down to the corner or behind the net, drags your coverage low, and then gets passed back *up* to the point for a shot with your defenders' backs turned and traffic in front. Coaching material routinely calls it one of the most common ways modern teams score, and it exists precisely to punish low zone collapse. (*Shot-location data is public and plentiful — Shooting owns what it says. What does not exist publicly is a classification of goals by the **play that produced them**, which is what a ranking like this would need, so treat "one of the most common" as coaching consensus rather than a measured figure.*)

### Defending it:

- **The strong-side winger's discipline is the whole answer.** They stay high, in the lane, between that defenceman and the net. If they got sucked low, the low-to-high is free.
- **Recognise the trigger.** When the puck goes behind the net, expect the low-to-high next. Wingers should already be closing on their points as the puck disappears behind the goal line, not reacting when it comes out.
- **Get out to the shot, don't sit under it.** Close the distance to the shooter. A winger standing at the hash marks isn't blocking anything; a winger closing hard at the top of the circle is.
- **Everyone else finds a body.** The shot is only dangerous because of the tip and the rebound. As the puck goes high, the low players stop looking at the puck and start boxing out.

## The point shot with a screen

|                  |                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>       | Screening from outside the crease, without contact, is normally legal — the referee will not help you in real time                           |
| <b>Action</b>    | Move the screen, don't watch it — get your body between them and your goalie's sightline, or walk them out with leverage under the arms      |
| <b>Technique</b> | Lift the stick — a screen with a free stick is a deflection waiting to happen, and this is the highest-value thing a net-front defender does |
| <b>Never</b>     | Block a shot from a screening position — you change the direction of a puck your goalie never saw                                            |
| <b>Technique</b> | Block from close if you block at all — ten feet from the shooter, square, shin pads to the puck, stick down beside you                       |
| <b>Action</b>    | Talk to your goalie — "screen left", "I've got the tip"; they are trying to find the puck through legs                                       |

**What it is:** they shoot from the blue line with a forward parked in front of your goalie. The shot doesn't need to be good; the goalie can't see it, and the rebound comes off a moving body.

### Defending it:

- **Move the screen, don't watch it.** Screening from outside the crease, without contact, is normally legal — the referee will not help you in real time. Get your body between the screen and your goalie's sightline, or physically walk them out with leverage under the arms.
- **Lift the stick.** A screen with a free stick is a deflection waiting to happen; a screen with a lifted stick is just a person. This is the highest-value thing a net-front defender does.
- **Don't block the shot from a screening position.** Half-blocking a shot your goalie cannot see is worse than not blocking it, because you've changed the direction of an already invisible puck. If you're in the sightline, get out of it or take the man; let the puck through.
- **Block from close if you block at all.** Ten feet from the shooter, square, shin pads to the puck, stick down beside you. See Body Contact and Battles.
- **Talk to your goalie.** "Screen left", "I've got the tip" — they are trying to find the puck through legs.

## The back door / weak-side seam

|                   |                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | While everyone watches the strong-side battle, an attacker drifts to the far post — one cross-ice pass and it is an open net                       |
| <b>Priority</b>   | The chance every coverage system is most afraid of, and worth conceding almost anything else to prevent                                            |
| <b>Never</b>      | Watch the puck as the weak-side defenceman — eyes track the puck, body stays on the man at the back post                                           |
| <b>Technique</b>  | Lie your stick flat in the seam across the slot — it makes the play impossible even when the passer is open                                        |
| <b>Convention</b> | Weak-side winger sags into the middle rather than standing pretty at the point — a body in the high slot is worth more than perfect point coverage |
| <b>Action</b>     | Call the arrival, not the goal — "back door!" the moment he appears, not when the pass is on the way                                               |

**What it is:** while everyone watches the strong-side battle, an attacker drifts to the far post. One cross-ice pass and it's an open net. This is the chance every coverage system is most afraid of, and the one worth conceding almost anything else to prevent.

### Defending it:

- **The weak-side defenceman never watches the puck.** Your eyes track the puck, your body stays on the man at the back post. If you find yourself facing the corner, you've already lost him.
- **Stick in the seam.** The pass has to cross the slot. A stick lying flat in that lane makes the play impossible even when the passer is open.
- **Weak-side winger sags into the middle** rather than standing pretty at the point. The seam runs through the high slot; a body there is worth more than perfect point coverage.
- **Call the arrival, not the goal.** "Back door!" the moment he appears, not when the pass is on the way.

## The walk-down from the point

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | Instead of shooting, the opposing defenceman skates down toward the top of the circle — in a pure zone he crosses out of the winger's area and into nobody's                    |
| <b>Action</b>     | Find out your team's version before you need it — this one is a coaching choice, not a rule of hockey                                                                           |
| <b>Convention</b> | Under low zone collapse, follow a few feet and stay connected but do not chase into the corner, and call the switch loudly                                                      |
| <b>Convention</b> | Under man-on-man, you go with them all the way, wherever they go                                                                                                                |
| <b>Convention</b> | Under hybrid, release from zone and pick them up man-on-man as soon as they cross the dots                                                                                      |
| <b>Priority</b>   | When a fourth attacker arrives low, somebody gives up their area and it must not be the goalmouth — usually the centre absorbs him and the weak-side winger takes the high slot |

**What it is:** instead of shooting, the opposing defenceman skates down from the blue line toward the top of the circle — about **35 feet** from the goal line — or all the way to the hash marks. In a pure zone system, they cross out of the winger's area and into nobody's, and get a clean look from there or an easy feed into the slot.

### Defending it — and this is a coaching choice, so know your team's version:

- **Under low zone collapse:** the standard instruction is that the winger **follows them down a few feet and stays connected, but does not chase into the corner**, and calls the switch loudly so the centre and defencemen know a fourth attacker is arriving low. This is a genuine compromise, and it is the system's weak point.
- **Under man-on-man:** you go with them, all the way, wherever they go. Simple, and the reason the walk-down doesn't trouble man teams.
- **Under hybrid:** you release from zone and pick them up man-on-man as soon as they cross the dots. This is the cleanest answer of the three, and the main reason hybrids exist.
- **Everyone else:** when a fourth attacker arrives low, you are outnumbered down there. Somebody has to give up their area and it must not be the goalmouth. Usually the centre absorbs the extra man and the weak-side winger takes over the high slot entirely.

## The net-front scramble

|                  |                                                                                                                                     |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Priority</b>  | Body first, puck second — tie up the most dangerous stick before you look for the puck                                              |
| <b>Never</b>     | Lunge at the puck through your goalie — you will knock the puck loose or knock them off their post                                  |
| <b>Rule</b>      | Your stick is legal, your glove and your chest are not — covering the puck inside your own crease is a penalty shot (NHL Rule 67.4) |
| <b>Rule</b>      | You may hand-pass in your own zone (NHL Rule 79.2), and the test is where the puck is, not where the skates are                     |
| <b>Never</b>     | Hand-pass it out to a breaking winger — it is illegal the moment the puck itself has left the zone                                  |
| <b>Technique</b> | Stay on your feet as long as possible — a defender on the ice is out of the play for two seconds, which is the whole scramble       |

**What it is:** a rebound, a loose puck at the top of the crease, four bodies, two seconds. Coaches will tell you more goals come from here than from any highlight play. **The rebound half of that is countable, and it is substantial** — **11.4%** of NHL goals are scored within three seconds of a previous shot on goal by the same team, and **19.7%** within ten seconds; Offensive Zone Play section 10 owns that figure and carries its source. Put it alongside shot-*location* data, which says the ice in front of the crease is the most dangerous on the rink (Shooting owns that), and the direction is well supported. What is still not published is a classification of goals by the **play that produced them**, so "more than any highlight play" stays a coaching comparison rather than a measured ranking.

### Defending it:

- **Body first, puck second.** Tie up the most dangerous stick before you look for the puck. A player with a free stick at the goalmouth will score before you get there.
- **Don't lunge at the puck through your goalie.** You'll knock the puck loose or knock them off their post. Trust them to smother it and protect them while they do.
- **Whack it out — but do not cover it.** Under NHL Rule 67.4, a defending player other than the goalie who falls on, holds, picks up or gathers the puck into their body **inside the goal crease** gives up a **penalty shot**. Outside the crease, deliberately falling on it is a minor penalty. Your stick is legal; your glove and your chest are not.

- **You may hand-pass in your own zone.** Under NHL Rule 79.2, play is not stopped for a hand pass by players in their own defending zone. Batting a bouncing puck down or shoving it to a teammate in a scramble is legal in your own end.

**The test is where the *puck* is, not where the skates are.** Rule 79.2: *"The location of the puck when contacted by either the player making the hand pass or the player receiving the hand pass shall determine the zone it is in."* So a defenceman standing with a skate over the blue line can legally glove a puck down as long as the puck itself is still in the zone — and conversely, batting a puck to a teammate is illegal the moment the puck has left the zone, wherever the players are standing. Don't hand-pass it out to a breaking winger.

- **Stay on your feet as long as possible.** A defender on the ice is a defender out of the play for two seconds, which is the whole scramble.

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## When the System Breaks

---

|                  |                                                                                                                                                  |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Priority</b>  | Bodies to the net front immediately — not to the puck                                                                                            |
| <b>Technique</b> | If you can't reach anyone, lie your stick flat in the passing lane through the slot                                                              |
| <b>Read</b>      | Find the most dangerous unmarked player — scan the house, not the puck; in a scramble it is almost never the person holding it                   |
| <b>Action</b>    | Count — outnumbered low, somebody high comes down and says so; even, match up loudly: "I've got 19", "you take the net"                          |
| <b>Action</b>    | Get the puck out any way you can — a clear that concedes possession has still bought your team a change                                          |
| <b>Action</b>    | Reset before you attack — the commonest second goal is the one conceded straight after surviving the first                                       |
| <b>Key</b>       | The moment you realise you don't know your assignment, go to the middle — every mistake inside the house is smaller than the same one outside it |

Every system document describes an orderly world. A large share of your defensive-zone time will not look like that — often enough that it deserves its own plan: a broken play, a bad change, a puck ricocheting off shin pads, three of you below the goal line and nobody where the diagram says. (*How large a share is not something anybody has published; the "roughly a third" figure you sometimes hear is not sourced and is not used here.*) Systems don't cover this state, so players freeze, and freezing is what turns a scramble into a goal.

Here is the priority order when structure is gone. Work down it and don't skip.

**1. Bodies to the net front, immediately.** Not to the puck — to the front of the net. The most dangerous thing on the ice during a scramble is an unmarked player at the goalmouth, and the second most dangerous is nobody standing there when the puck squirts out. If you are the closest player and unsure what to do, go and stand between your goalie and the nearest opponent.

**2. Sticks in lanes.** If you can't reach anyone, lie your stick flat in the passing lane through the slot. Broken plays are decided by passes that shouldn't have got through. A stick on the ice is defence you can perform while out of position.

**3. Find the most dangerous unmarked player.** Scan the house, not the puck. Ask "who could score in the next two seconds?" and go and stand on them. In a scramble the answer is almost never the person with the puck — it's the person who's about to receive it.

**4. Count.** Are you outnumbered low? Then somebody high has to come down, and the person who does should say so. Are you even? Then match up, loudly: "I've got 19", "you take the net". A scramble ends the instant five people have re-agreed who has whom.

**5. Get the puck out any way you can.** Once you touch it, get it out. Off the glass, around the boards, into the neutral zone, off a shin pad. Nobody is grading you. A clear that concedes possession has still bought your team a change and reset the coverage — which is the whole point.

**6. Reset before you attack.** When it's over, take the extra second to re-form. The most common second goal is the one conceded immediately after surviving the first, because everyone relaxed while three attackers were still in the zone.

**The habit to build:** the moment you realise you don't know your assignment, **go to the middle.** Every mistake made inside the house is a smaller mistake than the same one made outside it.

---



# Clearing the Zone

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>     | Decide before you touch it — scan while the battle is still going, so you already know whether it's the winger, the centre or the glass                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Priority</b>   | Controlled exit whenever it is genuinely available, then a rim or a chip off the glass, then anything that ends the shift                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>Convention</b> | Under low zone collapse the pass goes to the winger coming down the wall to between the hash marks and the goal line — not to the blue line                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Rule</b>       | Off the glass and out is legal; putting the puck directly out of play from your own defending zone is a two-minute delay of game (NHL Rule 63.2(iii)), with three narrow carve-outs                                                                                                  |
| <b>Rule</b>       | 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                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Ice it at even strength and the puck comes straight back — your tired line cannot change and cannot take a timeout                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Rule</b>       | Shorthanded you may ice the puck freely (NHL Rule 81.6), but two carve-outs apply under USA Hockey and the NHL — check your league; Special Teams owns both                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Rule</b>       | Your goalie may only play the puck behind the goal line inside the trapezoid (NHL Rule 27.8) — most rec, beer-league and youth associations don't use it, so find out                                                                                                                |
| <b>Rule</b>       | 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 |
| <b>Never</b>      | Cheat up the ice — the puck should leave the zone before your third forward does                                                                                                                                                                                                     |

Winning the puck is only half the job. The handoff from coverage into a breakout is where good defensive shifts become good shifts. Full detail in Breakouts; this is the transition itself.

**Decide before you touch it.** The single biggest cause of turnovers on a zone exit is a defenceman receiving the puck and *then* starting to look. Scan while the battle is still going — see Scanning and Anticipation — so that when the puck is yours you already know whether it's the winger, the centre, or the glass.

## The three outcomes, in descending order of value:

1. **Controlled exit** — a pass to a winger on the wall or the centre swinging low, and out with possession. Under low zone collapse your wingers are high on the points *while the other*

team has the puck, and **they come down the wall to between the hash marks and the goal line as you win it** — that is where the pass goes, not the blue line. Being high is what makes the trip short; it is not the receiving position. Take this whenever it's genuinely available. See Breakouts.

2. **Uncontrolled but safe exit** — **rim** it around the boards, chip it off the glass, or bank it out. A *rim* is a hard puck sent **onward** around the boards, following the curve of the rink to the next teammate along; it is not a **reverse**, which sends the puck **back** against the flow into the space a forechecker has just vacated. Either way there is no possession, no chance against, and your team gets to change. This is a good play, not a failure.
3. **Anything that ends the shift.** When it's bad, it's bad. Get it out.

### Rules that constrain the clear:

- **Off the glass and out is legal; over the glass is a penalty.** Under NHL Rule 63.2, shooting or batting the puck **directly out of the playing surface from your own defending zone**, with no deflection, is a two-minute minor for delay of game. Hitting the glass and staying in play is fine — the penalty is for putting it into the crowd. Note that this version, Rule 63.2(iii), applies only in your defending zone: there it does not matter whether you meant it. It is not quite strict liability, because the rule carries three carve-outs — it applies "*except where there is no glass*", and the NOTE to it adds that "*when the puck is shot into the players' bench, the penalty will not apply*" and that "*when the puck goes out of the playing area directly off a face-off, no penalty shall be assessed.*" Over the glass **behind** the bench is still a penalty. Clause **63.2(ii)** is wider — a player who **deliberately** shoots or bats the puck out of the playing area "*from anywhere on the ice surface*" takes the same minor. So from the neutral zone you are safe only if it was an accident.
- **Icing applies at even strength.** A hard flat clear from your own end that reaches their goal line untouched brings the puck straight back for a defensive-zone faceoff, and **your line cannot change** and cannot take a timeout. That's the real cost — you've cleared the puck and kept your tired players on the ice. Aim clears wide and high off the glass, or short enough to die in the neutral zone.
- **Shorthanded, ice it freely — once you have checked that your league lets you.** A penalty-killing team may ice the puck with no whistle (Rule 81.6). Two carve-outs, both owned by Special Teams: USA Hockey gives the exemption only at Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult (Rule 624(b)(1)), and the NHL withdraws it from a team shorthanded by a major that has left the penalty bench empty.
- **Your goalie cannot go and get a puck in the corner.** Under NHL Rule 27.8 the goalkeeper may only play the puck behind the goal line inside the **trapezoid**, and the sole exception is maintaining skate contact with the crease. Retrieval outside it is on the

defencemen. This applies in the NHL (since 2005-06), the KHL, and IIHF play (since the unified 2021-22 rulebook). **Most rec, beer-league and youth associations do not use the trapezoid** — if you play under those rules, your goalie is a genuine third puck-handler behind the net and your entire retrieval and clearing game changes. Find out. See Goaltender. 🇬🇧 **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. Assume it binds, 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.

**Structure first, speed second.** It is tempting to leave the zone the instant the puck turns over, and forwards cheating up the ice is how a cleared zone becomes an odd-man rush the other way. Exit as a group. The puck should leave the zone before your third forward does.

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## Common Mistakes

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- **Not knowing which system you're playing.** The root cause of most of what follows. Ask on day one.
- **Both defencemen drawn to the same puck.** The goalmouth is empty and one pass beats five players.
- **Wingers drifting into the corner in a collapse system.** You've abandoned the point *and* your team's best breakout outlet, to be the third player in a battle that already had two.
- **The weak-side winger failing to collapse** when the centre goes low, leaving the high slot open — or collapsing when the *strong*-side winger should have stayed and both sagging at once.
- **Chasing the puck instead of covering the pass.** Zone coverage waits; the player who chases is the one who breaks the shape.
- **Watching the puck at the net front.** Eyes on the puck, body on the man — get that backwards and your check scores from six feet.
- **Cross-checking the net-front player repeatedly** instead of lifting their stick. It is among the most predictable penalties in hockey — officials are told to watch for it at the net front — and a stick lift works better.

- **Blocking a shot from a screening position**, deflecting a puck your goalie never saw.
  - **Following your check into harmless ice** in a man system while their teammate walks into the slot you left.
  - **Freezing when the structure breaks** instead of defaulting to the house.
  - **Covering a loose puck with your hand in your own crease** — that's a penalty shot, not a whistle.
  - **Cheating up ice before the puck is out**. The clear becomes a turnover and you're a spectator on the rush back.
  - **Silent defending**. Coverage is a shared model. Unspoken, it isn't shared.
- 

## Key Takeaways

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1. Every defensive-zone system is a different answer to one question: how do five people protect the house and still be able to leave with the puck? Every answer concedes something on purpose.
2. **Low zone collapse is the house default** here: strong-side D on the puck, weak-side D at the goalmouth, centre as low support, both wingers high on the points, weak-side winger sagging into the high slot when the centre goes low.
3. Under low zone collapse, wingers do **not** go to the corner. Under man-on-man, they do. That one difference is the fastest way to identify which system a team is playing.
4. The universal principles survive every system: middle before outside, stay on the defensive side, never both D on the puck without knowing who has taken the goalmouth, somebody always has the goalmouth, sticks flat in lanes, box out at the net. Note that only the *goalmouth* half of that pair is genuinely invariant — which player holds it changes with the system, and a few systems send both defencemen low on purpose. But "middle before outside" tells you which *chance* to concede, not where to stand — a man system honours it by staying glued to the man who would receive the seam pass, not by sagging into the slot.
5. Low zone collapse's real weakness is not the point shot — it's the **walk-down** from the point. Hybrid coverage exists mainly to fix it.
6. Man-on-man leaves nobody unmarked and dies to picks, mismatches, and any single lost battle.
7. **Most defensive-zone goals are not effort failures**. They are two hard-working players operating on different assumptions about who has whom. Announce your intentions, not your observations.

8. When structure is gone: bodies to the net front, sticks in lanes, find the most dangerous unmarked player, get it out any way you can. When in doubt, go to the middle.
  9. Winning the puck is half the job. Decide where it's going before it's yours, and get the puck out of the zone before your third forward leaves it.
  10. Off the glass and out is a good play. Over the glass from your own end is two minutes — **direct and non-deflected** is the test (Rule 63.2(iii)), with narrow exemptions for a puck that goes into the players' bench, one that comes directly off a faceoff, and rinks with no glass. Know the difference.
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# Defending the Rush

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**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

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A **rush** is an attack that arrives in transition — the puck moving from one end toward the other while the defending team is still getting organised. This is the situation that produces the most dangerous scoring chances in hockey, because the defence is not set and the goalie is still moving. This document covers how to stop one: gap control, backchecking lanes and assignments, every numerical situation from 1-on-1 through 3-on-2 to breakaways and the late trailer, the choice between standing up at the blue line and backing off, the four ways teams manufacture odd-man rushes against themselves, the vocabulary you need to shout during one, and how to hand a stopped rush over to your defensive-zone structure.

Almost everything here is a habit rather than a system. Get the habits right and you will defend rushes competently under any coach.

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# Why Rush Defence Matters More Than Anything You Do in the Zone

- Key** On a rush your goalie is moving and cannot be set — and being set is what makes routine saves routine
- Key** Nobody has a mark, assignments are formed on the fly, and the attackers pick the play rather than you
- Priority** Preventing a rush chance is worth far more than defending one well
- Action** Kill rushes by holding a tight gap and forcing dump-ins rather than by making recoveries afterwards

Set defensive-zone play gets most of the practice time. Rush defence deserves more, and here is why.

When a shot comes from a **set** defensive zone — your team in position, the puck cycling around the outside — the goalie is square to the puck, stationary, and already tracking. Five defenders are between the shooter and the net. The shooter is usually taking the shot the defence has decided to allow.

On a rush, none of that is true:

- **Your goalie is moving.** They are pushing across, backing in, resetting depth. A goalie who is mid-movement when the shot is released cannot be set. Being set — feet planted, square, weight balanced — is what makes routine saves routine.
- **The defence is not organised.** Nobody has a mark. Assignments are being formed on the fly at 30 kilometres an hour.
- **The attackers pick the play.** In a set zone you dictate what shot they get. On a rush, they do.
- **Everything happens facing the wrong way.** You are skating backwards and they are skating forwards. That asymmetry is why rush defence has its own technique.

The practical conclusion: **preventing a rush chance is worth far more than defending one well.** A defenceman who kills rushes by holding a tight gap and forcing dump-ins does more for the goals-against column than one who makes spectacular recoveries after they have already happened.

**A note on numbers.** Rush and odd-man chances are widely treated by coaches and analysts as the highest-danger chances in hockey, and there is published tracking behind that. Sportlogiq data covering every NHL game from 2017-18 to 2020-21, presented at the Ottawa Hockey Analytics Conference and reported by Alison Lukan for NHL.com (<https://www.nhl.com/kraken/news/seattle-kraken-analytics-with-alison-chances-off-the-rush-328173944>), puts a "*normal shot*" at an **8.15% likelihood of becoming a goal** — and says that "*the minute an opponent gets an extra skater on an attack, that likelihood almost triples.*" The per-situation numbers sit in a Sportlogiq graphic rather than in the article's text, so the multiplier is quoted here in the words the source used and not as a precise figure.

**The other half of the picture is how rare they are.** Tulskey and colleagues ([http://hockeyanalytics.com/Research\\_files/Using%20Zone%20Entry%20Data%20To%20Separate%20Offensive,%20Neutral,%20And%20Defensive%20Zone%20Performance.pdf](http://hockeyanalytics.com/Research_files/Using%20Zone%20Entry%20Data%20To%20Separate%20Offensive,%20Neutral,%20And%20Defensive%20Zone%20Performance.pdf)) tracked which zone entries were odd-man rushes and found their overall impact "*negligible*" — they are "*relatively infrequent in today's NHL (representing less than 3% of all 5-on-5 zone entries)*" and the difference against an ordinary carry-in is "*significant but not overwhelming (0.78 shots versus 0.57)*". Note that the two figures measure different things: 8.15% is per shot, 0.78 is shots per zone entry. Put together they say what coaches say — **a shot from an odd-man situation is worth roughly three ordinary ones** — while adding the part coaches skip, which is that you will face only a handful of them a game. Both halves matter here. The danger is why the habits below are worth drilling; the rarity is why *preventing* an odd-man rush beats defending one, and why the section on the four ways teams manufacture odd-man rushes against themselves is the most valuable part of this document.

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## The Organising Idea: Stay on the Defensive Side of the Puck

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|                 |                                                                                                          |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>      | Be between the puck and your net — every attacker, all the time                                          |
| <b>Position</b> | On the line between your opponent and your own goal, which is what "defensive side" or "goal side" means |
| <b>Risk</b>     | An attacker between you and your net has already gone wrong; everything after that is damage control     |
| <b>Key</b>      | "Don't get beat wide" and "don't get beat to the middle" are the same instruction                        |
| <b>Read</b>     | When a rush goes wrong and you are not sure why, somebody lost the defensive side of somebody            |



Before any of the technique, one principle sits above everything else in this document.

**Be between the puck and your net. Always. Every attacker, all the time.**

"Defensive side" — sometimes called **goal side** — means you are on the line between your opponent and your own goal. Anything that puts an attacker between you and your net has already gone wrong, and everything after that point is damage control.

This one idea generates most of the specific advice below:

- Gap control is just staying on the defensive side while *close*.
- Backchecking on the inside of your man is just re-establishing the defensive side.
- Not chasing the puck carrier is just refusing to give up the defensive side on someone else.
- "Don't get beat wide" and "don't get beat to the middle" are both the same instruction.

When a rush goes wrong and you're not sure why, this is nearly always the answer: somebody lost the defensive side of somebody.

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## Gap Control — The Full Method

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**Your gap is the distance between you and the puck carrier.** It is the single most important variable in rush defence, and it is almost entirely under your control.

This section expands the summary in Defender — it does not replace it, and nothing here contradicts it.

### Why a big gap is the root of most rush goals

- |               |                                                                                                  |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>    | A large gap looks safe and is not — it hands the attacker three things at once                   |
| <b>Risk</b>   | Space to accelerate into, so they arrive faster than you while you are moving backwards          |
| <b>Risk</b>   | Time to lift their head, find the trailer and the far winger, and pick the best of three options |
| <b>Risk</b>   | A clean shooting lane from distance — a shot through your shins is not a real chance             |
| <b>Action</b> | Close the gap and you remove speed, vision and shooting simultaneously                           |
| <b>Key</b>    | Gap control is the highest-leverage habit in defensive hockey                                    |

A large gap looks safe. It is not. A gap gives the attacker three things, all of them bad for you:

- 1. **Speed.** They can accelerate into the space between you. By the time they reach you they are moving faster than you, and you are moving backwards.
- 2. **Time to look.** With four metres of clear ice they can lift their head, find the trailer, find the far winger, and pick the best of three options. With one stick length they can only handle the puck.
- 3. **A shooting lane.** A shot from distance with a clean lane is a real chance. A shot from distance through your shins is not.

Close the gap and you take away all three at once. This is why gap control is the highest-leverage habit in defensive hockey — it is one adjustment that removes speed, vision and shooting simultaneously.

**Start your feet early — you cannot close a gap from a standstill**

|                  |                                                                                                          |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Never</b>     | Stand still and wait for the attacker — the gap opens at the moment you most need it closed              |
| <b>Action</b>    | Begin skating backwards while the puck is still being retrieved or regrouped in their end                |
| <b>Read</b>      | Read the pace of the attack, not the position of the puck — a slow regroup lets you skate up and squeeze |
| <b>Action</b>    | Reset your gap on every regroup; each new attack is a new gap problem                                    |
| <b>Technique</b> | C-cuts and backward crossovers, low stance, chest up, weight over the balls of the feet                  |
| <b>Key</b>       | At full backwards speed you can hold any gap you like; at zero you can hold none at all                  |

This is the most common defenceman error at every level, and the hardest to unlearn.

Standing still and waiting for the attacker feels like patience. It is the opposite. When they arrive you are at zero and they are at full speed, so the first thing you must do is accelerate backwards — and while you are accelerating, they are gaining. The gap opens *at the moment you most need it closed*.

Instead:

- **Begin skating backwards while the puck is still being retrieved or regrouped in their end.** Match their speed before they arrive rather than after.
- **Read the pace of the attack, not the position of the puck.** A slow regroup lets you skate up and squeeze. A quick outlet means you need to be moving already.
- **Reset your gap every time they regroup.** Neutral-zone attacks often turn back, swing, and come again. Each new attack is a new gap problem — skate up into them again rather than sitting where you finished the last one.
- **If you are already at full backwards speed when they arrive, you can hold any gap you like.** If you are at zero, you cannot hold any gap at all.

**Backward skating is the physical foundation.** C-cuts and backward crossovers to generate speed, low stance with chest up, weight over the balls of the feet. See Skating; Defender also covers the essentials. You cannot play a gap you are not fast enough to hold.

## Target distances

|                   |                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | Roughly two to three stick lengths through the neutral zone, in open ice                                             |
| <b>Position</b>   | Tighten to around a stick and a half as they cross the centre red line                                               |
| <b>Position</b>   | Roughly a stick length at your own blue line — close enough to poke check, far enough that one deke doesn't beat you |
| <b>Key</b>        | The gap should be closing the whole way in; a gap that grows as they approach is a goal waiting to happen            |
| <b>Convention</b> | Distances are a guide, not a law — they vary with your backward speed and the attacker's skill                       |
| <b>Key</b>        | The blue line is an ally — squeezing tight at the line forces the carrier to slow for their trailers or enter alone  |

Distances are a guide, not a law, and they vary with your own backward speed and the attacker's skill.

- **Through the neutral zone, in open ice:** roughly **two to three stick lengths**. Close enough to be a problem, far enough to react to a change of direction.
- **As they cross the centre red line:** tighten to around **a stick and a half**. This is the moment the attack commits, and the moment your gap should be actively shrinking rather than holding.

- **At your blue line:** roughly **a stick length**. Close enough to reach the puck with a poke check; far enough that one deke doesn't put them past you.

Notice the direction of travel: the gap should be **closing** the whole way in. A gap that grows as they approach is a goal waiting to happen; a gap that shrinks forces them to make their decision earlier than they wanted to.

**The blue line is an ally here.** Under NHL rules an attacker is offside only when **both skates** completely cross the blue line before the puck completely crosses it — so a defender squeezing tight at the line can force the carrier to either slow down for their own trailers or enter alone. See Rules Primer and Zone Entries.

## Read the chest and hips, not the puck, the hands or the head

- Read** The chest and hips cannot lie — the torso has to point where the body mass is actually going
- Key** The puck, blade, hands, shoulders, head and eyes are all deception tools, and all of them can lie
- Action** Fix your eyes on the numbers on the front of their jersey and use peripheral vision for the puck
- Read** A dangle that doesn't move the hips is not a dangle — if the chest stays square they have gone nowhere
- Never** Watch the puck — your feet follow your eyes, and your eyes have just been sent the wrong way

A skilled attacker will fake with everything they can move. The puck, the stick blade, the hands, the shoulders, the head, the eyes — all of these are **deception tools**, and all of them can lie.

Their **chest and hips cannot lie**. Their torso has to point where their body mass is actually going. Watch the middle of them, and use your peripheral vision for the puck.

Practically:

- **Fix your eyes on the numbers on the front of their jersey.** You will still see the puck; you just will not be led by it.
- **A dangle that doesn't move the hips is not a dangle.** If the puck goes wide but the chest stays square, they have not gone anywhere.

- **Watching the puck is how you get beaten clean** — your feet follow your eyes, and your eyes have just been sent the wrong way.

## Stick on the ice, out front, in the passing lane

|                  |                                                                                                              |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>       | Your stick is a passive weapon — used well it removes options without committing your body                   |
| <b>Position</b>  | Blade flat on the ice, out in front, in the lane between the carrier and their most dangerous support option |
| <b>Technique</b> | One hand on the stick for reach, two hands for control — but never with the blade in the air                 |
| <b>Action</b>    | Poke check only when you can reach the puck, not as a hope                                                   |
| <b>Never</b>     | Telegraph the poke check — hide it until you use it, or they pull the puck back and go around your reach     |
| <b>Risk</b>      | A missed poke check becomes a lever the attacker skates around, and often a hooking or tripping penalty      |

Your stick is a passive weapon. Used well it removes options without committing your body.

- **Blade flat on the ice**, out in front of you, in the lane between the carrier and their most dangerous support option.
- **One hand on the stick** for reach when you need it, two hands when you need control — but never with the blade in the air. A stick off the ice defends nothing.
- **Poke check only when you can reach the puck**, not as a hope. A missed poke check turns your stick into a lever the attacker skates around, and often into a hooking or tripping penalty.
- **Hide the poke check until you use it.** Telegraphing it lets the carrier pull the puck back and go around your reach.

## Angle to take the middle and force them outside

|                 |                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>      | The middle of the ice is the dangerous ice — shots from the slot beat goalies, shots from the wall mostly do not |
| <b>Position</b> | Boardside shoulder roughly on the middle of their chest, your body between them and the middle of the ice        |
| <b>Never</b>    | Line up chest-to-chest, or put your inside shoulder on their chest — that slides you wide and opens the middle   |
| <b>Action</b>   | Force them outside, then close the outside — ride them further wide and away from the net                        |
| <b>Key</b>      | The boards are your second defender — no ice on one side, a shrinking angle, and nowhere to cut back             |
| <b>Mindset</b>  | Good rush defence is choosing which thing to concede, not taking everything away                                 |

**The middle of the ice is the dangerous ice.** Shots from the slot beat goalies; shots from below the faceoff dots on the wall mostly do not.

So do not line up chest-to-chest with the carrier. Position yourself slightly to the **inside** — your **boardside shoulder** (the shoulder nearer the wall) roughly on the middle of their chest — so that your body sits between them and the middle of the ice, and the only route they can see is toward the boards. Getting this backwards and putting your *inside* shoulder on their chest slides your torso to the boards side and opens the middle, which is exactly the lane you are trying to take away.

- **The boards are your second defender.** A carrier pushed to the wall has no ice on one side, a shrinking angle to the net, and nowhere to cut back.
- **Force them to the outside, then close the outside.** Steering wide and then giving them the wall lane is only half the job — once they are committed outside, ride them further outside and away from the net.
- **You are giving them something on purpose.** Good rush defence is not taking everything away; it is choosing which thing to concede.

## Pivot late

|                   |                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>     | Delay the moment you turn and skate forwards with them as long as you possibly can                                 |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Once you pivot to forwards you can no longer react, and a change of direction beats you                            |
| <b>Technique</b>  | Hips lead the pivot, not shoulders — turning your upper body first opens the gate early                            |
| <b>Convention</b> | Pivot to the boards side rather than the middle — a default, not a rule; if beaten, be beaten toward the wall      |
| <b>Read</b>       | Some coaches want a middle pivot when turning away would take your eyes off the puck, or when you have inside help |

At some point you must turn and skate forwards with them. Delay that moment as long as you possibly can.

- Once you pivot to forwards, **you can no longer react** — you are committed to their current direction, and a change of direction beats you.
- **Hips lead the pivot, not shoulders.** Turning your upper body first opens the gate before your feet are ready.
- **Pivot to the boards side rather than the middle — as a default, not a rule.** If you are beaten, be beaten toward the wall. But some coaches want a middle pivot on specific reads, such as when turning away would take your eyes off the puck, or when you have inside help and the greater danger is the attacker cutting behind you. Find out which your coach wants, and be competent both ways: the correct direction is set by where the attacker is, not by which way you can pivot. See Skating → Which way to pivot.

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## Backchecking — Lanes and Assignments

**Backchecking** is racing back toward your own end when your team loses the puck. It is the difference between an odd-man rush and an even one, and it is the most commonly underperformed job in hockey. (Do not confuse it with **forechecking**, which is pressure in *their* end.)

## The three lanes

|                   |                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | Three vertical lanes — two outside along the boards, one middle between the faceoff dots                                                  |
| <b>Convention</b> | The standard assignment is the centre in the middle lane and the wingers in the outside lanes                                             |
| <b>Key</b>        | The middle-lane driver — the attacker skating hard through the middle without the puck — is the most commonly missed assignment in hockey |
| <b>Read</b>       | They are missed because they do not have the puck, and eyes go to the puck                                                                |
| <b>Options</b>    | Other teams give the middle to the first man back, or pick up man-on-man from the puck outward — find out which yours uses                |
| <b>Key</b>        | Under every variant, somebody owns the middle and nobody assumes it is somebody else                                                      |

Think of the ice as three vertical lanes running the length of the rink: the two outside lanes along the boards, and the middle lane between the faceoff dots.

The standard assignment, and the one most teams use:

- **The centre takes the middle lane** — and, crucially, **the middle-lane driver**: the attacker skating hard through the middle without the puck.
- **The two wingers take the outside lanes**, each picking up the attacker on their side.

**The middle-lane driver is the most dangerous and most commonly missed assignment in hockey.** They arrive into the slot unmarked, at speed, with a clean look. They are missed because they do not have the puck, and eyes go to the puck. If you are the centre coming back, that player is yours before anything else. See Center and Winger.

**This is a coaching choice, not a law.** Most teams assign lanes by position as above. Others assign by **first man back takes the middle**, regardless of who it is — common when the centre is the one caught deep, and common in rec hockey where lines are less structured. A third variant has the backcheckers pick up **man-on-man from the puck outward**, taking whoever is nearest. Find out which one your team uses. See Neutral Zone Systems.

Under every variant, two things hold: somebody owns the middle, and nobody assumes it is somebody else.



## Come back on the defensive side of your man

|                 |                                                                                                       |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Never</b>    | Chase from behind their shoulder — that is jogging, and you cannot defend anything from behind        |
| <b>Action</b>   | Take a route that puts you inside them, between them and your net, even if it is slightly longer      |
| <b>Position</b> | Arrive at their inside hip, not their back pocket, so your stick reaches the passing lane             |
| <b>Options</b>  | If you are genuinely beaten and can only chase, chase the stick — blade under theirs or on the puck   |
| <b>Risk</b>     | Reaching around their body from behind is a hook or a trip, and near your own net that gets expensive |

Chasing an attacker from behind their shoulder is not backchecking — it is jogging. You cannot defend anything from behind.

- **Take a route that puts you inside them**, between them and your net, even if that route is slightly longer.
- **Arrive at their inside hip**, not their back pocket. From there your stick reaches the passing lane and your body is already goal side.
- **If you are genuinely beaten and can only chase**, chase the *stick*, not the body: get your blade under theirs or on the puck. Reaching around their body from behind is a hook or a trip, and near your own net that gets expensive (see the breakaway section below).

## Skate first, then look

|                |                                                                                                     |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>  | Turn and sprint first, and look on the third or fourth stride                                       |
| <b>Never</b>   | Turn your head to watch what happens on a turnover — it costs you two strides you never get back    |
| <b>Key</b>     | The picture will still be there when you look up, and you will be five metres further into the play |
| <b>Mindset</b> | Full-speed backchecking is a conditioning issue as much as a hockey one                             |

The instinct on a turnover is to turn your head and watch what happens. That costs you two strides you never get back.

**Turn and sprint first. Look on the third or fourth stride.** The picture will still be there when you look up, and you will be five metres further into the play. Full-speed backchecking is a conditioning issue as much as a hockey one — see Conditioning and Recovery.

## Do not chase the puck carrier when your D has them

- Never** Sprint in to help a defenceman who is already engaged with the carrier and playing a good gap
- Risk** Two defenders on one attacker, and your actual assignment left unmarked
- Action** Skate past the puck battle to the unmarked man — your job is the player nobody has
- Mindset** Trusting your defenceman to win their own 1-on-1 is what turns a 3-on-2 into three 1-on-1s

If a defenceman is already engaged with the carrier and playing a good gap, sprinting in to help them is worse than useless — it leaves your actual assignment unmarked and puts two defenders on one attacker.

**Your job as a backchecker is the player nobody has.** Skate past the puck battle to the unmarked man. Trusting your defenceman to win their own 1-on-1 is a skill, and it is what turns a 3-on-2 into three 1-on-1s.

---

## The Numerical Situations

The number always reads **attackers on defenders** — a 2-on-1 is two attackers against one defender.

## 1-on-1

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>     | A shot from a place your goalie is comfortable with — not a hit and not a turnover                                                                                              |
| <b>Action</b>   | Steer them to a bad angle, force them wide, and keep forcing                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Position</b> | Stick in the lane, on the ice, out front — passing options are arriving behind the play                                                                                         |
| <b>Never</b>    | Lunge — it is a single bet on their next move, and if you are wrong they have the whole net                                                                                     |
| <b>Action</b>   | Ride them into the boards, your second defender, until their options collapse to zero                                                                                           |
| <b>Rule</b>     | IIHF women's Rule 101.1 prohibits using the boards to eliminate an opponent from the play, push her into the boards, or pin her along the boards — pin the puck, not the player |
| <b>Never</b>    | Ride an opponent into the boards in any non-check adult or youth league — the instruction above is for checking leagues only                                                    |
| <b>Priority</b> | Position first, contact second — a body check is a bonus, not a plan                                                                                                            |

You against the carrier. This is gap control applied, and it is the situation everything else is built from.

- **Steer them to a bad angle.** Your target is not a hit and not a turnover — it is a shot from a place your goalie is comfortable with. Force them wide and keep forcing.
- **Stick in the lane, on the ice, out front.** Even in a 1-on-1 there are passing options arriving behind the play.
- **Do not lunge.** A lunge is a single bet on their next move. If you are wrong, you are out of the play entirely and they have the whole net. Contain, keep your feet, and let them run out of ice.
- **Use the boards as a second defender.** Ride them into the wall and their options collapse to zero — no cutback, no shooting angle, no pass across. **In women's hockey this instruction does not apply, and that includes every level in Britain.** IIHF Rule 101.1: two or more players competing for possession are "*not allowed to use the boards to make contact with an opponent to eliminate her from the play, push her into the boards, or pin her along the boards*" — a minor, or a major plus an automatic game misconduct, and in British women's hockey below adult a major carries a further automatic ejection. **Pin the puck, not the player** (Body Contact and Battles). The same applies in any non-check adult or youth league.
- **A body check is a bonus, not a plan.** Missing a hit on a rush is far more costly than not attempting one. Position first, contact second. See Body Contact and Battles.

## 1-on-2

|                 |                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Never</b>    | Both defenders converge on the carrier — that opens the ice behind you for a late second attacker                   |
| <b>Action</b>   | One defender takes the puck, normally the one on the carrier's side, and plays it as a 1-on-1 with a very tight gap |
| <b>Position</b> | The other stays back and inside, covering the trailer who has not arrived yet                                       |
| <b>Key</b>      | The engaged defender can afford to be aggressive — a miss leaves your partner in a 1-on-1 rather than nothing       |
| <b>Action</b>   | Call it — "I've got him" from the engaging defender, so the other holds                                             |

One attacker, two defenders. The luxury case — and one that teams waste constantly.

The failure mode is both defenders converging on the carrier. That opens the ice behind you for a late-arriving second attacker and turns a comfortable situation into a scramble.

- **One defender takes the puck** — normally the one on the carrier's side — and plays it exactly as a 1-on-1, with a very tight gap because there is backup.
- **The other stays back and inside**, watching for the second wave. You are not a spectator; you are covering the trailer who has not arrived yet.
- **The engaged defender can afford to be aggressive.** This is the one rush situation where stepping up hard is genuinely low risk, because a miss leaves your partner in a 1-on-1 rather than nothing.
- **Call it.** "I've got him" from the engaging defender, so the other holds.

## 2-on-1 — the headline situation

|                   |                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | Take away the pass and give up the shot — your goalie can save the shot and cannot save the pass                             |
| <b>Read</b>       | A shooter walking into the slot unpressured with no realistic pass available is no longer a 2-on-1 — close on the puck       |
| <b>Action</b>     | Say the contract out loud — you own the pass, the goalie owns the shooter, and neither of you covers both                    |
| <b>Position</b>   | Sit in the passing lane, roughly on the line between the two attackers, biased slightly toward the middle                    |
| <b>Technique</b>  | Stick flat on the ice on the passing side, blade extended into the lane, arm long — your stick takes the pass, not your body |
| <b>Action</b>     | Take away the far attacker's stick as you get close to the net, where the danger converts into a tap-in                      |
| <b>Never</b>      | Slide before the pass is released — you remove yourself from the play and open both options at once                          |
| <b>Never</b>      | Try to block the shot — you abandon the pass, and a half-block deflects a puck your goalie was tracking                      |

Two attackers, one defender. This is the situation every defenceman is judged on, and it has a single governing instruction:

### TAKE AWAY THE PASS. GIVE UP THE SHOT.

**Why.** Your goalie can save the shot and cannot save the pass.

- On the **shot**, the goalie can see the puck the whole way, is square to the shooter, and is set. That is a save they are trained to make and expect to make — even a good shot from the wing.
- On the **cross-ice pass**, the goalie must push all the way across the crease while the puck travels faster than they can move. They arrive late, off balance, and often still sliding when the shot comes. A backdoor tap-in into an open half of the net is essentially unsaveable.

So the arithmetic is not "which is the better chance for them" — it is "which chance can my goalie actually stop." One of them, and only one.

**The goalie/defenceman contract — say it out loud.** This is a two-person agreement, and it only works if both people know it:

- **The defenceman owns the pass.** You take the lane and never leave it.
- **The goalie owns the shooter.** They play the puck carrier as if the second attacker does not exist — square to the shot, correct depth, set and stopped before release.
- Neither of you covers both. If the goalie also cheats toward the pass, the shooter gets an open net; if you also drift toward the shooter, the pass is open. **Both of you hedging is how a 2-on-1 becomes a goal.**

Talk about this with your goalie before the game, not during it. Most goalies want it exactly as described, but a few — especially at rec level, and especially against a weak shooter — will ask you to pressure the puck instead. See Goaltender.

**Your positioning, concretely:**

1. **Sit in the passing lane**, roughly on the line between the two attackers, biased slightly toward the middle of the ice.
2. **Stick flat on the ice on the passing side**, blade extended into the lane, arm long. Your stick, not your body, is what takes the pass away — that way your feet stay free.
3. **Match the retreat speed of the attack** and stay on the defensive side of both of them. Do not backpedal so fast that you end up behind your own goal line, and do not stall so the shooter walks in on top of your goalie.
4. **Take away the far attacker's stick as you get close to the net.** Late in the rush, the danger converts from a pass into a tap-in — get your blade to their stick.
5. **Do not slide. Not until the pass is released.** A slide is a one-time, irreversible commitment: if the pass has not gone, you have removed yourself from the play and both options are now open. If the pass *is* released and you can genuinely intercept it, sliding into the lane is correct.
6. **Do not try to block the shot.** Blocking the shot means abandoning the pass, and worse, a half-block deflects a puck your goalie was tracking. See the shot-blocking section in Defender.

**The one honest caveat:** if the shooter is walking into the slot completely unpressured with no realistic pass available — for example the second attacker has been picked up by a backchecker — the situation is no longer a 2-on-1 and you should close on the puck. Read what is actually in front of you rather than the label.

## 2-on-2

|                   |                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | Play it man-on-man — each defender takes an attacker and holds a tight gap on them                                    |
| <b>Options</b>    | Zone is the realistic alternative — strong-side D takes whoever carries into their half, weak-side D holds the middle |
| <b>Read</b>       | Zone survives a crossing rush better, man-on-man is tighter on a straight one — find out which your team wants        |
| <b>Never</b>      | Both drift toward the puck — a simple pass then leaves their partner the net                                          |
| <b>Action</b>     | Follow your man through a crossing or call a clean "switch" — never do half of each                                   |
| <b>Key</b>        | The weak-side defender is not free; being ready to help is not the same as leaving your man                           |

Two attackers, two defenders. Even numbers, and it should be routine — but it is the situation most often botched, because "even" makes people relax.

- **Play it man-on-man.** Each defender takes an attacker and holds a tight gap on them. This is the default in almost every system. The realistic alternative is **zone**: the strong-side D takes whoever carries the puck into their half of the ice and the weak-side D holds the middle, so the two of you trade marks rather than following them across. Zone survives a crossing rush better; man-on-man is tighter on a straight one. Find out which your team wants, because mixing them on the same rush leaves an attacker free.
- **The single biggest danger is both defenders drifting to the puck.** It is magnetic and it is fatal: two of you converge on the carrier, they make a simple pass, and their partner has the net. If you are the defender on the non-puck attacker, your job is to *stay with them* and let your partner do theirs.
- **Communicate the switch if they cross.** Attackers criss-cross specifically to make two defenders trade assignments badly. Either follow your man through the crossing or call a clean switch — "switch!" — but do not do half of each.
- **The weak-side defender is not free.** You are marking a person. Being ready to help is not the same as leaving your man.

## 3-on-2

|                   |                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | The common default is "two wide, middle to the backchecker" — a defenceman on each outside attacker                          |
| <b>Never</b>      | Chase the puck carrier — a wide carrier belongs to the D in that lane, a middle carrier to the backchecker                   |
| <b>Options</b>    | The alternative is strong-side D on the puck as a 1-on-1, weak-side D splitting the middle and the far attacker              |
| <b>Read</b>       | If your backchecker is genuinely not coming, squeeze the middle and concede the far wide man — but look before you assume it |
| <b>Action</b>     | Retreat together at the same speed, holding a flat line with the middle sealed between you                                   |
| <b>Never</b>      | Back all the way to the goal line — collapsing into your crease concedes the whole slot                                      |
| <b>Key</b>        | Ask your coach which version you play; two defencemen playing different ones on the same rush is worse than either           |

Three attackers, two defenders. Chaotic-looking, and the way you take the chaos out is to have agreed in advance which of two systems you are playing.

**The common default — "two wide, middle to the backchecker."** This is what most teams run, and what the rest of this section assumes unless you are told otherwise.

- **Each defenceman takes an outside attacker.** One D on each wide lane.
- **Nobody chases the puck carrier.** If the carrier is in the middle, they belong to the backchecker; if the carrier is wide, they belong to the defenceman in that lane and the other D holds the far attacker.
- **The middle belongs to the backchecking centre,** arriving from behind. This is exactly the middle-lane assignment above. If your backchecker is genuinely not coming, the defenceman on the puck side has to squeeze the middle and concede the far wide man — but do not assume that until you have looked.

**The realistic alternative — "strong side takes the puck, weak side splits."** Some teams do not wait on the backchecker at all. The **strong-side defenceman takes the puck carrier** wherever they are, playing it as a 1-on-1; the **weak-side defenceman drops off and splits the middle and the far attacker**, sitting in the passing lane between them exactly as you



would on a 2-on-1. Under this version the backchecker's job becomes the *third* attacker rather than the middle specifically.

The trade: the default keeps three defenders on three attackers if the backcheck arrives, but concedes the middle entirely if it does not. The alternative never concedes the middle, but the weak-side D is covering two people and the far attacker gets more room. **Ask your coach which one you are playing** — they fail in different directions, and two defencemen playing different versions of it on the same rush is worse than either.

- **Retreat together.** Both defencemen back up at the same speed, holding a flat line across the ice with the middle sealed between you. A staggered retreat opens a diagonal seam straight to the slot.
- **Do not back all the way to the goal line.** Retreating together does not mean collapsing into your own crease — that concedes the entire slot. Retreat under control and force the shot from outside.

### 3-on-1

|                 |                                                                                             |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b> | Central, on the defensive side of the puck, stick in the most dangerous lane                |
| <b>Goal</b>     | Delay — the objective changes from "stop this" to "make it take longer"                     |
| <b>Action</b>   | Retreat slowly, stay in the lanes, and force them to make an extra pass                     |
| <b>Never</b>    | Commit to one attacker — attacking the carrier turns it into an unopposed 2-on-0            |
| <b>Priority</b> | Give your goalie the shot from distance and take away the cross-ice options, as on a 2-on-1 |
| <b>Action</b>   | Call for help loudly — your backcheckers may not know how bad it is                         |

Three attackers, one defender. This is a bad situation and pretending otherwise helps nobody.

- **Take the middle.** Position yourself centrally, defensive side of the puck, stick in the most dangerous lane. You cannot cover three; you can make the two middle options harder.
- **Delay.** Your objective changes from "stop this" to "make it take longer." Every extra second is another backchecker arriving. Retreat slowly, stay in the lanes, force them to make an extra pass.
- **Never commit to one attacker.** Attacking the carrier on a 3-on-1 turns it into an unopposed 2-on-0.
- **Give your goalie the shot from distance** and take away the cross-ice options, on the same logic as the 2-on-1.

- **Call for help loudly.** Your backcheckers may not know how bad it is.

## Breakaways

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Priority</b> | This is your goalie's save and they usually make it — do the one useful legal thing, then get out of the way                                                                |
| <b>Action</b>   | Stick on the puck only — a poke at the puck itself, or a stick lift on their blade as they release                                                                          |
| <b>Options</b>  | Skating to catch them and re-establish position is legal, and angling them wide turns it into a bad-angle chance                                                            |
| <b>Rule</b>     | A hook, trip, hold or slash from behind that denies the chance is a penalty shot, not a two-minute minor (NHL Rule 57.3)                                                    |
| <b>Rule</b>     | Make contact with the puck first and a tripping minor is assessed instead of the penalty shot (NHL Rule 57.3)                                                               |
| <b>Rule</b>     | Under USA Hockey Rule 616(a) a foul diagonally from behind also counts, and the referee may assess an optional minor instead                                                |
| <b>Rule</b>     | With your goalie pulled, ANY foul that denies the chance is an awarded goal — there is no "from behind" requirement in either awarded-goal clause (NHL Rules 25.1 and 57.4) |
| <b>Rule</b>     | A skater smothering the puck in their own crease gives a penalty shot (67.4), or an awarded goal with the net empty (67.5) — 67.4 exempts the goalkeeper                    |
| <b>Never</b>    | Stand up and look at the official — play does not stop until the attacking team loses possession (NHL Rule 57.3)                                                            |

A **breakaway** is an attacker alone with the puck against the goalie, no defender between them and the net.

**The honest answer first: this is your goalie's save, and they usually make it.** Breakaways are stopped far more often than they are scored on. *(No breakaway save percentage is quoted here on purpose: the NHL does not publish one, and the penalty-shot and shootout conversion rates people reach for instead measure a different situation. Take the direction — the goalie is favoured — and not a number.)* Your job is to do the one useful legal thing and then get out of the way.

### What you can legally do from behind:

- **Play the puck with your stick.** Get your blade onto the puck itself — a poke at the puck from behind, or a stick lift on their blade as they release. This is legal and it is the only reliable option you have.

- **Skate to catch them and re-establish position.** Legal, and worth doing if you have the speed.
- **Angle them wide** if you can get alongside — turning a breakaway into a bad-angle chance is a win.

**What you must not do:** a hook, a trip, a hold, a slash or any other foul from behind that denies the chance is a **penalty shot** — not a two-minute minor. NHL Rule 57.3 (Tripping) states it directly:

"When a player, in the neutral or attacking zone, in control of the puck (or who could have obtained possession and control of the puck) and having no other opponent to pass than the goalkeeper, is tripped or otherwise fouled from behind, thus preventing a reasonable scoring opportunity, a penalty shot shall be awarded to the non-offending team."

The four conditions the officials are checking:

1. The infraction happened in the **neutral or attacking zone** (from the puck carrier's own blue line onward).
2. It was committed **from behind**.
3. There was **no opponent between the carrier and the goalkeeper**.
4. A **reasonable scoring opportunity** was denied — and note that getting a shot away does not automatically rule out a penalty shot.

**Two carve-outs in the same rule that change what you actually do:**

- **Touch the puck first and you are safe from the penalty shot.** Rule 57.3: *"If, in the opinion of the Referee, a player makes contact with the puck first and subsequently trips the opponent in so doing, no penalty shot will be awarded, but a minor penalty for tripping shall be assessed."* This is the whole reason "stick on the puck only" is the instruction. Getting your blade to the puck first converts the worst outcome in the rulebook into a two-minute minor — and if you get the puck cleanly, into nothing at all.
- **Play does not stop when the foul happens.** Rule 57.3: *"the Referee shall not stop play until the attacking team has lost possession of the puck to the defending team."* So do not stand up and look at the official. It is a delayed call: the attacker may still score, and your team is still defending until the whistle. Rule 57.3 also notes that if the fouled player recovers and gets a reasonable chance anyway, no penalty shot is awarded — the appropriate minor is called instead if no goal results.

Two more things worth knowing:

- **If your goalie has been pulled** for an extra attacker and you foul an attacker on the empty net, **a goal is awarded** — there is no shot to take. **Note what the awarded-goal clauses do not say.** Rule 57.4 reads "*is tripped or **otherwise fouled** with no opposition between him and the opposing goal*", and Rule 25.1 "*prevented from scoring as a result of an infraction*". Neither carries the **from behind** requirement that the penalty-shot test in 57.3 does — so with the net empty the awarded goal is *easier* to trigger than the penalty shot, not harder, and stepping across from the front does it. Cite 25.1 and 57.4 as a pair; they are not alternatives. (Risk Management sets this out at length.)
- **Falling on, holding, picking up or gathering the puck into your body or hands in your own goal crease** is a penalty shot under **Rule 67.4**, which opens "*If a **defending player, except a goalkeeper...***" — your goalie may smother it, you may not — the trigger is not only "*deliberately covering it with your hand.*" Smothering a loose puck in the blue paint in any of those ways stops play and gives them the shot. **With your own goalie pulled for an extra attacker, the same act is an awarded goal** under **Rule 67.5**, not a penalty shot. **Throwing your stick or any object** at the puck or the carrier in your defensive zone also produces a penalty shot. All of these come up in desperation moments at the end of a rush.

#### Rule-set note — the criteria are not the same everywhere.

**IIHF Rule 24.8** mirrors NHL 57.3 almost word for word, including the four criteria and the puck-first carve-out, with one addition: criterion (II) reads "*The infraction must have been committed from behind (**except a foul committed from the front by the goalkeeper on a 'breakaway' situation**).*" So under IIHF rules a goalie who fouls a breakaway attacker from the front concedes a penalty shot; the NHL text has no such exception in 57.3.

**USA Hockey Rule 616(a)** is **materially different**, and the difference changes how you defend: "*A penalty shot/optional minor penalty shall be awarded to the non-offending team any time a player is fouled from behind, **or diagonally from behind** by an opponent, and is denied a reasonable scoring opportunity **during a breakaway.***" Two things follow. First, "from behind" is defined by the fouled player's **peripheral vision** — Rule 616 Note 1 covers any infraction "*either directly or diagonally from behind (beyond the fouled player's peripheral vision)*" — so coming in at a diagonal does not protect you the way it might in the NHL. Second, it is a **penalty shot or an optional minor at the referee's discretion**, not an automatic penalty shot, and it requires a **breakaway** as Note 2 defines it (in control of the puck, beyond your own defending blue line, no opponent between you and the goalkeeper) rather than the NHL's broader "neutral or

attacking zone" test. USA Hockey 616(b) matches the NHL on the empty net: goalie pulled, obvious and imminent goal prevented, **goal awarded**.

**The practical instruction: stick on the puck only.** If your blade is not touching the puck or their blade, you are probably committing a penalty. Take the save-percentage odds over a penalty shot every single time.

## The late man / trailer

|                   |                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | The most under-defended player in hockey is the one who arrives second                                                                   |
| <b>Position</b>   | The trailer follows a few metres behind and arrives into the high slot with a clean, unopposed look                                      |
| <b>Convention</b> | In the house default — low zone collapse behind a 2-1-2 forecheck — the trailer belongs to the backchecking forwards, not the defencemen |
| <b>Options</b>    | Some teams give the trailer to the weak-side defenceman and drop the third forward to the net front — ask which yours runs               |
| <b>Action</b>     | If you are the last backchecker and everyone else is marked, the trailer is yours — do not skate into the pile                           |
| <b>Action</b>     | Defencemen, call them out — "trailer!" or "high!" is a genuinely game-saving shout                                                       |

The most under-defended player in hockey is the one who arrives second.

The **trailer** (or **late man**) is the attacker following the rush a few metres behind — often a defenceman who has activated, often a forward who was slow out of the zone. They arrive into the high slot just as the first wave has pulled everybody low, and they arrive with a clean, unopposed look.

- **In the house-default structure — low zone collapse behind a 2-1-2 forecheck — they belong to the backchecking forwards**, not to the defencemen. Your defencemen are occupied with the first wave, and if they step up to the trailer the first wave gets the net. **This is an assignment, not a law:** some teams have the weak-side defenceman take the trailer and the third forward drop to the net front instead, which is tighter on the trailer and thinner in front. Ask which your team runs, because a trailer covered by nobody and a trailer covered by two are both goals.
- **This is the specific reason "skate first, then look" matters.** A backchecker who is five metres behind cannot catch the trailer. One who sprinted from the turnover can.

- **If you are the last backchecker and everyone else is marked, the trailer is yours by default.** Do not skate into the pile.
- **Defencemen: call them out.** You will see the trailer before the backcheckers do — "trailer!" or "high!" is a genuinely game-saving shout.
- Note the symmetry: this is the same play your own team should be running in attack, described from the other side in Defender under activating, and in Zone Entries.

## Standing Up at the Blue Line vs Backing Off

Two legitimate ways to defend the line, and this is a genuine trade-off rather than a right answer. It is also frequently a **coaching choice** — many teams specify which one they want, and it usually follows from their neutral-zone system. See Neutral Zone Systems.

### Standing up (stepping up)

|                     |                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | Hold your ground at or just inside the blue line and challenge the carrier as they try to enter                                                                                   |
| <b>Goal</b>         | Deny the zone entirely — the attack has to dump the puck in or turn back, and neither produces a chance                                                                           |
| <b>Rule</b>         | Both skates must cross the line after the puck under NHL and IIHF rules; USA Hockey Rule 630(a) requires skate contact with the line or the neutral zone, which is stricter still |
| <b>Risk</b>         | If you miss there is nothing behind you — your partner is left in a 2-on-1 or worse                                                                                               |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A skilled carrier who chips the puck past you and skates onto it                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Read</b>         | Right for slow attacks, a head-down carrier, a carrier already near the boards, clear support behind you, and a clogged neutral zone                                              |

You hold your ground at or just inside the blue line and challenge the carrier as they try to enter, rather than retreating with them.

### What it gets you:

- **Denies the zone entirely.** The attack has to dump the puck in or turn back, and neither produces a chance.

- **Uses the offside rule as an extra defender.** Because under NHL and IIHF rules both skates must cross after the puck (and under USA Hockey Rule 630(a) the attacker needs skate *contact* with the line or the neutral zone, which is stricter still), a defender squeezing the line can force the carrier to slow up or enter alone. A delayed offside also lets your team reset while the attackers tag up.
- **Keeps play out of your end**, which keeps your forwards fresh and available for the counter.

#### What it costs you:

- **If you miss, there is nothing behind you.** A step-up that fails in the neutral zone leaves your partner in a 2-on-1, or worse. This is the specific risk flagged in Defender.
- It rewards a skilled carrier who chips the puck past you and skates onto it.

**When it's right:** slow attacks, an attacker with their head down, a carrier already near the boards, when you clearly have support behind you, and when your forwards have the neutral zone clogged.

#### Backing off (retreating)

|                   |                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | Give ground, holding your gap, and defend them as they enter                                                                       |
| <b>Goal</b>       | Nothing gets behind you — the worst case is a controlled entry, not a breakaway                                                    |
| <b>Convention</b> | The default for most defencemen most of the time, because it is reliable and repeatable                                            |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Concedes the blue line, so play happens in your end and the shift gets longer                                                      |
| <b>Never</b>      | Back off with a growing gap — a soft retreat gives the attacker speed and the zone, and is worse than either option                |
| <b>Read</b>       | Right against attackers with speed, on odd-man situations, when you are the last defender, when unsure, and any time you are tired |

You give ground, holding your gap, and defend as they enter.

#### What it gets you:

- **Nothing gets behind you.** The worst case is a controlled entry, not a breakaway.
- Reliable and repeatable, which is why it is the default for most defencemen most of the time.

#### What it costs you:

- **Concedes the blue line**, so play happens in your end and the shift gets longer.
- **A soft retreat is worse than either option.** Backing off with a growing gap gives the attacker speed *and* the zone.

**When it's right:** attackers with speed, odd-man situations, when you are the last defender, when you are unsure, and any time you are tired.

## How to choose

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Never</b>      | Step up unless you are confident you can win the puck — confidence, not hope                                                                                     |
| <b>Convention</b> | How aggressive "confident" should be is a coaching choice — an aggressive 1-2-2 press wants you challenging the line, a 1-3-1 trap wants you holding             |
| <b>Never</b>      | Half-commit — drifting forward, changing your mind, and arriving late with a huge gap                                                                            |
| <b>Priority</b>   | When in doubt, back off with a tight gap — it has no catastrophic failure mode                                                                                   |
| <b>Key</b>        | Keep "step up" and "pinch" separate — stepping up is challenging in the neutral zone or at your own line, pinching is stepping down from the offensive blue line |

- **Do not step up unless you are confident you can win the puck.** Confidence, not hope — a missed step-up is an odd-man rush behind you. **How aggressive "confident" should be is a coaching choice:** a team playing an aggressive 1-2-2 neutral-zone press wants you challenging at the line and will accept the occasional miss; a team playing a passive 1-3-1 trap wants you holding and steering the carrier wide. Find out which risk your coach wants to carry.
  - **Step up or back off — do not do neither.** The killer is the half-commit: drifting forward, then changing your mind, and arriving late with a huge gap. Pick and go.
  - **The default when in doubt is back off with a tight gap.** It has no catastrophic failure mode.
  - **Keep "step up" and "pinch" separate.** Stepping up is challenging forward in the neutral zone or at your own line with nothing behind you. Pinching is stepping down from the *offensive* blue line with your forwards behind you. The pinch is the safer play; see Defender and Risk Management.
-



# Odd-Man Rushes: How They Are Created

|               |                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>    | Almost every odd-man rush against you was manufactured by your own team, in one of four ways                                                |
| <b>Read</b>   | Pinch on a read — when you will clearly win the puck, when a forward can cover for you, and when score and time say the risk is worth it    |
| <b>Never</b>  | Turn up ice hunting a breakaway pass before your team actually has possession — the test is whether you can still get back if you are wrong |
| <b>Never</b>  | Stickhandle through the middle under pressure, or force cross-ice passes in the neutral zone                                                |
| <b>Action</b> | Change lines when the puck is in the offensive zone or moving away from your end, not during a scramble                                     |
| <b>Key</b>    | One defenceman is always above the puck — both below it in the offensive zone is the fifth, subtler cause                                   |

The best rush defence is not creating the rush. Almost every odd-man rush against you was manufactured by your own team, in one of four ways.

**1. A pinch that misses.** A defenceman steps down at the offensive blue line to keep the puck in and does not get it. Now one D is behind the play. The fix is not "never pinch" — it is pinch on a read: pinch when you will clearly win the puck, when a forward can cover for you, and when the score and time say the risk is worth it.

**2. Forwards cheating for offence.** A winger turning up ice before the team actually has possession, hunting a breakaway pass. When the puck does not come out, they are useless in both directions. Note the distinction made in *Winger*: *anticipating* possession while staying defensively accountable is a coached skill; abandoning coverage on a hope is not. The test is whether you can still get back if you are wrong.

**3. Neutral-zone turnovers.** The most direct cause of all, because a turnover in the middle of the ice hands the puck to a team already facing the right way with your forwards behind the puck. This is why every position document says the same thing: do not stickhandle through the middle under pressure, and do not force cross-ice passes in the neutral zone. See *Time and Space* and *Puck Support and Spacing*.

**4. A bad line change.** Changing while the puck is loose, or while your team does not have clear possession, means five players in transition and two of them stepping onto the ice cold. Change when the puck is in the offensive zone or moving away from your end, and not during a scramble.

Full five-man changes on the fly are routine at every level and are not the problem in themselves — the problem is *when* you go. A five-man change off a clean dump-in deep in their end is normal; the same change with the puck loose at your own blue line is how a 3-on-2 gets born. See Game Management.

A fifth, more subtle one: **both defencemen below the puck in the offensive zone.** The rule of thumb from Defender — one defenceman is always above the puck — exists precisely to prevent this.

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## Communication During a Rush

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|                |                                                                                                                             |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>  | Short, early, loud — a call as it happens is information, a call after it happens is commentary                             |
| <b>Action</b>  | Call the solution, not the problem — "back door" is useful, "watch out" is noise                                            |
| <b>Options</b> | "Odd man!", "I've got the pass", "Take the shooter", "Back door!", "Pick him up", "Trailer" or "high", "Switch", "I'm back" |
| <b>Key</b>     | "Back door!" — an attacker arriving unmarked at the far post — is the single most urgent call in defensive hockey           |
| <b>Action</b>  | Name the number and the location rather than shouting vaguely: "pick up 12, high slot"                                      |
| <b>Mindset</b> | Everyone talks, and the goalie has the best view of the rush and should be the loudest voice on the ice                     |

A rush is loud, fast and facing away from most of your team. Talk is the only way anyone knows what is happening. Short, early, loud. Full detail in On-Ice Communication.

### The core vocabulary:

- **"Odd man!"** — from whoever sees it first, usually a forward turning back. It tells the defencemen to stop thinking about stepping up and start thinking about lanes.
- **"I've got the pass"** — the defenceman on a 2-on-1 telling the goalie the contract is on. It lets the goalie commit fully to the shooter.
- **"Take the shooter"** — the same message aimed at the goalie, or from a defenceman to a partner assigning the puck carrier.

- **"Back door!"** — an attacker is arriving unmarked at the far post. The single most urgent call in defensive hockey.
- **"Pick him up"** — a specific attacker is unmarked and someone needs to take them now. Better still, name the jersey number or the colour and the location: "pick up 12, high slot."
- **"Trailer"** or **"high"** — the late man is coming into the slot.
- **"Switch"** — two attackers crossed and you and your partner are trading assignments.
- **"I'm back"** or **"support"** — a backchecker announcing they have arrived, which lets a defenceman stop covering two people.

### Three rules about all of it:

1. **Call early.** A call as it happens is information. A call after it happens is commentary.
2. **Call the solution, not the problem.** "Back door" is useful. "Watch out" is noise.
3. **Everyone talks.** The goalie has the best view of the whole rush and should be the loudest voice on the ice during one.

## From Rush Defence into Zone Coverage

|                   |                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>       | The attack losing forward momentum — a dump-in retrieved, a shot frozen or rebounded to the wall, a pass back to their point                         |
| <b>Priority</b>   | Locate the net front before anything else, because during a rush nobody was assigned to it                                                           |
| <b>Action</b>     | Switch from lanes to assignments in about one second — from "who is in my lane" to "who is my man"                                                   |
| <b>Convention</b> | In the house default of low zone collapse, a backchecking winger releases their man and gets back to the point; under man-on-man they stay with them |
| <b>Action</b>     | Talk through the handover — every temporary assignment the rush created needs explicitly cancelling or confirming                                    |
| <b>Key</b>        | A rush is not over when the shot is saved; it is over when everybody has a mark                                                                      |

Stopping the rush is only half of it. The seconds immediately after are when teams that defended the rush well still concede — everyone relaxes, nobody picks up a mark, and the attackers who were rushing are now cycling against nobody.

## The transition, in order:

1. **Recognise the moment it becomes a set situation.** The trigger is the attack losing its forward momentum: a dump-in retrieved in the corner, a shot stopped and frozen or rebounded to the wall, a pass back to their point, or the puck simply cycling below the goal line.
2. **Locate the net front before anything else.** The first thing to check after a rush dies is whether anybody is standing unmarked at your goalmouth, because during a rush nobody was assigned to them. This is the weak-side defenceman's job in the default system.
3. **Switch from lanes to assignments.** Rush defence is lane-based and situational. Defensive-zone coverage is structural. Everybody needs to move from "who is in my lane" to "who is my man / what is my area" in about one second.
4. **Backcheckers take up their zone roles, not the nearest puck.** In the house default of **low zone collapse** with wingers high on the points, a backchecking winger who followed a man into the corner has to release them and get back to the point. Under **man-on-man** they stay with them. **Find out which one your team plays** — see Defensive Zone Coverage.
5. **Talk through the handover.** "I've got the corner," "you take the point," "net front is mine." The rush created temporary assignments and every one of them needs to be explicitly cancelled or confirmed.
6. **Then look to exit.** Once the coverage is set, the job becomes the breakout — see Breakouts.

The habit to build: **a rush is not over when the shot is saved.** It is over when everybody has a mark.

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## Common Mistakes

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- **Standing still at the blue line** waiting for the attacker, then trying to accelerate backwards as they arrive. You cannot close a gap from a standstill, and this is the root cause of most rush goals.
- **Watching the puck instead of the chest.** Your feet follow your eyes, and the puck is the thing they are using to lie to you.
- **Sliding on a 2-on-1 before the pass is released.** You take yourself out of the play and open both options at once.

- **Trying to block the shot on a 2-on-1.** You abandon the pass, and a half-block deflects a puck your goalie was tracking cleanly.
- **The goalie and the defenceman both hedging on a 2-on-1** because they never agreed who has what. Neither option ends up covered.
- **Both defenders drifting toward the puck on a 2-on-2**, leaving the far attacker with an open net.
- **Chasing the puck carrier as a backchecker** when your defenceman already has them, leaving your actual assignment free.
- **Losing the middle-lane driver.** They do not have the puck, so nobody looks at them, and they score.
- **Looking before skating on a backcheck**, costing two strides you never recover.
- **Backchecking behind your man's shoulder** instead of taking a route to their inside hip. You cannot defend anything from behind.
- **The half-commit at the blue line** — drifting up, changing your mind, and arriving late with a huge gap. Worse than either full option.
- **Reaching around an attacker from behind on a breakaway.** Under NHL Rule 57.3 that is a penalty shot, and if your goalie is pulled it is an awarded goal.
- **Relaxing the instant the rush is stopped**, before anybody has picked up the net front.
- **Pivoting early** and giving up your ability to react to a cutback.
- **Both defencemen below the puck in the offensive zone**, which is how the odd-man rush got created in the first place.

## Key Takeaways

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1. **Stay on the defensive side of the puck.** Every attacker, all the time. Anything that puts an attacker between you and your net has already gone wrong.
2. **Start your feet early and keep the gap shrinking.** You cannot close a gap from a standstill — be at speed before they arrive, and reset on every regroup. Two to three stick lengths through the neutral zone, a stick and a half at the red line, a stick length at your blue line, and never growing.
3. **Read the chest and hips.** The puck, hands, stick and head are all deception tools. The torso cannot lie.
4. **On a 2-on-1: take away the pass, give up the shot — and say the contract out loud.** You own the pass, the goalie owns the shooter, and neither of you covers both. Do not slide until the pass is released. The one exception: if the second attacker has been picked up and

the shooter is walking in unpressured with no pass available, it is no longer a 2-on-1 — close on the puck.

5. **The middle-lane driver is the most commonly missed player in hockey.** In the most common backcheck scheme the centre owns the middle, the wingers own the outsides, and nobody chases the carrier your D already has. That lane assignment is a coaching choice, not a law — some teams give the middle to the first man back whoever it is, others pick up man-on-man from the puck outward. Find out which yours runs.
  6. **Skate first, then look.** Two strides at the start of a backcheck are worth more than any read you make while standing still.
  7. **Step up or back off — never half.** Only step up when you are certain; when in doubt, back off with a tight gap.
  8. **The best rush defence is not creating the rush.** Pinches with no read, forwards cheating, neutral-zone turnovers and bad line changes cause almost all of them.
  9. **On a breakaway, stick on the puck only.** A hook or trip from behind that denies the chance is a penalty shot — and an awarded goal if your net is empty.
  10. **The rush is not over when the shot is saved.** It is over when everybody has a mark — and which mark is yours depends on your team's D-zone coverage, so know whether you play low zone collapse or man-on-man before the puck gets there.
-

# Special Teams

**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](#). This document owns the shorthanded-icing exemption and its carve-outs for the whole guide, and **neither carve-out is IIHF's** — read "[You may ice the puck freely](#)" below before you build a kill around it.

**RELATED**[UK and England Rules](#)[Faceoffs](#)[Zone Entries](#)[Offensive Zone Play](#)[Defensive Zone Coverage](#)[Neutral Zone Systems](#)[Goaltender](#)[Center](#)[Winger](#)[Defender](#)[Game Management](#)

## Overview

**Special teams** means any situation where the two teams do not have the same number of skaters on the ice — most often a **power play** (you have the extra skater) and a **penalty kill** (you are the team a skater short). It also covers 4-on-4, 3-on-3 overtime, and the strange states in between. Special teams decide a large share of close games, because a two-minute minor penalty hands one team an advantage that even strength never offers.

This document is about **what to actually do** in those situations: the shapes, the plays inside the shapes, how to get into the zone and how to stop someone getting in, and the rules that quietly govern all of it.

**A note on notation.** "5-on-4" means five skaters against four, goalies not counted. So a standard power play is 5-on-4, a two-man advantage is 5-on-3, coincidental penalties give 4-on-4, and regular-season overtime is 3-on-3. When a team pulls its goalie during a power play you get 6-on-4.

# POWER PLAY

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## The one idea behind every power play

|                   |                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>       | Create a 2-on-1 — the extra man only pays when the kill has two attackers to worry about and one body to do it with                  |
| <b>Never</b>      | Stand still — a static 5-on-4 is a 4-on-4 with a spare man standing somewhere useless                                                |
| <b>Action</b>     | Manufacture 2-on-1s wherever the kill lets you; every one pulls the kill further out of shape and sets up the next                   |
| <b>Priority</b>   | Cash them in as close to the net as you can — a net-front 2-on-1 is near-certain, one at the top of the zone is a shot from distance |
| <b>Convention</b> | Danger is a function of location — a coaching judgement, not a rule, but the one every modern power play is built on                 |

Five attackers against four defenders is not "one extra shooter". It is **one extra decision the penalty kill cannot make**.

Four killers can cover four attackers. That is the whole problem. A static 5-on-4 where nobody moves is, functionally, a 4-on-4 with a spare man standing somewhere useless. The advantage only becomes a goal when the kill is forced to have **two attackers to worry about and one body to do it with** — a 2-on-1 somewhere on the ice. **A 2-on-1 anywhere is worth creating**, because every one of them pulls the kill further out of shape and sets up the next one. But they are emphatically **not worth the same**: danger is a function of location. A 2-on-1 at the net front — net-front player plus a backdoor arriver against one defenceman — is a near-certain chance. A 2-on-1 at the top of the zone usually amounts to no more than a shot from distance into traffic. *(That ranking is a coaching judgement about danger by location, not a rule — but it is the judgement every modern power play is built on.)* Manufacture them wherever the kill lets you, and cash them in as close to the net as you can.



## Why puck movement, not shooting, creates it

|                   |                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | A kill can cover any single option; it cannot cover three options in two seconds                                                                     |
| <b>Action</b>     | Move the kill with passes, not with skating — two crisp passes pull a box further out of shape than thirty seconds of stickhandling                  |
| <b>Never</b>      | Shoot into a set kill — a point shot into four square bodies is a coin-flip on possession and a re-entry against a set kill                          |
| <b>Convention</b> | This document's default is "shoot when the kill is out of shape" — a coaching philosophy, not a law; shot-volume power plays are coached and do work |
| <b>Key</b>        | The pass that beats a kill is usually the second one — the first makes them move, the second arrives where they no longer are                        |
| <b>Position</b>   | Wherever you stand, be an option the kill must physically account for, able to shoot or pass immediately                                             |

A penalty kill is a shape, and a shape has to travel to cover the puck. Every pass makes at least one killer skate. Killers skating are killers arriving late, and a killer arriving late is a 2-on-1 for the two seconds before they get there.

- **A kill can cover any single option. It cannot cover three options in two seconds.** That is the entire mechanism.
- **Passing moves the kill faster than skating does.** The puck travels far quicker than a person. Two crisp passes will pull a box further out of shape than thirty seconds of one player stickhandling on the half-wall.
- **Shooting into a set kill is how you end your power play.** A shot from the point into four bodies with the killers already square is a coin-flip on possession — block, clear, and now you have to re-enter the zone against a set kill, which is the single hardest thing to do in hockey. **This document's default is "shoot when the kill is out of shape."** That is a coaching philosophy, not a law. The realistic alternative is a genuine **shot-volume power play**, which is coached and does work: fire everything at the net from the moment you are set, on the theory that tips, rebounds and scrambles beat a goalie who is never allowed to settle, and that a retrieval unit which wins the loose pucks turns a "wasted" shot into a fresh setup. Volume-first suits units with a heavy point shot, a fearless net front and good retrievers; patience-first suits units with a distributor and a one-timer. **Find out which one your coach wants before you decide the point shot was a bad idea.**
- **Corollary: the pass that beats a kill is usually the second one.** The first pass makes them move; the second one arrives where they no longer are. Power plays that make one pass and shoot are just slow even-strength hockey.

**What this means for you personally:** whatever spot you occupy, your job is to be an option the kill must physically account for, in a body position where you could shoot or pass *immediately*. A player who has to take two touches to become dangerous is not an option — the kill can ignore them and cover the other three.

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## Power play formations

- Convention** Which formation your team plays is a coaching choice, not a rule of hockey — and so is who stands where inside it
- Key** Every shape below wins against some kills and loses to others, and every one requires personnel it suits
- Action** Find out which formation your team runs, and which spot is yours, before your first power play shift
- Never** Guess — if you are guessing, you are the reason the seam is covered

**Read this first.** Which formation your team plays is a **coaching choice**, not a rule of hockey. So is who stands where inside it. Every shape below wins against some kills and loses to others, and every one of them requires personnel it suits. **Find out which formation your team runs, and which spot is yours, before your first power play shift.** If you are guessing, you are the reason the seam is covered.

### 1-3-1 — the modern default

|                     |                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | One at the point, two on the half-walls, a bumper in the middle of the slot, one at the net front — one point player, not two |
| <b>Action</b>       | The point walks the line laterally — three metres sideways changes the angle of every passing lane in the zone                |
| <b>Technique</b>    | Half-walls play the off-wing so the puck is on the inside hand; look inside before you look up                                |
| <b>Action</b>       | The bumper keeps the blade on the ice for a one-touch shot and holds the kill's high players down                             |
| <b>Position</b>     | The net front lives at the edge of the blue paint, not inside it — screen, tip and hunt rebounds                              |
| <b>Convention</b>   | The bumper is most often the centre, but that is team-dependent, not a law — ask your coach who has it                        |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A diamond — this is the most-scouted shape in hockey, so kills arrive with a plan for it                                      |
| <b>Risk</b>         | With only one player back, a lost puck at the blue line is an immediate odd-man rush the other way                            |

**Three words used constantly below, defined here.** The **slot** is the area directly in front of the net between the two faceoff circles, running from the goalmouth out to the tops of the circles — the most dangerous ice on the rink. Within it, the **high slot** is the upper half, from the faceoff dots out to the tops of the circles; the **goalmouth** is the immediate net front, within a stick's length of the goal line. The **point** is the position at the blue line in the offensive zone; the **half-wall** is the boards level with the faceoff dot, well below it. Point and half-wall are not the same place and are never interchangeable.

**The shape:** **one** player at the point (the blue line), **three** across the middle of the zone — two on the **half-walls** (the boards roughly level with the faceoff dot, between the corner and the point) with a **bumper** between them in the middle of the slot — and **one** at the net front.

That is one point player, not two. Most NHL first units run the 1-3-1 with **four forwards and a single defenceman**, and that defenceman is the point.

**The jobs:**

- **Point (the "quarterback").** Usually the lone defenceman. You are a distributor first and a shooter second. Walk the line laterally — moving three metres sideways changes the angle of every passing lane in the zone and forces the killers' heads to turn. Your shot exists mainly as a threat: the moment the kill stops respecting it, they stop stepping out to you, and the half-walls lose their space. Shoot for tips and rebounds, not to beat the goalie clean through four bodies.
- **Half-walls (two players, usually forwards).** The primary decision-makers. From here you can reach the point, the bumper, the net front and — through the seam — the far half-wall. Ideally you play your **off-wing** (a left-hander on the right side, or vice versa) so the puck is on your inside hand: that opens your body to the middle of the ice, makes the one-timer available, and lets you shoot or pass without turning. Your first move should almost always be to look inside before you look up.
- **Bumper.** The middle of the three, sitting in the soft spot between the point and the net-front player, roughly the middle of the slot. You are the reason a box fails: a box has nobody assigned to the middle. Your job is to keep your stick free and your blade on the ice for a one-touch shot or redirect, to constantly adjust your angle so a passing lane exists from at least one half-wall, and to hold the kill's high players down so they cannot step out and pressure the point.
- **Net front.** Screen the goalie, tip point shots, hunt rebounds, and occasionally slide below the goal line to open a high-to-low pass. Live at the edge of the **blue paint** — the painted goal crease in front of the net, the goalie's protected ice — not inside it. See the goaltender-interference note under Center.

**Who plays the bumper? Most often the centre,** because the position is a centre's whole skill set: soft hands in traffic, back to the play, one-touch passing. But this is genuinely **team-dependent, not a law** — plenty of real NHL units put a **winger** in the bumper. The spot is chosen for the ability to receive and release in a crowd, not for what is printed on the lineup card. Ask your coach who has it; do not assume.

**Strengths:** occupies all five dangerous areas at once; creates four passing triangles, so there is always a short outlet; the bumper attacks the one place a box cannot cover; the off-wing half-walls make the cross-seam one-timer live at all times.

**Weaknesses:** every player must be comfortable making plays under pressure — a weak link in any of the five spots kills it. With only one player back, a lost puck at the blue line is an immediate odd-man rush the other way. It is also the most-scouted shape in hockey, so kills arrive with a plan (usually a diamond) specifically for it.

**Suits:** skilled units with at least one high-end distributor on a half-wall, one genuine one-timer threat, and a centre or winger brave enough to stand in the slot.

### **Umbrella — three high**

|                     |                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | Three high in an arc — one apex highest in the middle at the blue line, two flanks lower either side — and two low at the net                               |
| <b>Key</b>          | There is no bumper in a true umbrella; the middle of the slot is deliberately vacated so the high players have clean lanes into it                          |
| <b>Options</b>      | Classic — a forward apex with both defencemen out on the flanks; modern — the lone defenceman at the apex with two forwards down at the tops of the circles |
| <b>Never</b>        | String three players level across the blue line and call it an umbrella — with no depth every pass is short and lateral                                     |
| <b>Action</b>       | The three high move the puck side to side for a shot with a lane; the two low screen, tip and collect rebounds                                              |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A diamond or an aggressive box, which will happily let you pass it around the top all night                                                                 |
| <b>Risk</b>         | It is far from the net, and goalies and killers are most comfortable when the puck is far from the net                                                      |

**The shape: three players high**, arranged as an **arc** rather than a flat line — that curve is what the name describes. **One apex** sits highest, in the middle at or just inside the blue line, and the **two flanks sit lower than the apex** on either side. Below the arc sit **two low players**, typically one at the net front and one at the side of the net or in a circle.

**How far the flanks drop is the one real variation.** In the **classic** version the apex is a forward in the middle of the blue line with **both defencemen out on the flanks**, still close to the line — the arc is shallow. In the **modern** version the lone defenceman takes the apex and two forwards drop right down to the **tops of the faceoff circles**, where the one-timer lives — a much deeper arc. Both are umbrellas. What neither is, is three players strung out **level** across the blue line: with no depth between them every pass is short and lateral and the kill barely has to move.

**There is no bumper in a true umbrella.** The middle of the slot is deliberately vacated so the high players have clean shooting lanes into it.

**The jobs:** the three high move the puck side to side looking to get it to the middle for a shot with a lane; the two low screen, tip and collect rebounds. Everything is aimed at getting a puck through to the net with a body in front of the goalie.

**Strengths:** enormous space and time up high; hard to pressure, because pressuring one high player opens a pass to another; three shooting angles from the top; very difficult for the kill to get a shorthanded break, because you always have players above the puck.

**Weaknesses:** it is far from the net, and goalies and killers are most comfortable when the puck is far from the net. Used as a permanent shape it becomes predictable, and a diamond or an aggressive box will happily let you pass it around the top all night. It concedes the middle of the ice by design.

**Suits:** teams with heavy, accurate point shots and a genuinely fearless net front; also a good change-up shape when a kill has settled comfortably against your 1-3-1.

**Overload — four to one side**

|                     |                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | Four on one side — below the goal line, in the corner or low circle, on the half-wall and at that point — with the fifth weak side as a release valve |
| <b>Action</b>       | Cycle the puck relentlessly in a small area, creating repeated 3-on-2s along the strong-side wall                                                     |
| <b>Read</b>         | When a killer over-commits, attack the seam or swing it cross-ice to the lone weak-side player with the goalie moving                                 |
| <b>Read</b>         | Excellent against a passive box that will not come out to the wall                                                                                    |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A kill that reads the pattern — the passes are short and easy to intercept, and a strong-side interception is a shorthanded break                     |
| <b>Risk</b>         | It produces fewer shots than other shapes; cycling without ever pulling the trigger just tires your own unit                                          |

**The shape: four players loaded onto one side of the ice** — typically a player below the goal line, one in the corner or low circle, one on the half-wall and one at the point on that side — with the fifth player weak side as a release valve and safety.

**The jobs:** cycle the puck relentlessly in a small area, creating repeated 3-on-2s along the strong-side wall until a killer over-commits, then either attack the resulting seam or swing the puck cross-ice to the lone weak-side player for a shot with the goalie moving.

**Strengths:** outnumbers the kill locally; generates chances from deception and short passes rather than long ones; excellent against a passive box that will not come out to the wall.

**Weaknesses:** demands deceptive, patient passers — if the kill reads the pattern, the passes are short and easy to intercept, and interceptions on the strong side lead straight to shorthanded

breaks. It also produces fewer shots than other shapes; a unit that cycles without ever pulling the trigger achieves nothing but a tired power play.

**Suits:** skilled, patient units, and teams whose best player is a below-the-goal-line playmaker. Note that at rec and youth level overload is often run out of a **2-3 base** (below), with both defencemen staying at the points.

**Spread / box — pulling the kill apart**

|                     |                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | Two low just outside the posts, two high and wide at the tops of the circles or points, one in the middle of the slot                    |
| <b>Key</b>          | The point is the spacing, not the shape — stand far enough apart that one killer cannot cover two of you                                 |
| <b>Action</b>       | Occupy space, stay still enough to be a genuine passing target, and make everything a one-touch play                                     |
| <b>Read</b>         | Use it at 5-on-4 against a kill that has collapsed so tightly it has conceded the outside entirely; it is also the standard 5-on-3 shape |
| <b>Countered by</b> | Long passes — at 5-on-4 they are interceptable and can be blocked by a well-placed stick                                                 |
| <b>Risk</b>         | It surrenders the possession game — you are not cycling, you are waiting                                                                 |
| <b>Key</b>          | "Box" names both this power-play spacing and the standard penalty-kill shape; say which one you mean                                     |

**The shape:** five spots, deliberately stretched to the corners of the danger area — **two low**, one on each side of the net just outside the posts; **two high and wide**, at the tops of the circles or the points; and **one in the middle of the slot**. The point is not the shape itself but the spacing: **stand far enough apart that one killer cannot cover two of you**.

**Terminology warning:** "box" names both this power-play spacing *and* the standard penalty-kill shape. They are unrelated. Say which one you mean.

**The jobs:** occupy space, stay still enough to be a genuine passing target, and force the kill to make full-length skates to close anyone down. Everything is a one-touch play — with this much space the kill's only defence is anticipation, and one-touch passing beats anticipation.

**Strengths:** the maximum geometric stress you can put on a small defensive unit. Creates backdoor plays almost automatically, because the weak-side low player is simply too far away for

the kill's low defender to reach.

**Weaknesses:** at 5-on-4 the passes are long, and long passes are interceptable and can be blocked by a well-placed stick. It surrenders the possession game — you are not cycling, you are waiting.

**Suits:** it is the standard **5-on-3** shape (see below), and it is worth using at 5-on-4 against a kill that has collapsed so tightly it has conceded the outside entirely.

**2-3 — the older structure**

|                     |                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | Two defencemen at the points and three forwards low — one at the net front, one in each circle or corner                       |
| <b>Action</b>       | The points shoot and keep pucks in; the three forwards screen, tip and hunt rebounds, with the puck going low-to-high and back |
| <b>Key</b>          | It is safe — two defencemen at the line means very few shorthanded breaks and good retrieval on missed shots                   |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A competent box, which is built to defend the two areas this attacks                                                           |
| <b>Risk</b>         | It ignores the middle of the slot entirely and generates lots of low-quality shots                                             |
| <b>Read</b>         | Choose it with no puck-moving defenceman, when protecting a lead, or before a group can hold the blue line under pressure      |

**The shape: two defencemen at the points and three forwards low** — one at the net front, one in each circle or corner. This was the default power play for decades and remains extremely common in rec, beer-league and youth hockey.

**The jobs:** the points shoot and keep pucks in; the three forwards work the low area, screen, tip and hunt rebounds; the puck generally goes low-to-high and back.

**Strengths:** it is safe. Two defencemen at the line means very few shorthanded breaks and very good puck retrieval on missed shots. It is also the easiest shape to teach and the least dependent on individual skill — everyone knows where to stand.

**Weaknesses:** it attacks the two areas a box is built to defend (the points and the goalmouth) and ignores the middle of the slot entirely. It generates lots of low-quality shots. Against a competent box it is close to harmless.

**Suits:** teams without a puck-moving defenceman, teams who are protecting a lead, and any group that has not yet learned to hold the blue line under pressure. It is a perfectly respectable



place to start.

---

## The key power-play plays

These are the plays the shapes exist to produce. Learn the plays first; the shape is just where you stand to make them available.

### The seam pass

|                  |                                                                                                                                        |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>       | A seam runs through or across the middle of the defensive shape rather than around it — half-wall to half-wall, or half-wall to bumper |
| <b>Goal</b>      | Any puck that crosses the middle forces every killer and the goalie to re-orient at once                                               |
| <b>Technique</b> | Flat, hard, on the ice, to the receiver's stick, with a look or a fake sold first — Passing and Receiving owns the mechanics           |
| <b>Never</b>     | Force a seam that is not there — intercepted in the middle it is a shorthanded breakaway, and you have four teammates above the puck   |

A **seam** is a passing lane that runs through or across the middle of the defensive shape rather than around it — most often half-wall to half-wall, or half-wall to bumper.

- It works because a kill's shape is built to defend the *perimeter*. Any puck that crosses the middle forces every killer and the goalie to re-orient at once.
- **How to throw one — flat, hard, on the ice, to the receiver's stick, with a look or a fake sold first** — is standard passing technique under pressure, covered in Passing and Receiving. What is special-teams-specific is the judgement: **if the seam is not there, do not force it**. A seam pass intercepted in the middle is a shorthanded breakaway, and you have four teammates above the puck.

## The one-timer from the off-wing

|                  |                                                                                                                            |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Technique</b> | A one-timer is a shot taken directly off an incoming pass without stopping the puck                                        |
| <b>Position</b>  | Play your off-wing — left-hander on the right side — so the puck is on your inside hand and your body turns toward the net |
| <b>Technique</b> | Weight loaded on the back foot, body still and square before the pass leaves — Shooting owns the mechanics                 |
| <b>Key</b>       | The threat is worth as much as the shot — a live weak-side one-timer forces one killer to stay wide                        |
| <b>Goal</b>      | That wide killer is precisely how the bumper and the net front get free, before the puck ever comes to you                 |

A **one-timer** is a shot taken directly off an incoming pass without stopping the puck. Playing your **off-wing** (left-hander on the right side, right-hander on the left) puts the puck on your inside hand and turns your whole body toward the net, which is what makes it possible. The shooting mechanics — weight loaded on the back foot, body still and square before the pass leaves — are in Shooting.

The power-play point is a different one: **the threat is worth as much as the shot**. A live one-timer option on the weak side forces one killer to stay wide, and that is precisely how the bumper and the net front get free. You are being useful in the two seconds *before* the puck ever comes to you.

## The royal road / slot-line pass

|               |                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>    | The royal road runs down the middle of the ice from net to net; a pass crossing it just before a shot is the most dangerous event in offensive hockey |
| <b>Goal</b>   | A goalie tracking the puck across the middle cannot stay square — they are off their angle and depth when the shot arrives                            |
| <b>Action</b> | Before you shoot from a half-wall, check the far side — a cross-seam pass beats a shot from the same spot almost every time                           |
| <b>Key</b>    | Offensive Zone Play owns the measured finishing rate and its qualifications — take the number from there, with those words attached                   |
| <b>Risk</b>   | The 20-30% range quoted in coaching material has no published primary source behind it; treat it as illustrative only                                 |

The **royal road** (also called the slot line) is an imaginary line running straight down the middle of the ice from net to net. A pass that **crosses** it immediately before a shot is the most dangerous single event in offensive hockey. (*Published descriptions of exactly where the line runs disagree — some put it net-centre to net-centre as here, others stop it at the top of the circles. Shooting sets out the disagreement; nothing here turns on which is right.*)

- **Why it works:** a goalie who has to track the puck across the middle cannot stay square. They must break from small shuffles into a hard lateral push, and while pushing they are opening up, off their angle and off their depth. The shot arrives before they are set. See Goaltender for the save mechanics from the other side.
- The concept was popularised by former NHL goaltender **Steve Valiquette**, whose shot-tracking work classified chances by whether the puck crossed the line. **The best-sourced measured figure is 15.50%** — the finishing rate on shots following a royal road / cross-slot pass, the highest-value pass type measured, roughly double the next one (Alan Wells' analysis of Ryan Stimson's Passing Project data, via NHL.com (<https://www.nhl.com/kraken/news/analytics-with-alison-dangerous-passes-327627898>)). **Carry its qualification with it, because that qualification is part of the fact:** the Passing Project was **volunteer-tracked**, the sample is "51,308 shots at 5v5", and the percentage counts **all attempts, not shots on goal** — and note where that qualification comes from: it is **not** in the NHL.com article, which gives only the 15.50% figure. The sample size and the all-attempts basis are stated by Wells himself, in *Weighted Shot Rates Based on the Passing Project* (Hockey Graphs, 6 September 2016) — so it is not comparable with a shots-on-goal conversion rate, and it is not a power-play measurement. Offensive Zone Play owns this figure and its limits. Use that number, with those words attached. ⚠ **The 20-30% range you will see quoted in coaching material has no published primary source behind it** — it is not a power-play-specific measurement of the same thing, because nobody has published a separate power-play conversion rate for seam passes; treat it as illustrative only. Valiquette's own "76% of goals are green shots" split does at least trace back to Valiquette himself — he gave the figure directly to NHL.com in December 2014 (<https://web.archive.org/web/20150924092445/http://www.nhl.com/ice/news.htm?id=744483>), along with the detail that 30% of goals came on plays with a pass or carry across the royal road — but the Clear Sight Analytics tracking underneath it is proprietary and has never been replicated. Shooting sets out that source and its limits in full; Offensive Zone Play carries the same figures. The direction of the effect is not in doubt, and it is why every modern power play is designed around cross-ice passing.
- **Practical version:** a cross-seam pass beats a shot from the same spot almost every time. Before you shoot from a half-wall, check the far side.

## The point shot for tips and rebounds

|                  |                                                                                                                     |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>       | The point shot is not an attempt to score from the point — it is a delivery system for a tip or a rebound           |
| <b>Technique</b> | Judge it on whether it arrives low, hard and on net with a body in front                                            |
| <b>Read</b>      | Shoot when the net-front player has established position and the goalie's view is obstructed, not before            |
| <b>Action</b>    | Change the angle first — walking two or three metres along the line takes the shot out of the lane the kill has set |
| <b>Risk</b>      | A missed net is a free clear off the end boards and twenty seconds gone                                             |

**The point shot is not an attempt to score from the point.** It is a delivery system for a tip or a rebound, and should be judged on whether it arrives low, hard and on net with a body in front. Release, weight transfer and getting a shot through a blocking lane are in Shooting.

The two special-teams reads: **shoot when the net-front player has established position and the goalie's view is obstructed, not before** — screening a goalie from outside the crease, without touching them and without crowding them so they cannot move, is legal — and **change the angle first**, because walking two or three metres along the line takes the shot out of the lane the kill has set. A missed net on a power play is a free clear off the end boards and twenty seconds gone.

## The backdoor play

|                 |                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b> | The backdoor is the weak-side post — the far side of the net, away from the puck                                                                    |
| <b>Read</b>     | Whenever the kill's low defender commits to the strong side or to the net-front player, it is a 2-on-1 with nobody defending it                     |
| <b>Action</b>   | Arrive late — time it, do not camp it; a player standing at the back post all shift is marked                                                       |
| <b>Key</b>      | The pass comes low-to-high-to-backdoor or straight across from below the goal line — either way it crosses the royal road, which is why it converts |

The **backdoor** is the weak-side post — the far side of the net, away from the puck. Whenever the kill's low defender commits to the strong side or to the net-front player, it is a 2-on-1 with nobody defending it.

**Arrive late.** A player standing at the back post all shift is marked; a player arriving as the shot or pass is released is not. Time it, do not camp it. The pass comes low-to-high-to-backdoor or straight across from below the goal line — either way it crosses the royal road, which is why it converts.

**The walk-down from the half-wall**

|           |                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Action    | Skate the puck down from the half-wall toward the goal line and inside rather than passing                                                        |
| Read      | If the kill's low defender steps out to you, the net front is free; if they stay, you have a shot from the top of the circle with a moving goalie |
| Never     | Walk to the corner — below the goal line and wide you are harmless; the threat comes from heading toward the dot                                  |
| Technique | Head up, feet moving toward the net — the moment your feet stop, the kill resets                                                                  |
| Action    | If it is denied, reset to the point and start over                                                                                                |
| Risk      | Losing the puck below the goal line is a wasted twenty seconds and usually a clear                                                                |

The **walk-down** is the half-wall player skating the puck down toward the goal line and inside rather than passing. It forces a decision: if the kill's low defender steps out to you, the net front is free; if they stay, you have a shot from the top of the circle with a moving goalie.

**Walk to the middle, not to the corner** — below the goal line and wide you are harmless, and the threat comes from heading toward the dot. Head up, feet moving toward the net; the moment your feet stop the kill resets. If it is denied, **reset to the point and start over**. Losing the puck below the goal line on a power play is a wasted twenty seconds and usually a clear.

---

## Power play zone entries

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>      | This is where most amateur power plays die — at the blue line, not in the zone                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Priority</b> | A clean, controlled entry is worth far more than a fast one; enter with possession and you have ninety seconds of pressure                                                                                                     |
| <b>Key</b>      | Zone Entries owns the entry toolkit and the tracked values — read the figures there rather than restating them                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Action</b>   | Use the drop pass — it changes the carrier without changing the speed of the attack and makes the defending line commit to the wrong player                                                                                    |
| <b>Action</b>   | Swing one or two players back to gather speed and receive already moving forward; the single swing is less predictable than the double                                                                                         |
| <b>Action</b>   | Dump to a spot, not a player, and rim away from the goalie's trapezoid so a defender retrieves under pressure                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Rule</b>     | The restricted area is IIHF Rule 27.7, not the NHL's 27.8 — and 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 |
| <b>Read</b>     | Regroup rather than force — you can afford it and the kill cannot, but the cost is clock, so do not regroup out of habit                                                                                                       |
| <b>Risk</b>     | A puck turned over at the offensive blue line with four teammates ahead of it is the way coaches most often name for conceding a shorthanded goal                                                                              |

**This is where most amateur power plays die** — not in the zone. A kill defending its blue line is compact, has four players between you and the net, and has nothing to lose by conceding the neutral zone, while you have to bring a five-player structure through a narrow gate without a turnover. Units drill the in-zone setup for hours and the entry for minutes, then wonder why they never get set up.

**The entry toolkit itself — carry, chip, dump, delay, the drive-and-drop, and the data on what each is worth — is in Zone Entries, and everything there applies here.** What changes with the extra man is only this:

1. **A clean, controlled entry is worth far more than a fast one.** Enter with possession and set up, and you have ninety seconds of pressure. Dump and lose the race and you have ten, then you do it all again. (The tracked data in Zone Entries still favours the carry-in on the power play — roughly two and a half times the shots of a dump-in — but by a **narrower** margin than at even strength, because the extra man also makes dump-in retrievals easier.

Read the figures there rather than restating them; the advantage is real, it just is not larger than usual.)

2. **You do not get many attempts.** A failed entry — dump, lose the race, regroup, come again — burns a serious slice of a 120-second advantage. Two or three of those and the penalty is over. *(There is no measured figure for the cost of a failed entry; treat this as calibration, not data.)*
3. **The drop pass is the signature power-play entry**, because it changes the carrier without changing the speed of the attack and makes the defending line commit to the wrong player. **Arik Parnass's** tracking for the Special Teams Project across six NHL teams in 2015-16 found drop-pass entries produced **0.84 shot attempts per entry versus 0.70** for other entries — but took **15.5 seconds to execute versus 12.6**, which cancels most of the gain. *(His three categories run drop 15.49 s, regular 12.56 s, stretch pass 10.37 s. 12.6 is the figure that pairs with the 0.70, because he removed stretch-pass results from the non-drop bucket; comparing the drop against the stretch's 10.4 s instead is not like for like.)* His conclusion is the sensible one, and it is about your own team rather than theirs: keep **both** a polished regular scheme and a drop scheme, and **go to the drop when your primary scheme is in a slump**. *(Decade-old, small-sample study — indicative, not settled.)* Every kill now expects it, and a drop stolen at the red line is a shorthanded breakaway.
4. **The swing** — one or two players arcing back to gather speed and receive already moving forward — solves the entry's hardest problem: arriving at the line with speed and the puck at once. The single swing (one forward swings, one stays wide) is less predictable than the double.
5. **Dump to a spot, not a player.** The extra man means you will usually win a loose-puck race in the corner if you time the arrival. Rim away from the goalie's **trapezoid** — the marked area behind the net where an NHL, KHL or IIHF goalie may legally play the puck; most rec and youth leagues do not have one — so a defender has to retrieve under pressure. See Defender.  **In England and Wales, treat that as unsettled.** The IIHF book carries 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 In-House Rules are silent — so for you as the attacking team, plan as though their goalie may come and get it, and look behind the net for painted lines.
6. **Regroup rather than force.** Curl back out, reset to the point defenceman or the goalie, re-form the swing, attack with new speed and a different pattern. **You can afford this and the kill cannot** — they are tiring while you are not. The cost is clock, so do not regroup out of habit. **A puck turned over at the offensive blue line with four teammates ahead of it is the way coaches most often name for a power play conceding a shorthanded goal** — coaching consensus rather than a counted breakdown; nobody

publishes shorthanded goals classified by the play that produced them, the same limit that applies to the prevalence claims elsewhere here.

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## Retrievals and keeping possession

Most of a power play is not the set play. It is the twenty seconds of scrambling after the kill clears it or blocks a shot. Units that win here get three or four setups per power play; units that lose here get one.

### When the kill clears it

- Action** Decide in advance who chases — most teams send the net-front player or the weak-side half-wall and leave the point at the line
- Never** Send two chasers — if two players chase, nobody is holding the zone
- Goal** The chaser's job is not to win the puck but to arrive before the puck stops, so it can be moved on the move
- Action** Everyone else re-forms while the chase is happening, not after — possession with no options is nothing
- Read** If the clear leaves the zone entirely, regroup as a unit and re-enter properly rather than chasing in ones and twos

- **Decide in advance who chases.** Most teams send the net-front player or the weak-side half-wall and leave the point at the line. If two players chase, nobody is holding the zone.
- **The chaser's job is not to win the puck — it is to arrive before the puck stops.** A rolling puck retrieved on the move can be moved immediately; a dead puck against the boards is a battle you might lose.
- **Everyone else re-forms while the chase is happening,** not after. If the retrieval succeeds and the shape is not rebuilt, you have possession and no options.
- **If the clear leaves the zone entirely, do not chase it in ones and twos.** Regroup as a unit and re-enter properly — see the entries section above. A disorganised re-entry loses more time than a calm one.



## The defenceman's job holding the line

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Priority</b>   | As the lone point player, keeping the puck in the zone is your first responsibility and shooting is your second                                                     |
| <b>Position</b>   | Stay inside the blue line — outside it you are not a passing option, and a puck reaching you there has cleared the zone                                             |
| <b>Technique</b>  | Take the puck off the wall with your feet already moving laterally, body on the wall, stick low and flat                                                            |
| <b>Never</b>      | Lunge at a clear that has beaten you cleanly — turn and skate; a missed hold with one defenceman back is a 2-on-0                                                   |
| <b>Key</b>        | Holding is staying at the line to stop the puck leaving; pinching is stepping down the wall into the zone, and with one defenceman back it is almost never worth it |
| <b>Convention</b> | If your team runs two defencemen, only one holds aggressively at a time — the other backs up as the safety                                                          |
| <b>Rule</b>       | Drifting into the neutral zone is not offside; offside is judged only at the instant the puck crosses the line into the zone (NHL Rule 83.1)                        |

If you are the lone point player in a 1-3-1, **keeping the puck in the zone is your first responsibility and shooting is your second**. A power play that gets cleared has to re-enter, and re-entry is the hardest thing in hockey.

- **Stay inside the blue line.** Drifting out into the neutral zone is not offside — offside is only ever judged at the instant the puck crosses the line into the zone (Rule 83.1), and a puck already in the zone cannot make you offside. The real cost is simpler: with your skates outside the line you are no longer an option for a pass, and if the puck reaches you there the zone is cleared and the whole unit has to re-enter against a set kill.
- **Take the puck off the wall with your feet already moving laterally**, not standing square to the boards — that is how clears go past you.
- **Body on the wall, stick low and flat.** Most clears on the power play are along the boards at ankle height.
- **A hold you miss is a 2-on-0.** With one defenceman back, "keep it in at all costs" is wrong. If the clear beats you cleanly, turn and skate; do not lunge. See Risk Management.
- **Holding the line is not pinching, and the difference matters here.** *Holding* means staying at the offensive blue line and stopping the puck leaving. (Do not call it "stepping up" — a **step up** is moving *forward* to challenge an attacker early, in the neutral zone or at your **own** blue line. Different end of the rink, different play. See Rink Map and Glossary.) *Pinching* means leaving the line and stepping **down** the wall into the zone to attack a puck below

you. Holding is the point player's standing job on a power play. Pinching is an extra risk you take on top of it, and with one defenceman back it is almost never worth taking — a missed pinch puts you two strides deeper than a missed hold does.

- If your team runs two defencemen (umbrella, 2-3), **only one holds aggressively at a time** — the other backs up as the safety. Same partnership discipline as an even-strength pinch, described in Defender.

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## 5-on-3

|               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>    | A two-man advantage is a different game, not a better power play — it fails when a unit plays it like a 5-on-4                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Read</b>   | Three killers sit in a tight triangle around the slot and concede everything outside it — nobody is coming to hunt you on the perimeter                                                                                        |
| <b>Action</b> | Spread out into the spread/box shape and make the triangle try to cover the whole zone                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>Action</b> | Move the puck side to side across the royal road, not around the perimeter, until the goalie cannot get set                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Never</b>  | Shoot from the outside into three shot-blockers — wait for the goalie to be moving, but do not pass for two minutes without shooting                                                                                           |
| <b>Goal</b>   | The goal usually comes from a one-timer at the far post or the second-wave rebound, so have someone at the net for both                                                                                                        |
| <b>Rule</b>   | A team never plays fewer than three skaters — a third penalty's clock waits and a substitute keeps them at three (NHL Rule 26.1)                                                                                               |
| <b>Rule</b>   | A goal against a shorthanded team terminates only the minor with the least time remaining, so a 5-on-3 becomes a 5-on-4 (NHL Rule 16.2)                                                                                        |
| <b>Rule</b>   | A goal releases only a minor or bench minor (NHL and IIHF Rule 16.2), so a major is served in full however many you score                                                                                                      |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Under England Ice Hockey a fighting major in NIHL, NIHL1 or NIHL2 in the last five minutes of regulation or in overtime also carries an automatic game misconduct (In-House Rules, Section 6, sitting on top of the IIHF book) |

A two-man advantage is a different game, not a better power play. It should almost always produce a goal, and when it does not it is nearly always because the unit played it like a 5-on-4.

**Why it is different:** three killers can defend a triangle. They will sit in a tight triangle around the slot — usually two low in front of the net and one high — concede everything outside it, and block

shots. **Sustained pressure on the puck is not available to them**, because every killer who leaves the triangle opens a hole nobody can fill. That does not mean you will never be touched: a three-man kill will still jump a bobbled reception, close hard on anyone who walks into the slot, and throw a stick or a body at a shooter. What it means is that **nobody is coming to hunt you on the perimeter** — so you have time out there that does not exist at 5-on-4, and the only way to lose it is to hurry.

### How to play it:

- **Spread out** into the spread/box shape above, and make the triangle try to cover the whole zone.
- **Move the puck side to side across the royal road, not around the perimeter.** Every cross-ice pass forces the goalie into a full lateral push; three or four in a row and they will not be set. **Do not shoot from the outside into three shot-blockers** — with nobody hunting you there is no reason to rush, so wait for the goalie to be moving.
- **The goal usually comes from a one-timer at the far post or the second-wave rebound.** Have someone at the net for both. Be patient but not passive: two minutes of pretty passing with no shot is a failed 5-on-3.

### Rules that matter here:

**Terminology warning — "delayed penalty" means two different things in the rulebook, and both appear in this document.**

- **Sense 1 — the signalled penalty (Rule 15.1).** The referee has seen an infraction by the team *without* the puck, raises an arm, and play continues until the offending team gains control. This is the one where you pull your goalie for an extra attacker.
- **Sense 2 — the delayed clock (Rule 26).** A third penalty assessed to a team that already has two players serving. The third penalty's time does not begin until one of the first two expires. Nobody's arm is raised and nobody pulls a goalie.

They are unrelated. Where this document says "delayed penalty" it says which sense it means.

- **A team never plays with fewer than three skaters.** If a third player is penalised while two are already serving, the third penalty's clock does not start until one of the first two expires (a **delayed penalty in the Rule 26 sense**), and the team may put a substitute on the ice to stay at three (NHL Rule 26.1). So a 5-on-2 does not exist.
- **A goal only releases one penalty.** When you score against a shorthanded team, the minor penalty **with the least time remaining** terminates (Rule 16.2). A 5-on-3 therefore

becomes a 5-on-4, not a 5-on-5 — and if you were about to get another chance, take it immediately while the kill is reorganising.

- **This does not apply to major penalties**, which are served in full regardless of goals, and **does not apply to penalty-shot goals** (Rule 16.2). IIHF 16.2 and 26.1 are the NHL's rules in the same words on all of this, including the three-skater floor and the delayed clock, so a British reader can take this whole subsection as written.
- **One British addition on majors.** Under the England Ice Hockey / SIHA In-House Rules, fighting in NIHL (all leagues), the SNL and BUIHA Varsity is "*penalised with a 5-minute Major Penalty*" — and in **NIHL, NIHL1 and NIHL2**, "*any fighting major assessed in the last 5 minutes of regulation time (including overtime) will also carry an automatic Game Misconduct.*" That does not change the kill itself: under **IIHF Rule 20.3** a substitute goes to the box immediately and serves the five minutes, so you are killing a full major either way. What it changes is your bench for the rest of the night, at exactly the point in a game when you can least afford to lose a body. See UK and England Rules.

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## PENALTY KILL

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### The one idea behind every penalty kill

|                |                                                                                                                               |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>     | You cannot cover five players with four, so stop trying                                                                       |
| <b>Goal</b>    | Decide which shot you are willing to give up, then spend two minutes making sure it is the only shot you give up              |
| <b>Key</b>     | Every kill concedes something — a box the middle of the slot, a diamond the outside and the backdoor, a wedge+1 the perimeter |
| <b>Never</b>   | Cover something that was never yours — that is how the thing that was yours becomes a goal                                    |
| <b>Mindset</b> | Discipline beats effort on a penalty kill, every time                                                                         |
| <b>Key</b>     | Time is on your side and nothing else is — three point shots and no break beats forty clean seconds and then a break          |

You cannot cover five players with four. **So stop trying.** A penalty kill is a decision about **which shot you are willing to give up** — and then a two-minute exercise in making sure that is the only shot you give up.

Every kill concedes something. A box concedes the middle of the slot. A diamond concedes the outside and the backdoor. A wedge+1 concedes the perimeter. The failure mode is always the same: a killer decides to cover something that was never theirs, and the thing that was theirs becomes a goal. **Discipline beats effort on a penalty kill, every time.**

The second idea: **time is on your side and nothing else is.** Two minutes is not long. A kill that concedes zero clean looks for 40 seconds and then breaks is worse than one that concedes three shots from the point and never breaks.

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## Penalty kill formations

|                   |                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | Which shape you run is a coaching choice — the same four players can run all three in one game                                                 |
| <b>Action</b>     | Know which one is called before the faceoff                                                                                                    |
| <b>Key</b>        | These are the in-zone shapes, a separate decision from the neutral-zone pressure scheme below, not a competing one                             |
| <b>Key</b>        | The box is the shape almost everyone is taught first and the baseline the other two are described against                                      |
| <b>Risk</b>       | No public count of how many NHL teams run each as a base shape exists — treat any "most teams use X" claim as an impression, not a measurement |

Again: which shape you run is a **coaching choice**. The same four players can run all three of these in one game. **Know which one is called before the faceoff.**

**On "which one is most common" — an honest answer.** These three are the shapes you defend the *zone* with, once the power play is set up. They are a separate decision from the neutral-zone pressure scheme further below (the 1-3, the 1-1-2 and so on), which is how you meet the entry; a team runs one of each in the same kill and there is no contradiction. Within the in-zone group, the **box is the shape almost everyone is taught first** and the baseline the other two are described against. Coaching material commonly describes the **wedge+1** as widely used at NHL level, and the diamond as the standard counter to a 1-3-1. **No public count of how many NHL teams run each as their base shape exists**, so treat any "most teams use X" claim — including the ones here — as an impression from coaching sources rather than a measured figure.

## Box — the shape everyone learns first

|                     |                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | A rectangle around the slot — two forwards high, one on each point, and two defencemen low covering the corners and the goalmouth  |
| <b>Key</b>          | A box has two players high and no single "top" — if you are describing "the top of the box", you are describing a diamond          |
| <b>Action</b>       | High forwards deny the point time and space, stay in shooting lanes, and never both drift to the same side                         |
| <b>Action</b>       | The strong-side D pressures the puck below the goal line or in the low circle; the weak-side D owns the goalmouth and the backdoor |
| <b>Technique</b>    | The box slides with the puck rather than rotating — all four shift together, keeping the shape intact                              |
| <b>Read</b>         | Very good against an overload, which it can out-wait, and against a 2-3, whose attack aims where a box is strongest                |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A 1-3-1 — nobody in a box is assigned to the middle of the slot, so the bumper stands there uncovered by design                    |

**The shape:** a rectangle around the slot. **Two players high** — both forwards, one on each side, each responsible for one point — and **two players low**, both defencemen, covering the two low corners and the goalmouth.

**A box has no single "top".** Two forwards, side by side, is the whole point. If you find yourself describing "the top of the box", you are describing a diamond.

### The jobs:

- **High forwards:** deny the point players time and space, stay in shooting lanes, and never both drift to the same side. Your inside shoulder should be turned so you can see your point man and the middle at once.
- **Low defencemen:** the strong-side D pressures the puck when it comes below the goal line or to the low circle; the weak-side D owns the goalmouth and the backdoor. Same partnership logic as even-strength Defensive Zone Coverage.
- **Everyone:** the box **slides** with the puck rather than rotating. When the puck moves across, all four shift together, keeping the shape intact.

**Strengths:** simple, teachable, hard to break down, and excellent at protecting the goalmouth and the low slot. Very good against an **overload**, which it can simply out-wait, and against a **2-3**, whose entire attack aims at the two areas a box defends best.

**Weaknesses: nobody in a box is assigned to the middle of the slot.** Against a 1-3-1 the bumper stands in the hole in the middle of your rectangle and is uncovered by design. It is also passive by nature: a box that never pressures gives a skilled unit unlimited time on the perimeter to find the seam.

### Diamond — a single apex

|                     |                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | One player high at the apex, two in the middle either side, one low — exactly one player at the top                                  |
| <b>Goal</b>         | The two middles squeeze the slot from either side so a 1-3-1's bumper can be accounted for                                           |
| <b>Action</b>       | The apex pressures the point and takes away the middle shooting lane — you are the only player up there, so do not get walked around |
| <b>Action</b>       | Each middle takes a half-wall and both collapse onto the bumper when the puck goes to the middle                                     |
| <b>Position</b>     | The low player owns the goalmouth, alone                                                                                             |
| <b>Read</b>         | Use it against a 1-3-1, or against an umbrella where the apex can pressure the middle point man                                      |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A quick cross-seam pass to the far half-wall — the shape is narrow, and the far-side one-timer is on if the middles are slow         |
| <b>Risk</b>         | The single low player faces a net-front presence and a backdoor arriver at once — a 2-on-1 you are choosing to concede               |

**The shape:** one player **high** at the apex, **two in the middle** on either side, and **one low**. A diamond, not a rectangle: it has exactly one player at the top.

**Why it exists:** because a box leaves the bumper unmarked. The diamond's two middle players squeeze the middle of the slot from either side, so the 1-3-1's bumper can be accounted for. Coaches also use it against a three-high **umbrella**, where the apex can pressure the middle point man who would otherwise have a free shot.

### The jobs:

- **Apex** (often the centre, but this varies by team): pressure the point player, take away the middle shooting lane, and do not get walked around. You are the only player up there — if you overcommit, the point is uncovered.
- **Two middles:** each takes a half-wall, and both collapse onto the bumper when the puck goes to the middle. You are working two jobs at once; the timing of when you leave the wall

for the middle is the whole art of playing this position.

- **Low:** own the goalmouth. You are alone down there.

**Strengths:** the only common shape that starts with an answer to the bumper; puts real pressure on the point; encourages turnovers high in the zone, which is where shorthanded chances come from.

**Weaknesses: narrow.** A quick cross-seam pass to the far half-wall pulls it apart, and the far-side one-timer is available if the middles are slow. The single low player is alone against a net-front presence *and* a backdoor arriver — a genuine 2-on-1 that you are choosing to concede. Also more mentally demanding than a box; a confused diamond is worse than a competent box.

### Wedge+1 (also called triangle-and-one)

|                     |                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>     | Three killers in a tight triangle around the net — two defencemen just off the crease edges, one forward at the mid-to-high slot           |
| <b>Action</b>       | The wedge stays tight, protects the slot and goalmouth, blocks shots and rotates as a connected unit; it does not chase                    |
| <b>Action</b>       | The +1 applies straight-line pressure outward from the net — make every possession uncomfortable, do not try to win the puck               |
| <b>Technique</b>    | When your pressure forces the puck to move, the nearest wedge player becomes the new +1 and you drop into the triangle                     |
| <b>Key</b>          | The exchange is the hard part — everyone must know who is out and who is in, every second                                                  |
| <b>Countered by</b> | A +1 who chases without purpose; you are then killing with three players                                                                   |
| <b>Risk</b>         | High cognitive load makes it a poor choice for a young or ad-hoc unit                                                                      |
| <b>Convention</b>   | Coaching material describes it as popular at NHL level, but no league-wide count is published, so treat the prevalence claim as unverified |

**The shape: three killers hold a tight triangle** around the net — two defencemen just off the crease edges, one forward at the mid-to-high slot — while the **fourth player, the "+1", chases the puck** around the perimeter.

### The jobs:

- **The wedge (three players):** stay tight, protect the slot and the goalmouth, block shots, and rotate as a connected unit. You do not chase. Your shape barely moves.



- **The +1:** apply straight-line pressure to whoever has the puck, working outward from the net. Your job is to make every possession uncomfortable, not to win the puck.
- **The exchange:** when your pressure forces the puck to move, the nearest wedge player becomes the new +1 and you drop into the triangle. This handover is the hard part and the reason the system needs practice — everyone must know who is out and who is in, every second.

**Strengths:** it protects the highest-danger ice absolutely while still applying pressure, which is why it is **commonly used at NHL level** — The Coaches Site (<https://members.thecoachessite.com/article/explained-wedge-penalty-kill-formation>) describes it as popular with most NHL clubs, though **no league-wide count of who runs what is published, so treat the prevalence claim as unverified**. It is very hard for a 1-3-1 to get a clean look at the middle. It creates turnovers and therefore shorthanded chances.

**Weaknesses:** high cognitive load — it demands constant awareness of a rotating assignment, which is why it is a poor choice for a young or ad-hoc unit. If the +1 chases without purpose, you are effectively killing with three players.

### Aggressive versus passive

|                   |                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | The pressure setting is a separate decision from the shape itself                                                                          |
| <b>Read</b>       | Go passive — hold structure, concede the perimeter, block lanes — when protecting a lead, when tired, when outgunned, or late in a kill    |
| <b>Options</b>    | Go aggressive to force errors; the best-known version is the Czech press, where the high forward genuinely attacks the point player        |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Aggression creates chaos, and chaos with four players against five is not usually your friend                                              |
| <b>Convention</b> | That aggression pushes shots outside while passivity concedes closer ones is a coaching claim, not a measured one — treat it as unverified |
| <b>Never</b>      | Pressure alone — pressure as a unit or not at all; one player pressuring while three sit is how seams open                                 |

Every shape has a pressure setting, and it is a separate decision from the shape itself.

- **Passive:** hold the structure, concede the perimeter, block lanes, wait for a clear. Lowest variance. Right when you are protecting a lead, when you are tired, when the opposition power play is much better than you, or late in a kill.

- **Aggressive:** attack the puck carrier and try to force errors. The best-known version is the **Czech press**, where the high forward genuinely attacks the point player rather than just threatening to. Higher variance: it forces mistakes and creates shorthanded chances, but it also creates chaos, and chaos with four players against five is not usually your friend.
- **The honest trade-off:** the coaching consensus is that aggression pushes shots outside and to the wings while passivity concedes fewer shots overall but allows more of them from close range. **That trade-off is a coaching claim, not a measured one — no published tracking data separates shot location by penalty-kill pressure setting, so treat it as unverified.** What is not in doubt is the structural point: pressure spends a killer to buy a mistake, and if the mistake does not come you are defending five with three.
- **The one rule: pressure as a unit or not at all.** One player pressuring while the other three sit is how seams open.

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## The PK forecheck and neutral-zone pressure schemes

- Key** A forecheck is pressure applied in the opponent's end; a neutral-zone scheme is how you meet them between the blue lines
- Goal** On the kill these are one conversation — deciding where to make the power play uncomfortable
- Key** F1/F2 are roles, not people — defined by who is first and second to the puck, not by position

A **forecheck** is pressure applied in the opponent's end; a neutral-zone scheme is how you meet them between the blue lines. On the kill these are the same conversation, because the whole point is deciding **where** to make the power play uncomfortable.

**F1/F2 are roles, not people** — defined by who is first and second to the puck, not by position.

## The four you will meet

|                     |                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Options</b>      | The 1-3 — one forward on the puck, the other forward and both defencemen in a line across the ice behind him                                          |
| <b>Read</b>         | Passive 1-3 gives token pressure to make them commit to a side; the same-side press has F1 angle the carrier and F2 close to force a dump or turnover |
| <b>Risk</b>         | Beat F1 or spread the 1-3's three-man line and there is a lot of ice behind it                                                                        |
| <b>Options</b>      | The 1-1-2 — F1 on the puck, F2 layered behind on the same side, two defencemen abreast near the line                                                  |
| <b>Countered by</b> | Quick direction changes and drop passes at the red line, which slide underneath F1 and F2 at once                                                     |
| <b>Options</b>      | The retreating box (2-2) — all four backing up together; safe and easy, and vulnerable to drop passes and direction changes                           |
| <b>Options</b>      | Tandem pressure — two forwards take turns attacking the carrier; if both are beaten at once the kill is a 2-on-2 with no support                      |
| <b>Convention</b>   | The 1-1-2 is commonly described as a current NHL default for neutral-zone pressure, but that prevalence claim is not independently verified           |

- **The 1-3** — one forward up on the puck, the other forward and both defencemen in a line across the ice behind him. In the **passive** version F1 gives token pressure to make the power play commit to a side while the three behind back up in unison, refusing to be split; the goal is not to win the puck, it is to **make them dump it in**. In the **same-side press** version F1 angles the carrier to one side and F2 closes from that side to force a dump or a turnover — more pressure, but it needs killers who can read and accelerate. **Weakness:** beat F1 or spread the three-line and there is a lot of ice behind it.
- **The 1-1-2** — F1 up on the puck, F2 layered behind on the *same* side forming a wall parallel to the boards, two defencemen abreast near the line. Aggressive without over-committing; it bleeds clock and forces contested entries. Coaching material commonly describes it as a current NHL default **for neutral-zone pressure**, which is a different decision from the in-zone shape above, not a competing one — and **that prevalence claim is not independently verified**. **Weakness:** quick direction changes and drop passes at the red line slide underneath F1 and F2 at once.
- **The retreating box (2-2)** — two forwards abreast, two defencemen abreast, all four backing up together. Purely reactive, safe, easy, and vulnerable to drop passes and direction changes.

- **Tandem pressure** — two forwards take turns attacking the carrier, one peeling off as the other arrives. Exhausting to play against and exhausting to play; if both get beaten at once the kill is a 2-on-2 with no support.

### Killing the entry — what all of this is for

- Goal** The most effective place to kill a penalty is before the puck enters your zone — a power play that never gets set up never uses its extra man
- Action** Take away the middle and force them to one side; angle with your body, not your stick
- Action** Stand up at the blue line as a pair — both defencemen step or both retreat; one of each is a hole
- Action** Attack the receiver, not just the carrier — the dangerous player is the one arriving with speed off a drop or a swing
- Goal** Make them dump it; force three failed entries and the penalty is over without you ever defending your own zone
- Never** Lunge or dive at the blue line — a missed poke check at your own line is a clean entry with you out of the play
- Read** Pressure only if you can actually get there, the carrier is looking down or facing the boards, you are fresh, and the score allows it

**The most effective place to kill a penalty is before the puck enters your zone**, and every scheme above serves that one sentence. The reason is arithmetic: a power play that never gets set up never gets to use its extra man. Once they are established in a shape you are managing damage; in the neutral zone you are 4-on-5 in a space where you can dictate.

- **Take away the middle and force them to one side.** A power play made to enter along one boards has removed half its own options. Angle with your body, not your stick.
- **Stand up at the blue line as a pair.** Both defencemen step, or both retreat. One of each is a hole.
- **Attack the receiver, not just the carrier.** The dangerous player on entry is usually the one arriving with speed off a drop or a swing. Taking away the target is easier than taking away the puck.
- **Make them dump it.** A dump-in with your defencemen already turned is a win. You do not have to force turnovers to kill a penalty; you just have to keep them out. Force three failed entries and the penalty is over without you ever defending your own zone.
- **Do not lunge or dive at the blue line.** A missed poke check at your own line is a clean entry with you out of the play and your team down two.

**Pressure or retreat? Judge it in this order:** (1) **Can you actually get there** — pressure arriving a stride late is worse than none, because you have spent a player for nothing. (2) **Where is the puck** — attack a carrier looking down, receiving badly, or facing the boards; never one with head up and support both sides. (3) **What is the clock** — pressure early while you are fresh; in the last 30 seconds or when gassed, retreat and make them beat structure. (4) **What is the score** — protecting a one-goal lead late is not the time for the Czech press; see Game Management. (5) **Who is on** — a unit with one elite carrier is often worth attacking; five good passers will punish you for it.

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## Clearing, blocking, sticks and discipline

**You may ice the puck freely — where your rule set allows it**

- Rule** A team below the opposing team's on-ice numerical strength cannot be called for icing — play continues and no violation is called (NHL Rule 81.6)
- Rule** IIHF Rule 81.6 grants the exemption in the same words but carries neither carve-out below, so in UK hockey it is unconditional
- Rule** The NHL withdraws that exemption from a team shorthanded by a major that has left nobody on the penalty bench — "Icing will be called" (Rule 81.6); the IIHF book has no such paragraph
- Rule** USA Hockey grants the nullification only at Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult (Rule 624(b)(1)); below those levels a shorthanded team can be called for icing
- Rule** Release the puck before your penalty expires and the icing does not apply, even if the penalty ends while it is travelling (NHL Rule 81.6)
- Rule** Shooting the puck directly out of the playing surface from your defending zone is a delay-of-game minor even while shorthanded (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
- Action** Where the exemption applies, fire it the length of the ice the moment you have it — no faceoff, no line-change restriction, and a chance to change
- Action** Aim clears hard and flat, into the corner away from their goalie's trapezoid, so the retrieval is awkward
- Never** Stretch "numerical strength" beyond penalties — five skaters defending a pulled goalie are not below it and can be called for icing

Under **NHL Rule 81.1**, icing applies only to a team "equal or superior in numerical strength (power-play)" to the opponent, and **Rule 81.6** states it directly: "If the puck was so shot by a player of a side below the numerical strength of the opposing team, play shall continue and the icing violation shall not be called." **A shorthanded team cannot be iced.** The test is whether you are *below* the opponent's strength, not who is serving the penalty — so at 4-on-4 both teams *can* be iced (equal strength), and at 6-on-4 with the power play's goalie pulled the four-skater team still cannot be.

⚠ **Do not stretch "numerical strength" beyond penalties.** It is a natural-sounding leap to say that five skaters defending a pulled goalie are below six and so cannot be iced. **They can be, and the rulebook says so three ways:** Rule 81.1 glosses the term as "*equal or superior in numerical strength (power-play)*"; Rule 84.1 counts a goalkeeper *inside* numerical strength, setting overtime at "*three (3) skaters and one (1) goalkeeper*", so six against six is equal; and Rule 81.3 expressly preserves an icing call where the opposing "*goalkeeper is legitimately out of the crease in an attempt to go to the players' bench to be substituted for an extra attacker*" — "*the icing should not be nullified.*" Defending a 6-on-5 is handled in Game Management.

**There are two carve-outs — never state the exemption without them. Neither of them is the IIHF's**, which matters if you play in Britain; the UK position is set out at the end of this section.

**Carve-out 1 — the NHL's empty penalty bench, written into Rule 81.6 itself.** A team shorthanded **by reason of a major penalty** that has "*neglected to ensure there is a player on the penalty bench to exit upon the expiry of the penalty*" **is not permitted to ice the puck** — the rule says flatly, "*Icing will be called.*" They keep playing shorthanded and may substitute for the penalised player at the next stoppage. In practice this is an administrative failure on the bench, not a playing decision, but it means the exemption is not quite unconditional: on a five-minute major, make sure somebody is sitting in the box ready to come out.

**Carve-out 2 — USA Hockey restricts the exemption by classification, and for most readers this is the one that matters.** The nullification in **USA Hockey Rule 624(b)(1)** is prefixed with a classification limit: "*(For all Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult classifications only) The offending team is short-handed (below the on-ice numerical strength of their opponent) when the puck is shot.*" **Below those levels the nullification simply does not exist, so a shorthanded team cannot ice the puck at all** — a length-of-the-ice clear on the kill comes straight back for a defensive-zone draw. If you play or coach youth hockey under USA Hockey rules, the single biggest structural advantage described in this section is not available to you, and a kill built on clearing the length of the ice will just feed the power play repeated defensive-zone faceoffs.

**When is it judged?** *The rulebook does not state a general "moment of the shot" test, so what follows is an interpretation drawn from the two places it does put a timestamp on.* Rule 81.4 says that for the line-change ban "the determination of players on ice will be made when the puck leaves the offending player's stick." Rule 81.6 says that when a penalty is about to expire, icing is judged "at the instant the penalty expires" — and, explicitly, "should the puck be released from the stick of the player shooting the puck down the ice prior to the penalty expiring, the icing infraction shall not apply." **Both point the same way: release the puck before your penalty expires and you are still exempt, even if the penalty ends while the puck is travelling.** That is a real tactical detail — with two seconds left on the kill, fire it.

### How to use it:

- **Fire it the length of the ice the moment you have it.** There is no penalty, no faceoff, and no line-change restriction. This is your single biggest structural advantage on a kill.
- **You do not need to look for a teammate.** Getting the puck 200 feet away buys you a few seconds of clock and, crucially, a chance to change tired players. (*How many seconds depends entirely on how fast they retrieve and regroup; there is no measured figure to put on it.*)
- **Aim to make the retrieval awkward** — into the corner away from their goalie's trapezoid, or hard around the boards — so they cannot set up a clean regroup.
- **Beware the one thing that is still a penalty:** under **Rule 63.2(iii)**, shooting or batting the puck **directly (non-deflected) out of the playing surface from your defending zone** is a minor for delay of game — even while shorthanded. There is no penalty-kill exception. Off the glass and staying in is fine; a deflection out is fine; a clean flip over the glass is a second penalty and a 5-on-3 against you. Aim your clears **hard and flat**, not high.

### Three written exceptions matter on a kill:

- **"Except where there is no glass"** — the rule's own wording. Where the boards have no glass above them (the bench areas in some rinks, and many rec facilities), the penalty does not apply.
- **Into the players' benches.** The rule's NOTE: "When the puck is shot into the players' bench, the penalty will not apply." But shooting it **over** the glass *behind* the benches **is** penalised.
- **Directly off a faceoff.** The same NOTE: "When the puck goes out of the playing area directly off a face-off, no penalty shall be assessed." This is the one you will actually use — on a defensive-zone draw while shorthanded, a centre who wins the puck straight out of the rink has given up a faceoff, not a penalty.

- Also under Rule 63.2(v), a skater other than the goalie who **deliberately falls on or gathers the puck into his body** takes a minor. Smothering the puck to beg for a whistle is not a legal kill tactic.

**If you play in Britain — the exemption is unconditional, and this is settled against the book.**

**IIHF Rule 81.6 gives the exemption in the same words as the NHL's:** *"If the puck was so shot by a Player of a side below the numerical strength of the opposing team, play shall continue, and the 'icing' violation shall not be called."* The expiry test is identical too, word for word — *"Should the puck be released from the stick of the Player shooting the puck down the ice prior to the penalty expiring, the 'icing' infraction shall not apply."* So shorthanded, you may fire it the length of the ice, and with two seconds left on the kill you still may.

**What the IIHF book does not have is either carve-out.** IIHF 81.6 runs to two paragraphs and stops; the NHL's third paragraph — *"When a team is 'short-handed' by reason of a major penalty, and they have neglected to ensure there is a player on the penalty bench... Icing will be called"* — **has no IIHF counterpart anywhere in Rule 81.** The duty itself survives: **IIHF Rule 20.3** still requires that when a player takes a major and is removed or injured, *"the offending team must place a substitute in the penalty box immediately."* What does not survive is the sanction. Fail it under IIHF and you have broken 20.3; you have not lost your right to ice the puck. Carve-out 2 is a USA Hockey classification limit and reaches nothing outside USA Hockey.

**So for every level of British hockey the kill's single biggest structural advantage comes with no conditions attached** — and the England Ice Hockey / SIHA In-House Rules do not amend Rule 81 at all, so nothing local claws it back. See UK and England Rules.

**Rec and youth note:** under USA Hockey the exemption exists only from **Youth 15-Only, Girls 16U, High School and Adult** upward (Rule 624(b)(1)), so across most of North American youth hockey a shorthanded team is called for icing like anyone else. Many youth and rec leagues also use **no-touch (automatic) icing**. Check your league's rules before building your kill around it.



## Shot blocking

|                 |                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>      | Blocking shots is a technique, not an act of courage                                                                                        |
| <b>Position</b> | Be in the lane before the shot, not sliding into it — sliding gets you a puck off the ankle and a shooter who has already changed his angle |
| <b>Never</b>    | Block from a screening position — half-deflecting a shot your goalie could not see is worse than letting it through cleanly                 |
| <b>Action</b>   | If you cannot get properly into the lane, get out of it                                                                                     |
| <b>Key</b>      | Body Contact and Battles and Defender own the technique; this section adds only what is specific to the kill                                |

Blocking shots is a **technique**, not an act of courage. **The technique — how close to get, how to present the biggest surface, why to stay on your feet — is in Body Contact and Battles and Defender, and this document does not repeat it.**

Two things are specific to the kill:

- **You are blocking on purpose, not by accident**, which means you should be **in the lane before the shot**, not sliding into it. Sliding gets you a puck off the ankle and a shooter who has already changed his angle.
- **Never block from a screening position.** Half-deflecting a shot your goalie could not see is worse than letting it through cleanly. If you cannot get properly into the lane, get out of it.

## Stick lanes

|                  |                                                                                                     |
|------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>  | Blade flat on the ice, out in front of your body, in the passing lane — not on the puck carrier     |
| <b>Key</b>       | Sticks in lanes deter far more passes than they intercept                                           |
| <b>Priority</b>  | Take away the seam first, and point the stick at the most dangerous option rather than at the puck  |
| <b>Action</b>    | Concede the perimeter pass — the puck is being handled by someone your teammate already has         |
| <b>Technique</b> | Stay in a low stance with your knees bent; you cannot make a quick lateral adjustment from standing |

The most valuable and least visible thing you do on a kill.

- **Blade flat on the ice, out in front of your body, in the passing lane** — not on the puck carrier. Sticks in lanes deter far more passes than they intercept.
- **Take away the seam first**, and point the stick at the most dangerous option rather than at the puck. The puck is being handled by someone your teammate already has; the perimeter pass is the one you are happy to concede.
- **Stay in a low stance with your knees bent.** You cannot make a quick lateral adjustment from standing.

## The discipline not to chase

|                |                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mindset</b> | The power play wants you to chase — perimeter possession is not a threat, taking the bait is                                              |
| <b>Read</b>    | Chase only when the puck can actually be won — a bobbled reception, a player with their back turned, a puck on the boards with no support |
| <b>Risk</b>    | If you chase and miss, you have created the seam yourself                                                                                 |
| <b>Action</b>  | Talk constantly — call switches, call the bumper, call the backdoor                                                                       |
| <b>Action</b>  | Clear, then change, in that order; change when you can, not when you must, because a tired killer chases                                  |

**The power play wants you to chase.** Every pass around the perimeter is an invitation, and perimeter possession is not a threat — taking the bait is. **If you chase and miss, you have created the seam yourself:** four players cannot cover a five-man shape with one of them out of position.

Chase only when the puck can **actually be won** — a bobbled reception, a player with their back turned, a puck on the boards with no support. Talk constantly while you do it; most kill breakdowns are two players making different assumptions rather than two players being lazy, so call switches, call the bumper, call the backdoor (On-Ice Communication). And **change when you can, not when you must** — a tired killer chases. Clear, then change, in that order.

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## Shorthanded offence

|                 |                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b>     | Take it when the turnover handed you a genuine 2-on-1 or breakaway, not one you have to manufacture with speed                               |
| <b>Read</b>     | Take it when the turnover happened above the puck, so their players are behind you, and you can get there before their point player recovers |
| <b>Never</b>    | Take it on a 2-on-2 or worse, when your partner has not seen it, when protecting a lead late, or when you are the last player back           |
| <b>Priority</b> | The default is always get the puck out, then change — the rush is the exception you take when it is free                                     |
| <b>Key</b>      | If it is a footrace you will lose it is not a rush; if you have to think about whether it is on, it is not on                                |

A shorthanded rush is one of the highest-value plays in hockey and one of the easiest ways to lose a game. The difference is entirely the read.

**Take it** when you have a genuine odd-man rush — a 2-on-1 or a breakaway — that the turnover *handed* you rather than one you have to manufacture with speed; when the turnover happened **above** the puck, so their players are behind you (a power play with four players below the puck is defenceless); and when you can get there before their point player recovers. If it is a footrace you will lose, it is not a rush.

**Do not take it** when it is a 2-on-2 or worse — lose the puck and you are 4-on-5 again with two players out of the play and them entering with speed; when your partner has not seen it, so the "rush" is you alone turning it over at their line and skating 180 feet back; when you are protecting a lead late (clear it and change — see Game Management); or when you are the last player back. That last one is obvious and it still happens every week.

**The default is always: get the puck out, then change.** The rush is the exception you take when it is free. If you have to think about whether it is on, it is not on. Fuller treatment of the trade-off in Risk Management.

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# BOTH

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## 4-on-4 and 3-on-3

### 4-on-4

- Key** Each player has a quarter more ice, and the extra room is mostly in the middle, so skill and skating matter more and structure matters less
- Risk** With only two forwards back you have one fewer support layer, and a 2-on-1 arrives faster and with more room
- Never** Activate as a defenceman more than you would at even strength — being caught is an immediate odd-man rush the other way
- Action** Change on possession in the offensive zone or after a clear; a change with the puck live hands them a rush against three
- Action** Support the puck with short options and quick movement — do not spread out, exactly as at 5-on-5

Coincidental penalties (below) put both teams at four skaters. Two fewer bodies on the same sheet changes the game more than the numbers suggest: each player has **a quarter more ice**, and the extra room is mostly in the middle, so skill and skating matter more and structure matters less.

- **You have one fewer support layer defensively.** With only two forwards back, the backchecking centre's middle-lane job (see Center) becomes everyone's problem, and a 2-on-1 arrives faster and with more room.
- **Defencemen should activate less, not more.** The open ice tempts you into the rush; the punishment for being caught is an immediate odd-man rush the other way.
- **Change with extreme care** — a change with the puck live at 4-on-4 hands them a rush against three. Change on possession in the offensive zone, or after a clear.
- **Support the puck, do not spread out.** The instinct in open ice is to stretch; the right play is short support options and quick movement, exactly as at 5-on-5.

### 3-on-3 overtime

|                 |                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>     | NHL regular-season overtime is five minutes of 3-on-3 sudden death then a shootout; playoff overtime is 20-minute periods at 5-on-5 (Rules 84.1, 84.4, 84.5)                           |
| <b>Priority</b> | Possession is the whole game — you cannot be scored on while you have the puck                                                                                                         |
| <b>Action</b>   | Carry the puck back out to the neutral zone and reset rather than forcing a low-percentage attack; the regroup is legal and standard practice                                          |
| <b>Read</b>     | Attack only with a numerical advantage — a 2-on-1 is nearly a goal, a 1-on-1 is nothing                                                                                                |
| <b>Action</b>   | Isolate a defender in space and go at them, but do not chase the puck as a group                                                                                                       |
| <b>Never</b>    | Change on the fly with the puck loose — change by holding possession, often passing back to the goalie, who retains and replays it rather than freezing it                             |
| <b>Rule</b>     | A penalty in overtime makes it 4-on-3, not 3-on-2 — the non-offending team adds a skater (NHL Rule 84.3, matched by IIHF 84.3)                                                         |
| <b>Rule</b>     | A goalie pulled for an extra attacker in regular-season overtime must wait for a stoppage to return and cannot change on the fly (NHL Rule 84.2); IIHF 84.2 sets no such restriction   |
| <b>Rule</b>     | IIHF overtime is 3-on-3 throughout — five minutes in preliminary games and ten in playoff and bronze medal games, with no 5-on-5 playoff format (IIHF Rules 84.1, 84.5)                |
| <b>Rule</b>     | England Ice Hockey plays overtime only in NIHL, and in SNL where its regulations provide; NIHL National is five minutes of 3-on-3 then three shooters a side (In-House Rules, Rule 84) |

NHL regular-season overtime is **five minutes of 3-on-3, sudden death**, followed by a shootout if nobody scores (Rule 84.1, 84.4). **Playoff overtime is full 20-minute periods at 5-on-5** — the 3-on-3 format does not apply (Rule 84.5).

**How the game changes:** there is no forecheck worth the name, no cycle, and nowhere to hide. Everything is possession and odd-man rushes.

#### Strategy that actually works:

- **Possession is the whole game.** You cannot be scored on while you have the puck. The format has shifted from run-and-gun to a deliberate, possession-first approach precisely because of this.
- **The regroup is a weapon.** Carrying the puck back out of the offensive zone into the neutral zone to reset — rather than forcing a low-percentage attack — is standard practice at NHL level. (It is unpopular with fans, and the League's general managers **have** discussed limiting it. Reporting the November 2023 GM meetings for NHL.com, **Dan Rosen** wrote that

Colin Campbell, the NHL's senior executive vice president of hockey operations, *said* there is a growing concern about the regroup in 3-on-3 overtime, when teams cross the blue line with possession but pull it back out into the neutral zone to reset and retain possession — and that Campbell said the talking points included potentially eliminating the ability to pull the puck out of the attacking zone once you cross the blue line. **Those are Rosen's words summarising Campbell, not Campbell's own**; the article carries no direct quotation from him on the regroup. But **discussion is not adoption**: the NHL Official Rules 2025-2026 contain no restriction on regrouping, in overtime or otherwise, so as of writing the regroup remains entirely legal. Flagged as a live issue, not a rule.)

- **Attack only with a numerical advantage.** A 2-on-1 in 3-on-3 is nearly a goal. A 1-on-1 is nothing. Wait for the extra man rather than driving into a set defender.
- **Never change on the fly with the puck loose.** A bad change at 3-on-3 is a breakaway. Teams change by holding possession — often passing back to the goalie, who **retains and replays** it: settles it, keeps it live, and moves it back out once the change is made. **Not freezes it.** A goalie who covers the puck in his crease to cause a stoppage is a minor under Rule 63.2(vii) unless he is actually being checked, and a stoppage hands the draw and the reset to the other team anyway.
- **Isolate and attack.** With one defender to beat, the point is to get a defender alone in space and go at them. Support arrives too slowly to help them.
- **Do not chase the puck as a group.** Three players chasing is nobody home.

**Penalties in overtime** (Rule 84.3), which are worth knowing because they decide games:

- A penalty in 3-on-3 overtime makes it **4-on-3**, not 3-on-2 — the non-offending team adds a skater. The three-skater floor from the 5-on-3 section above is what forces this.
- If **both** teams take a minor at the same stoppage with nothing else on the clock, play **continues 3-on-3**.
- A two-man advantage in overtime is played **5-on-3**: the offending team stays at three and the other team goes to five.
- Carry-over: 5-on-3 at the end of regulation starts overtime 5-on-3; 4-on-4 at the end of regulation starts overtime **3-on-3**.
- **Pulled goalies in regular-season overtime cannot change on the fly.** Rule 84.2: once removed for an extra attacker, the goalie "must wait for the next stoppage of play before returning to his position. He cannot change 'on the fly.' If he does, a bench minor penalty shall be assessed for having an ineligible player." **This one is NHL-only.** IIHF Rule 84.2 is a single sentence — "*A team shall be allowed to pull its goalkeeper in favor of an additional skater in the overtime period*" — and attaches no return restriction and no bench minor.

**If you play in Britain — check whether you get overtime at all, and then which one.**

**The five-on-the-clock rules above are yours.** IIHF Rule 84.3 is NHL 84.3 in the same words: a penalty makes it **4-on-3**, coincidental minors with nothing else on the clock continue **3-on-3**, a two-man advantage is played **5-on-3**, the carry-over ladder is identical, and *"at no time will a team have less than three (3) skaters on the ice."*

**The format is not.** IIHF overtime is 3-on-3 all the way up: **five minutes** in a round-robin or preliminary-round game (84.1) and **ten minutes** in a playoff, relegation, classification or bronze medal game (84.5), each *"with each team at a numerical strength of three (3) skaters and one (1) goalkeeper"*. **There is no IIHF equivalent of the NHL's 20-minute 5-on-5 playoff overtime**, so the caveat in the Rule 84.5 line above is a North American one.

**And England Ice Hockey amends Rule 84 on top of that.** Overtime *"is only played in NIHL fixtures and in SNL fixtures where specifically provided for in competition regulations"* — in most English and Scottish hockey a tied game simply ends tied, and none of this section applies. Where it is played, NIHL National league and group-stage playoff games use **five minutes of 3-on-3**, then a game-winning-shots competition with **three shooters per team**; the NIHL National playoff semi-finals use **20 minutes of 5-on-5** and the Final successive 20-minute 5-on-5 sudden-death periods with no shootout. Two details that catch people out in the rest period: teams **do not change ends** for overtime, and **penalised players must stay in the box** while goalkeepers may go to the bench. The full amendment list is in UK and England Rules; your league's own competition regulations are above both.

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## Coincidental penalties, expiring penalties and 6-on-4

### Coincidental penalties

|                   |                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>       | One minor to each team at the same stoppage, with nothing else on the clocks, is served without substitution and both teams play 4-on-4 (NHL Rule 19.1)       |
| <b>Rule</b>       | If at least one team was already shorthanded, substitution is immediate and the on-ice strength does not change (NHL Rule 19.1)                               |
| <b>Rule</b>       | Coincidental minors make neither team shorthanded, so a goal scored during 4-on-4 releases nobody from the box (NHL Rule 16.2)                                |
| <b>Rule</b>       | Where several penalties are assessed at once, equal majors cancel first, then equal minors, and any remaining differential is served normally (NHL Rule 19.5) |
| <b>Convention</b> | Rec and minor-hockey leagues frequently differ — several substitute immediately so both teams stay at five; check your league                                 |

Under **NHL Rule 19.1**, when one minor is assessed to a player from each team at the same stoppage, **with nothing else on the penalty clocks**, the penalties are served **without substitution** and both teams play **4-on-4** for two minutes.

- **If at least one team was already shorthanded**, the rule works differently: immediate substitution is made for the matching penalties, so the on-ice strength does not change, and those players wait for the **first stoppage after their time expires** to come out.
- **Coincidental minors do not make either team "shorthanded"** (Rule 16.2). This matters: a goal scored during 4-on-4 does **not** release anybody from the box.
- Where multiple penalties are assessed at once, referees cancel out equal numbers of majors first and then equal numbers of minors, and any remaining time differential is served normally (Rule 19.5).
- **Rec and minor-hockey leagues frequently differ here** — several play coincidental minors with immediate substitution so both teams stay at five. Check your league.



## Penalties expiring

|                  |                                                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>      | A goal against a shorthanded team ends the minor with the least time remaining — minors and bench minors only, not majors, and not on a penalty shot (NHL Rule 16.2) |
| <b>Action</b>    | On the power play, know the clock — the last ten seconds are your best chance, because the kill's concentration dips                                                 |
| <b>Read</b>      | On the kill, the player coming out of the box is a fresh attacker arriving from the side at full speed with nobody assigned to him                                   |
| <b>Action</b>    | Whoever is nearest calls "man coming out!" and picks him up                                                                                                          |
| <b>Action</b>    | If you are the player leaving the box, sprint — you are the most dangerous player on the ice for about three seconds                                                 |
| <b>Technique</b> | While you are in the box, watch the play rather than the clock, and come out facing the ice                                                                          |

The seconds around a penalty ending are among the most dangerous in hockey, in both directions.

- **A goal against a shorthanded team ends the minor with the least time remaining** (Rule 16.2). Minors and bench minors only — **not majors**, and **not when the goal comes on a penalty shot**.
- **On the power play, know the clock.** The last ten seconds are your best chance: the kill is watching the clock too, and their concentration dips.
- **On the kill, the player coming out of the box is a fresh attacker** arriving from the side of the rink at full speed with nobody assigned to him. Whoever is nearest must call it — "man coming out!" is one of the most useful things anyone says on a rink — and pick him up. If *you* are the player leaving the box, sprint; you are the most dangerous player on the ice for about three seconds. While you are in there, **watch the play, not the clock**, and come out facing the ice.

## 6-on-4

|                     |                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>          | Pulling the goalie on a power play makes it 6-on-4, the largest advantage in hockey, and it is used far less than the arithmetic suggests                    |
| <b>Position</b>     | As the power play, put two at the net front and send the extra body to the bumper or the backdoor, never the perimeter                                       |
| <b>Action</b>       | Move the puck quickly and accept that blocking lanes will be crowded                                                                                         |
| <b>Countered by</b> | The empty net — a killer who wins a puck can legally clear it 180 feet into it, and it counts                                                                |
| <b>Action</b>       | As the kill, block shots, keep sticks in lanes, and clear with your head up looking for the empty net                                                        |
| <b>Rule</b>         | Over the glass from your own zone is still a delay-of-game minor, shorthanded or not (NHL Rule 63.2(iii))                                                    |
| <b>Rule</b>         | On a signalled delayed penalty the non-offending team pulls its goalie for 6-on-5, and play continues until the penalised team gains control (NHL Rule 15.1) |
| <b>Risk</b>         | In that window the danger is not a shot against — it is your own player shooting the puck into your own empty net                                            |

Pulling the goalie during a power play, late in a game, to make it 6-on-4.

- **It is the largest advantage in hockey** and is used far less than the arithmetic suggests: two extra attackers against four killers means genuine 2-on-1s everywhere and a kill that cannot pressure at all. **The kill's counter is the empty net**, and it is a real one — a killer who wins a puck can clear it 180 feet into that net legally, because icing does not apply to a shorthanded team and a puck that enters the net is a goal regardless.
- **As the power play:** put two at the net front and send the extra body where it forces a decision — the bumper or the backdoor, never the perimeter. Move the puck quickly and accept that blocking lanes will be crowded.
- **As the kill:** shot blocking and stick lanes matter more than ever, clear with your head up looking for the empty net, and remember that over the glass from your own zone is still a penalty.
- **A related situation:** on a **delayed penalty in the Rule 15.1 sense** — the referee's arm is up, the infraction has been signalled, and the offending team does not yet have the puck — the non-offending team pulls its goalie for a 6-on-5. Play continues until the team to be penalised **gains control of the puck** (Rule 15.1), so the risk is not a shot against; it is your own player shooting the puck into your own empty net. See Breakouts for how to play the puck in that window.

## Faceoffs on special teams

|               |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Goal</b>   | With a man advantage, winning the draw skips the zone entry entirely; a skater short, losing it means defending a set power play from the first second                                          |
| <b>Rule</b>   | The team awarded the power play chooses which end-zone dot the draw starts at (NHL Rule 76.2) — pick the side that suits your one-timer                                                         |
| <b>Rule</b>   | After an icing the attacking team picks the dot (NHL Rule 81.2), and the team that iced it can neither change lines (81.4) nor take a timeout (87.1) — NHL and IIHF only                        |
| <b>Never</b>  | Fire a loose puck the length of the ice while on the power play — you hand the kill the dot and freeze your own tired unit                                                                      |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Encroachment ejects your centre from the dot, not the encroaching player (NHL Rule 76.6); a second violation by the same team on the same draw is a bench minor (76.7)                          |
| <b>Rule</b>   | IIHF Rule 76.6 makes the same encroachment a warning to the offending team, not an ejection — in UK hockey your centre stays on the dot for the first one                                       |
| <b>Rule</b>   | IIHF Rule 76.7 still makes a second violation by the same team on the same draw a bench minor, so the 5-on-3 risk on the kill is identical                                                      |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Home last change is forfeited after your own icing — the team in violation may not substitute before the ensuing faceoff (NHL Rules 81.4, 82.1), which USA Hockey does not replicate            |
| <b>Rule</b>   | IIHF Rules 81.2, 81.4 and 87.1 impose all three icing consequences in the same words as the NHL, so this is the UK position; USA Hockey imposes neither the line-change ban nor the timeout ban |
| <b>Action</b> | Agree the play before you line up — where the win is going, or whether you are tying up for a winger to sweep, and where the clear goes                                                         |

Faceoffs matter disproportionately when the numbers are uneven: **with a man advantage, winning the draw means you skip the zone entry entirely** — the hardest part of the power play, gone. A skater short, losing the draw means defending a set power play from the first second. Technique, alignment and the set plays themselves are in Faceoffs; what follows is only the special-teams-specific rules layer, and it is the part almost nobody knows.

**The four rules that give you an edge here — verify these against your own league:**

- **The team awarded the power play chooses which end-zone dot the draw takes place at** to start the power play (Rule 76.2). Pick the side that suits your one-timer, not the side the puck happened to be on.

- **Following an icing, the attacking team chooses the dot** (Rule 81.2) — and on special teams this cuts the opposite way to the way most players assume. **The kill cannot be called for icing** (Rule 81.6 — subject to the two carve-outs above, the NHL's empty penalty bench on a major and USA Hockey's classification limit), so where the exemption applies this essentially never comes up against them. (Read that the right way round: the kill may shoot the puck the length of the ice as much as it likes; what it cannot do is be whistled for it.) It comes up when the **power play** ices it, which is entirely possible and happens on a rushed clear after a failed entry. The draw then goes back to the power-play team's own end; the attacking team at that end is the **penalty kill**, so the *kill* picks the dot, the power play **cannot change lines** (Rule 81.4) **and cannot take a timeout** — that second one is **Rule 87.1**: "*No time-out shall be granted to the defensive team following an icing.*" — and you have handed a tired unit a defensive-zone draw while a man up. On a power play, never fire a loose puck the length of the ice.

**All three land identically in the IIHF book, and that is now checked rather than assumed.** IIHF **81.2**: "*Following an 'icing', the attacking team will have the choice of which end zone dot the 'face-off' will take place.*" IIHF **81.4**: "*A team that is in violation of this rule shall not be permitted to make any Player substitutions prior to the ensuing 'face-off'.*" IIHF **87.1**: "*No 'time-out' shall be granted to the defensive team following an icing...*" — the same sentence as the NHL's, with the same two companion cases. **So icing your own power play costs a British reader exactly what it costs an NHL one. USA Hockey imposes neither the line-change ban nor the timeout ban**, so the self-inflicted wound is smaller there.

- **Encroachment gets your centre ejected from the dot, not the encroaching player** (Rule 76.6). A winger whose skate crosses into the circle, or who creeps into the area between the hash marks before the drop, costs you your best draw-taker on the most important faceoff of the shift. **A second violation by the same team on the same draw is a bench minor** (Rule 76.7) — on the kill, that is a 5-on-3 against you.

 **This is one where the IIHF book genuinely differs, so British readers should not carry the ejection across.** Where NHL 76.6 says "*the offending team's player taking the face-off shall be ejected from the face-off circle*" and, on the establish-position-first violation, that the Linesperson "*shall order the center of the offending team replaced*", **IIHF 76.6 makes both a warning**: the offending team "*shall receive a warning for a 'face-off' violation*", and on the encroachment version "*the Linesperson shall assess a warning for a 'face-off' violation to the offending team.*" Your centre stays on the dot. **What does not change is the second one** — IIHF 76.7 is the NHL's rule in the same words, "*When two (2) 'face-off' violations have been committed by the same team during the same 'face-off', this*

*team shall be penalized with a bench minor penalty" — so on a British penalty kill a second violation is still a bench minor and still a 5-on-3 against you. The warning is a free one; the next one is not. (Faceoffs owns the full split.)*

Related, and the same in both books: do not crowd the scrum after a penalty is called; players coming into the attacking zone beyond the outer edge of the end-zone circle during a gathering move the draw out to the neutral zone (Rule 76.2), throwing away your offensive-zone start for nothing.

- **The home team has last change — but not after its own icing.** Rule 82.1 gives the visiting team first change, then: "*The home team may then make any desired substitution, **except in cases following an icing, which does not result in the delay of the game.***" Later in the same rule the exception is identified: "*A team that is in violation of Rule 63.8 - Delaying the Game or Rule 81 - Icing shall not be permitted to make any player substitutions prior to the ensuing face-off.*"

Those are the **same bar stated twice**, and the second statement is the one that says whose. Rule 81.4 repeats it in the same words, with the same three exceptions (a goalkeeper who had come off for an extra attacker, an injured player, a penalty affecting on-ice strength) — none of which would make sense if both benches were frozen. The team that iced it cannot change; the other team can.

What that means on special teams: **if your unit ices the puck you cannot change, home or away** — that is the expensive one. But if the *opponent* ices it, you get the free matchup wherever you are playing, and at home you still get it last. See Faceoffs, which covers the same situation from the draw's point of view.

**What to actually do:** agree the play *before* you line up — on the power play, whether you are winning it back to the point, to the half-wall, or forward; on the kill, whether you are winning it clean for a clear or tying up for a winger to sweep, and where that clear is going.

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## The goalie's role on both

- Action** On the kill, tell your goalie what you are conceding — a kill that never says this makes its goalie guess
- Action** On the kill, agree the retrieval before it starts; they can stop a rim behind the net and leave it stationary for you
- Rule** Under NHL, KHL and IIHF rules your goalie may only play the puck behind the goal line inside the trapezoid; most rec and youth leagues 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 — either way, keep your goalie inside it
- Read** Play it as though it binds — your goalie stays inside the trapezoid, so a rim that dies in the corner is yours to fetch, not theirs
- Action** On the power play, use them as a reset on a regroup and as your safety on a failed entry
- Rule** A goal is disallowed where an attacker, by positioning or by contact, impairs the goalie's ability to move freely in the crease or defend the goal (NHL Rule 69.1, matched by IIHF 69.1)
- Key** Screening from outside the crease, in the sightline, without contact, is legal — but outside the paint is no safe harbour if you have crowded them out of their crease
- Rule** In EIH and SIHA competition there is no video review of a goaltender-interference call and no coach's challenge, so the referee's on-ice judgement is final (In-House Rules, Rules 37, 38, 69.1)

Your goaltender is a full participant in both special teams, not a bystander. **The goalie's own game — depth, tracking, save selection under a screen — is in Goaltender.** Four things you have to do about it:

- **On the kill, tell them what you are conceding.** If the plan is to concede point shots, they will set their depth for a shot through traffic instead of holding for a seam pass. A kill that never says this makes its goalie guess.
- **On the kill, agree the retrieval before it starts.** Under NHL, KHL and IIHF rules your goalie may only play the puck behind the goal line inside the trapezoid, but they *can* stop a rim behind the net and leave it stationary for you. Where there is no trapezoid — most rec and youth leagues — they are a genuine third puck-handler and your clears get far easier. See Breakouts. 🇬🇧 **In England and Wales, treat that as unsettled.** The IIHF book carries 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. Play it as though it binds — your goalie stays inside the trapezoid, so a rim that dies in the corner is yours to fetch.

- **On the power play, use them as a reset.** On a 5-on-4 regroup, passing back to the goalie is a legitimate way to buy a couple of seconds and change the angle of attack. They are also your safety on a failed entry, which is another reason not to force one.
- **Against their goalie, know the line.** Screening from **outside** the crease, in the sightline, without contact, is legal and is the single most valuable thing a net-front player does. But the qualifier attaches to the *impairment*, not to where your skates are: Rule 69.1 disallows the 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 do it.** Standing outside the paint is not a safe harbour if you have crowded them out of their own crease. Contact inside the crease that impairs a save is out; incidental contact outside it is fine if you made a reasonable effort to avoid it (Rule 69.4), and a rebound scramble is expressly carved out (Rule 69.7).

**In Britain, the standard is the same but the safety net is gone.** IIHF 69.1 disallows a goal on the same two grounds in the same terms — "*either by their positioning or by a 'relevant contact', impairs the goalkeeper's ability to move freely within their goal crease or defend their goal*" — and the IIHF text then adds that the call "*may be subject to a Video Review... or to a Coach's Challenge.*" **The In-House Rules delete both:** "*On-ice video review is not available in EIHL or SIHA competition*" (Rule 69.1, and Rule 37 generally), and "*a Coach's Challenge is not permitted*" (Rule 38). So the referee's live judgement of a net-front scramble is the final one, with nothing to appeal it to. If you play net front in England or Scotland, the practical lesson is to give the referee nothing to interpret. See UK and England Rules.

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## Common Mistakes

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These are errors the body above does not cover — the ones that survive knowing the systems.

- **Icing the puck while on the power play.** Nothing in the numerical-strength exemption protects the team with the extra man. You hand the kill the choice of dot, you cannot change (Rule 81.4), you cannot take a timeout (Rule 87.1), and a tired unit now defends a draw in its own end. **The IIHF book imposes all three in the same words** — 81.2, 81.4 and 87.1, each checked against the rulebook — so this holds in British and European league hockey;

USA Hockey imposes only the defensive-zone draw. On the power play, a rushed length-of-ice clear is a self-inflicted wound.

- **Assuming last change is automatic at home.** It is not, after your *own* icing. If you are the home team and you ice it, the visitors change and you do not (Rules 81.4 and 82.1) — Rule 82.1's exception reads "*except in cases following an icing, which does not result in the delay of the game*", and the rule's later paragraph identifies who it catches: the team in violation of Rule 81. After a *visitor's* icing your last change is intact. Plan the matchup accordingly, and remember that your own icing forfeits it. See Faceoffs.
- **Winning a shorthanded defensive-zone draw straight out of the rink and bracing for a penalty.** Rule 63.2(iii)'s note exempts a puck that leaves the playing area **directly off a faceoff**. It is a faceoff, not a minor. Knowing this stops a centre steering a draw he should be firing.
- **Sending your best draw-taker out and then having a winger creep over the hash marks.** Under the NHL's Rule 76.6 the encroaching player is not the one ejected — your centre is. **Under IIHF 76.6, which is the British and European rule, the first one is only a warning to your team**, so do not expect to lose your centre for it. What is the same everywhere is the second one: a second violation on the same draw is a bench minor and, on the kill, a 5-on-3 against (NHL and IIHF 76.7) — or, under USA Hockey Rule 613(d), a minor on the individual who committed it, which is the same 5-on-3. Faceoffs owns the full split.
- **Confusing the two things called a "delayed penalty."** Players pull a goalie because they heard "delayed penalty" when what was actually announced was a third penalty stacking on the clock. Listen for the referee's raised arm, not the phrase.
- **Reading "the kill can't be pressured at 5-on-3" as "nobody will touch me."** Three killers will still jump a bobble and close on anyone walking into the slot. What you have is *time on the perimeter*, not immunity.
- **Treating a 2-on-1 at the top of the zone as the objective.** Creating it is a step, not the finish. Cash it in near the net, where the shot is actually worth something.
- **Blocking a shot from a screening position** and deflecting a puck your goalie never saw. The most common shot-blocking error on a kill, and it is worse than not blocking at all.
- **Describing a 1-3-1 as having "defencemen at the points".** It has **one** point player. Two means you are running an umbrella, an overload or a 2-3 — call it what it is, so the person next to you knows where to stand.
- **Standing three players level across the blue line and calling it an umbrella.** With no depth between them, every pass is short and lateral and the kill barely moves. An umbrella



is an **arc**: apex highest in the middle, flanks lower — barely lower in the classic version with both defencemen out wide, all the way down to the tops of the circles in the modern one.

- **Too many men on the ice during a special-teams change.** Units change together; count before you go. It is the only penalty in hockey that is purely an administrative failure.
  - **Arguing about the system on the bench instead of before the game.** Almost every special-teams breakdown is two players operating on different assumptions, and the fix is a thirty-second conversation in the room.
- 

## Key Takeaways

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1. **A man advantage is a 2-on-1 waiting to be created.** Five against four is nothing until the kill has two things to cover and one body to do it with. Create them anywhere; cash them in near the net, because danger is a function of location.
2. **Puck movement, not shooting, creates it.** A kill can cover any single option; it cannot cover three options in two seconds.
3. **The 1-3-1 has exactly one player at the point** — one point, two half-walls, one bumper, one net front — and most first units run four forwards and a single defenceman. The bumper is most often the centre, but that is a team choice, not a rule.
4. **Most power plays die at the blue line, not in the zone.** Drill entries — drop, swing, carry, controlled dump and the regroup — and be willing to reset rather than force one.
5. **A pass that crosses the middle of the ice before a shot is the most dangerous play in hockey**, because a goalie moving laterally cannot be set. Before you shoot from a half-wall, check the far side.
6. **A penalty kill is a decision about which shot you are willing to concede**, then two minutes of discipline making sure it is the only one. A box concedes the middle; a diamond concedes the outside and the backdoor; a wedge+1 concedes the perimeter.
7. **A box has two players high and no single top; a diamond has one apex.** Use the diamond against a 1-3-1, because a box leaves the bumper unmarked.
8. **The best place to kill a penalty is before the puck enters your zone.** Three failed entries and the penalty is over.
9. **You may ice the puck freely while shorthanded — but check your book first, and never ice it while on the power play.** Where it applies, the exemption (Rule 81.6) is the kill's biggest structural advantage. It has **two carve-outs, and neither of them is the IIHF's**: the NHL withdraws it from a team shorthanded by a *major* that has left nobody on

the penalty bench, and **USA Hockey grants it only at Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult** (Rule 624(b)(1)) — below those levels a shorthanded team cannot ice the puck at all, so a kill built on length-of-the-ice clears just feeds the power play defensive-zone draws. **IIHF Rule 81.6 carries the exemption in the same words and carries neither carve-out, so in UK hockey it is unconditional.** Over the glass from your own zone is a second penalty either way. And a power play that ices it hands the kill the choice of dot and forbids itself a line change.

10. **Know your team's shape, and your job inside it, before the puck drops.** These are coaching choices, and almost every breakdown is two players assuming different systems.

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#### VERIFICATION NOTES

*Note on Rule 27.8 vs Rule 1.8: the two rules give different near dimensions — Rule 1.8 (the painted markings) gives eight feet from each post, Rule 27.8 (the penalty) still reads six, wording left over from before the area was widened in 2014. 27.8 is stale rather than self-contradictory: six feet a side describes the old trapezoid perfectly well. Rule 1.8 is the geometry to trust. Full treatment in **Rules Primer** ("The trapezoid (goalkeeper's restricted area)") and **Rink Map and Glossary**, which carry the dimensions, the single exception and the league-by-league coverage. **Defender** covers what it means for a defenceman's retrievals.*

# Faceoffs

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**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. **The faceoff-violation rules are one of the biggest NHL/IIHF splits in the whole game** — see "Violations, Ejections and the Bench Minor" below. **Playing in Britain? The IIHF flags are yours** — every level of UK hockey runs the IIHF book, amended locally; see UK and England Rules. That split is therefore not a footnote for you: **nobody is ejected from a draw in British hockey.**

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## Overview

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A **faceoff** (also called a **draw**) is how play starts and restarts: an official drops the puck between the sticks of two opposing players, and whoever wins it gives their team possession. There are roughly **56 of them in an average NHL game** — 56.6 per game in 2024-25 and 56.0 in 2025-26, computed from the NHL's official statistics. That is 56 guaranteed, scheduled, whistle-stopped possession opportunities where you know exactly where the puck will be, exactly when, and exactly where all ten skaters are standing.

Nothing else in hockey is that predictable. That is what makes faceoffs the most practisable part of the game, and it is why they are also the most neglected: they look like a coin flip, so people treat them like one.

This document is the deep dive. It covers what the research actually says about how much draws matter, where the nine faceoff spots are and what sends the puck to each one, the exact procedure and violation rules, the techniques for winning a draw, and the full five-player alignments and set plays that the position documents can only gesture at.

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# Why Faceoffs Matter — Honestly

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There is a bad version of this argument and a good one. The bad version says faceoffs win games. They do not, and pretending otherwise makes everything else you say less credible.

## What the evidence actually shows

**Team faceoff percentage barely predicts winning.** Computed from the NHL's official team statistics: across the eleven completed seasons from 2015-16 to 2025-26 (344 team-seasons), the correlation between a team's faceoff win percentage and its **points percentage** (the share of available standings points a team actually took — points earned divided by two per game played) is  $r = +0.25$ , meaning faceoff percentage accounts for **about 6% of the variation** in how many points teams take. It is positive — but it is weak, and it is unstable. In 2016-17 the relationship was actually *negative* ( $r = -0.24$ ), and in 2025-26 it was essentially zero ( $r = +0.03$ ).

**And at team level there is barely any spread to predict with.** Computed from the NHL's public team-summary data: across the **32 NHL teams** in the **2025-26 regular season, all situations**, team faceoff win percentage ran from about **45.9% to 54.5%**, with the league mean sitting at **50.0% by definition** — every draw is a win for one team and a loss for the other, so the teams must average out to even. That is a total range of under nine percentage points between the best and worst faceoff teams in the league — far narrower than people assume when they quote a team's faceoff rank.

**Do not confuse that with the spread between individual centres, which is much wider.**

The team figure blends every skater a club sends to the dot — including the wingers who take emergency draws (eleven of the 120 skaters with 500+ faceoffs in 2025-26 were wingers) — so it pulls hard toward 50%. The skater-level range described in the next section — **62.1% down to 39.7%** across the 109 centres with 500 or more draws in 2025-26 — is a different unit of analysis and roughly two and a half times as wide. Team faceoff percentage tells you about a roster; skater faceoff percentage tells you about a player.

**It barely predicts possession either.** Garret Hohl, writing at Hockey Graphs, found an  $R^2$  of about 0.20 between team faceoff percentage and Corsi percentage (shot-attempt share, the standard possession proxy), across every 82-game NHL team-season from 2007-08 on — a real relationship, but one that leaves four fifths of the variation unexplained.

**The best faceoff man in the league is worth a handful of goals.** Here the model and the man who applied it are two different people, and it is worth keeping them straight. The per-zone even-strength goal values are **Gabriel Desjardins'**; **Garret Hohl** applied them at Hockey Graphs to the faceoff differentials of the NHL's 100 most frequent draw-takers, in his own words "*using*

data originally brought up by Gabriel Desjardins." That exercise put the best of them (Boyd Gordon) at **+4.34 goals** and the worst (Ryan Nugent-Hopkins) at **-2.73** — a spread of **7.07 goals** from the best draw-taker in the league to the worst. For comparison, the same piece set that against the gap between top-decile and bottom-decile possession players, which its chart puts at roughly **10-15 goals per 82 games** — *read off the figure, not stated as a number in the article text, so treat it as approximate. (The 82-game basis is stated for that comparison chart only; Hohl's player table gives no time base, so read +4.34 and -2.73 as season-scale rather than exactly per-82.)* Hohl's own conclusion is worth quoting: faceoffs "matter, but they do not matter on average much more than any other of the many puck battles that occur throughout the game."

**The advantage decays in seconds.** The finding is **Craig Tabita's**, published at hockeyprospectus.com: shot volumes after a draw even out to roughly the same level about ten seconds later, regardless of where the draw was. It reaches this document at two removes — Hockey Graphs' women's-hockey piece quotes **Alison Lukan's** 2017 summary of Tabita in *The Athletic*, which is where the sentence "*after 10 seconds of play, regardless of where a face-off occurs ... shot volume evens out to be more or less the same*" comes from. The figure here rests on Lukan's summary rather than on Tabita's original. A faceoff win buys you about one possession's worth of head start, not a scoring chance.

## So why bother?

|                 |                                                                                                             |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Priority</b> | Prepare the situational draws, not the league-average one                                                   |
| <b>Risk</b>     | A defensive-zone draw lost cleanly puts a set opponent into the most dangerous ice while you are stationary |
| <b>Action</b>   | Fix the free failure modes — a winger creeping over a line is an information problem, not a skill one       |
| <b>Key</b>      | A 22-point spread between the best and worst NHL centres means this is learnable, not luck                  |
| <b>Never</b>    | Chase your faceoff percentage — chase the ten or fifteen draws a game that change something                 |

Because *average* is the wrong frame. The honest case for faceoffs is not "win more draws, win more games." It is four narrower claims, and all four survive the evidence.

- **Situational draws are not average draws.** A defensive-zone draw while shorthanded, with your best penalty killers already tired, is not the same event as a neutral-zone draw at 3-0 in the first period. The league-average draw is worth almost nothing. The specific ones

described later in this document are worth a great deal, and they are a small enough share of the total that a team can prepare for all of them.

- **A lost defensive-zone draw is a shot against, quickly.** The reason coaches obsess over these is not the possession — it is that losing one cleanly puts a set opponent with a set play into the highest-danger area of the ice while your five skaters are stationary and facing the wrong way. That is the one faceoff outcome that is genuinely, immediately dangerous.
- **The failure modes are free to fix.** Getting your centre ejected because a winger crept over a line is not a skill problem. It is an information problem, and it costs nothing to solve. See the violations section.
- **It is the single most improvable skill in hockey.** Computed from the NHL's official skater statistics: 120 skaters took at least 500 draws in 2025-26, and 109 of them are listed as centres (the other eleven are wingers). Among those 109 centres the median win rate was **51.8%**, the tenth percentile 45.4%, the ninetieth 57.7%, and the range ran from **62.1% down to 39.7%** — a **22-point spread** on a repeatable, isolated, closed-skill action. That is enormous, and it tells you this is learnable, because nothing that wide is luck. (This is the figure Switching Positions leans on when it tells a winger moved to centre that the draw is worth working at.)

**The practical version: don't chase your faceoff percentage. Chase the ten or fifteen draws a game where the outcome actually changes something, and stop giving away the free ones.**

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## The Nine Faceoff Locations

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Every faceoff in the game happens at one of **nine spots** (NHL Rule 76.2). There is no such thing as a draw somewhere else — Rule 76.2 explicitly forbids one within fifteen feet of the goal or the side boards, or anywhere that isn't a marked spot.

# Where they are, and what's painted on the ice

|                 |                                                                                                             |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>     | Every faceoff happens at one of nine marked spots, and nowhere else (Rule 76.2)                             |
| <b>Position</b> | Wingers stand at the hash marks, and those marks are a hard boundary                                        |
| <b>Rule</b>     | The centre's restraining lines define where your feet may go (Rule 1.9)                                     |
| <b>Rule</b>     | The four neutral-zone dots have no circles and no hash marks — everyone stands "uniformly back" (Rule 76.7) |
| <b>Key</b>      | Encroachment is called loosely in the neutral zone and tightly in the end zones                             |

| Spot              | Count | Markings (NHL Rule 1.9)                                                                                            |
|-------------------|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Centre ice        | 1     | A 12-inch blue spot, with a circle of 15-foot radius                                                               |
| Neutral-zone dots | 4     | 2-foot red spots, 5 feet outside each blue line, 44 feet apart.<br><b>No circles</b>                               |
| End-zone dots     | 4     | 2-foot red spots with 15-foot-radius circles, 20 feet out from the goal line and 22 feet either side of the middle |

*(The dimensions in that table are the rink's, and Rink Map and Glossary owns them — it carries the same figures alongside the rest of the ice, with the IIHF metric equivalents.)*

Two markings inside the end-zone circles matter enormously and almost nobody can name them:

- **Hash marks** — red lines two inches wide and two feet long, running parallel to the goal line. Rule 1.9 puts two of them "at the outer edge of **both sides** of each face-off circle", set **5 feet 7 inches apart** — so **four per circle**, a pair on the boards side and a pair on the middle-of-the-ice side. These are where the wingers stand, and they are a hard boundary (see violations).
- **The centre's restraining lines** — the little painted "L" shapes a foot outside the spot: two lines four feet long and eighteen inches apart running parallel to the side boards, plus a line 2 feet 10 inches long parallel to the end boards. These define where the centre's feet may go.

**The four neutral-zone dots have no circles and no hash marks at all.** Rule 76.7 acknowledges this directly and tells linespersons to use judgement, requiring only that everyone stand "uniformly back" as if a circle were there. Practically: encroachment is called loosely in the neutral zone and tightly in the end zones.

# How often each zone comes up

Computed from the NHL's public team-faceoff data for the **2025-26 regular season (team-level, all situations)**, a team's draws split roughly:

| Zone                                | Share of a team's draws | Draws per game |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------|
| Offensive zone                      | 34.6%                   | ~19-20         |
| Defensive zone                      | 34.6%                   | ~19-20         |
| Neutral zone (including centre ice) | 30.8%                   | ~17            |

Those come out of the roughly **56 draws in an average NHL game** (56.0 per game in 2025-26; see the Overview). The percentages are the computed figures; the per-game counts in the right-hand column are simply those percentages applied to 56 draws, rounded.

Three things follow from that table, and they are worth holding onto:

- **The offensive and defensive shares are identical, and they have to be.** Every offensive-zone draw for you is a defensive-zone draw for the other team, so once you average across the league the two numbers are the same number seen from opposite ends. If someone quotes you a team with more offensive- than defensive-zone draws, that is a real fact about *that* team's play; league-wide it cannot happen.
- **End-zone draws are about 69% of all draws** — so most faceoffs *are* in an end zone, and the defensive-zone draws described later in this document are not a rare event. You take about twenty of them a game.
- **Offensive-zone draws are only about a third of the total**, which matters when you read "sheltered usage" or zone-start percentage in a statistics table. A coach loading a favoured player with offensive-zone starts is redistributing within that third, spread across a whole bench — which is one reason the measured effect on any single player's season numbers is modest. See How to Watch Hockey for how zone starts are used and misused as a context statistic.



## What sends the draw to which spot

|               |                                                                                                                            |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b> | Work out where the next draw will be and start skating there before the whistle finishes                                   |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Centre ice takes period starts, draws after a goal, and an erroneous icing call (Rules 76.2, 81.2)                         |
| <b>Rule</b>   | After an icing or a penalty the draw is in the offending team's end, and the other team chooses the dot (Rules 81.2, 76.2) |
| <b>Rule</b>   | A stoppage below the end-zone dots draws at the dot on the side it happened (Rule 76.2)                                    |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Offside on a carry-in draws at the neutral-zone dot outside that blue line (Rule 83.6)                                     |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Offside on a pass or shot sends the draw back to the zone the puck came from (Rule 83.6)                                   |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Point men entering the end-zone circle in a post-whistle scrum moves the draw to the neutral zone (Rule 76.2)              |
| <b>Never</b>  | Fire the puck over the line — carrying it over and being whistled costs you far less                                       |

This is the part worth actually learning, because knowing where the next draw will be lets you start skating there before the whistle finishes.

### To centre ice:

- The start of every period, and after every goal.
- A penalty assessed *after* a goal, or at the end or start of a period (Rule 76.2).
- A linesperson's **erroneous** icing call (Rule 81.2) — the one time a mistake gets fully neutralised.
- A premature-substitution violation when play was stopped beyond the centre red line (Rule 76.2).

### To an end-zone dot in the offending team's own end:

- **Icing.** And here is the detail almost nobody knows: since 2019-20, **the attacking team chooses which of the two dots** (Rule 81.2). They will pick the one their centre is strong on. See "Situational Faceoffs".
- **A penalty.** One of the two dots in the penalised team's end — and again, **the team awarded the power play chooses which dot** (Rule 76.2). Three exceptions send it to centre ice or the neutral zone instead.
- **Intentional offside** — deliberately going offside to force a whistle (Rule 83.7).

- **A goalie freeze, or any stoppage low in the zone.** Rule 76.2: when the stoppage happens between the end-zone dots and the end of the rink, the draw is at the end-zone dot **on the side where the stoppage occurred**. So which side a goalie freezes the puck on determines which circle you play. Goalies know this.
- **The goalie freezing the puck on the back of the net with stick or glove, or a defender shielding an attacker from playing it off the back of the net** — Rule 85.2 sends these to "one of the face-off spots in the defending zone." Note that a puck **merely lodged in the outside netting** is *not* automatically a defensive-zone draw: that is Rule 85.5, which puts it at "either of the adjacent face-off spots or at the nearest face-off spot in the zone from which the puck was shot."

#### **To a neutral-zone dot:**

- **Offside where the puck was carried over the line** — the draw is at the neutral-zone dot outside that blue line (Rule 83.6).
- **A stoppage in the neutral zone not attributable to either team** — the nearest dot outside the blue line; if it's genuinely unclear which is nearest, the tie goes to the spot giving the **home** team the greatest territorial advantage (Rule 76.2).
- **A goal illegally scored by hand, kick or high stick** (Rule 76.2).
- **A scrum after the whistle that draws the point men in.** If either team's defencemen (or anyone off the bench) come inside the outer edge of the end-zone circle during an altercation, the draw is moved out to the neutral zone (Rule 76.2). This is a real and frequently-conceded cost: your team just turned a won defensive-zone draw into a neutral-zone one, or lost an offensive-zone draw entirely, by joining a shoving match.

**Puck out of play:** the nearest spot in the zone the puck was shot or deflected out from. If it came from the neutral or defending zone, the spot chosen is the one giving the **offending team the least territorial advantage** (Rules 85.1 and 85.5). Two useful exceptions: if the puck leaves the rink **directly off a faceoff**, the draw stays at the same spot and nobody is penalised (Rule 85.1, and the note to Rule 63.2). And a shot that goes into the players' bench through an open door is not a delay-of-game penalty — though note which bench: Rule 85.1 says that if the puck enters the **opposing** team's bench through an open door (or hits an opposing player hanging over it), the draw is in the **neutral zone adjacent to that bench**, not back in the zone the shot came from.

**Offside where the puck was shot or passed in** (rather than carried): the draw goes back to the nearest spot in the zone the pass or shot came from, again picking the option giving the offending team the least territorial advantage (Rule 83.6). So a sloppy stretch pass from your own end that goes offside sends the draw all the way back into your own zone. Carrying it over the line

and getting whistled costs you far less than firing it over. Zone Entries draws the tactical conclusion from that asymmetry.

*Rules Primer carries the same material as a single compact lookup table, and it lists a few situations not covered above — a defender dislodging his own net, a hand pass in the attacking zone, a goal disallowed for goaltender interference, and what happens when two violations occur at once. Use whichever form suits you; they are the same rules.*

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## The Procedure and the Rules

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### The sequence, start to finish

- Rule** The visiting team gets up to five seconds to change, then the home team up to eight (Rule 82.2)
- Rule** After the linesperson's whistle both teams have no more than five seconds to line up (Rule 76.3)
- Rule** The sticks go down before the drop, and order matters (Rule 76.4)
- Rule** The faceoff ends when the puck has been legally dropped (Rule 76.1)
- Rule** The five-second limit is not enforced in the last two minutes of regulation or in overtime (Rule 76.3)
- Key** Last change is why the away centre so often finds himself against a specialist

1. **Line change.** The referee gives the **visiting team up to five seconds** to change, raises a hand, then gives the **home team up to eight seconds** (Rule 82.2). This is the mechanism behind "last change" — the home team sees the visitors' personnel before committing its own, which is why home coaches can hunt matchups and visiting coaches cannot. It is also why the away team's centre often finds himself against a specialist. Note that the *right* itself comes from Rule 82.1 rather than 82.2, and it carries an icing exception — see the post-icing draw below.
2. **The referee lowers their hand.** No more changes.
3. **The linesperson blows the whistle.** Both teams now have **no more than five seconds** to line up (Rule 76.3).
4. **The sticks go down** (Rule 76.4). Order matters — see below.

5. **The puck is dropped** between the two blades. The faceoff formally "ends when the puck has been legally dropped" (Rule 76.1).

**In the last two minutes of regulation and at any point in overtime, the five-second limit is not enforced** (Rule 76.3). The whistle still goes, but the linesperson will take the time to get it right. This changes how late-game draws feel: there is more time to set your alignment, more time to look at the bench, and more time for both centres to fidget for an advantage.

## Who puts their stick down first

**Rule** At centre ice the visiting player places their stick first (NHL Rule 76.4)

**Rule** At the other eight spots the defending player places first, then the attacking player (NHL Rule 76.4)

**Rule** USA Hockey reverses this — the attacking player places first everywhere but centre ice (USA Hockey Rule 613(a))

**Key** Placing first shows your blade angle first, so under NHL rules the advantage of going second is the attacking team's

**Action** When you are the one who must show your hand, vary the angle you show

This is stated wrongly more often than almost any rule in hockey. The actual text of Rule 76.4:

- **At centre ice** — the **visiting** player places their stick first.
- **At the other eight spots** — the **defending** player places first, "followed immediately by the attacking player."

So the common shorthand "the visitor puts their stick down first" is true at exactly one of the nine spots. Everywhere else the **defending** player commits first — and putting your stick down first means showing your blade angle first, which is information you'd rather not give away. **So at the eight end-zone and neutral-zone spots the advantage of going second belongs to the attacking team**, which is the opposite of what most players assume. If you are defending, expect to show your hand, and vary the angle you show.

At the four neutral-zone dots the rule still says "defending player," which means the player from the team defending the goal at that end. The rulebook does not spell this out further; that is the standard reading.

 **USA Hockey reverses this, so check before you build a habit on it.** USA Hockey Rule 613(a) reads: *"The attacking player shall be the first to place their stick on the ice, except for a*

center ice face-off where the visiting team player shall be first to place their stick on the ice." So under the NHL the **defending** centre shows his blade angle first at eight of the nine spots; under USA Hockey the **attacking** centre does. If you play in a North American rec or youth league, the advantage of going second is yours when you are *defending*, not attacking — the exact opposite of the NHL situation described above.

## Positioning requirements

|                 |                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b> | Square to your opponent's end of the rink, roughly one stick length apart (Rule 76.4)                           |
| <b>Rule</b>     | Feet either side of the restraining lines — touching the lines is fine (Rule 76.4)                              |
| <b>Rule</b>     | Your skate toe must not cross the restraining lines perpendicular to the side boards (Rule 76.4)                |
| <b>Rule</b>     | At least the toe of your stick blade stays in the white of the spot until the puck is dropped (Rule 76.4)       |
| <b>Rule</b>     | No other player may enter the circle or come within fifteen feet of the two takers (Rule 76.6)                  |
| <b>Rule</b>     | At end-zone draws the other eight skaters keep their bodies on their own side of the hash marks (Rule 76.6)     |
| <b>Rule</b>     | The attacking team's four other skaters set their positions first; the defending team then counters (Rule 76.6) |
| <b>Rule</b>     | The goalkeeper may not participate in a faceoff (Rule 76.1)                                                     |

### For the centre (Rule 76.4 and 76.7):

- Stand **squarely facing your opponent's end of the rink**, roughly **one stick length apart**.
- Place your feet on either side of the restraining lines running parallel to the side boards — touching the lines is fine.
- The **toe of your skate blade must not cross** the restraining lines running perpendicular to the side boards as you approach.
- At least the **toe of your stick blade** must be on the ice in the designated white part of the spot, and **must stay there until the puck is dropped**.

### For everyone else (Rule 76.6):

- No other player may enter the faceoff circle or come within **fifteen feet** of the two players taking the draw.

- At end-zone draws, all eight other skaters must keep their bodies **on their own side of the hash marks**.
- Crucially: **the attacking team's four other skaters must establish their positions first**, and only then may the defending team counter and hold. If an attacker tries to reposition after that, the violation is charged to the *attacking* team — even if the defending centre backs out of the dot in response.

That last rule is a genuine tactical asset for the defending team, and it is the reason defensive-zone alignments can be reactive: you get to see where their net-front threat is going before you decide who takes them.

**The goalkeeper may not participate in a faceoff** (Rule 76.1). This matters when your goalie is pulled — see "Situational Faceoffs".

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## Violations, Ejections and the Bench Minor

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Get this exactly right, because the consequences are asymmetric and one of them is routinely misunderstood.

**Two different consequences, depending on your book.** The *list* of violations is essentially the same in the NHL and IIHF rulebooks — the same premature movement, the same encroachment, the same bad stick placement. What differs is what it costs you. The NHL throws your centre out of the circle. The IIHF issues **a warning to your team** and re-drops the puck with the same centre still in the dot. **If you play anywhere in Britain, the IIHF consequence is the one you live under** — see UK and England Rules. Read this section with that substitution in mind; it is flagged again at each point where it changes what you should do.

## What gets your centre thrown out of the dot

- Rule** A faceoff violation ejects the offending team's centre from that draw (NHL Rule 76.4)
- Rule** Under IIHF — the British book — the same violation is a warning to the team and a re-drop, with the centre staying in the dot (IIHF Rules 76.6, 76.7)
- Rule** Any early twitch of the stick or body before the drop is a violation (Rule 76.7)
- Rule** Improper stick placement, or skates in the wrong place relative to the restraining lines, is a violation (Rule 76.7)
- Rule** A teammate putting a skate inside the circle or across the hash marks is a violation (Rule 76.7)
- Rule** Physical contact with an opponent before the drop is a violation (Rule 76.7)
- Rule** Being late to the faceoff location costs one warning per game, not your centre (Rule 76.7, IIHF Rule 76.7)

Under NHL rules, a faceoff violation results in the **offending team's centre being ejected from that draw** — replaced "by any teammate then on the ice" (Rule 76.4). The violations (Rule 76.7):

- **Moving prematurely** before the drop — any early twitch of the stick or body.
- **Improper stick placement or positioning** — failing to get the blade into the white area, lifting it before the drop, or having your skates in the wrong place relative to the restraining lines.
- **Encroachment by a teammate.** A player other than the centre putting a skate inside the circle, or across the hash marks, before the puck is dropped.
- **Physical contact with an opponent** before the drop.
- **Lining up in an off-side position** for the ensuing draw (Rule 76.3(v)).

**One softening worth knowing:** players who are simply **late to the faceoff location**, and therefore off-side for the draw, get **one warning per game** — given to the offending team and to its coach — and Rule 76.7 is explicit that "in this situation, the offending team's center is not ejected from the face-off." Any subsequent instance is a bench minor, announced as "Delay of Game – Slow Proceeding to Face-off Location." So being slow off the bench is not the same offence as being early on the drop: the first one costs you a warning, the second costs you your centre.

**Under IIHF this softening is worth more, not less.** IIHF Rule 76.7 carries the same once-a-game lateness warning, but phrases the carve-out for a book that has no ejections: "*In this situation, the offending team's center will not receive a warning for a 'face-off' violation.*" Because a warning is the currency in the IIHF book — the thing that puts you one twitch from a bench

minor — that sentence means being slow to the dot does **not** burn the warning you may still need on the same draw. Your one free violation stays intact.

**One trap if you go and check this in your own book.** The IIHF rulebook states the same lateness carve-out twice, in two different vocabularies. Rule 76.7 uses the IIHF one quoted above; Rule 82.2(VII) uses leftover NHL wording — "*In this situation, the offending team's center is not ejected from the 'face-off'.*" That is the **only** appearance of the word "ejected" in the IIHF book's face-off material, and it is a sentence saying an ejection does *not* happen. Do not read it as evidence that IIHF face-off ejections exist somewhere else. They do not: the word appears nowhere in IIHF Rule 76 at all.

## The rule everybody gets wrong

- Rule** A teammate moving into the circle ejects the centre, not the teammate (NHL Rule 76.6)
- Rule** Under IIHF the same encroachment costs the team its one warning for that draw, not the centre (IIHF Rule 76.6)
- Rule** Both skates stay outside the circle and outside the hash marks (Rule 76.7)
- Rule** Skate contact with the line is permitted — crossing it is what does it (Rule 76.7)
- Rule** Your stick may be inside the circle or the hash marks if it touches no opponent or their stick (Rule 76.7)
- Action** Tell your linemates — you can reach, but you cannot step

**Encroachment by a teammate gets the CENTRE ejected, not the teammate.** Two rules work together here, which is why you will see both cited. **Rule 76.6** supplies the consequence: "*If a player other than the player taking the face-off moves into the face-off circle prior to the dropping of the puck, then the offending team's player taking the face-off shall be ejected from the face-off circle. This shall be considered a face-off violation.*" **Rule 76.7** then enumerates what counts as encroachment — **(i)** any player other than the centre entering the face-off circle, and **(ii)** any player crossing into the area between the hash marks — and supplies the escalation: "*When at least two face-off violations have been committed by the same team during the same face-off, this team shall be penalized with a bench minor penalty.*"

In both clauses the line itself is safe: "*skate contact with the line is permitted*" — it is a skate **crossing** the line that does it. Your stick may be inside the circle or inside the hash marks provided there is no contact with an opponent or their stick.

So if your winger leans over the hash marks trying to time a jump, **you lose your best draw-taker for the most important draw of the game.** The winger stays. This is the highest-value



piece of information in this entire document and it costs nothing to act on: tell your linemates.

**In Britain it costs you something different, and it is still worth teaching.** IIHF Rule 76.6 sets out the identical offence with the IIHF consequence: *"If a Player other than the Player taking the 'face-off' moves into the face-off circle prior to the dropping of the puck, then the offending team taking the 'face-off' shall receive a warning for a 'face-off' violation."* Your centre stays. What your winger has spent is the team's **one free violation on that draw** — and IIHF Rule 76.7 then puts a bench minor on the second. So on a defensive-zone draw you cannot afford, an early winger does not remove your specialist; it removes your margin, and the next twitch by anyone in your five is two minutes. Same instruction to your linemates, different sentence after "because".

The specific standard is the same in both books and is worth quoting once, because it is the part people get wrong. **Both skates** must stay outside the circle and outside the hash marks. **Skate contact with the line is permitted** — it is crossing it that's illegal. Your **stick** may be inside the circle or inside the hash marks, provided it makes no contact with an opponent or an opponent's stick. So you can reach; you cannot step. NHL Rule 76.7 and IIHF Rule 76.7(I)–(II) are word-for-word here: *"Players on the perimeter of the face-off circle must keep both skates outside the face-off circle – skate contact with the line is permitted."*

## The second violation

- Rule** Two faceoff violations by the same team on the same draw is a bench minor (Rule 76.7)
- Rule** Any of the four on-ice officials may identify a faceoff violation, not just the linesperson dropping the puck (NHL Rule 76.7)
- Action** With a replacement in the dot take the simplest approach — a clean tie-up, nothing clever

**Two faceoff violations by the same team on the same draw is a bench minor** for "Delay of Game – Face-off Violation" (Rule 76.7). This is why the replacement taker has to be immaculate: your team is now one twitch away from a penalty. It is also why, when your centre is tossed, the replacement should take the simplest possible approach — a clean tie-up, nothing clever.

**This is the rule that does the work in Britain, because it is the only one with teeth.** IIHF Rule 76.7 carries the escalation in the NHL's own terms — *"When two (2) 'face-off' violations have been committed by the same team during the same 'face-off', this team shall be penalized with a bench minor penalty"* — and the IIHF Situation Handbook confirms it is served like any bench minor, by any skater the team designates. Its Situation 17.4 is precisely the case this document keeps warning you about — *"Team A has already had their center warned for a face-off violation."*

*The winger for Team A encroaches and Team A is penalized for committing a second face-off violation" — and the answer is that any skater may serve it (Situations 17.3 and 17.4, citing Rules 17.1 and 76.6). Under the IIHF book your first violation costs you a re-drop and your second costs you two minutes, and there is no ejection anywhere in between. So the discipline the NHL buys by removing your centre, the IIHF book buys by putting the whole five one mistake from a penalty kill. The instruction to your line is the same and the reason is different: after a warning, nobody moves early, nobody leans, nobody reaches.*

Note that any of the **four on-ice officials** may identify a faceoff violation, not just the linesperson dropping the puck. IIHF Rule 76.7 says the same in the same parenthesis.

## **The icing exception — a genuinely useful NHL loophole, and the British default**

- Rule** After an icing the first faceoff violation by either team does not remove the centre (NHL Rule 76.4)
- Rule** The centre is warned instead, and any subsequent violation by that team is a bench minor (NHL Rule 76.4)
- Rule** The IIHF book has no post-icing carve-out because it needs none — every first violation on every draw is already a warning (IIHF Rules 76.6, 76.7)
- Key** The warning is per team, so each side has its own free one
- Action** Use your free attempt to cheat the timing — and expect their centre to use theirs

**On a draw that follows an icing, the *first* faceoff violation does not get anybody's centre removed — and that applies to *both* teams, not just the team that iced.** Rule 76.4: *"When an icing infraction occurs, the first face-off violation by either team will not result in the center being removed. The center will be warned by the Linesperson that the team has committed their first face-off violation, and any subsequent violation by that team will result in a bench minor penalty for delay of game - face-off violation being assessed."*

Read the two limits carefully. It is the **first** violation only — not "any" violation — and the warning is per team, so each side has its own free one. Any subsequent violation by that team is a bench minor. But on the single most dangerous draw in hockey — a defensive-zone draw after your own icing, with a tired line that cannot change — you get one free attempt to cheat the timing, and so does the team that has just pinned you. Good centres use it and expect it.

⚠ **Do not go looking for this rule in the IIHF book — it is not there, and the reason matters.** The IIHF's Rule 76 mentions icing exactly once, and in a different context (the post-whistle scrum that moves a draw to the neutral zone). There is no post-icing carve-out anywhere in IIHF Rules 76.3 to 76.7, and no equivalent sentence in IIHF Rule 81. **That is not an omission — it is redundancy.** The NHL needs a special exemption after an icing because its default is ejection; the IIHF's default is already a warning, on every draw, all game. So a British reader should not read this section as a loophole to hunt for. **You have the free first violation the NHL rations to post-icing draws, and you have it on all fifty-six of them** — one per team, per faceoff, reset each drop.

The practical consequence is real and it cuts both ways. The timing gamble the NHL lets a centre take once per icing, an IIHF centre can take on any draw in the game, and so can his opponent. Expect the centre across from you to cheat the drop far more often than a diet of NHL hockey would lead you to expect, and understand that the cost of him being caught is a re-drop rather than a substitution.

## Closing your hand on the puck is a *penalty*, not a violation

- Rule** Closing your hand on the puck is a minor penalty (Rule 67.2)
- Rule** A taker who attempts to win the draw by batting the puck with their hand takes a minor for delay of game (NHL Rule 67.2)
- Rule** Neither centre may play the puck with a hand until a third player has touched it (Rule 76.5)
- Rule** An open hand placed over the puck to conceal it is a minor (Rule 67.2(ii))
- Rule** Deliberately falling on or gathering the puck into your body is a minor (Rule 63.2(v))
- Never** Put your hands or your body on the puck in the scrum — tie up the stick and win it with your stick or skates

This is a different category entirely. Under Rule 67.2, a player who closes their hand on the puck takes a **minor penalty**. And specifically for draws: a minor for "delay of game – face-off violation" is assessed to a player taking the faceoff who "attempts to win the face-off by batting the puck with their hand."

Rule 76.5 sets the boundary: the two centres may not play the puck with their hand **until a third player from either team has at least touched it**. Once a winner of the draw is clear, normal hand-pass rules apply.

The practical line: **in the scrum after the drop, your hands and your body stay off the puck.** An open hand is not a loophole — Rule 67.2(ii) assesses a minor "*if he places his hand over the puck while it is on the ice in order to conceal it from or prevent an opponent from playing the puck.*" Nor is your body — Rule 63.2(v) assesses a minor on "*a player other than the goalkeeper who deliberately falls on or gathers the puck into his body.*" What **is** legal is tying up your opponent's stick and winning the puck with your own stick or your skates. Do not gamble on this one — it is a penalty, not a do-over.

## When your centre gets tossed — and where he never is

|               |                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>   | Any teammate then on the ice may step in (NHL Rule 76.4)                                                                                 |
| <b>Rule</b>   | The replacement must come into position quickly or risk the puck being dropped without them set (NHL Rule 76.4)                          |
| <b>Rule</b>   | No time-out shall be granted following a faceoff violation (Rule 87.1; IIHF Rule 87.1 in the same words)                                 |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Under IIHF rules — the British book at every level — a violation is a warning to the team, not an ejection (IIHF Rules 76.4, 76.6, 76.7) |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Under IIHF the warned centre stays and the draw is simply taken again (IIHF Rule 76.7)                                                   |
| <b>Rule</b>   | IIHF also counts winning the draw with your skates as a violation (IIHF Rule 76.3(VI))                                                   |
| <b>Rule</b>   | USA Hockey keeps the ejection but makes the second violation a minor on the individual (Rule 613(d))                                     |
| <b>Action</b> | Agree the designated replacement in advance, and make the plan a tie-up rather than a set play                                           |

**Under NHL rules**, when the violation is yours the centre goes and somebody else takes the draw:

- **Any teammate on the ice may step in** (Rule 76.4) — in practice, a winger.
- **They must get set quickly.** Rule 76.4: the replacement "must come into position quickly or risk having the puck dropped by the Linesperson without the player being set," or being ejected themselves, which is the second violation and therefore a bench minor.
- **Agree the backup in advance.** Every winger should know whether they are the designated replacement, and every line should have a default plan for the draw they take without their centre. That plan should almost always be a **tie-up**, not a set play.
- **No timeout can save you.** Rule 87.1: "No time-out shall be granted following a face-off violation." **IIHF Rule 87.1 says it in the same words**, so that one is true wherever you play.

⚠ **In Britain none of the above happens, because nobody is ejected from a draw.** The IIHF Official Rule Book 2025/26 is the base rule set at every level of UK hockey — the Elite League, the NIHL, the English and Scottish recreational and junior game, university hockey and the GB sides (UK and England Rules) — and it has no faceoff ejection anywhere in Rule 76. A violation is a **warning to the offending team**, and the draw is taken again with the same centre. IIHF Rule 76.7: *"A warning shall be issued to the offending team and the 'face-off' must be conducted again."* IIHF Rule 76.6, on a teammate entering the circle: *"the offending team taking the 'face-off' shall receive a warning for a 'face-off' violation."* IIHF Rule 76.4, on bad positioning: *"the Official may assess a warning for a 'face-off' violation."* Two violations by the same team on the same draw is still a bench minor (IIHF Rule 76.7).

**What that changes about how you play.** Your specialist takes every draw he lines up for — there is no "designated replacement" problem, and no reason to keep a simple back-up plan in reserve for a winger in the dot. What you are protecting instead is **the warning**, because it is the only thing between your team and a bench minor on that draw. IIHF Rule 76.4 makes the point directly: *"If a Player received a warning for a 'face-off' violation, they must come into position quickly or risk having the puck dropped by the Linesperson without the Player being set."* So the sequence to rehearse is not "who steps in" but "what we do after the warning" — and the answer is that everybody freezes, the centre takes the re-drop straight, and nobody attempts anything with timing in it.

**The IIHF also lists a violation the NHL does not have, and it deletes a technique.** IIHF Rule 76.3(VI): a violation occurs where **"one of the centers wins the face-off by using the skates."** Under NHL rules, kicking the puck back is legal; under the book you actually play, it is not. Rule 76.3 lists the skate win alongside the other violations and has the Linesperson *"assess a warning for a 'face-off' violation prior to dropping the puck."* So a skate win burns your team's warning and the *next* violation by anyone in your five is the bench minor. **Take "kick it back" out of your repertoire** — it is in the technique list below because the document is written to NHL rules, and it is not available to you. A free warning is not free twice.

**USA Hockey keeps the ejection but changes the escalation** — this flag is not yours if you play in Britain. Rule 613(d) has the same headline consequence as the NHL — *"if a player, other than the player facing off, fails to maintain their proper position, the center of their team shall be ejected from the face-off"* — so a winger still costs a draw-taker. What differs is the second violation: USA Hockey assesses *"a minor penalty for delay of game ... to the player committing the second violation"*, a minor on an individual rather than the NHL's bench minor on the team. Same two minutes off the clock, different player in the box.

Many rec, beer and youth leagues enforce faceoff violations loosely or not at all, and some simply re-drop. **In Britain the re-drop is the rule**, not a local softening of it — but how strictly the warning is issued in a Monday-night rec game is still a matter for your officials. Ask.

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## Faceoff Technique

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A draw is a closed skill: same start position, same cue, same distance, every single time. That is exactly the kind of thing humans get good at through reps.

### The stance

|                  |                                                                                                      |
|------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Technique</b> | Get low — deep knee bend, chest over the puck, weight on the balls of your feet                      |
| <b>Goal</b>      | React faster from a loaded position, and be impossible to push off the dot                           |
| <b>Position</b>  | Feet either side of the restraining lines, staggered rather than square, back foot loaded            |
| <b>Position</b>  | Square to the opponent's end, hips already cocked toward where you intend to send the puck           |
| <b>Key</b>       | Eyes on the linesperson's hand, not the opponent — watching the opponent means you are always second |

- **Get low.** This is the single most repeated instruction from coaching sources, and for two reasons: you react faster from a loaded position, and you cannot be pushed off the dot. Deep knee bend, chest over the puck, weight on the balls of your feet.
- **Feet either side of the restraining lines**, staggered rather than square, with your back foot loaded — that's the foot you'll drive off.
- **Square to the opponent's end**, as the rule requires, but with your hips already cocked toward where you intend to send the puck.
- **Eyes on the linesperson's hand, not the opponent.** This is the highest-leverage habit in the whole skill. You are reacting to the puck's release, not to your opponent's movement. Watching the opponent means you are always second.

## The grip

|                  |                                                                                                  |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Technique</b> | Bottom hand right down near the blade — that is where the leverage, speed and power come from    |
| <b>Options</b>   | Top hand halfway down the shaft or up on top of it; the coaching sources disagree, so try both   |
| <b>Technique</b> | For the reverse grip, roll your bottom hand over so your knuckles face down                      |
| <b>Read</b>      | Take the reverse grip when you have committed to a backhand pull and want raw speed and strength |
| <b>Risk</b>      | The reverse grip telegraphs, and gives you almost nothing on the forehand                        |
| <b>Options</b>   | Some players roll both hands into a "kayak paddle" grip for maximum backhand snap                |

- **Standard draw grip:** the two How To Hockey pieces cited here disagree on the top hand. Their faceoff-tips article describes "their top hand about halfway down the stick, and their bottom hand right near the blade"; their pro-tips article quotes former NHL player Jeff Serowik as "one hand on top of shaft and the other hand really low on shaft for leverage." **What both agree on is the part that matters: the bottom hand comes right down near the blade.** That is where the leverage, speed and power come from. Try both top-hand positions — neither is your normal skating grip and neither should feel like it.
- **The reverse grip (backhand grip):** roll your bottom hand over so your knuckles face down — the coaching cue from How To Hockey is to "hold the stick as if you were going to cross-check someone in the teeth." This gives you far more pulling power and quickness on the backhand, and it's what centres use when they intend to yank the puck backward hard rather than sweep it.
- **When to use the reverse grip:** when you have committed to a backhand pull and want raw speed and strength — typically defensive-zone draws you must not lose, and offensive-zone draws set up for a **one-timer** (a shot taken straight off a pass, without stopping the puck first). Its cost is that it telegraphs, and it gives you almost nothing on the forehand. A centre who lines up in a reverse grip every time is a centre who can be read.
- Some players use a two-handed "**kayak paddle**" grip — both hands rolled, stick held like a paddle — for maximum backhand snap.

## The techniques

|                  |                                                                                                                                |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>       | There is no single correct draw — the good centres own three or four                                                           |
| <b>Technique</b> | The backhand pull is the most common winner, because pulling is stronger and faster than pushing                               |
| <b>Options</b>   | Tie up their blade instead of playing the puck, turning a 1-on-1 into a scramble your wingers lean into                        |
| <b>Risk</b>      | The stick lift is the higher-reward version and it fails badly if you miss                                                     |
| <b>Read</b>      | Try the "lose it forward" play at the neutral-zone dots, where there is space behind the other centre                          |
| <b>Never</b>     | Use "lose it forward" in your own end                                                                                          |
| <b>Rule</b>      | Contact before the drop is a violation; going through the man is only legal once the faceoff is complete (Rule 76.7)           |
| <b>Rule</b>      | Kicking the puck back is legal in the NHL but a violation under IIHF Rule 76.3(VI), so it is not available anywhere in Britain |
| <b>Rule</b>      | Batting the puck out of the air is legal with the stick and a minor penalty with the hand (Rule 67.2)                          |

There is no single correct draw. There are seven or eight, and the good centres own three or four.

- **The clean backward win (the draw proper).** Sweep or yank the puck behind you to a designated teammate. This is the one that shows up on highlight reels and it is genuinely the highest-value outcome — but it is also the lowest-percentage, because it requires beating the other centre outright.
- **The backhand pull.** Rotate and pull the puck back on the backhand side, usually with the reverse grip. The most common winning technique in hockey, because the pulling motion is stronger and faster than the pushing one.
- **The forehand pull.** The same idea on the forehand. Weaker and slower than the backhand equivalent for most players, which is precisely why your handedness matters (below).
- **Tying up the stick.** Instead of playing the puck, get your blade over or under your opponent's and neutralise it. You are not winning the draw; you are ensuring **nobody** wins it, and converting a 1-on-1 into a 4-on-4 scramble that your wingers are already leaning into. Against a superior draw-taker this is the correct play, not a surrender.
- **The stick lift.** A more aggressive version: lift their blade off the ice entirely, then take the puck. Higher reward, and it fails badly if you miss.



- **Going through the man.** Drive your body into your opponent as the puck drops, taking the ice and the puck together. Beware: physical contact **before** the drop is a violation and can be a minor penalty. This only becomes legal in "the course of playing the puck after the face-off has been completed" (Rule 76.7).
- **Using your feet.** Kick the puck back to a teammate, or open your skate as a backstop so a tied-up puck squirts the right way. Legal in the NHL. **A violation under IIHF rules, and therefore not a technique available in British hockey at any level** — IIHF Rule 76.3(VI) makes it a violation where "*one of the centers wins the face-off by using the skates.*" Note the wording: it is *winning* the draw with the skates that is caught, so opening a skate as a backstop is a finer line than kicking the puck back, and neither is worth learning if this is your book. See the flag above.
- **The "lose it forward" play.** Deliberately push the puck *forward* past your opponent and skate through him onto it. Used most often at the neutral-zone dots, where there is space behind the other centre and no immediate danger if it fails. In your own end it is a bad idea; in the offensive zone it can beat a centre who is committed to pulling backward.
- **Batting it out of the air.** Advanced, and legal with the **stick** — several coaching sources describe attacking the puck mid-drop. With the **hand** it is a minor penalty (Rule 67.2). Timing this requires watching the linesperson's release, not the ice.

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## Reading and Beating Your Opponent

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### Everyone has a tell

- |               |                                                                                                  |
|---------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b> | Watch other lines' draws from the bench, not just your own                                       |
| <b>Read</b>   | A rolled-over bottom hand means a backhand pull is coming                                        |
| <b>Read</b>   | Hands high on the shaft means a sweep or a tie-up rather than a yank                             |
| <b>Read</b>   | Which foot is loaded tells you which way they intend to rotate                                   |
| <b>Read</b>   | Stick blade angle tells you where they want the puck to go                                       |
| <b>Read</b>   | A tight grip and low coiled stance means a clean-win attempt; relaxed and upright means a tie-up |

Most centres have exactly one preferred technique and one strong side. Two shifts of attention is usually all it takes to find them.

- **Watch other lines' draws, not just your own.** You get roughly 56 opportunities a game to scout the two or three centres you'll face, and most of them happen while you're on the bench.
- **Read the grip.** A rolled-over bottom hand means a backhand pull is coming. Hands high on the shaft means a sweep or a tie-up rather than a yank.
- **Read the stance.** Which foot is loaded tells you which direction they intend to rotate. Stick blade angle tells you where they want the puck to go.
- **Read the tension.** A tight grip and a low, coiled stance usually means an aggressive attempt at a clean win; a relaxed, upright posture often means they're planning to tie you up.

## Watch the hand, not the man

|                |                                                                                                             |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>     | Look at the linesperson's hand and the puck, not your opponent's stick                                      |
| <b>Goal</b>    | Turn the draw into a pure reaction-time problem, which you can train                                        |
| <b>Risk</b>    | Reacting to your opponent leaves you a step behind and open to feints                                       |
| <b>Options</b> | Some coaching sources watch the official's elbow instead, on the grounds that it moves fractionally earlier |
| <b>Read</b>    | Linespersons have tendencies too — height of drop, speed of drop, how long they hold                        |

This is the one universal. **Look at the linesperson's hand and the puck, not at your opponent's stick.** Reacting to the drop is a pure reaction-time problem you can train; reacting to your opponent means you are always one step behind, and it makes you vulnerable to feints. Some coaching sources recommend watching the official's **elbow** rather than the hand, on the grounds that the elbow moves fractionally earlier.

Linespersons also have tendencies — height of drop, speed of drop, how long they hold. Notice them.

## Vary your approach

|                  |                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>    | Change the technique, not just the target — pull one back, tie the next up, sweep the third                                                |
| <b>Risk</b>      | Win three straight draws to the same defenceman and the fourth will be jumped                                                              |
| <b>Key</b>       | Even a technique you are worse at has value if it stops an opponent pre-loading against your best one                                      |
| <b>Technique</b> | A shoulder feint, hip fake or delayed stick approach can draw an opponent into moving early                                                |
| <b>Goal</b>      | Make them move before the drop — that is a faceoff violation, and it ejects them under NHL rules                                           |
| <b>Rule</b>      | Under IIHF it warns their team instead, which is worth less on the first draw and a great deal once they have been warned (IIHF Rule 76.7) |

The counter to a scouted centre is unpredictability. If you win three straight draws pulling to the same defenceman, the fourth one will be jumped. Change the *technique*, not just the target: pull one back, tie the next one up, sweep the third. Even a technique you're worse at has value if it prevents the opponent from pre-loading against your best one. (Kicking it back is a fourth option **only under NHL rules** — see the technique list above.)

Deception belongs here too: a small feint of the shoulder, a hip fake, or a deliberately delayed stick approach can draw an opponent into moving early — which, if they move before the drop, is a faceoff violation. **What that is worth depends on your book, and the difference is large.** Under NHL rules it ejects *them*, and you now face a winger. Under the IIHF rules you play under in Britain it issues their team a warning and the draw is taken again against the same man — so drawing an opponent early is worth little the first time. It is worth a great deal the *second* time: once their team has been warned on that draw, a further violation is a bench minor, so a centre who has just been caught cheating the drop cannot afford to try anything at the re-drop. Bait him once, then take a clean, straight draw against a man who has been told he cannot move.

## Handedness and which side you're strong on

|                   |                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | Coaching sources call the strong-side draw a right-shot centre on the right side, or a left-shot on the left        |
| <b>Key</b>        | Your strong side is the circle where your natural backward pull sends the puck toward the boards                    |
| <b>Action</b>     | Take ten draws in each circle and you will know within a minute                                                     |
| <b>Risk</b>       | On your weak side the board-side pull is a forehand — slower and weaker for most players                            |
| <b>Never</b>      | Solve that by pulling to your backhand in your own end — it sends the puck to the middle, the worst place it can go |
| <b>Options</b>    | Match the circle to the centre, flip your hands, or put a left-shot and a right-shot centre out together            |

A centre's shot handedness determines which circle they're better in, and every coaching staff builds around it.

- The consensus in coaching sources (Ice Hockey Systems, Hockey's Arsenal) is that a **strong-side draw** is a **right-shot centre on the right side** of the ice, or a **left-shot centre on the left side**.
- On your **strong side**, you can pull the puck backward on your **backhand toward the boards** — the most powerful motion available to you, sending the puck to the safest part of the ice.
- On your **weak side**, that same board-side pull has to be made on the **forehand**, which is slower and weaker for most players. The alternative is to pull on your backhand — but that sends the puck toward the **middle of the ice**, which in your own end is the worst place it can go.

**Flagged:** the sources above state the mapping (right shot / right side) but do not spell out the reference frame — "right side" as you stand at the dot facing the opponent's end. That is the standard reading and it's the one used here, but the sources are not explicit about it. **The reliable self-test that doesn't depend on anyone's convention: your strong side is the circle where your natural backward pull sends the puck toward the boards.** Take ten draws in each circle and you'll know within a minute.

**What teams do about it:**

- **Match the circle to the centre.** This is why coaches send a specific centre out for a specific dot, and why the rules that let you *choose* the dot (after an icing, or starting a power play) are more valuable than they look.
- **Flip your hands.** Some NHL centres — Vincent Trocheck is the frequently-cited example — take weak-side draws holding the stick the other way round, recreating strong-side mechanics on the wrong side of the ice. It is a real technique, and it is a lot of work: you are learning a second, mirror-image skill. Worth it if you take 1,000 draws a season; probably not if you take 100.
- **Use two centres.** Many teams have a left-shot and a right-shot centre on the ice together in key situations, and simply swap who takes the draw depending on the circle. This is free, and almost no rec team does it.

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## Full Five-Player Alignments

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**This entire section describes coaching choices, not rules of hockey.** Every team's faceoff alignment is different, and the differences are large. What follows is the most common default at each location, with realistic alternatives named. **Find out what your team runs before your first shift** — and specifically, find out what the *call* is for each draw. A faceoff alignment that half the line is guessing at is worse than no alignment.

The defaults below assume the house system used throughout this guide: a **low zone collapse (zone) defensive-zone coverage** and a **2-1-2 forecheck** (see Defensive Zone Coverage and Forechecking Systems).

## Defensive-zone draws

|                   |                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Priority</b>   | Do not lose this cleanly — a tie-up is acceptable, a clean loss to their strong-side point is not                               |
| <b>Position</b>   | Boards-side winger on the outside hash mark; inside winger on the inside hash mark, facing the slot                             |
| <b>Position</b>   | Boards-side defenceman behind and outside that winger; slot defenceman in front of the goalie                                   |
| <b>Action</b>     | On a clean win, pull to the boards-side defenceman to rim it out or hit the boards-side winger                                  |
| <b>Action</b>     | On a clean loss, both wingers go to the points on the drop, not after they see where the puck went                              |
| <b>Convention</b> | That points call is the house zone system — under man-to-man each winger follows his assigned man, so ask which your team plays |
| <b>Action</b>     | On a tie-up everyone jumps; the inside winger and the boards-side defenceman are usually closest                                |
| <b>Never</b>      | Pull the puck to the middle — a draw won into the slot is barely better than a loss                                             |

The highest-stakes alignment in hockey. It has to work on a win, a loss and a tie-up, because you get all three.

### The standard setup:

- **Centre** — in the dot. Your job is stated simply: **do not lose this cleanly**. A tie-up is an acceptable outcome; a clean loss to their strong-side point is not.
- **Boards-side winger** — on the **outside hash mark**, the one nearer the boards. Default is the winger whose natural side matches the circle. You are the primary breakout outlet on a win and the first man to the opposing point on a loss.
- **Inside winger** — on the **inside hash mark**, facing the **slot** (the lane of ice straight out from the net between the two faceoff circles — the *high slot* runs from the dots up to the top of the circles, the *goalmouth* is the immediate net front). You have the harder job: on a loss you must get to the far point, and on a scramble you are the closest body to the most dangerous ice.
- **Boards-side defenceman** — behind and outside the boards-side winger, near the hash marks, ready to retrieve anything pulled back to the wall or to get behind the net.
- **Slot defenceman** — in the slot in front of the goalie, responsible for the net front and for blocking a point shot.

**Common variation worth knowing:** many teams set their defencemen on their "**off**" **sides** for defensive-zone draws — the right-shot D on the left boards and vice versa — so that a puck pulled back to the wall arrives on their forehand and the breakout pass up the boards is a forehand pass. It costs you a little on defensive coverage and gains you a lot on the exit. Ask which your team does.

#### **On a clean win:**

- Pull to the **boards-side defenceman**, who rims it out or hits the boards-side winger for a direct exit. This is the default because the boards are the safe half of the ice.
- The **wingers release** the moment the puck is secured — you are not needed in the battle, you are needed out on the wall **between the hash marks and the goal line**, which is the outlet spot Breakouts owns. That is at or just below the dot line, roughly twenty feet out from the goal line — not thirty feet up the wall, which would put you above the outlet and make the pass long, flat and into your back.
- **Never pull the puck to the middle.** A defensive-zone draw won into the slot is barely better than a loss.

#### **On a clean loss:**

- **Both wingers go straight to the points.** In the house zone system assumed here, this is the call, and you make it on the drop rather than after you see where the puck went — it is the only thing standing between you and a shot from the top of the circle with your goalie screened. **Under man-to-man coverage the job changes:** each winger takes the specific opponent they were assigned before the draw and follows him, which may mean staying low if his man stays low. A hybrid ("zone with man-on-man in the low slot") splits the difference — the wingers still release to the points, but the low defender stays glued to a specific body. Ask which one your team plays.
- **Centre finds their centre.** Having lost the draw, your job is now to cover the man who beat you, who will be heading for the **high slot** (the area from the faceoff dots up to the top of the circles) or the **net front** (the immediate goalmouth).
- **Slot defenceman holds the net front and blocks the lane.** Do not chase the puck to the point; your winger has it.
- **Boards-side defenceman takes the strong-side corner or half-wall** (the **half-wall** is the boards level with the faceoff dot — about 20 feet out from the goal line (Rule 1.9), so barely a third of the way to the blue line, which sits 64 feet out (Rule 1.5). It is *not* the same thing as the *point*, which is up at the blue line).

#### **On a tie-up (the most common outcome):**

- **Everyone jumps.** A tied-up draw is a loose puck in a two-foot area with eight players around it, and it belongs to whoever moves first. This is the single most under-coached moment in hockey: half the players on the ice wait to see what happens.
- The **inside winger** and the **boards-side defenceman** are usually the two closest bodies and should be the two who attack it.
- **Call it.** "Loose!" from anyone with eyes on the puck. See On-Ice Communication.

## Offensive-zone draws

|                 |                                                                                                           |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b> | Strong-side defenceman at the point, feet already set and stick already loaded — this is the shooter      |
| <b>Position</b> | Weak-side defenceman at the far point, holding the line as the safety against a counterattack             |
| <b>Action</b>   | Centre wins it back rather than forward                                                                   |
| <b>Read</b>     | The inside winger is the usual target for a quick pull-back, and the net-front driver if the draw is lost |
| <b>Priority</b> | On a clean loss the priority flips instantly to not conceding a counterattack                             |
| <b>Key</b>      | An offensive-zone tie-up is a free 50-50 puck in the other team's end — a good outcome, not a failure     |

The one place in hockey where you get to run a genuine set play with a stationary defence and a known start position.

### The standard setup:

- **Centre** — in the dot, trying to win it back rather than forward.
- **Boards-side winger** — outside hash mark, ready to attack the wall or spin off it.
- **Inside winger** — inside hash mark, the most common recipient of a quick pull-back for a shot from the circle, and the primary net-front driver if the draw is lost.
- **Strong-side defenceman** — at the point on the draw side, **feet already set, stick already loaded**. This is the shooter.
- **Weak-side defenceman** — at the far point, holding the line as the safety against a counterattack.

**On a clean win:** run the set play (see below). The important thing is that the shooter's feet are already planted — this is one of the very few shots in hockey where you don't have to receive, settle and set. That is worth more than a slightly better shooting angle.



**On a clean loss:** the priority flips instantly to **not conceding a counterattack**. The weak-side defenceman holds; the strong-side defenceman recovers to the line; the wingers pressure the puck rather than retreating, because you have four skaters above the puck and their exit options are limited. This is the moment a 2-1-2 forecheck is at its most effective, because everyone is already in position for it.

**On a tie-up:** attack the puck with the two nearest bodies and keep the two defencemen honest at the line. An offensive-zone tie-up is a free 50-50 puck in the other team's end — a good outcome, not a failure.

## Neutral-zone draws

|                 |                                                                                             |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b> | Both wingers wide in their lanes, level with or just behind the dot                         |
| <b>Position</b> | Both defencemen back toward your own blue line, one either side of the middle               |
| <b>Action</b>   | On a win advance the puck immediately, and look to carry or pass into the zone with control |
| <b>Risk</b>     | A won neutral-zone draw that ends in a dump-in has produced very little                     |
| <b>Action</b>   | On a loss, gap up immediately and defend the rush                                           |
| <b>Mindset</b>  | This is where you experiment — a lost neutral-zone draw costs you almost nothing            |

The lowest-stakes draws, and the ones most worth taking a risk on.

### The standard setup:

- **Centre** in the dot; **both wingers** wide, level with or just behind the dot, in their lanes.
- **Both defencemen** back toward your own blue line, one either side of the middle, ready to defend a rush if the draw goes the wrong way.

**On a win:** advance the puck immediately. Neutral-zone possession is worth having but it decays fast — **Daniel Weinberger**, writing at Hockey Graphs, found that neutral-zone faceoff wins mostly turn into **dump-ins**, and that possessions containing a dump-in produced 5.5 shots and 0.17 **expected goals** per 100 possessions versus 32 shots and 0.68 expected goals for those without one. (*Expected goals* is a model estimate of how many goals an average shooter would score from those shots, given where and how they were taken — it values chance quality, not just chance count.) ⚠ **Note the league before you carry these numbers anywhere.**

Weinberger's data is **InStat tracking of the 2018-19 Swiss National League**, not the NHL — he says so in the article — so this is the one set of figures in this document that is not measured on the league the rest of it is written to. **The four figures are quoted exactly as the article**

**gives them** — but note what a roughly six-fold gap implies: this is one author's tracked sample of possessions following neutral-zone faceoff wins in one league in one season, not a league-wide measurement, and part of the gap is selection rather than causation (a possession that never generated a controlled entry is *why* it ended in a dump-in). Treat the direction as solid and the multiple as approximate. A won neutral-zone draw that ends in a dump-in has produced very little. Look to carry or pass into the zone with control. See Zone Entries.

**On a loss:** your defencemen are the whole plan. Gap up immediately and defend the rush — see Defending the Rush.

**Why this is where you experiment:** a lost neutral-zone draw costs you almost nothing. It is the right place to try the "lose it forward" play, the weak-side flipped grip you're learning, or a technique you want your opponent to see now so it's in their head for the defensive-zone draw later.

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## Set Plays

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Set plays off draws are the closest hockey gets to American football. They also fail constantly, and the reason is almost always complexity rather than execution.

Everything in this section is a **coaching choice**. These are the common patterns; your team's playbook will differ.

### Offensive-zone plays

- Options** The D one-timer, the winger walk-out, the tip play, or a board-side variation
- Key** The point of the D one-timer is that the shooter's feet are set before the puck moves
- Risk** Every defensive alignment expects the D one-timer, so someone must clear the inside winger's shooting lane
- Read** Use the winger walk-out against a team that immediately pressures the point
- Options** The tip play is the safest, because a point shot into traffic rarely turns into a counterattack
- Risk** Board-side loops and swaps work precisely once per game against an attentive opponent

**The D one-timer.** The centre pulls the puck straight back to the strong-side defenceman, who shoots first-time. The whole point is that the shooter's feet are set and traffic is already in place before the puck moves. Its weakness is that it is the play every penalty kill and every defensive alignment expects — the inside winger's shooting lane needs to be cleared by someone, usually the net-front player stepping across.

**The winger walk-out.** The centre pulls the puck to the inside winger in the circle, who takes a stride toward the middle and shoots or feeds the slot. Better than the D one-timer against a team that immediately pressures the point, because you're attacking the space they vacated.

**The tip play.** The pull goes to the point, but the intended outcome is a deflection rather than a clean shot — someone screens, someone tips. Lower expected value per shot, higher rebound and chaos value, and it works when the goalie can see everything else you do. This is also the safest play, because a point shot into traffic rarely turns into a counterattack.

**The board-side variations.** Coaching sources describe plays where the strong-side winger loops **over the top of the circle to the weak-side hash mark** for a one-timer, or where the winger and defenceman **swap positions** before the draw to create an unfamiliar passing lane. These work precisely once per game against an attentive opponent.

## Defensive-zone plays

|                |                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Options</b> | The quick rim, the direct exit, the reverse, or off the glass and out                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Key</b>     | Every opposing forechecker is stationary at the whistle, so a hard rim or a direct exit is past them before they move                                                                                     |
| <b>Rule</b>    | Under NHL, KHL and IIHF rules your goalie may only play the puck behind the goal line inside the trapezoid (Rule 1.8; penalty 27.8 / 63.2(viii))                                                          |
| <b>Rule</b>    | 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 — either way, keep your goalie inside it |
| <b>Read</b>    | Play it as though it binds — your goalie stays inside the trapezoid, so a rim that dies in the corner is yours to fetch, not theirs                                                                       |
| <b>Rule</b>    | USA Hockey has no trapezoid, but Rule 614(c) bars the goalie covering the puck in the corners                                                                                                             |
| <b>Never</b>   | Rim it halfway — hard enough to reach your winger, or tight enough for the goalie to stop it behind the net                                                                                               |
| <b>Read</b>    | Use the reverse against a team that overloads the boards side                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Action</b>  | Call off the glass and out when you are tired, pinned, or a man down                                                                                                                                      |

**The quick rim.** Win the puck to the boards-side defenceman, who rims it hard around the boards immediately. No possession, no risk, and you are out. What makes it better than it looks is the standing start: every opposing forechecker is stationary at the whistle, so a hard rim is past them before anyone is moving. **The trapezoid does bear on this play, and the goalie it constrains is yours.** On a defensive-zone draw your own goalie is twenty feet away, and under NHL, KHL and IIHF rules he may only play a puck behind the goal line inside the marked trapezoid (Rules 1.8 for the geometry, 27.8 / 63.2(viii) for the penalty). So a rim that dies in your own corner is not his to fetch — a defenceman has to go and get it, under pressure, with his back to the forecheck. ⚠️ **Under USA Hockey, which is what most North American rec and youth hockey runs on, there is no trapezoid at all**, so the same rim *is* your goalie's to fetch — he simply may not freeze it out there, because Rule 614(c) restricts covering the puck to the "goalkeeper's privileged area", which excludes the corners. That reverses the play: check your book before you decide who chases a dead rim. Rules Primer owns both rules. **Rim it hard enough to carry all the way round to your winger, or tight enough that the goalie can legally stop it behind the net and leave it.** Never in between. Full treatment in the trapezoid-and-retrieval section of Breakouts. 🇬🇧 **In England and Wales, treat that as unsettled.** The IIHF book carries 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. Play it as though it binds — your goalie stays inside the trapezoid, so a rim that dies in the corner is yours to fetch.

**The direct exit.** Win the puck to the boards-side defenceman, who hits the boards-side winger already breaking up the wall. Retains possession, and it is fast — the whole play happens before the opposing forecheck is organised, because they are also stationary at the whistle.

**The reverse.** Win the puck behind you and let a defenceman take it behind the net to change the angle. Good against a team that overloads the boards side on defensive-zone draws.

**Off the glass and out.** Not a play so much as an outcome, but it should be the explicit call when you're tired, pinned, or a man down. Nobody has ever been beaten by a puck in the neutral zone.

## Keeping it simple enough to work

|                   |                                                                                                                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | Two or three plays maximum, per zone                                                                                         |
| <b>Action</b>     | One-word calls from the centre at the dot, acknowledged by everyone — a play nobody heard is not a play                      |
| <b>Key</b>        | Every play needs a defined failure branch: if we lose it, X does Y                                                           |
| <b>Never</b>      | Get clever when there is confusion, no call, or a replacement taking the draw — tie up in your own end, point shot in theirs |

The failure mode is universal: teams install six plays, run each of them badly, and the players spend the drop trying to remember which one is on.

- **Two or three plays maximum**, per zone. A team that runs one play excellently beats a team that runs six adequately.
- **One-word calls**. The centre calls it at the dot; everyone acknowledges. A play nobody heard is not a play.
- **Every play needs a defined failure branch**. "If we lose it, X does Y." Most set plays are drawn up only for the win, which is why teams that lose an offensive-zone draw look so disorganised.
- **The default is always the simple one**. If there's confusion, no call, or a replacement taking the draw: tie-up in your own end, point shot in theirs.

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## Special Teams Faceoffs

Special-teams draws are about 10 per game (9.6 in 2024-25, 10.1 in 2025-26, from NHL official data) — a small share of the total, and a hugely disproportionate share of the ones that matter. See Special Teams for the formations themselves.

## Power-play draws

|                 |                                                                                                          |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>     | The team awarded the power play chooses which end-zone dot the draw starts at (Rule 76.2)                |
| <b>Rule</b>     | USA Hockey gives no dot choice here or after an icing (Rules 612(b), 624(a)); the IIHF follows the NHL   |
| <b>Action</b>   | Where you have the choice, pick your centre's strong side or the side your one-timer threat shoots from  |
| <b>Key</b>      | The entry you avoid is worth more than the draw you win                                                  |
| <b>Priority</b> | Win the draw, or make sure you do not lose it cleanly — a tie-up that keeps the puck in the zone is fine |
| <b>Never</b>    | Fire a fancy set play that ends in a clearance                                                           |

**The team awarded the power play chooses which end-zone dot the draw starts at** (Rule 76.2). Use it: pick your centre's strong side, or the side your one-timer threat shoots from. A surprising number of teams don't think about this at all.

**⚠ USA Hockey gives you no such choice — neither here nor after an icing.** Rule 612(b) sends a penalty draw simply to "a defending zone face-off spot of the offending team", and Rule 624(a) sends an icing draw to "an end zone face-off spot in the defending zone of the offending team". Neither rule offers a selection, and the phrase "choice of" appears nowhere in the 2025-29 book in this context. **The IIHF does follow the NHL and give you the choice, so this right is yours everywhere in Britain** — IIHF Rule 76.2: "*The team awarded the 'Power-Play' will have the choice of which end zone spot the 'face-off' will take place at to start the 'Power-Play'.*" So if you play North American rec or youth hockey, everything below about picking your dot is unavailable to you — the official picks it, and your preparation goes into being ready for either side rather than into choosing.

League-wide, power-play units win about **54% of their draws** (53.6% in 2024-25, 54.4% in 2025-26, computed from NHL official data), which reflects both better personnel and the fact that the kill often has a winger in the dot.

**The entry you avoid is worth more than the draw you win.** This is the real argument for offensive-zone power-play draws, and it isn't about the set play at all. If you win the draw, you keep the zone. If you lose it and the puck gets cleared, you have to break out, regroup, and re-enter against a **set** penalty kill standing on its blue line — the hardest thing to do in hockey. Zone-entry research is consistent that controlled entries generate roughly **twice** the shot volume of

dump-ins, and a power play forced to re-enter against a set kill mostly gets dump-ins. A won draw is worth perhaps one extra possession's shot volume; a lost draw that costs you the zone can cost you a third of your two minutes.

So on the power play: **win the draw, or make sure you don't lose it cleanly.** A tie-up that keeps the puck in the zone is a fine power-play faceoff outcome. Firing a fancy set play that ends in a clearance is not.

## Penalty-kill draws

|                |                                                                                                                               |
|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mindset</b> | You are not trying to create — you are trying to end the possession                                                           |
| <b>Risk</b>    | A defensive-zone draw shorthanded is the most dangerous faceoff in hockey                                                     |
| <b>Rule</b>    | You may ice the puck freely while shorthanded (Rule 81.6), so a won draw is a penalty-free clear                              |
| <b>Rule</b>    | USA Hockey grants that exemption only at Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult (Rule 624(b)(1)) |
| <b>Rule</b>    | NHL Rule 81.6 withdraws it from a team shorthanded by a major that has left nobody on the penalty bench                       |
| <b>Rule</b>    | IIHF Rule 81.6 carries no such carve-out, so in Britain the shorthanded icing exemption is unqualified (IIHF Rule 81.6)       |
| <b>Key</b>     | A tie-up is a win here too — anything but their point man shooting into a screen is acceptable                                |
| <b>Action</b>  | Put your best draw man out even if he is not a natural killer                                                                 |

Everything is inverted. You are not trying to create; you are trying to end the possession.

- **A defensive-zone draw shorthanded is the most dangerous faceoff in hockey.** You are one man down, in your own end, against a set unit with a rehearsed play and a shooter with his feet planted.
- **Winning it clean is enormous — where the shorthanded icing exemption applies.** You may **ice the puck freely while shorthanded** (Rule 81.6), so a won draw shorthanded is a guaranteed, penalty-free clear — and a chance to change tired killers. (How much time that burns depends entirely on how quickly they retrieve and re-enter; no published figure puts a number on it, so don't trust the "fifteen seconds" figure you sometimes hear.) There is no other situation in hockey where a won faceoff so directly converts into time off the clock. **Two carve-outs before you plan the shift around it**, both owned by Special Teams: USA Hockey gives the 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* that has left nobody on the penalty bench. Below those USA Hockey levels the won draw still has to be cleared legally. **Neither carve-out is yours in Britain.** IIHF Rule 81.6 grants the exemption in one sentence — *"If the puck was so shot by a Player of a side below the numerical strength of the opposing team, play shall continue, and the 'icing' violation shall not be called"* — and then says nothing further about majors or empty penalty benches. So the won shorthanded draw converts into a free clear under the IIHF book without qualification, which makes this one of the few places in this document where the British reader has the *simpler* rule rather than the more complicated one.

- **A tie-up is a win here too.** Any outcome that isn't "their point man shoots into a screen" is acceptable.
- **Put your best draw man out even if he isn't a natural killer.** The draw is worth more than the twenty seconds of coverage.

## 4-on-4 and 3-on-3

|                   |                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | 4-on-4 is two forwards and two defencemen, or three forwards and one, depending on the coach                           |
| <b>Priority</b>   | At 4-on-4 keep both back players honest — a lost draw is a genuine odd-man threat                                      |
| <b>Key</b>        | 3-on-3 draws are close to the highest-leverage moment in the game, because a loss is often a chance within ten seconds |
| <b>Rule</b>       | The five-second setup limit is not enforced in overtime (Rule 76.3) — use the time                                     |

- **4-on-4** — two forwards and two defencemen, or three forwards and one defenceman depending on the coach. The ice is enormous and a lost draw is a genuine odd-man threat, so the alignment is generally more conservative than at even strength: keep both back players honest.
  - **3-on-3 overtime** — draws are close to the highest-leverage moment in the game, because a lost draw at 3-on-3 is often a scoring chance within ten seconds and the game ends the moment somebody scores. Note that in overtime **the five-second setup limit is not enforced** (Rule 76.3), so you have time to get this exactly right. Use it.
-



# Situational Faceoffs

## After an icing

- |               |                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>   | The team that iced cannot change lines (Rules 81.4, 82.1) and cannot take a time-out (Rule 87.1)                                             |
| <b>Rule</b>   | The freeze falls on the team that iced, so the home team keeps last change when the visitors ice it (Rule 82.1)                              |
| <b>Rule</b>   | The IIHF imposes both restrictions in the NHL's words; USA Hockey imposes neither (Rules 624, 204, 636(f))                                   |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Under NHL and IIHF rules the attacking team picks the dot (Rule 81.2); USA Hockey gives no choice (Rule 624(a))                              |
| <b>Rule</b>   | The first faceoff violation after an icing ejects nobody's centre, on either team (NHL Rule 76.4)                                            |
| <b>Rule</b>   | The IIHF book has no post-icing carve-out and needs none — in Britain the first violation is a warning on every draw (IIHF Rules 76.6, 76.7) |
| <b>Action</b> | Play fast — their disadvantage is fatigue, and it evaporates the moment they get to breathe                                                  |
| <b>Action</b> | When you iced it, get the puck deep or off the glass at the first opportunity; nothing clever                                                |

The single most exploitable situation in the game, and it works in both directions.

### When they iced it:

- **They cannot change lines** (Rules 81.4 and 82.1), and **they cannot take a timeout** (Rule 87.1). Whoever is on the ice for them, stays on the ice — and they are usually tired, because teams ice the puck when they are pinned. **This one travels to the IIHF book intact** — Rules 81.4 and 87.1 impose both restrictions in the NHL's own words — so it is available to you in British and European league hockey. **USA Hockey imposes neither** (Rule 624 restricts no substitution, Rule 204 gives the normal change windows, Rule 636(f) attaches no icing condition to time-outs), so under that book there is no edge here at all.
- **You can change; they cannot.** The team that iced is frozen — Rule 82.1: "*A team that is in violation of... Rule 81 – Icing shall not be permitted to make any player substitutions prior to the ensuing face-off.*" So you get to answer whoever they are stuck with, which is one of the largest matchup edges available to a coach, and it lasts one shift.

**And this holds at home as well as on the road.** Rule 82.1's other clause is often quoted short, and quoted short it looks like a problem: the home team may make any desired substitution "*except in cases following an icing*" — whose icing? The full sentence is "*The home team may then make any desired substitution, except in cases following an icing, which does not result in the delay of the game.*" That exception is the same bar the rule spells out later — "*A team that is in violation of Rule 63.8 – Delaying the Game or Rule 81 – Icing shall not be permitted to make any player substitutions prior to the ensuing face-off*" — and that Rule 81.4 repeats word for word: it falls on **the team that iced the puck**, not on both benches. So if the visitors ice it, the home team changes normally and keeps last change; if the home team ices it, the home team is frozen and the visitors get the free matchup. See Special Teams for the same point from the special-teams side.

- **You choose the dot — under NHL and IIHF rules, so this one is yours in Britain.** Since 2019-20 the attacking team picks which of the two end-zone dots the draw happens at (Rule 81.2), and IIHF Rule 81.2 says the same in one line: "*Following an 'icing', the attacking team will have the choice of which end zone dot the 'face-off' will take place.*" Pick your centre's strong side. **Under USA Hockey there is no choice** (Rule 624(a) sends it to a defending-zone spot, full stop).
- **Play fast.** The advantage is their fatigue, and it evaporates the moment the whistle-to-whistle stoppage lets them breathe. Win the draw and attack immediately.

**When you iced it:** you are tired, stuck, in your own end, and cannot rest. Get the puck deep or off the glass at the first opportunity; nothing clever. Remember that **the first faceoff violation after an icing does not eject the centre** (Rule 76.4) — you have one free warning. So does the other team, so do not count on their centre being tossed either. **In Britain you get that free warning on this draw and every other one**, because the IIHF book has no ejection to make an exception from; see "The icing exception" above.

## In the last minute

|                 |                                                                                                            |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>     | The five-second setup limit is not enforced in the final two minutes of regulation (Rule 76.3)             |
| <b>Read</b>     | Expect more re-drops and more violations called                                                            |
| <b>Key</b>      | A defensive-zone draw protecting a one-goal lead late is worth more than the previous fifty draws combined |
| <b>Action</b>   | With a lead, accept the tie-up — a scramble that burns eight seconds beats a 50-50 clean-win attempt       |
| <b>Priority</b> | Get the alignment right before you get the play right                                                      |

- **The five-second setup limit is not enforced** in the final two minutes of regulation (Rule 76.3), so both centres will take their time and the linesperson will manage the alignment more carefully. Expect more re-drops and more violations called.
- **Everything is about the location.** A defensive-zone draw protecting a one-goal lead with 40 seconds left is worth more than the previous 50 draws combined, because there is no time to recover from losing it.
- **This is where you accept the tie-up.** With a lead, a scramble that burns eight seconds is a better outcome than a 50-50 attempt at a clean win.
- **Get the alignment right before you get the play right.** Late-game draws are lost to confusion more often than to the other centre.

## After a timeout

|             |                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Read</b> | Expect the opponent to have a plan too, and expect it to differ from their default                                                                                                         |
| <b>Rule</b> | No time-out is granted following a faceoff violation (Rule 87.1)                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Rule</b> | No time-out for the defensive team following an icing, after their goalie stops a shot from beyond the centre red line, or after a defender accidentally dislodges the net (NHL Rule 87.1) |
| <b>Rule</b> | USA Hockey attaches no icing condition to its one 60-second time-out (Rule 636(f))                                                                                                         |
| <b>Rule</b> | IIHF Rule 87.1 carries both restrictions; USA Hockey Rule 636(f) carries neither and gives sixty seconds                                                                                   |

A timeout buys both teams the same thing: a rest and a chance to draw up the alignment. So expect the opponent to have a plan too, and expect it to be different from their default.

Note the restrictions (Rule 87.1): **no timeout after a faceoff violation**, and **no timeout for the defensive team following an icing** or after their goalie causes a stoppage from a shot beyond the centre red line. So a team cannot ice the puck and then buy itself a rest — the two rules work together, which is exactly why icing is punished the way it is. **IIHF Rule 87.1 carries both restrictions in the same words**, so this is the position in British and European league hockey too. **USA Hockey Rule 636(f) carries neither**, and gives a sixty-second timeout rather than thirty.

## With the goalie pulled

|                 |                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>     | The goalkeeper may not participate in a faceoff (Rule 76.1)                                                                       |
| <b>Rule</b>     | A team that pulled its goalie may still substitute after an icing to put the goalie back in (Rule 81.4)                           |
| <b>Rule</b>     | The other two exceptions to the no-change rule are an injured player, and a penalty that changes on-ice strength (NHL Rule 81.4)  |
| <b>Rule</b>     | IIHF Rule 81.4 lists a fourth — a player with a broken skate — so in Britain there are four ways off the ice after your own icing |
| <b>Position</b> | The extra attacker goes to the net front or the high slot, with both defencemen at the points                                     |
| <b>Priority</b> | The centre must win it back cleanly — there is no safe outlet and no recovery from a loss                                         |
| <b>Key</b>      | Defending against a pulled goalie, winning the draw effectively ends the game                                                     |

- **The goalkeeper may not participate in a faceoff** (Rule 76.1) — a non-issue when they're on the bench, but worth knowing.
- **A team that pulled its goalie may still substitute after an icing** (Rule 81.4) — specifically to put the goalie back in. That is one of **three** exceptions to the no-change rule; the other two are replacing an injured player, and any penalty that changes the on-ice strength of either team. **The IIHF book lists four.** IIHF Rule 81.4 permits a substitution "*to replace a goalkeeper who had been substituted for an extra attacker, to replace an injured Player, a Player with a broken skate, or when a penalty has been assessed which affects the on-ice strength of either team.*" The broken skate is not in the NHL's list, and it is a real escape from an otherwise frozen bench — worth knowing, and worth not abusing, because the officials read the same sentence you do. (The same list is repeated in IIHF Rule 82.1 *without* the broken skate; 81.4 is the rule specific to icing and is the one to work from.)

- **Six skaters changes the alignment entirely.** The extra attacker usually goes to the net front or the high slot, and both defencemen are at the points. The centre is under maximum pressure to win it back cleanly, because there is no safe outlet and no recovery from a loss.
- **Defending against a pulled goalie:** win the draw and the game is effectively over — you get an empty net at the other end. This is the single highest-leverage faceoff in hockey and it should get the most practice time of any of them, which in most organisations it does not.

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## How to Practise Faceoffs

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Here is the case, plainly. **A faceoff is the only meaningful action in hockey with a fixed starting position, a fixed cue, a fixed distance, and a binary outcome.** Everything else — a shot, a pass, a battle, a gap — happens from a different position every time. Faceoffs are a closed skill in an open-skill sport. Closed skills respond to repetition faster than anything else.

The 22-point spread between the best and worst NHL centres cited at the top of this document is not a talent gradient. Faceoff percentage is one of the few statistics in hockey where the people at the top are, mostly, the people who worked at it.

### What actually to do

- |                 |                                                                                                          |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>   | Reps in pairs with a real drop — correct height, unpredictable timing, because you are training reaction |
| <b>Action</b>   | End every practice with ten minutes of draws, both circles, both grips                                   |
| <b>Priority</b> | Practise the technique you are worst at — your weak-side draws are where the points are                  |
| <b>Action</b>   | Rehearse alignments with all five skaters: run the win, run the loss, run the tie-up                     |
| <b>Action</b>   | Have every winger take draws in practice, because every winger will take one in a game                   |
| <b>Key</b>      | Teach your wingers the encroachment rule — thirty seconds, and the highest return in this document       |

- **Reps, in pairs, with a real drop.** Not a coach handing the puck over — someone dropping it from the correct height with unpredictable timing. Prediction is the enemy; you are training reaction.
- **End every practice with draws.** Ten minutes at the end of the session, both circles, both grips. This is the standard advice from coaching sources and it works because it is

repeatable and nobody has to plan it.

- **Practise the technique you're worst at.** Everyone drills their strong-side backhand pull because it feels good. Your weak-side draws are where the points are.
- **Rehearse alignments, not just the draw.** Have all five skaters on the ice. Run the win, run the loss, run the tie-up. Most faceoff goals against come from four players not knowing what to do after the puck moves, not from the centre losing it.
- **Practise as the replacement.** Every winger should take draws in practice, because every winger will take one in a game after their centre is tossed — and some of you will be moved to centre permanently, which Switching Positions covers.
- **Off-ice: grip and hand speed.** Coaching sources recommend wrist and grip strengthening and hand-eye work (dribbling a golf ball with a stick is the classic). The premise those recommendations rest on is that a draw is decided in a fraction of a second and is a hand-speed event before it is a strength event — **coaching craft; there is no published measurement of faceoff reaction times, so do not quote a figure for it.** See Conditioning and Recovery.
- **Scout from the bench.** Watch the opposing centres take draws while you're resting. This is free, and almost nobody does it.
- **Teach your wingers the encroachment rule.** Highest return on investment of anything in this document, and it takes thirty seconds.

See Practice and Development for how to structure deliberate practice generally.

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## Common Mistakes

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- **Chasing your faceoff percentage instead of the important draws.** Raw faceoff percentage explains about 6% of the variation in team results. The defensive-zone draw on the penalty kill explains rather more.
- **Wingers creeping over the hash marks.** It ejects your **centre**, not you, and it happens on the draws where you can least afford it. **Under the IIHF book you play under in Britain it spends your team's one warning instead**, which puts the whole five one mistake from a bench minor. Both skates outside the line; touching the line is fine.
- **Waiting to see what happens on a tie-up.** Most draws end in a scramble, and scrambles are won by whoever moves on the drop rather than after it.
- **Watching your opponent instead of the linesperson's hand.** If you're reacting to them, you're second.

- **Winning a defensive-zone draw into the middle of the ice.** A puck pulled to the slot in your own end is barely better than a loss.
- **Standing still after the draw.** The wingers' jobs — points on a loss, wall on a win — start on the drop, not after the puck is settled.
- **Using the same technique every time.** Three straight wins to the same defenceman guarantees the fourth gets jumped.
- **Trying something clever with the replacement taker.** Your centre is out and a second violation is a bench minor — a minor on the individual under USA Hockey Rule 613(d), which costs you the same skater. Tie it up. **Under IIHF rules there is no replacement taker at all**, but the same restraint applies to your own centre after a warning: take the re-drop straight.
- **Putting a hand or your body on the puck in the scrum.** An open hand over the puck is a minor (Rule 67.2(ii)) and so is falling on it or gathering it into your body (Rule 63.2(v)). Tie up the stick and win it with your stick or skates instead.
- **Not choosing your dot, where you have one.** Under NHL and IIHF rules you choose after an icing and at the start of a power play, and most teams never think about it. **Under USA Hockey you get no choice at all** — Rules 624(a) and 612(b) fix the spot — so check your book before you build a routine on it.
- **Joining a post-whistle scrum in the offensive zone.** If your point men come inside the circle's outer edge, the draw is moved to the neutral zone and you've thrown away the zone.
- **Practising only your strong side.** That's the one you're already good at.

## Key Takeaways

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1. There are about **56 faceoffs a game** and most of them barely matter — faceoff percentage explains only around 6% of the variation in team **points percentage** across eleven NHL seasons. Ten to fifteen a game matter enormously. Say the honest version, then spend your attention on the situational draws.
2. **Know all nine spots, and know what sends the draw to each.** Knowing where the next draw will be lets you be there first — and under **NHL and IIHF** rules, after an icing or at the start of a power play, **you get to choose the dot** — choose your centre's strong side. **USA Hockey gives no dot choice in either case** (Rules 624(a), 612(b)), so find out which book you are in.
3. **At eight of the nine spots the defending player puts their stick down first under NHL rules — and the attacking player under USA Hockey rules;** only at centre ice, in both books, does the visitor go first. Going second means seeing the other blade angle

before you show yours, so **the advantage of going second belongs to the attacking team in the NHL and to the defending team under USA Hockey** — it is exactly reversed (NHL Rule 76.4; USA Hockey Rule 613(a)). Work out which book you are in before you build a habit on it. And the attacking team's other four skaters must set their positions before the defending team counters.

4. **A winger's encroachment ejects the CENTRE** under NHL rules, and **costs your team its one warning** under the IIHF rules Britain plays by (see 6). Both skates outside the circle and outside the hash marks; touching the line is legal, crossing it is not — the positioning standard is word-for-word the same in both books. Tell your linemates — it is the cheapest improvement available to any team.
  5. **Two violations by the same team on the same draw is a bench minor** — under USA Hockey Rule 613(d) it is instead a minor on the individual who committed the second violation — so the replacement taker plays it simple. And a hand or a body on the puck in the scrum is a **minor penalty**, not a faceoff violation — win it with your stick or your skates.
  6. **Under IIHF rules there is no ejection** — a violation is a warning to the team and the draw is taken again, and winning a draw with your skates is itself a violation. **That is the rulebook every level of British hockey is played under**, so for a UK reader this replaces the ejection rules above rather than qualifying them: nobody is thrown out of a draw, you get one free violation on every draw rather than only after an icing, and "kick it back" is not a technique you own. See UK and England Rules. Know which rulebook you're under.
  7. **Watch the linesperson's hand, not your opponent.** You are training a reaction, not a duel.
  8. **Your handedness decides your strong circle.** Your strong side is the one where your natural backward pull sends the puck toward the boards. On the weak side, either learn the forehand pull, flip your hands, or let the other centre take it.
  9. **Every alignment needs a plan for the win, the loss AND the tie-up** — and the tie-up is the most likely of the three. Most faceoff goals against are four players not knowing what to do next.
  10. **Faceoffs are the most improvable skill in hockey** because they are the only closed skill in it: same position, same cue, every time. Among NHL centres taking at least 500 draws in 2025-26 the range ran from 62.1% down to 39.7% — a 22-point spread, and nothing that wide is luck. On the power play in particular, the entry you avoid by keeping the zone is worth more than any set play off the draw.
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## VERIFICATION NOTES

Verification note — the IIHF and UK layer, 29 July 2026. **Every IIHF claim in this document has now been read in the IIHF Official Rule Book 2025/26 itself rather than carried forward**; a previous review round flagged all of them as unverified. All of them hold, including the two most load-bearing: that a face-off violation is a warning to the team rather than an ejection (IIHF Rules 76.4, 76.6, 76.7) and that winning the draw with the skates is itself a violation (IIHF Rule 76.3(VI)). Three things the earlier text did not record were found in the same pass and are now stated where they belong: the IIHF book has **no post-icing face-off-violation carve-out** of the kind NHL Rule 76.4 provides, because its first violation is always a warning; IIHF Rule 81.4 lists a **fourth** exception to the post-icing substitution ban (a player with a broken skate) that the NHL's list does not have; and IIHF Rule 81.6 grants the short-handed icing exemption **without** the NHL's major-penalty carve-out. **The IHUK In-House Rules 2025-26 Rev 1 were searched in full and amend nothing about face-offs** — the only occurrence of the phrase in that document is the team-sheet deadline ("no later than 20 minutes before the scheduled face-off"), which **UK and England Rules** owns. Silence in the In-House Rules means the IIHF rule stands unamended, so everything above marked "IIHF" is the operative rule in England, Scotland and university hockey. Nothing here is attributed to the EIHL Casebook, which this corpus has not obtained.

Unverified / flagged in the text: the reference frame for the "right shot = right side" strong-side convention is not stated explicitly by the coaching sources that assert it. One source claimed a team went from 24th to 1st in faceoff percentage after adopting flipped-hand draws; NHL official data does not support that claim, so it is not repeated here.

# Game Management

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**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](#). Read **Overtime** and **Shootouts** below before you rely on anything in them: those are the sections where the British position differs most, and outside NIHL and some SNL fixtures there is no overtime in England or Scotland at all.

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**RELATED**

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[Defending the Rush](#)

[Faceoffs](#)

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## Overview

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Every other document in this project tells you what your job is. This one tells you how that job changes depending on the score, the clock and who is on the ice with you. A 2-1 lead with four minutes left is a different sport from a 2-1 lead in the first period, and the player who knows the difference is worth more than the player who only knows their assignments.

**Game management** is the layer above systems: reading the situation and adjusting the *risk* you take, the *speed* you play at, and the *decisions* you make, without abandoning the structure your team plays. Almost none of it is written in the rulebook. Almost all of it is decided in the two seconds before you touch the puck.

Two warnings before you start. First, everything in this document that is not explicitly a rule is a **coaching choice** — teams differ, and yours may want something different. Second, the biggest game-management errors in amateur hockey are not exotic. They are changing at the wrong moment, taking a lazy penalty, and sitting back on a lead an hour too early.

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# Score Effects: How the Score Changes the Game

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## The finding

This is one of the oldest and best-established results in hockey analytics: **teams that are trailing take more shots, and teams that are leading take fewer**. The effect is large, it is consistent, and it grows as the deficit grows and as the clock runs down.

Analysts noticed this early enough that it reshaped how hockey statistics are calculated. Shot-attempt measures — **Corsi** (all shot attempts for and against, including blocks and misses) and **Fenwick** (the same, minus blocked shots) — turned out to be badly distorted by score. The first fix was to throw away the distorted parts: **Corsi Tied** counts only attempts while the game is level, and **Corsi Close** only while the score is within one goal. In 2011 it was found that a team's shot differential *in a tied game state* predicted their future wins better than their actual points in the standings did.

Corsi Close was later criticised for throwing away too much data, and the modern approach is **score adjustment** — weighting each shot attempt according to the score situation it happened in, so an attempt at 3-0 down in the third period counts for less than an attempt at 1-1 in the first.

## Why leading teams retreat

There are honest reasons, and they matter:

- **A goal against costs a leading team more than a goal for gains them.** Going 2-1 up from 1-1 is worth less than going 1-1 from 2-1 down is worth to the opponent. Asymmetric stakes justify asymmetric risk.
- **Time is on your side.** If the clock runs out with the score unchanged, you win. The trailing team has to force the issue; you don't.
- **The trailing team over-commits.** When the other team pushes defencemen up into the rush and cheats for offence, the counter-attack is available. Defending deeper and countering is a legitimate way to *score*, not just to survive.
- **The trailing team pulls its goalie.** Late, a lead turns into an empty-net opportunity — a shot at an unguarded goal, which needs no ranking to be obviously the best look available.

So a leading team conceding shot attempts is not automatically playing badly. It is often trading *volume* of shots against for *quality* of shots against — more point shots from distance, fewer chances from the slot.

## Why it's often overdone

- Key** The trade only works if you are actually trading volume of shots against for quality of shots against
- Risk** You never get the puck back, so you never change, so your legs go — fatigue in your own zone is how one-goal leads die
- Risk** Your defencemen play the whole shift below the hash marks — no exits, no relief, eventually a bad clear
- Risk** Collapsing everyone to the net front concedes screens, rebounds and scrambles — the highest-danger chances there are
- Risk** Four minutes of defending without the puck produces stick fouls, and a power play against is what a trailing team wants

The trade only works if you are actually trading volume for quality. Amateur and even professional teams routinely cross the line into pure retreat, and then:

- **You never get the puck back.** The other team keeps possession in your end, which means you never change, which means your legs go. Fatigue in your own zone is how one-goal leads die.
- **Your defencemen play the whole shift below the hash marks.** No exits, no relief, and eventually a bad clear.
- **Quality goes up, not down.** A team that collapses everyone to the net front concedes screened shots, rebounds and net-front scrambles — the highest-danger chances there are. "Fewer chances" is a claim you have to earn with structure, not just by standing near your own goal.
- **You invite penalties.** Defending for four straight minutes without the puck produces stick fouls. A power play against is exactly what a trailing team wants.

 **Treat the attack-type argument with real suspicion — it is dressed as research it cannot name.** The claim is that "analysis of shot quality by attack type has found" that cycle attacks produce better shot quality for trailing teams while rush attacks produce better results for leading teams, and that the pattern reverses with the game state. **No study, dataset or author is attached to it anywhere**, and none of the sources below carry it. It stands here only as **an untraced assertion, not evidence** — do not restate it as a finding, and do not build a plan on it. The rest of this section stands on its own reasoning without it, and the practical conclusion it is usually used to support — that when you are ahead your best offence is the counter-attack off a

turnover, which requires you to be organised and *fast* rather than passive — is coaching craft either way.

## What this means for reading statistics

If you look at a box score or a shot chart without knowing the score situation, you will systematically:

- **Overrate trailing teams.** They out-attempt everyone. Being outshot 40-22 while winning 4-1 tells you very little.
- **Underrate leading teams and the players who protect leads.** Defencemen and checking forwards who play the last ten minutes of one-goal games will look worse than they are.
- **Misjudge goaltenders.** A goalie facing lots of low-danger third-period shots from a team chasing the game will have a flattering save percentage; one facing fewer, better chances will not.

The fix when watching or analysing: **look at score-adjusted numbers, or at even-strength numbers with the game close.** See [How To Watch Hockey](#).

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# Protecting a Lead

## What actually works

|                   |                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Priority</b>   | With a lead the question is not "can I create a chance" but "can they get it back somewhere dangerous"                                                   |
| <b>Never</b>      | Cross-ice passes through the middle, blind D-to-D across your own goalmouth, or stretch passes you are not sure about                                    |
| <b>Action</b>     | Chip the puck past the forechecker and out rather than forcing a breakout pass under pressure                                                            |
| <b>Rule</b>       | Shooting the puck directly out of play from your own defending zone is a two-minute delay-of-game minor, with no pressure exception (NHL Rule 63.2(iii)) |
| <b>Rule</b>       | 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                 |
| <b>Action</b>     | Take away the middle — concede the outside, keep your stick in the passing lane, defend with your feet                                                   |
| <b>Action</b>     | Shorten your shifts to 30-35 seconds; fresh legs defend, tired legs reach                                                                                |
| <b>Priority</b>   | Win the defensive-zone draws, and have a plan for losing the draw as well as winning it                                                                  |
| <b>Convention</b> | Which forecheck your team switches to with a lead — 2-1-2, 1-2-2 or 1-1-3 — is a system choice, so find out yours                                        |

**1. Manage the puck.** The single biggest lever. With a lead, the value of a possession is not "can I create a chance" but "can I make sure they don't get it back in a dangerous place." That means:

- No cross-ice passes through the middle of your own zone or the neutral zone. A turnover there becomes an **odd-man rush** — attackers outnumbering defenders coming back, a 2-on-1 or 3-on-2. Coaches and analysts treat these as the most dangerous chances in open play, and there **is** published tracking behind that — Defending the Rush owns it and carries both halves: Sportlogiq data covering every NHL game from 2017-18 to 2020-21 puts an ordinary shot at an **8.15% chance of becoming a goal** and says that once an attacking team has an extra skater that likelihood "*almost triples*", while Tulskey and colleagues found odd-man rushes are **under 3% of all 5-on-5 zone entries** and worth 0.78 shots per entry against 0.57 for an ordinary carry-in. What that document declines to give is a *precise per-situation* percentage, because the underlying numbers sit in a graphic rather than in the article's text. Go there for the figures rather than restating them here.

- No blind D-to-D passes across your own goalmouth.
- No stretch passes you're not sure about. An interception at your own blue line is worse than a chip out.

**2. Chip out, don't force out.** A **chip** — a short, deliberate flip or wall-play that puts the puck past a forechecker and out of the zone — beats an attempted breakout pass under pressure. You will lose possession, but you'll lose it 150 feet from your net, with your team facing the right way. Getting the puck out and getting a change is worth more than a coin-flip at a controlled exit. (*The "40%" break-even you will see quoted for this is arithmetic with nothing behind it — no published work sets a threshold for this decision the way Tulskey's does for zone entries. Use the direction, not a number.*)

**Careful — this is where a good idea becomes a penalty.** Under **NHL Rule 63.2(iii)** a player who shoots or bats the puck **directly (non-deflected) out of the playing surface from his own defending zone** takes a two-minute minor for delay of game. There is no "I was under pressure" exception, but there are three written carve-outs: the clause applies "*except where there is no glass*", and its NOTE adds that "*when the puck is shot into the players' bench, the penalty will not apply*" and that "*when the puck goes out of the playing area directly off a face-off, no penalty shall be assessed.*" Over the glass **behind** the bench is still a penalty. Keep the puck down and off the glass-line, or make sure it deflects. (Most rec leagues either don't call this or apply it inconsistently — but never assume.)

**3. Take away the middle.** Concede the outside; deny the slot and the middle lane through the neutral zone. Practically: your stick lives in the passing lane, you defend with your feet rather than lunging, and you never chase a puck carrier to the wall and leave the middle open behind you.

**4. Short shifts.** 30–35 seconds instead of 50. Fresh legs defend; tired legs reach. A team that changes cleanly every 35 seconds late in a game is much harder to score on than a team of tired heroes.

**5. Win the defensive-zone draws.** A defensive-zone faceoff loss with three minutes left and a one-goal lead is the most dangerous single event in the game — it hands the opposition immediate set-up possession in your end. Have your best faceoff man out there, have a clear plan for the loss as well as the win, and know your wall assignments. See Faceoffs.

**6. Keep forechecking — just choose the *right* forecheck.** This is a system choice, not a rule of hockey. The house default across these documents is a **2-1-2 forecheck** (two forwards pressuring in the offensive zone, one high, two defencemen at the line). Many teams switch with a lead to a **1-2-2** (one forechecker steers the puck to one side; two forwards hold the neutral-zone

line) or a **1-1-3** (one chaser, one mid-ice support, three players across the neutral zone — commonly called a trap). Under a 1-2-2 or 1-1-3, your job as the first forward in is not to win the puck, it's to take away one side of the ice so your teammates can intercept the exit. **Find out which one your team goes to with a lead, and when.** Turning up as an aggressive F1 while the other four are trapping is how leads get thrown away.

**F1 / F2 / F3 are roles, not people.** They are defined by order of arrival at the puck, not by whether you are a centre or a winger.

## What doesn't work

- Risk** Sitting back entirely is a siege you will eventually lose — you need a way to get out and a way to counter
- Never** Ice the puck repeatedly — it is the classic self-inflicted wound
- Never** Play keep-away on the perimeter with no plan; the blue-line turnover becomes the rush you must not concede
- Never** Play the clock instead of the puck — watching the scoreboard makes you late to loose pucks
- Never** Chase the extra body-check; if the player has already passed or shot it is a late hit as well as bad position

- **Sitting back entirely.** Five players below the top of the circles for four minutes is not a system, it's a siege you will eventually lose. You need a way to *get out* and a way to *counter*.
- **Icing the puck repeatedly.** See below — this is the classic self-inflicted wound.
- **Playing keep-away in the offensive zone without a plan.** Pointless perimeter possession invites a turnover at the blue line and a rush the other way, which is the one thing you must not concede.
- **Playing the clock instead of the puck.** Watching the scoreboard makes you late to loose pucks. Play the puck; the clock takes care of itself.
- **Fighting for the extra body-check.** Finishing a hit that takes you out of position is a luxury you can't afford with a lead — and if the player has already passed or shot, it is also a late hit and a penalty, which is a worse outcome still.



## The icing trap

|               |                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>   | Icing is sending the puck from your own side of the centre red line past the opposing goal line untouched (NHL Rule 81.1)                             |
| <b>Rule</b>   | Under hybrid icing the linesperson judges who would reach the puck first, not who reaches the dot first (NHL Rule 81.1)                               |
| <b>Rule</b>   | After your own icing you may make no player substitutions before the ensuing faceoff (NHL Rule 82.1)                                                  |
| <b>Rule</b>   | The IIHF bar is Rule 81.4, and its exceptions run one longer — you may also replace "a Player with a broken skate", which the NHL does not allow      |
| <b>Rule</b>   | No time-out is granted to the defensive team following an icing (NHL Rule 87.1) — USA Hockey attaches no icing condition to its one time-out (636(f)) |
| <b>Risk</b>   | A defensive-zone draw, your five most tired players, and no way to rest them                                                                          |
| <b>Action</b> | Ask before the game — many rec and youth leagues use no-touch icing, and under USA Hockey there is no no-change rule to enforce                       |

**Icing** is sending the puck from your own side of the centre red line all the way past the opposing goal line untouched. Under NHL **hybrid icing** (adopted 2013-14) the linesperson judges who would reach **the puck** first — not who reaches the dot first (Rule 81.1). The end-zone faceoff dot is the **deadline for that decision**: the call is made no later than the instant the first player's skate reaches it, and a race too close to call at that moment is icing.

Here is why icing with a lead is so costly. Under **NHL Rule 82.1**, a team in violation of Rule 81 (Icing) **shall not be permitted to make any player substitutions prior to the ensuing face-off**. And under **Rule 87.1**, **no time-out shall be granted to the defensive team following an icing**. So you have handed the opposition:

- a faceoff in your end,
- against your five most tired players,
- with no way to rest them.

That combination — tired players, defensive-zone draw, no escape — is a goal waiting to happen, and the rules were deliberately written to make it so.

Three details worth knowing:

- **The exceptions to the no-change rule** are narrow: you may substitute to **replace a goalkeeper who had been pulled for an extra attacker**, to **replace an injured**

**player**, or when a **penalty has been assessed that affects on-ice strength** (Rule 82.1). The on-ice personnel are determined **at the moment the puck leaves the offending player's stick. In the IIHF book — the British base rule set — the bar lives in Rule 81.4** and reads the same way, with the same three exceptions and the same "when the puck leaves the offending Player's stick" test, plus **one the NHL does not have: you may also substitute for "a Player with a broken skate."** (Note that IIHF 82.1 lists only the NHL's three; the broken-skate exception is in 81.4, which is the icing rule itself.)

- **Icing is waved off if your team is shorthanded** — with two exceptions. Killing a penalty you may normally ice it freely, but under Rule 81.6 a team shorthanded "*by reason of a major penalty*" that has "*neglected to ensure there is a player on the penalty bench to exit upon the expiry of the penalty*" keeps playing a man short and "*are not permitted to ice the puck. Icing will be called.*" And **USA Hockey restricts the exemption by classification**, to "*(For all Youth 15-Only and above, Girls 16U and above, High School and Adult classifications only)*" (Rule 624(b)(1)) — below those levels a shorthanded team cannot ice the puck at all, so a kill built on length-of-the-ice clears just feeds the power play defensive-zone draws. Special Teams owns this rule.
- **Rec and youth leagues vary.** Many still use no-touch (automatic) icing, and plenty do not enforce the no-change rule at all. Ask before the game; it changes how hard you should work to get the puck over the red line.

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## Playing From Behind

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### Pressing without giving up odd-man rushes

|                |                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>  | Move the puck north faster and arrive in numbers through the neutral zone before you park extra players deep                         |
| <b>Options</b> | Aggressive forecheck, then pinching defencemen, then activating a defenceman, then pulling the goalie — roughly that order of safety |
| <b>Read</b>    | Trailing, you pinch on anything close; leading, you pinch only when you are certain                                                  |
| <b>Risk</b>    | A pinch that misses is a 2-on-1 the other way, and a fourth attacker deep is a genuine odd-man risk                                  |
| <b>Never</b>   | Leave nobody as the last man back — if a defenceman goes, a forward replaces them high                                               |
| <b>Action</b>  | Say that swap out loud                                                                                                               |

Trailing, you must generate more. The trap is that the easiest way to generate more — sending everybody — is also the fastest way to concede and end the game.

What to add, in roughly this order of safety:

1. **Speed and support, not bodies.** Get the puck moving north faster and arrive in numbers *through* the neutral zone, rather than parking extra players deep. This costs you nothing defensively.
2. **Aggressive forecheck.** Switching from a 1-2-2 to a 2-1-2, or to a full-ice press with both defencemen pinching, creates turnovers in their end. (Avoid calling this a "2-2-1" — that's basketball terminology, not an established hockey forecheck name; see Forechecking Systems.) Cost: your F3 (the highest forward) is now deeper, so a clean exit against you is more dangerous.
3. **Pinching defencemen.** A **pinch** is your defenceman stepping down from the *offensive* blue line to keep a puck in — different from a **step up**, which is challenging an opponent forward in the neutral zone. Pinching keeps possession alive; a pinch that misses is a 2-on-1 the other way. Trailing, you pinch on anything close. Leading, you pinch only when you are certain.
4. **Activating a defenceman into the rush or the low zone.** Now you have four attackers and one back. This is a genuine 2-on-1-against risk and should be deliberate, not accidental.
5. **Pulling the goalie.** The biggest risk of all — its own section below.

**The non-negotiable in all of this: someone is always the last man back.** If a defenceman goes, a forward replaces them high. That swap has to be spoken out loud. See On-Ice Communication.

## When to start taking risks

|                 |                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Priority</b> | Scale risk to how much time is left against how many goals you need, not to how frustrated you feel                    |
| <b>Action</b>   | Down one in the first or second period, play your normal game harder — no structural risk at all                       |
| <b>Action</b>   | Down one early in the third, add forecheck pressure and pinch more, but keep the last man back honest                  |
| <b>Action</b>   | Down two mid-third, activate defencemen and accept some rush chances against — trading one-for-one is no longer a loss |
| <b>Action</b>   | Down three or more in the third, be extremely aggressive early rather than moderately aggressive late                  |

Risk should scale with **how much time is left relative to how many goals you need**, not with how frustrated you feel. A rough ladder:

- **Down one, first or second period:** play your normal game harder. No structural risk at all. There is enormous time left, and a second goal against is what actually kills you.
- **Down one, early third:** add forecheck pressure and pinch more aggressively. Still keep the last man back honest.
- **Down two, mid-third:** activate defencemen; take chances at the offensive blue line; accept some rush chances against. You need two goals, so trading one-for-one is no longer a loss.
- **Down one or two, last few minutes:** goalie out (see below), all-in.
- **Down three or more, any time in the third:** the mathematics say be extremely aggressive early rather than moderately aggressive late — one of the clearest findings in the goalie-pull literature. A team down three with ten minutes left that plays "sensibly" is choosing to lose slowly.

## How to know it's time

- Read** Lots of zone time and no slot chances means your entries are dying at the blue line — change how you enter, not how hard you skate
- Read** Their goalie seeing everything means you need traffic and pucks to the net, not better shots
- Read** Losing races out of your own end means you are too slow starting breakouts — simplify and go north earlier
- Action** Decide your clock thresholds before the third period, so nobody has to decide in the moment

Signs it's time to change something, rather than keep doing the same thing harder:

- **You've had the puck and produced nothing.** Lots of zone time, no slot chances, means your entries are dying at the blue line. Change *how* you enter (see Zone Entries), not how hard you skate.
- **Their goalie is seeing everything.** No screens, no rebounds, no second chances. You need traffic and pucks to the net, not better shots.
- **You keep losing races out of your own end.** You're too slow starting breakouts; simplify and go north earlier.
- **The clock crosses a threshold.** Have thresholds decided *before* the third period — "if we're still down one at six minutes we go to the 2-1-2 and pinch everything" — so nobody has to decide in the moment.

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## Pulling the Goalie

### When

The analytics consensus has moved much earlier than tradition, and it has been moving in that direction for fifty years. Every serious study says the same thing: **coaches pull too late.**

**What teams historically did.** Analysis of the 2007-08 NHL season found coaches typically pulled with **1:00 remaining when down one goal and 1:30 when down two** — and essentially never when shorthanded. Across 2003–2013 the league average pull time sat around **1.2–1.3 minutes remaining**, rising to about **1.9 minutes by 2019**. Another count puts the

average at **1:13 in 2013-14 rising to 1:37 by March 2021** — real movement, but slow. Over seven recent seasons, average pull times moved by only about **30 seconds**.

**What the numbers support.** The evidence comes at it from several directions:

- **The 6-on-5 is genuinely powerful.** With the extra attacker, the pulling team scored a goal every **8.5 minutes**, against sample means of **28.6 (road) and 26.2 (home) minutes** for a single team at 5-on-5 with both goalies in — using 2007-08 data. (These are **per-team** rates: how long one side takes to score. The 4-on-4 and 5-on-5 figures quoted later under Special Situations are **combined** rates — how long until *either* team scores — which is why they look so much shorter. Don't compare the two sets directly.) Put differently, 6-on-5 generates goals at rates comparable to a power play.
- **The empty net is genuinely expensive.** Opponents score into the empty net at roughly **19 goals per 60 minutes**. This is a real cost, not a rounding error.
- **The trade is still worth it, and worth it earlier.** Simulation over 150 million games found that simply pulling whenever trailing with under three minutes left was worth about **one extra standings point over an 82-game season**, and a more aggressive policy about **1.5 points** (average points per season 83.7 → 84.7 → 85.2). One study of 2003-2019 pulls found the **highest success rate at a pull around the 3:00 mark, roughly 26% (±4%)** — although the same author cautions that data before about 3:45 is sparse and those estimates are uncertain.
- **A pulled goalie is the biggest lever there is.** A survival analysis of one-goal games (2014-15 to 2018-19) found the leading team was **3.275 times more likely to lose their lead** when the trailing team pulled its goalie.
- **You draw penalties.** In 652.4 minutes of pulled-goalie play in 2007-08, **44 penalties were called on the pulling team versus 84 on their opponents** — close to 1:2. Penalties came against the defending team every **7.4-7.9 minutes** at 6-on-5, versus every **12.2-13.3 minutes** at 5-on-5.

**And the honest limits.** Success rates are still low, and note what is being measured: the study counts **tying the game before regulation ended**, not winning it. Over seven seasons, pulling when down one **tied the game** roughly **15%** of the time; down two, about **1%**; down three, essentially never. Whatever happens in the overtime that follows is a separate coin-flip on top. And it can go very badly — in their inaugural season the Seattle Kraken allowed **26 empty-net goals while scoring five**.

**Practical takeaway for a player:** expect to go earlier than feels natural, expect to be out there down two with four or five minutes left, and know that the goalie is coming out on the next stoppage in your favour — not on the next whistle of any kind.

**A coaching constraint that gets ignored.** As Seattle's Dave Hakstol put it: "*The earlier you pull, the stronger your second group has to be.*" Pulling with five minutes left means three or four different units play 6-on-5. If your second group can't handle it, pulling early isn't free.

## The 6-on-5 structure

|                   |                                                                                                          |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Position</b>   | Two at the points, two on the half-walls, one at the net front, one below the goal line or in the middle |
| <b>Action</b>     | Get set up — a 6-on-5 that has to enter the zone repeatedly is wasting its advantage                     |
| <b>Action</b>     | Put the puck to the net with a screen; the extra man is a body in front, not a sixth passer              |
| <b>Technique</b>  | One-touch it — the advantage only shows up if the puck moves faster than they can shift                  |
| <b>Never</b>      | Let both point men pinch — someone must be able to stop a clear, because there is no net behind you      |
| <b>Action</b>     | Change with possession and change fast; changing while chasing the puck concedes an empty-netter         |
| <b>Convention</b> | Umbrella, overload or your normal power-play look at 6-on-5 is a team choice — learn yours in practice   |

The extra attacker is almost always a forward, and the sixth skater usually comes on for the goalie at a stoppage with an offensive-zone faceoff, or on the fly once you have possession in their end.

The most common shape takes a standard power-play look and adds a second body high: **two players at the blue line (the points), two on the half-walls (level with the faceoff dots), one at the net front, and one below the goal line or in the middle of the zone.** The principles matter more than the diagram:

- **Get set up.** A 6-on-5 that has to enter the zone repeatedly is wasting its advantage. Win possession, gain the line, and get organised.
- **Puck to the net with a screen.** The extra man is most valuable as a body in front and a second-chance collector, not as a sixth passer.
- **One-touch it.** The defenders can only cover so much; the advantage only shows up if the puck moves faster than they can shift.

- **The point men do not both pinch.** Someone must be able to stop a clear. There is no net behind you.
- **Change with possession, and change fast.** A 6-on-5 shift is exhausting. If you change while chasing the puck you will concede an empty-netter.

**This is a system choice.** Some teams run an **umbrella** (three players high) at 6-on-5, some **overload** four players onto one side, some just add a net-front body to their normal power-play look. Learn yours in practice, because there is no time to work it out in the game. See Special Teams.

## The 6-on-4

If you are trailing *and* on a power play, pulling the goalie creates a 6-on-4. This is a much bigger edge than most coaches use. In 2007-08, teams that pulled the goalie on a power play to make it 6-on-4 **scored every 5.5 minutes and allowed an empty-net goal every 4.8 minutes** — nearly as likely to score as to concede, but you *need* the goal and they don't. The clearest single recommendation from the goalie-pull research is that **teams trailing should pull much earlier on a power play than at 5-on-5.**

⚠ **And do not assume the opposite applies when you take the penalty.** It is intuitive that a trailing team which has just been penalised should leave the goalie in until the kill is over — being down 5-on-4 with an empty net looks like a losing trade. **Beaudoin and Swartz's simulations find the reverse, at least late.** Their scenario C is exactly this case — trailing by one, 1:54 left, just penalised, 4-on-5 — and the best of the strategies tested is "*pull goalie until the score is tied*", worth **0.0761** expected points against **0.0409** for current NHL practice (which keeps the goalie in while shorthanded) and **0.0351** for never pulling. They write that "*the two strategies that performed best are the ones that involve pulling the goalie even in shorthanded situations*", and their best season-long strategy — "*an even more aggressive approach*", worth **85.2 points over an 82-game season against 83.7 for current NHL practice** (their Table 8) — is the one that pulls the goaltender "*when shorthanded, even-strength and on power-plays with increasing time remaining and various goal deficits.*"

**The caveat that makes this usable is time, not strength.** The same paper's scenarios with more clock left — down two with six minutes, down three with 12:22 — do not call for pulling while shorthanded. So the finding is **time-conditional**: late and down one, being shorthanded is not by itself a reason to keep the goalie in; earlier in a game it still is. This is a model of NHL scoring rates, not a rule, and no coach at rec level is running it — but if you are keeping the goalie in with under two minutes left because you are killing a penalty, the arithmetic does not support you.



## The delayed-penalty freebie

- Rule** On a delayed penalty the referee raises an arm and play continues until the team to be penalised gains control of the puck (NHL Rule 15.1)
- Rule** During a delayed penalty the offending team cannot score unless you shoot the puck into your own net (NHL Rule 78.5(xi))
- Action** Goalie goes to the bench immediately at the first sign of the arm — every second is a free attacker
- Action** The extra attacker jumps from the bench as the goalie arrives
- Never** Blind D-to-D passes across your own crease during a delayed call
- Action** Keep the puck away from the offending team; do not force a low-percentage shot that could be smothered
- Risk** A shot that misses and rims to an opponent ends the sequence

This is the one time you get an extra attacker for free, and amateur teams waste it constantly.

Under **NHL Rule 15.1**, when a player on the team *not* in control of the puck commits a penalty, the referee **raises an arm and delays the call**; play continues until **the team to be penalized gains control of the puck**. So the moment the arm goes up, your goalie can skate to the bench and you play 6-on-5 with **no empty-net risk** — because the offending team cannot score.

The one exception is a genuine own goal: under **Rule 78.5(xi)**, during a delayed penalty the offending team cannot score **unless the non-offending team shoots the puck into their own net**. A deflection off an opponent doesn't count; your own defenceman ringing it off your own goalie does. So: no blind D-to-D passes across your own crease during a delayed call.

### What to do when the arm goes up:

- **Goalie:** go, immediately, at the first sign. Every second is a free attacker.
- **Bench:** the extra attacker jumps as the goalie arrives.
- **On-ice players:** the whistle comes when *they* gain control — so keep the puck away from them, don't force a low-percentage shot that could be smothered, and above all don't turn it over. A shot that misses and rims to an opponent ends the sequence.

**Rec-league note:** many recreational leagues do not allow, or do not practise, pulling the goalie on a delayed call, and some officials will stop play early. It also requires your goalie to be paying attention. Talk about it beforehand.

## Defending against 6-on-5

|                 |                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Never</b>    | Chase — play a tight box or diamond in the slot, block lanes and let them have the perimeter                                                |
| <b>Position</b> | Sticks in lanes, feet in the house; clear bodies and take sticks away at the net front                                                      |
| <b>Action</b>   | Treat every clear as a shot — get your head up and put it at the empty net when the lane is clean                                           |
| <b>Rule</b>     | You can be iced against a pulled goalie; six players against six is equal strength, not below it (NHL Rules 81.1, 81.3, 84.1)               |
| <b>Rule</b>     | After that icing they pick the dot (81.2), you cannot change (81.4) and you cannot take a time-out (87.1) — all three are NHL and IIHF only |
| <b>Priority</b> | Own-zone draws at 5-on-6 decide games — agree the plan before you line up                                                                   |
| <b>Never</b>    | Take a penalty; a 6-on-4 against is close to a goal                                                                                         |

Your job as the leading team defending an empty net:

- **Do not chase.** Six attackers means someone is always open if you leave your area. Play a tight box or diamond in the slot, block lanes, and let them have the perimeter. (**Box** = two players high, two low. **Diamond** = a single apex — used when their structure has a player in the middle, the **bumper**, whom a box leaves unmarked.)
- **Sticks in lanes, feet in the house.** Coaches will tell you most 6-on-5 goals come from tips, screens and rebounds rather than clean point shots. **Two thirds of that is checkable, and the strong form does not hold up.** The NHL's public play-by-play feed records a shot type for every goal and timestamps every event, so tips, deflections and rebounds can all be counted — screens cannot. Across games 2024020001–2024020400 of the 2024-25 regular season, **29.7% of goals scored with the extra attacker on were a tip, a deflection, or a shot inside three seconds of a previous shot on goal**, against **23.4%** at 5-on-5. That is a real elevation and it points where the coaches point, but it is a long way from "most" — and the 6-on-5 sample is only **74 goals**, so read the gap as a direction rather than a rate. What is separately sourced is that the ice in front of the net converts several times better than the perimeter (Shooting). Clear bodies and take away sticks at the net front.
- **Every clear is a shot.** Do not just chip it out — get your head up and put it toward the empty net if the lane is clean. **A puck that goes in is a goal and there is no icing; a puck that misses and crosses the goal line is icing** (see the next point), so this is a shot to take when you can actually hit the net, not a blind heave. A blind clear that goes straight to their point man is the worst outcome of the three.

-  **You can be iced against a pulled goalie, and it is one of the worst things you can do to yourself.** It is tempting to reason that Rule 81.6's first paragraph is general — *"If the puck was so shot by a player of a side below the numerical strength of the opposing team, play shall continue and the icing violation shall not be called"* — and that five skaters against six are therefore below numerical strength. **The rulebook does not support that reading, on three counts.** (1) Rule 81.1 glosses the term where it defines it: icing applies to a team *"equal or superior in numerical strength (**power-play**) to the opposing team"* — the parenthetical ties the concept to penalty situations, and every other paragraph of 81.6 is about a penalty expiring or a penalty bench. (2) Rule 84.1 does not measure numerical strength in skaters alone; it sets three-on-three overtime at *"a numerical strength of three (3) skaters **and one (1) goalkeeper**"* — the goalkeeper is counted *inside* the figure, so six players against six is equal strength. (3) Rule 81.3 settles it in terms: where a goalkeeper *"is legitimately out of the crease in an attempt to go to the players' bench to be substituted for an extra attacker and in no way makes an attempt to play the puck, the icing **should not be nullified** under this section."* The rulebook is expressly contemplating an icing being called while the other team pulls its goalie, and preserving the call. **So the whistle comes.** You get a defensive-zone draw, **the attacking team picks the dot** (Rule 81.2), you **cannot change** (Rule 81.4) and you **cannot take a timeout** (Rule 87.1) — five exhausted skaters, in their own end, against six, with no way out. Get it out with a purpose, or put it on net. See Special Teams for the shorthanded exemption, which is a different situation.
  - **Faceoffs are everything.** Draws in your own end at 5-on-6 decide games. Have the plan agreed before you line up.
  - **Take no penalties.** A 6-on-4 against is close to a goal.
-

# Line Matching and Last Change

## The rule

- Rule** After a stoppage the visiting team places its line-up on the ice first, then the home team may substitute (NHL Rule 82.1)
- Rule** The referee allows the visitors up to five seconds and the home team up to eight, then no more changes (NHL Rule 82.2)
- Rule** Only the team that iced the puck is frozen — if the visitors ice it, the home team changes normally and keeps last change (NHL Rules 82.1, 81.4)
- Key** Last change is the main mechanical component of home-ice advantage, but travel, rest and rink familiarity are in there too
- Action** In a rec league, treat matching as something you do on the fly — many run no formal change procedure at all

Under **NHL Rule 82.1**, following a stoppage the **visiting team places its line-up on the ice first**, and only then may the home team make any substitution it wants. **Rule 82.2** sets the clock: the referee gives the visiting team **up to five seconds**, raises his hand to close visitor changes, gives the home team **up to eight seconds**, then lowers his hand. After that, no more changes until play resumes.

**Icing is where this is often misread.** The first paragraph of Rule 82.1 reads in full: "*The home team may then make any desired substitution, except in cases following an icing, which does not result in the delay of the game.*" Quoted short — stopping at "following an icing" — that looks like it might switch last change off after *any* icing, whoever committed it. It does not. Later in the same rule the exception is spelled out: **a team in violation of Rule 63.8 (Delaying the Game) or Rule 81 (Icing)** "*shall not be permitted to make any player substitutions prior to the ensuing face-off*" — and Rule 81.4 repeats it word for word. The bar falls on **the team that iced the puck**. So if the home team ices it, the home team is frozen and has no last change to exercise; if the **visitors** ice it, the home team changes normally and keeps last change. Full treatment in Faceoffs.

This is what "**last change**" means, and it is the main mechanical component of home-ice advantage. Across 2021-22 to 2023-24, NHL home teams earned a **.585 points percentage against .524 for road teams**. That is a gap of **6.1 percentage points**, or about **11.6%** more points at home in relative terms. (The source article describes it as a 5.5% boost; that figure does not follow from the two numbers it prints, so the arithmetic above is given instead.) Either way the

effect is real but modest, and only part of it is the last change — travel, rest and rink familiarity are in there too.

**Rec-league note:** many recreational and beer leagues do not enforce a formal line-change procedure at all, and the referee simply drops the puck. If you're a rec player, treat everything below as something you do *on the fly*, not at stoppages.

## What coaches do with it

|                   |                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | The classic use is matching a checking line — picked for defensive reliability, forechecking and faceoffs — against a scoring line |
| <b>Options</b>    | Shelter a young player with soft starts, get the trusted group out for late defensive-zone draws, or chase a favourable matchup    |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Last change can cost you the draw — coaches sometimes send out a worse faceoff man to win the matchup instead                      |
| <b>Key</b>        | The road team's counter is the change on the fly, which is why change discipline matters more on the road than at home             |

The classic use is **matching a checking line against a scoring line**. A **checking line** (or shutdown line) is a forward line selected primarily for defensive reliability, forechecking and faceoffs rather than scoring. The coach with last change waits for the opponent's top line, then sends the checkers over the boards against them.

Coaches also use last change to:

- **Shelter players.** Give a young forward or a weak defence pair starts in the offensive zone against the opponent's fourth line.
- **Protect a lead.** Get the defensively trusted group out for every defensive-zone draw in the last five minutes.
- **Chase a matchup.** Get your best offensive line out against their weakest pair.
- **Manipulate the faceoff.** Last change can even cost you a draw — the Sound Of Hockey analysis cited below found that home teams won only **50.4% of 8,383 centre-ice faceoffs in 2023-24** — an externally published figure, not one of the faceoff computations made for this guide, which Faceoffs owns — partly because coaches sometimes send out a worse faceoff man in order to win the matchup instead.

**The road team's counter is the change on the fly.** Last change applies only at stoppages. On the road, coaches dictate matchups by timing changes during play — getting a line off as the opponent's top line comes on — which is why change discipline matters more on the road than at home.

## What you should do when you know you're being matched

- Action** On a scoring line, change on the fly rather than at whistles — at a stoppage on the road you show your hand first
- Never** Take the bait and beat your man one-on-one into traffic — move the puck early and make them cover all five of you
- Read** If three players are focused on you, two of your teammates are unmarked
- Goal** A 0-0 shift with no penalties against a strong checking line is a win if your other lines are winning theirs
- Priority** On the checking line, your first job is to not get scored on — get the puck deep and change
- Action** On the checking line, be first on faceoffs and first back; you were sent out for reliability, not creativity

If you're on a scoring line being checked:

- **Change on the fly, not at whistles.** At a stoppage on the road you have to show your hand first. In open play you don't. Get out during play, when the other team can't react cleanly.
- **Don't take the bait.** A good checking line wants you frustrated and beating your man one-on-one into traffic. Move the puck early, take the safe play, and make them cover all five of you.
- **Use their commitment.** If three players are focused on you, two of your teammates are unmarked. Score effects apply in miniature — an over-committed checker leaves space behind.
- **Win the shift, don't win the fight.** Grinding a strong checking line to a 0-0 shift with no penalties and no chances against is a *win* for you if your other lines are winning theirs.

If you're on the line doing the checking:

- **Your first job is to not get scored on.** A 0-0 shift is a success.
- **Get the puck deep and change.** Long shifts against a top line are how the goal happens.

- **Be first on faceoffs and first back.** You were sent out for reliability, not creativity.

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## Defence Pair Logic

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Almost everything in this section is a coaching choice; the point is to know why your coach might be doing it.

### Shutdown pair versus offensive pair

|                   |                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | Most teams differentiate their three pairs by role rather than purely by quality                                              |
| <b>Priority</b>   | Shutdown pair — gap control, defending the rush, boxing out the net front, clean simple exits; not expected to produce points |
| <b>Priority</b>   | Offensive or transition pair — join the rush, activate from the point, move pucks, higher risk tolerance                      |
| <b>Convention</b> | The third pair is usually sheltered, with offensive-zone starts and weaker opposition                                         |
| <b>Never</b>      | Assume "first pair" means the hardest job — many teams use their second pair to shut down, so ask                             |

Most teams differentiate their three pairs by role rather than purely by quality:

- **The shutdown pair** takes the hard matchups and the defensive-zone starts. Priorities: gap control, defending the rush, boxing out the net front, clean simple exits. Not expected to produce points.
- **The offensive (or transition) pair** gets favourable starts and matchups. Priorities: joining the rush, activating from the point, moving pucks. Higher risk tolerance.
- **The third pair** is usually sheltered — offensive-zone starts, weaker opposition.

Which pair does which varies. Many teams use their **second** pair as the shutdown pair, keeping the first pair free to play offence. Ask; don't assume that "first pair" means "hardest job."

## Left-shot / right-shot pairings

|                   |                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>        | On your on-hand side the outlet up the wall and the D-to-D are on your forehand, and your body shields the puck from the middle         |
| <b>Technique</b>  | Retrieving on your on-hand side lets you turn away from the forecheck; off-hand you turn into the boards or the checker                 |
| <b>Read</b>       | At the left point a left shot's blade sits toward the boards — the gain is the puck arriving on your forehand, released in one motion   |
| <b>Convention</b> | Power-play units deliberately put off-hand defencemen at the points, because the blade is out in the middle for the one-timer           |
| <b>Key</b>        | Defending the rush, on-hand suits sealing a carrier against the wall and off-hand suits taking away the seam — neither is simply better |
| <b>Technique</b>  | On your off side, take your first touch into the middle, open your hips earlier on retrievals, and treat the backhand D-to-D as normal  |

A **left shot** holds the stick with the **left hand at the top of the shaft and the right hand lower**, so the blade sits on their **left** side and their **forehand is on their left**. That is what makes the left side of the ice their natural side. **On-hand** means playing on your natural side — a left shot on the left, a right shot on the right; **off-hand** means the opposite.

Coaches overwhelmingly try to build pairs of one left shot and one right shot. Why it matters:

- **Zone exits and breakouts.** On your on-hand side, the outlet pass up the wall and the D-to-D pass are on your forehand, and your body shields the puck from the middle. On your off-hand, that same pass is on your backhand or requires a turn into pressure.
- **Retrievals.** Skating back on your on-hand side lets you take the puck off the wall and turn away from the forecheck. Off-hand, you turn into the boards or into the checker.
- **Blue-line play in the offensive zone.** Be clear about the geometry here, because it is the opposite of what people assume: for a **left shot at the left point, the stick side is the boards side**. Your blade sits between you and the wall, not out toward the middle. The on-hand advantage at the point is therefore not about being off the wall — it is that the puck coming up the wall from the corner **arrives on your forehand**, so you can receive it and release it in one motion, and that a forehand release is much easier to **keep down and on the ice** where it can be tipped and rebounded. The off-hand point man gets the mirror image: the puck arrives on the backhand and needs a turn, but the blade is out in the middle of the ice, which is exactly why power-play units deliberately put **off-hand** defencemen at the points for the one-timer.



- **Angling and defending the rush.** The same geometry runs the other way here. Facing the attack on your on-hand side, your stick is on the **boards** side and your body is toward the middle; on your off-hand side, your stick sits naturally in the **middle** passing lane. Neither is simply better — on-hand suits sealing a carrier against the wall, off-hand suits taking away the seam — but know which one you have, because it decides whether you defend with your stick or with your feet.

There is real evidence behind the preference. One study of NHL shot-location data found **64.2% of shots occurred with opposite-handed (i.e. both on-hand) pairings** and **32.1% with two left shots**, and that opposite-handed pairs out-performed same-handed pairs — **50.71% versus 49.32% Corsi For** — with the gap narrowing as blocked and missed shots are excluded, which suggests the problem is generating clean offensive plays rather than defending.

Two honest caveats. The effect is real but small — around one percentage point. And roughly 60% of NHL defencemen shoot left — that league-wide handedness split is reported by NHL.com, **not** a finding of the puck++ shot-location studies cited above, so do not read it as part of the same analysis — so someone has to play their off side; some analysts argue teams have gone too far, playing weaker right shots ahead of better left shots to preserve handedness. If you are asked to play your off side, the adjustments are: **take your first touch into the middle rather than up the wall, open your hips earlier on retrievals, and accept the backhand D-to-D as a normal play rather than a last resort.**

## Zone starts

|                |                                                                                                                     |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>     | Zone starts are the proportion of your shifts that begin with a faceoff in the offensive, neutral or defensive zone |
| <b>Risk</b>    | Heavy defensive-zone starts make your raw shot and goal differentials look bad however well you play                |
| <b>Action</b>  | Check both players' zone starts before you compare their numbers                                                    |
| <b>Mindset</b> | A defensive-zone start means your coach trusts you — and the first ten seconds are the most dangerous of your shift |

**Zone starts** are the proportion of your shifts that begin with a faceoff in the offensive, neutral or defensive zone. They are a coaching lever and a statistical distortion in one:

- A player with heavy **defensive-zone starts** begins most shifts 200 feet from the other net, under pressure. Their raw shot and goal differentials will look bad no matter how well they play.

- A player with heavy **offensive-zone starts** looks better than they are.

When you compare two players' numbers, check their zone starts first. And when you get a defensive-zone start, understand what it means: your coach trusts you, and the first ten seconds are the most dangerous of your shift.

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## Shift Length and Change Discipline

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### The rules you're working inside

- Rule** You may change at any time during play, provided the player leaving is within five feet of the bench and out of the play (NHL Rule 74.1)
- Rule** If either player plays the puck, checks or makes contact while both are on the ice, it is too many men — a bench minor (NHL Rule 74.2)
- Rule** If the offending team scores before the whistle, the goal is disallowed and the penalty assessed (NHL Rule 74.2)
- Never** Leave the ice anywhere but at the bench — any other exit is a bench minor regardless

**NHL Rule 74.1:** players may be changed at any time during play, provided the player **leaving the ice is within five feet of the bench and out of the play** before the change is made. If either the player coming on or the player going off **plays the puck, checks or makes physical contact** with an opponent while both are on the ice, it's **too many men** — a bench minor (Rule 74.2). And if the offending team scores before the whistle, **the goal is disallowed and the penalty assessed.**

The retiring player must leave **at the bench**, not through any other exit, or it's a bench minor regardless.

## How long a shift should be

|                   |                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Convention</b> | 35-45 seconds for most players, 30-35 when protecting a lead or stuck in your own end — coaching prescription, not measurement |
| <b>Read</b>       | The signal to change is a reduction in your ability to accelerate, not a stopwatch                                             |
| <b>Key</b>        | Gliding to a spot you would have skated to ten seconds earlier means you are already too tired to be useful                    |
| <b>Action</b>     | Take the measured shift-length range and the physiology from Conditioning and Recovery, which owns them                        |

Shifts in fast, high-level hockey are typically **under a minute**, and the reason usually given is physiology: hockey is repeated maximal effort, and effort quality declines well before you feel exhausted. **Conditioning and Recovery owns both the physiology and the measured range** — take the figures from there rather than from here. A reasonable target for most players is **35-45 seconds**, shortened to **30-35 seconds** when protecting a lead or when the play is stuck in your own end; **those two bands are coaching prescription, not measurement** — the measured band is 30-80 seconds and the "well-managed" 30-45 s figure is itself coaching craft, as that document states.

The signal to change is not a stopwatch, it's a **reduction in your ability to accelerate**. The moment you find yourself gliding to a spot you would have skated to ten seconds earlier, you are already too tired to be useful.

## Tired players make bad decisions

|                   |                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Risk</b>       | Decision speed goes first — you see fewer options, later                                                                         |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Then your feet go: you stop skating and start reaching, which is how sticks end up around waists and hands                       |
| <b>Risk</b>       | Then support goes, so a teammate loses a battle they should have won; backchecking goes last and costs most                      |
| <b>Key</b>        | A 90-second shift is worth less in total than a 30-second one, and it costs your next shift too                                  |
| <b>Convention</b> | Coaches put late-shift penalties down to fatigue — the mechanism is sound reasoning, but no published study codes penalty motive |

Fatigue does not just cost you a step. It costs you, in this order:

1. **Decision speed** — you see fewer options, later.
2. **Feet** — you stop skating and start reaching, which is how sticks end up around waists and hands. Coaches routinely put late-shift penalties down to fatigue; **that is a motive attribution and no published study codes penalty motive** — see *Frustration penalties* below, which sets out what the youth-hockey penalty data does and does not support. The mechanism (tired legs, reaching stick) is sound reasoning; the frequency claim is not measured.
3. **Support** — you stop arriving as the second man to the puck, so your teammate loses a battle they should have won.
4. **Backchecking** — the last thing to go, and the most expensive.

The practical consequence, as coaches put it: **a 90-second shift is not three times as valuable as a 30-second shift — it is worth less in total, and it costs your next shift too.** (*Nobody has measured the value of a shift as a function of its length, so read that as the shape of the argument rather than as a quantity. What is measured is the decline in repeated-sprint quality, which Conditioning and Recovery owns.*)

## When NOT to change

- Never** Change when the puck is in your defensive zone and your team does not have it
- Never** Change while you are the last man back, until you are relieved — and say so out loud
- Never** Change while the opposition is on a rush; finish the defensive play first
- Rule** You cannot change after your own icing (NHL 82.1, IIHF 81.4), so do not start drifting toward the bench — USA Hockey Rule 624 imposes no such restriction
- Never** Change in the middle of a 6-on-5 possession — change with the puck or not at all
- Action** Change when your team has the puck heading north, has just dumped it in deep, or after a completed clear

This is the part that separates good game management from a good motor.

### Do not change when:

- **The puck is in your defensive zone and not under your team's control.** Coaches name this as one of the biggest sources of goals against in amateur hockey — an observation rather than a measured ranking, because no published data classifies goals by the cause behind them. Changing while the opposition has the puck in your end means a

player leaves, a player arrives late from the bench, and for two seconds you are 4-on-5 in the most dangerous area of the rink.

- **You are the last man back**, until you are relieved. Say so out loud.
- **The opposition is on a rush**. Finish the defensive play, then change.
- **You've just iced the puck**. You can't (NHL Rule 82.1; IIHF Rule 81.4), so don't start drifting toward the bench.
- **You're in the middle of a 6-on-5 possession**. Change with the puck or not at all.
- **You'd be changing into an offensive-zone faceoff you're needed for**, if you're the faceoff man.

#### Do change when:

- **Your team has the puck heading north, or has just dumped it in deep**. These are the safe windows.
- **After a completed clear from your own end** — the classic "get it out, get off."
- **You're beaten and a fresh teammate can take over safely**.

### Why a bad change costs goals

- |               |                                                                                                                  |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Risk</b>   | A bad change concedes a numbers disadvantage, a structural hole and a player joining the play blind, all at once |
| <b>Key</b>    | There is no other single action in hockey that gives away that much for free                                     |
| <b>Key</b>    | The fix is discipline and communication, not fitness                                                             |
| <b>Action</b> | Call it — "I'm changing", "stay on", "last man"                                                                  |

A bad change concedes three things at once: a numbers disadvantage, a structural hole (the player leaving usually has a specific job nobody is doing), and a player joining the play with no idea where anybody is. There is no other single action in hockey that gives away that much for free.

The fix is discipline and communication, not fitness. **Call it:** "I'm changing," "stay on," "last man." See On-Ice Communication.

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# Overtime

## Regular-season 3-on-3 (NHL)

|                  |                                                                                                                               |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>      | Five minutes maximum, sudden death, three skaters and one goalkeeper a side, teams changing ends (NHL Rule 84.1)              |
| <b>Priority</b>  | Possession over shooting — if you do not have a high-quality look, you do not shoot                                           |
| <b>Technique</b> | With no good option, carry or pass back out through the neutral zone, reset and come again                                    |
| <b>Never</b>     | Force a low-percentage shot — a missed net in 3-on-3 is often a goal against                                                  |
| <b>Never</b>     | Change without possession; you never surrender the puck to get fresh legs                                                     |
| <b>Read</b>      | The goal usually comes from isolating a defender who has been stuck out and cannot get off                                    |
| <b>Rule</b>      | A penalty makes it 4-on-3, coincidental minors leave it 3-on-3, and no team ever has fewer than three skaters (NHL Rule 84.3) |
| <b>Rule</b>      | Lose with your goalie pulled in overtime and you forfeit the point you had already earned (NHL Rule 84.2)                     |

**Rule 84.1:** five minutes maximum, sudden death, **three skaters and one goalkeeper** per side, teams change ends (they defend the same end as in the second period — the long change). Both points are secured before it starts: a tie after regulation guarantees each team one point.

The format arrived in 2015-16 to reduce shootouts and worked — the share of **games that reached overtime** and then went to a shootout fell from **over 55% to under 40%** in its first season. (That is a proportion of overtime games, not of all games; only around a quarter of NHL games go to overtime at all.)

**Strategy has changed a lot since then**, and this is the most important thing to know. Early 3-on-3 was chaos and end-to-end rushes. It is now **a possession game**. The core ideas, in coaches' and players' own words:

- **Possession over shooting.** "Overtime is all about puck possession and maintaining it at all costs." If you don't have a high-quality look, you don't shoot — because giving up the puck means facing a 3-on-2 the other way immediately.
- **The controlled regroup is the key skill.** With no good option in the offensive zone, you carry or pass the puck **back out through the neutral zone**, reset, and come again.

Retreating 30–40 seconds without forcing anything is normal and correct. The whole ice is your working space; camping in the offensive zone doesn't work.

- **Never force a low-percentage shot.** A missed net in 3-on-3 is often a goal against. As one goalie put it, once you give up the puck you may not get it back. Turnovers, careless passes and shots that miss the net "invite quality scoring chances against you almost right away."
- **Only change with possession.** You never surrender the puck to get fresh legs.
- **The goal usually comes from a tired opponent.** The winning play is often not a great shot — it's isolating a defender who has been stuck out for 90 seconds and can't get off.
- **Use your goalie as an outlet.** With the extra space, a pass back to the goalie is a legitimate reset. See Goaltender.

**Penalties in 3-on-3 (Rule 84.3)** are unusual and worth knowing:

- A penalty makes it **4-on-3**, not 3-on-2 — the non-offending team *adds* a skater.
- **Coincidental minors at the same stoppage** (with nothing else on the clock) leave it at **3-on-3**.
- A two-man advantage is **5 against 3**.
- **No team ever has fewer than three skaters.**

**Pulling the goalie in overtime (Rule 84.2)** is possible but almost never sensible: if you lose while the goalie is out, **you forfeit the point you'd already earned** — unless the goalie was pulled for a delayed penalty. And once pulled in regular-season overtime, the goalie **must wait for a stoppage to return; he cannot change on the fly** (Rules 84.2 and 74.5), on pain of a bench minor. **Both of those riders are NHL-only** — IIHF 84.2 is a single permissive sentence, so if you play in Britain neither applies to you; see the rule-set note below.

One more detail: **in the last two minutes of regulation and at any time in overtime**, the five-second whistle forcing players to set up for a faceoff does not apply (Rule 82.2(viii)) — officials give teams reasonable time.

## Playoff overtime (NHL)

- Rule** Fifteen-minute intermission, then full twenty-minute sudden-death periods at 5-on-5, changing ends, until someone scores (NHL Rule 84.5)
- Action** Play simple and get pucks in behind their defence
- Never** Be the one who makes the play that loses it
- Action** Manage shifts ruthlessly — teams routinely shorten to the low 30s in double overtime

**Rule 84.5:** after a tie through regulation, a **fifteen-minute intermission**, then full **twenty-minute periods at 5-on-5**, sudden death, changing ends each period, repeating until someone scores. No 3-on-3, no shootout.

This is a completely different game-management problem: it's regulation hockey, played tired, with an infinite-cost mistake. The universal advice is **play simple, get pucks behind their defence, don't be the one to make the play that loses it**, and manage shifts ruthlessly — teams routinely shorten shifts to the low 30s in double overtime.



## Overtime elsewhere: IIHF, Britain and rec leagues

- Rule** IIHF preliminary overtime is five minutes of 3-on-3, but teams do not change ends (IIHF Rule 84.1)
- Rule** IIHF playoff overtime is ten minutes of 3-on-3, not the NHL's twenty-minute 5-on-5 periods (IIHF Rule 84.5)
- Rule** The IIHF shootout is five shooters a side with a coin toss for order, not three with home-team choice (IIHF Rule 84.4)
- Rule** IIHF 84.2 is one sentence permitting the pull; the NHL's forfeited point and its bar on returning on the fly have no IIHF counterpart
- Rule** England Ice Hockey plays overtime only in NIHL fixtures, and in SNL fixtures whose competition regulations provide for it (In-House Rules, Rule 84)
- Rule** NIHL league and group-stage playoff overtime is five minutes of 3-on-3 with no change of ends, then game-winning shots with three shooters a side (In-House Rules, Appendix 1, on IIHF Rule 84)
- Rule** Playoff Final Weekend is different — semi-finals go to 20 minutes of 5-on-5 then shots, and the Final to successive 20-minute 5-on-5 sudden-death periods with no shots at all (In-House Rules, Appendix 1)
- Read** Under IIHF rules your bench is the near bench, so waiting for an exhausted defender is much less reliable
- Action** Ask before the game — formats run from 4-on-4 to 3-on-3 to a straight shootout to no overtime at all

**Rule-set note — IIHF overtime differs from the NHL in ways that change how you play it.** This is the operative section if you play in Britain: every level of the game here runs the IIHF book. From the *IIHF Official Rule Book 2025/26*, Rule 84:

- **Preliminary/round-robin (84.1):** five minutes maximum, sudden death, **3-on-3** — the same length and strength as the NHL. But it follows a **three-minute intermission** with the ice shovelled, and **teams do not change ends**. The NHL's overtime uses the long change; IIHF overtime does not, so your bench is the *near* bench and a tired player can actually get off. That single difference makes the "wait for the exhausted defender" plan much less reliable under IIHF rules.
- **Playoff, relegation, classification and bronze-medal games (84.5):** ten minutes, sudden death, still **3-on-3**, still no change of ends — not the NHL's 20-minute 5-on-5 periods. If it settles nothing, the shootout follows.

- **Gold-medal game (84.6):** repeating sudden-death 3-on-3 overtime periods with a **15-minute intermission** and an ice resurface between each. Teams stay at the same ends for the first overtime and **change ends from the second onward**. No shootout.
- **Pulling the goalie in overtime (84.2):** the whole rule is one sentence — *"A team shall be allowed to pull its goalkeeper in favor of an additional skater in the overtime period."* **Neither of the NHL's two riders appears anywhere in the IIHF book:** there is no forfeiture of the point already earned if you lose with the net empty, and no bar on the goalkeeper returning on the fly (the IIHF book has no Rule 74.5, and the phrase "on the fly" does not occur in it). So the standings-points arithmetic that makes an overtime pull almost never worth it in the NHL is not part of your game.
- **Shootout (84.4):** **five** shooters per side, not the NHL's three, then sudden death. The order of shooting is decided by a **coin toss** between the captains, rather than by the home team as in the NHL, where Rule 84.4 provides that *"the home team shall have the choice of shooting first or second."* More below, under Shootouts.
- **Overtime penalties (84.3)** work as in the NHL: a penalty makes it 4-on-3, coincidental minors with nothing else on the clock leave it 3-on-3, a two-man advantage is 5 against 3, and no team ever has fewer than three skaters.

**⚠ Britain — in many fixtures there is no overtime at all.** England Ice Hockey, the SIHA and the BUIHA amend IIHF Rule 84 down to a single line: overtime *"is only played in NIHL fixtures and in SNL fixtures where specifically provided for in competition regulations"* (In-House Rules, Rule 84). Recreational and junior games in England and Scotland end level, so everything above about managing a tied third period ends with the horn rather than with 3-on-3. Where overtime *is* played, the formats are set out in Appendix 1 of the In-House Rules:

- **NIHL National League, its group-stage playoffs, and NIHL 1 and 2: five minutes of 3-on-3**, then a **game-winning shots (GWS)** competition of **three** shooters a side taking alternate shots — three, as in the NHL, not the IIHF's five. **Teams do not change ends**, as under the IIHF book, so the near-bench point above is yours. Goalkeepers may go to the bench during the rest period; penalised players stay in the box. No group-stage playoff game may end in a tie.
- **NIHL Playoff Final Weekend:** semi-finals go to **20 minutes of 5-on-5** and then game-winning shots. The **Final** goes to successive **20:00 periods of 5-on-5 sudden death** — *"golden goal"*, with **no** shots competition — and *"[t]eams change ends at the start of each overtime period."* That is the one British format in which the long change comes back, and it is the closest thing here to NHL playoff overtime.
- **SNL:** five minutes of 3-on-3 sudden death, then a **best-of-three penalty shot shootout**, then sudden death.

- **BUIHA:** fixtures marked "VARSITY OT" on the schedule follow the NIHL procedure.

The full list of British amendments lives in UK and England Rules.

Formats vary enormously below the professional level everywhere else too: some leagues use 4-on-4, some 3-on-3, some go straight to a shootout, many simply record a tie, and youth leagues often have no overtime at all. **Ask before the game.**

## Shootouts

**Rule 84.4:** if the five-minute overtime settles nothing, each team gets **three shots**, alternating, and the **home team chooses whether to shoot first or second**. If still tied it goes to **sudden death**, and **no player may shoot twice until everyone eligible has shot**. The rules for each attempt are those of a penalty shot (Rule 24). The final score is recorded as one goal better than the opponent regardless of how many shootout goals were scored, and the winning shooter is not credited with a goal in personal statistics.

**Rule-set note — the shootout you will actually take in Britain.** Your base book is the IIHF's, and **IIHF Rule 84.4 differs from the NHL on four things that change how the competition is run:**

- **Five shooters a side, not three**, and they must be *"five (5) different shooters"* — where the NHL gives each team *"three shots, unless the outcome is determined earlier."*
- **A coin toss, not the home team.** The referee calls both captains over and flips: *"The winner of the coin toss will have the choice whether their team will shoot first or second."*
- **The goalkeepers may be swapped.** IIHF 84.4(VI): *"The goalkeepers from each team may be changed after each shot."* NHL 84.4 is the opposite — *"Once the shootout begins, the goalkeeper cannot be replaced unless he is injured."*
- **Repeat shooters in the tie-break.** Once the first five are done, *"[t]he same Player can be used for each shot"*, where the NHL makes everyone eligible shoot before anyone shoots twice.

**England Ice Hockey then replaces the whole procedure in the leagues that use it** (In-House Rules, Appendix 1). It is a **game-winning shots (GWS)** competition: **three** shooters a side taking alternate shots, then *"sudden victory"* — one shot each until it is settled. Eligibility splits by league, and this is the part to get right:

- **NIHL National League and its group-stage playoffs:** *"Any eligible player may take a penalty-shot attempt, and the same player may be used for multiple attempts."* Eligible means not serving a penalty and not injured at the time of the attempt. Your best shooter can go every round.
- **NIHL 1 and 2:** the opposite — *"All eligible players (except those serving penalties or injured) must shoot before any player can take a second attempt."* That is the NHL's rule, not the National League's, in the same document.
- **SNL:** a *"best-of-three penalty shot shootout"*, then sudden death, with the first three designated shooters repeatable *"after every full round of three."*

As in the NHL, the deciding goal is recorded as the game-winning goal and the final score increased by one for the winners. Full amendment list: UK and England Rules.

## For the shooter

|                  |                                                                                                                    |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>    | Decide before you start skating — deciding at the hash marks is how you end up doing neither thing well            |
| <b>Technique</b> | Have two moves and know which one you are using                                                                    |
| <b>Options</b>   | A shot in stride to the far side or five-hole, a deke to the backhand, or forehand-backhand-forehand               |
| <b>Read</b>      | Slower approaches give you more options and force the goalie to move first; faster ones beat passive, deep goalies |
| <b>Goal</b>      | Get the goalie sliding, then go where they have just left                                                          |
| <b>Never</b>     | Telegraph — head up, puck out in front where both a shot and a deke are live                                       |
| <b>Key</b>       | A missed net is the worst outcome; a saved shot at least creates the possibility of an error                       |

- **Decide before you start skating.** Deciding at the hash marks is how you end up doing neither thing well.
- **Have two moves and know which one you're using.** The commonest are a shot in stride (usually to the far side or five-hole), a deke to the backhand, and a forehand-backhand-forehand.
- **Speed is a choice, not a default.** Slower approaches give you more options and force the goalie to move first; faster approaches beat goalies who are passive and deep. Pick one deliberately.

- **Make the goalie move first if you can.** Most shootout goals come from getting the goalie sliding, then going where they've just left.
- **Don't telegraph.** Head up, puck out in front where both a shot and a deke are live.
- **You only need one good shot.** A missed net is the worst outcome; a saved shot at least creates the *possibility* of an error.

## For the goalie

|                  |                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Technique</b> | Control your depth — coming out cuts the angle, staying deeper gives you more time against dekes                                      |
| <b>Never</b>     | Commit first — stay square, stay patient, make them decide                                                                            |
| <b>Technique</b> | Track the puck, not the hands                                                                                                         |
| <b>Read</b>      | Match your retreat to their approach — back in with a fast shooter, hold your depth and stay big against a slow one                   |
| <b>Rule</b>      | You cannot be replaced once the shootout starts unless you are injured, and a substitute gets no warm-up (NHL Rule 84.4)              |
| <b>Rule</b>      | Under the IIHF book the goalkeepers "may be changed after each shot" (IIHF Rule 84.4), so in Britain a shootout substitution is legal |

- **Control your depth.** Coming out cuts the angle and beats shooters; staying deeper gives you more time against dekes. Know which you're better at.
- **Don't commit first.** Nearly every shootout goal comes from a goalie who moves before the shooter does. Stay square, stay patient, make them decide.
- **Track the puck, not the hands.**
- **Match your retreat to their approach.** A shooter coming in fast means you back in with them; a slow shooter means you hold your depth and stay big.
- **You cannot be replaced once the shootout starts** unless you're injured, and there is no warm-up for a substitute (Rule 84.4). **That is the NHL position and it is reversed in the IIHF book**, where "[t]he goalkeepers from each team may be changed after each shot" (IIHF Rule 84.4(VI)) — so in Britain, where the IIHF book is the base and the In-House Rules leave this alone, a coach genuinely can put the other goalie in mid-competition. The no-warm-up point still holds either way: nobody is getting shots first.

See Goaltender for the technical detail.

# Momentum and How to Respond to It

Whether "momentum" is a real measurable force is genuinely disputed. What is not disputed is that **teams behave differently after a goal**, and that behaviour is controllable.

## After conceding

|                   |                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mindset</b>    | Take the next shift as simply as possible — win a puck, get it deep, take your man, change                                        |
| <b>Never</b>      | "Finish your check" on a player who has already passed or shot; that is a late hit under USA Hockey's standard of play            |
| <b>Mindset</b>    | Play the game in front of you — replaying the goal is a decision-making tax you cannot afford                                     |
| <b>Action</b>     | Reset your risk to baseline; chasing the goal back immediately is how one-goal deficits become three-goal deficits                |
| <b>Action</b>     | Say one short factual sentence — "reset, next shift". Silence after a goal against is corrosive                                   |
| <b>Convention</b> | Coaches treat the minute after a goal against as the most dangerous stretch in hockey — coaching lore, not a measured hazard rate |

The minute after a goal against is treated by coaches everywhere as the most dangerous stretch in hockey, because the conceding team is either deflated or over-eager and both produce mistakes. **Read that as coaching lore, not as a measured hazard rate** — it is the same class of claim as "momentum" flagged just above, and there is no published count of goals by time since the last goal. The habits below are worth having whether or not the effect is real.

### What to do:

- **Take the next shift as simply as possible.** Win a puck, get it deep, take your man, change. Nothing clever. (Note the wording: "**finishing your check**" — hitting a player who has already passed or shot — is a late hit under USA Hockey's standard of play and is described there as unacceptable. Take the body of the player who *has* the puck, or take the ice they need. See Body Contact and Battles.)
- **Play the game in front of you.** Replaying the goal in your head is a decision-making tax you can't afford. See Mental Game.
- **Reset your risk to baseline.** The instinct is to chase the goal back immediately. That's how one-goal deficits become three-goal deficits.

- **Talk.** One short factual sentence — "reset, next shift" — from anyone. Silence after a goal against is corrosive.

## The value of a simple shift

|                |                                                                                                    |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>     | A simple shift is a deliberate, low-ambition, high-execution 35 seconds                            |
| <b>Never</b>   | Cross-ice passes, pinches or one-on-one attempts on a simple shift                                 |
| <b>Action</b>  | First man in on the forecheck, hard on the wall, change on the whistle or on the clear             |
| <b>Goal</b>    | Stop the bleeding and hand the game back to the bench in one piece                                 |
| <b>Mindset</b> | It is not a lack of ambition — being able to deliver one reliably makes you very hard to leave out |

A **simple shift** is a deliberate, low-ambition, high-execution 35 seconds: no cross-ice passes, no pinches, no one-on-one attempts, first man in on the forecheck, hard on the wall, change on the whistle or on the clear. Its purpose is to stop the bleeding and hand the game back to the bench in one piece. It is not a lack of ambition; it's the correct play in a specific situation, and being the player who can reliably deliver one makes you very hard to leave out of a line-up.

## Time-outs, icing, and what the evidence says

|               |                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Rule</b>   | Each team gets one thirty-second time-out per game, taken at a normal stoppage (NHL Rule 87.1)                                   |
| <b>Rule</b>   | No time-out is granted to the defensive team following an icing — you cannot rest your way out of your own icing (NHL Rule 87.1) |
| <b>Rule</b>   | USA Hockey is the outlier: Rule 636(f) gives one sixty-second time-out and attaches no icing condition to it                     |
| <b>Action</b> | Spend it on rest and instruction at a moment you choose — before a critical defensive-zone draw, or before setting up 6-on-5     |
| <b>Key</b>    | The measured effect on winning is nil, but most benches finish the game with the time-out still in the pocket                    |

**Rule 87.1:** each team gets **one thirty-second time-out per game**, regular season or playoffs. It must be taken at a normal stoppage, and **only one time-out — commercial or team — is permitted at any one stoppage.**

Crucially, **no time-out shall be granted to the defensive team following an icing** (also: following the goalie causing a stoppage from a shoot-in from beyond the centre red line, or when a defending player accidentally dislodges the net). This is the rule that closed the loophole in 2017-18 — before it, a coach could ice the puck and then buy their tired players a rest with a time-out. **You cannot rest your way out of your own icing.**

**Rule-set note. IIHF Rule 87.1 says the same three things in the same words** — one thirty-second time-out per team, none after a faceoff violation, and none to the defensive team following an icing, a goalie freeze on a shoot-in from beyond the red line, or a defender dislodging the net. So a British or European league player gets no relief here. **USA Hockey is the outlier:** Rule 636(f) gives each team **one sixty-second time-out** and attaches **no** icing condition to it, so under that book a coach genuinely can ice the puck and then buy the rest.

What the evidence says about time-outs generally is humbling. A survival analysis of NHL games from 2014-15 to 2018-19 found **no statistically significant effect on win probability** from calling a time-out in the last five minutes of one-goal games. The leading team calling a time-out to protect a lead was **1.339 times more likely to lose the lead** — a result that was not statistically significant and may well be correlation, since coaches call time-outs when they're already under siege. Time-outs bought about **0.25-0.50 extra shot attempts** but almost nothing in unblocked shots.

The same study found that **teams barely use them at all**: across 7,314 games from 2014-15 to 2019-20, only **30.1%** of available time-outs were called — and the rate *fell* over the period, from **41.8% in 2014-15 to 22.8% in 2019-20**. In other words, in roughly seven games out of ten a coach finishes with the time-out still in his pocket.

The practical reading: a time-out is a tool for **rest and instruction at a moment you choose** — before a critical defensive-zone draw, before setting up 6-on-5, after a long shift you couldn't escape. It is not a momentum spell, and the measured effect on winning is nil. But it is also free, and seven times out of ten it goes unused, so the error most benches actually make is not spending it badly — it is never spending it at all.

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# Special Situations

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## 4-on-4

|                   |                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>     | More ice means more time — hold the puck a beat longer and make the second option available                           |
| <b>Read</b>       | The open middle cuts both ways: more clean entries for you, more odd-man rushes against                               |
| <b>Convention</b> | Two forwards and two defencemen is the common personnel choice, but many teams use three forwards — know yours        |
| <b>Priority</b>   | The defensive priority is the far-side rush; losing a puck at the offensive blue line is a 2-on-1 with nobody to help |

Under **Rule 19.1**, when **one minor is assessed to a player on each team at the same stoppage** and there are no other penalties on the clock, they are served **without substitution** and both teams play **four skaters against four for the duration**.

4-on-4 is a higher-scoring game state than 5-on-5 — in 2007-08 a goal was scored every **12.1 minutes** at 4-on-4 versus **13.7 minutes** at 5-on-5. Both are **combined** rates: the time until *either* team scores, not until one particular team does. How to play it:

- **More ice, so more time — use it.** Support is farther away, so hold the puck a beat longer and make the second option available.
- **The middle is open, which cuts both ways.** More space through the neutral zone means more clean entries and more odd-man rushes against.
- **Two forwards and two defencemen is the common personnel choice**, but many teams use three forwards and a defenceman to attack. Coaching choice — know yours.
- **The defensive priority is the far-side rush.** Losing a puck at the offensive blue line at 4-on-4 is a 2-on-1 the other way with nobody to help.

## Coincidental penalties

- Rule** Coincidental minors of equal duration cancel; any difference in time is served normally (NHL Rule 19)
- Rule** A second pair of coincidental minors while already 4-on-4 leaves strength unchanged, because the first pair is still on the clock (NHL Rule 19.1)
- Rule** Penalised players in coincidental situations cannot leave the box until the first stoppage after their penalty expires (NHL Rule 19)
- Never** Retaliate — you convert your opponent's mistake into no advantage at all

The general principle in **Rule 19** is *cancel as many matching penalties as you can*. Coincidental minors of equal duration cancel; any difference in time is served normally. Once teams are already 4-on-4, another set of coincidental minors does **not** drop them to 3-on-3 — but nor does it put them back to 5-on-5. **They stay at 4-on-4**. The reason is in Rule 19.1: the four-skater provision applies only "*provided there are no other penalties in effect and visible on the penalty clocks*," and the original pair is still on the clock. So the second pair gets **immediate substitution** and on-ice strength is unchanged, while four players now sit in the boxes. Penalized players in coincidental situations **cannot leave the box until the first stoppage after their penalty expires**, which is why you sometimes see a player sitting long after the clock hits zero.

The game-management point: **if you retaliate, you have converted your opponent's mistake into no advantage at all**. Your team earned a power play; you gave it straight back. That is one of the few things in hockey that is pure, unforced loss.

## The last minute of a period

- Never** Get caught changing — the most common late-period goal comes from a lazy change at 0:40
- Never** Force an entry; a turnover at their blue line with 20 seconds left is a 2-on-1 you will not recover from
- Action** Get the puck deep and finish the period there
- Priority** Nobody's line is more important than the clock — tired with 15 seconds left, stay on and defend
- Read** The exception is a genuine chance — possession with numbers, and you go

The first and second periods have their own risk profile. A goal against in the final minute of a period is disproportionately damaging — it's the last thing everyone carries into the dressing room, and there's no time to respond.

- **Do not get caught changing.** The most common late-period goal comes from a lazy change at 0:40.
- **Do not force an entry.** A turnover at their blue line with 20 seconds left is a 2-on-1 you will not recover from.
- **Get the puck deep and finish the period there.**
- **Nobody's line is more important than the clock.** If you're tired and there are 15 seconds left, stay on and defend rather than change.
- **The exception is a genuine chance.** If you have possession with numbers, go — just know the difference between a chance and a hope.

## The first shift after a long stoppage

|                 |                                                                                                          |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Mindset</b>  | Expect your first stride to be slow, and expect both teams to play the shift badly                       |
| <b>Action</b>   | Keep your feet moving during the stoppage rather than leaning on your stick                              |
| <b>Action</b>   | Simplify the first 20 seconds — the pass you would normally complete may not connect                     |
| <b>Priority</b> | Win the faceoff; possession from a cold start is worth more than usual because they are disorganised too |
| <b>Goal</b>     | Be first to the first loose puck — that race usually sets the tone of the next two minutes               |

After a TV time-out, an injury delay, a video review or an intermission, everybody is cold, the ice is different, and the first shift is played badly by both teams. That makes it an opportunity as much as a risk.

- **Expect your first stride to be slow.** Keep your feet moving during the stoppage rather than leaning on your stick.
- **Simplify the first 20 seconds.** Nobody's timing is right yet; the pass you'd normally complete may not connect.
- **Win the faceoff.** After a stoppage the game restarts from a draw, and possession from a cold start is worth more than usual because the other team is disorganised too.
- **Be first to the first loose puck.** Whoever wins the first race after a stoppage usually sets the tone of the next two minutes, and that is decided by intent, not fitness.

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# Discipline as Game Management

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## When a penalty is worth taking

|                |                                                                                                                  |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Key</b>     | The test is whether the thing you are preventing is more likely to become a goal than the power play you give up |
| <b>Options</b> | Stopping an odd-man rush in the last minutes of a close game, or preventing a certain goal                       |
| <b>Rule</b>    | Fouling a breakaway from behind gives up a penalty shot, not a power play (NHL Rule 57.3)                        |
| <b>Rule</b>    | Covering the puck in your own crease is a penalty shot (NHL Rule 67.4) — still better than the goal it prevented |
| <b>Never</b>   | Foul anything once your own goalie is pulled — those trades become awarded goals (NHL Rules 25.1, 57.4, 67.5)    |
| <b>Never</b>   | Take one for retaliation, for sending a message, after the whistle, or at any point in the first period          |

Rarely — but not never. The test is simple: **is the thing you are preventing more likely to become a goal than the power play you are giving up?**

**The arithmetic behind that test is not repeated here.** What a minor actually costs you (the league power-play conversion rate), what a penalty shot is worth by comparison, and the full rulebook account of the fouls that are *not* priced as minors — the breakaway fouled from behind, and covering the puck in your own crease — all live in Risk Management, "Penalty risk as a decision". Read the numbers and the rule conditions there. What belongs in *this* document is the part that changes with the score and the clock:

- **Stopping an odd-man rush in the last minutes of a close game** — but *not* a clean breakaway, and this distinction matters enormously. Fouling a breakaway from behind gives up a **penalty shot**, not a power play (Rule 57.3), and over the last eleven NHL seasons penalty shots have converted at a *higher* rate than power plays — by less than the phrase "penalty shot" suggests, and not in every recent season, but higher. Chasing from behind and hauling someone down saves you little or nothing. The time to prevent the breakaway was four seconds earlier, with your gap — see Defending the Rush.

- **Preventing a certain goal.** If it is a goal or a penalty, take the penalty; and if the foul available to you is covering the puck in your own crease, a penalty shot (Rule 67.4) is still better than the goal it prevented.
- **Sometimes: killing time you need killed.** A stoppage you badly need for a change or a rest can occasionally be worth two minutes — but this is a coach's decision, not yours.

⚠ **Once your own goalie is out, every one of those trades stops working.** This is the game state most of this document is about, so it matters here. With the net empty there is no shot for anyone to save, so the rulebook skips the penalty shot and simply gives them the goal:

- **A breakaway fouled from behind with your goalie pulled is an awarded goal** — NHL **Rules 25.1 and 57.4**, which the rulebook cites as a pair (25.1 is the general awarded-goal rule; 57.4 is the operative clause for tripping, hooking, holding and slashing).
- **Covering the puck in your own crease with an extra attacker on for your goalie is an awarded goal too** — **Rule 67.5**, not the penalty shot of 67.4.

So: **when you have pulled your goalie, there is no foul left that buys you anything.** The exact conditions and wording are set out in Risk Management.

Note what is *not* on the list above: retaliation, sending a message, standing up for a teammate after the whistle, and anything at all in the first period.

## When it absolutely isn't

- Never** Take a penalty with a lead in the last five minutes — if you are beaten, be beaten, and let them have the outside shot
- Never** Take one while already killing a penalty; a 5-on-3 against is the single most dangerous game state in hockey
- Never** Take one while on your own power play, or after the whistle
- Never** Take one at 6-on-5 or defending 6-on-5 — both directions are catastrophic

- **When you're leading late.** A penalty with a lead in the last five minutes is the fastest way to lose a game. If you're beaten, be beaten — let them have the outside shot.
- **When you're already killing a penalty.** A 5-on-3 against is the single most dangerous game state in hockey.
- **When you're already on a power play.** Nothing wastes an advantage faster.

- **After the whistle.** These penalties buy you nothing, and they're the easiest ones for referees to call.
- **When you're 6-on-5 or defending 6-on-5.** Both directions are catastrophic — recall that teams defending a 6-on-5 take penalties at nearly twice the rate of the team attacking.

## Frustration penalties

|                   |                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Action</b>     | Keep your feet moving — almost every hooking and tripping call is a player who used their stick as a substitute               |
| <b>Action</b>     | Give up the last word; the referee almost always catches the second player                                                    |
| <b>Action</b>     | Have a reset — a breath at the faceoff dot, a tap of the pads, a look at the clock                                            |
| <b>Convention</b> | That most amateur penalties are frustration-driven is coaching experience, not data — no published study codes penalty motive |

*This section carries the full treatment of what is and is not known about why amateur players take penalties. Risk Management points here rather than restating it, and the claim should never travel without the qualification set out below.*

The standard coaching observation is that **the great majority of penalties in amateur hockey are frustration penalties**: retaliation, slashing after losing a battle, cross-checking after a whistle, arguing with an official. There is published data on youth-hockey penalties, and it partly supports this and partly does not. It is worth separating the two, because the coaching advice below survives either way.

**What the data does support.** Most penalties in youth hockey really are aggression-type infractions rather than obstruction fouls. Gilbert and Trudel coded gamesheets and video from **55 Bantam (14-15) games across five leagues, 850 penalties**, and found **an average of 15.5 penalties per game with "most penalties classified as minor aggression penalties (62.4%)"** — roughing, cross-checking, elbowing, slashing, as against the hooking-and-holding category. They also found that "the number of penalties tended to increase from the first period to the third period", which is at least consistent with accumulating frustration.

**What it does not support is the motive.** No study codes *why* a penalty was taken. "Minor aggression penalty" is a category of contact, not a category of intent: a clean, premeditated cross-check on a forechecker and a revenge slash after losing a board battle both land in it. Nobody has video-coded penalties against the preceding seconds of play for provocation, so the specific claim that most are *retaliation* has no measurement behind it. Two findings actively cut against it. McFaul and colleagues video-coded 249 verified head impacts across 48 U15 and U18 AA/AAA

games and found "**most HC events (~68%) were the outcome of nonaggressive play and within the rules of the sport (~67%)**". And Kirker, Tenenbaum and Mattson, observing ice hockey and basketball directly, found "**aggression was instrumental in nature two-thirds of the time**" — that is, goal-directed rather than hot-blooded. Note too that Gilbert and Trudel found **74.9% of penalties went to one player at a time**, whereas retaliation and post-whistle scrums tend to produce coincidental penalties in pairs.

There is also a nice piece of counter-evidence against the intuition that frustration needs a physical outlet: Régnier and colleagues, comparing 28 Pee Wee teams in a body-checking league against 21 in a league that banned it, reported that "**contrary to popular belief, playing without body-checking resulted in fewer 'hostile aggression penalties.'**"

**Where that leaves it.** Treat "most amateur penalties are aggression-type infractions" as measured; treat "most of them are frustration-driven" as coaching experience, not data. **And it cannot be settled either way:** no published study codes penalty motive in amateur hockey, so the frustration claim cannot be confirmed or refuted from evidence. What is not in doubt is that frustration penalties happen, that they buy you nothing, and that they mostly happen to players who have just been beaten and want to even the ledger.

Three practical habits:

1. **Keep your feet moving.** Almost every hooking and tripping call is a player who stopped skating and used their stick as a substitute. Discipline is largely a conditioning and effort problem in disguise.
2. **Give up the last word.** After a whistle, be the one who skates away. The referee almost always catches the second player.
3. **Have a reset.** Something small and physical — a breath at the faceoff dot, a tap of the pads, a look at the clock. See Mental Game.

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## Common Mistakes

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- **Sitting on a lead from the second period.** Retreating is a late-game tool with a specific purpose. Deploying it early just hands over the game and guarantees you spend forty minutes in your own end.
- **Reading raw shot totals without adjusting for score.** Being outshot while winning is the normal, expected, well-documented consequence of leading. Being outshot in a tie game is the problem.

- **Changing while the puck is in your own zone and the other team has it.** The most common self-inflicted goal against in amateur hockey.
  - **Long shifts because you feel fine.** You don't feel the drop in decision quality until after you've made the bad decision.
  - **Icing the puck to "get a whistle."** You get a whistle, a defensive-zone draw, no line change, no time-out and five tired players. You've made it worse.
  - **Waiting until 1:00 to pull the goalie.** Every study for fifty years says this is too late, and the gap between practice and the analytics is still substantial.
  - **Not knowing the delayed-penalty freebie exists.** A free extra attacker with no empty-net risk, wasted because the goalie didn't leave.
  - **Shooting from anywhere in 3-on-3 overtime.** A shot that misses the net is a 3-on-2 the other way. If it isn't a genuine look, regroup.
  - **Retaliating.** You turn their penalty into nothing, or their power play into your penalty kill.
  - **Playing your normal game down three with ten minutes left.** Being moderately aggressive late is worse than being very aggressive early.
  - **Treating the time-out as a momentum spell.** The evidence doesn't support it. Treat it as rest and instruction at a moment of your choosing — and don't end the game with it unused, which is what happens in about 70% of games.
  - **Assuming last change means anything in your league.** Many rec leagues don't run a formal change procedure at all. On the road at any level, your matchup tool is the change on the fly.
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## Key Takeaways

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1. **Trailing teams shoot more; leading teams shoot less.** It's the best-established score effect in hockey. It distorts every raw statistic you'll ever look at, and it's the reason score-adjusted numbers exist.
2. **Protecting a lead is an active job.** Manage the puck, chip it out cleanly, take away the middle, shorten your shifts, win the defensive-zone draws. Passive is not the same as safe.
3. **Scale your risk to the clock and the deficit, not to your emotions.** Down three with ten minutes left, being aggressive early beats being aggressive late.
4. **Get the extra attacker on the ice sooner than feels comfortable.** The 6-on-5 scores at power-play-like rates and draws penalties at nearly twice the normal rate against the defending team; every study for fifty years says coaches pull the goalie too late. On a



delayed penalty the extra attacker is free — the offending team cannot score (Rule 78.5(xi)) unless you put it in your own net — so the goalie goes immediately.

5. **Last change is real but it's only a stoppage tool.** At home you match at whistles; on the road you match on the fly. Rule 82.1's icing exception — "*except in cases following an icing, which does not result in the delay of the game*" — bars only the team that iced it, so the free matchup after the *other* side's icing is yours home or away.
  6. **Handedness on the blue line is about the first pass, not the shot.** On your on-hand side, the exit is on your forehand and your body shields the puck. The measured effect is real but modest — roughly one percentage point.
  7. **The bad change is the most expensive routine mistake in hockey — and icing with a lead is the worst version of it.** Never change when the other team has the puck in your zone, or when you're the last man back. And after your own icing you *cannot* change (Rule 82.1) or take a time-out (Rule 87.1): you have handed them a defensive-zone draw against your five most tired players.
  8. **3-on-3 overtime is a possession game, not a shooting gallery.** Regroup rather than force a shot; only change with the puck; wait for a tired defender rather than a great shot.
  9. **Take the penalty that prevents a certain goal; never take the one that answers a slash — and once your goalie is pulled, take neither.** With the net empty, fouling a breakaway from behind or covering the puck in your crease is an awarded goal, not a penalty shot (Rules 25.1, 57.4 and 67.5). As for why amateur penalties happen: that they are mostly **aggression-type infractions** is measured (62.4% of 850 Bantam penalties); that they are mostly **frustration-driven** is coaching experience, not data. The habits that prevent them — keep your feet moving, give up the last word, have a reset — are worth having either way.
  10. **After a goal against, play one deliberately simple shift.** Win a puck, get it deep, take your man, change — not "finish your check", which means hitting a player who has already given up the puck and is a late hit under USA Hockey's standard of play. Then play hockey again. And remember that everything in this document that is not explicitly a rule is a coaching choice — yours may want something different.
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