

Helping Out On Defense

As we progress through our season, the coaches are busy watching our players and discussing ways to build on our teams' strengths and shore up our soft spots. This handout describes some basic hockey concepts and simple defensive coverage strategies we will use this season. We hope that you can help train the players by discussing hockey issues with your players off the ice—using ice time for discussion in lieu of skating is inefficient and difficult (keeping the kids focused and moving is similar to “herding cats”!).

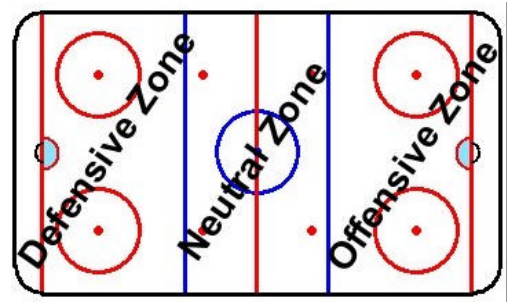
Our players span a wide range of ages and skating abilities, so this may be difficult. So, at the end we have included some concrete suggestions about playing defense that you can reinforce with your players.

Basic Terms and Positions

Hockey Zones

We will be working with the kids to understand basic offensive and defensive concepts. The ice rink can be divided into three “zones” defined by the blue lines. Assuming that we are attacking the zone on the right, and defending the zone on the left, the zones are named as shown here:

We use this terminology because both defensive and offensive strategies differ depending on whether the puck is in the defensive, neutral, or offensive zones.



Skating Lanes

While it is difficult for young kids to play their positions in hockey, it is not impossible. Fundamentally, we need to help the kids understand that “crowding” the puck creates situations leading to breakaways and missed scoring chances. We want to avoid having four (or five!) kids on top of the puck. To reinforce this idea, we talk to the kids about skating lanes as shown here:



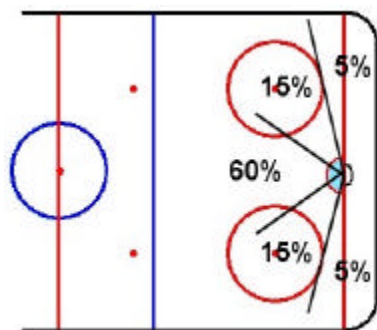
Shot On Goal

A “shot on goal” is a shot toward the goal that would go into the net if it was not blocked or deflected. Currently, we are generating less than ten shots on goal per game while our opponents are producing over twenty. At every level of play, more shots on goal are associated with consistently winning games.

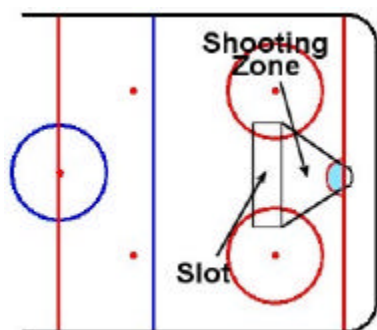
Shooting Zone

You may have noticed that early in the season almost all of our players were shooting toward the net from the side boards—a shot unlikely to result in a goal. You have probably also noticed that in both practices and games we have coached the kids to move the puck from the sides of the rinks toward the net before shooting, and they have substantially improved in this regard.

Hockey analysts have determined that there are better and worse places in the offensive zone to shoot at the opponents net. That is, there are places that are statistically more likely to result in goals. Here is what the experts have found:



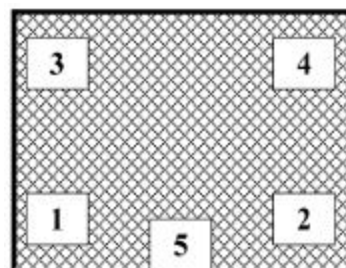
So, we have been telling the kids to get to the slot, and to shoot from the “shooting zone.” We have also instructed them to avoid shooting at the net from outside the shooting zone, where the percentages work against them



Where to Shoot On Net

Not only is shooting on goal important in producing wins, there are better and worse places to aim shots on goal. Again, hockey analysts have examined where goalies are vulnerable. Here are the “five holes” where goalies have trouble stopping shots on goal:

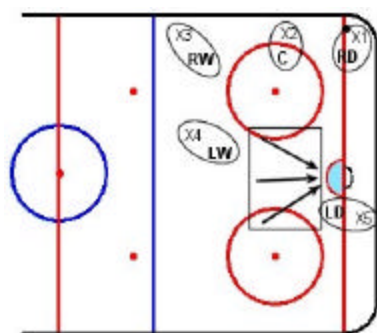
Please work with your player(s) off-ice on how to “lift” the puck. This will increase producing goals!



“Box Plus One” Positional Defense in the Defensive Zone

Some coaches (at many levels) prefer the “man-on-man” system. However, this system has several limitations. First, the man-on-man system opens up a lot of room through the important scoring areas and allows very little room for error. Second, the man-on-man system favors teams with lots of strong skaters. Finally, when players get into the “man on man” mode there is sometimes a tendency to individualize any break down and point the finger at the perpetrator instead of looking to develop solutions as a group.

We are going to try a simple defense often called “box-plus-one.” This system is based on “positional play” and allows strong pressure on the opponent with the puck but also gives the five defenders the ability to collapse towards the front of the net. The idea is to make it difficult for our opponents to take a shot on goal from the shooting zone.



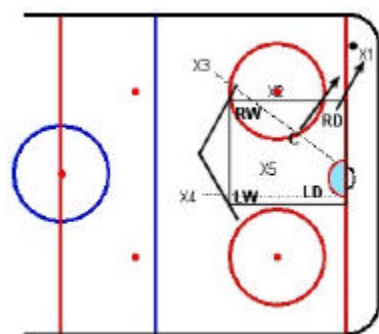
It is to our advantage when defending our goal, to push the puck, and therefore the play, to the sides of the rink. As an aside, it is to our offensive advantage to shoot from the “prime” locations in the offensive zone!

To simplify things, we need to tell our players that their responsibility is to play directly on a line between the player they are defending and their net but not necessarily standing right next to the opponent.

Often the key to defensive coverage is how each player positions his hockey stick. As you watch our practices and games, watch the stick positioning of our players and later remind them to use the stick positioning to take away passing lanes. In the defensive zone we want to play half-ice-hockey, always flooding the side or zone where the puck is.

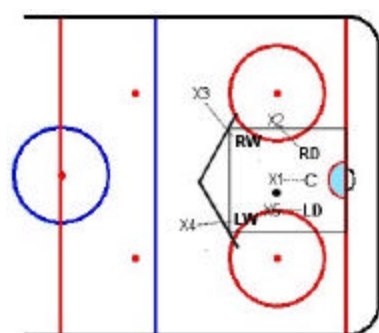
One easy concept to help simplify an explanation for defensive structure is for the team to take care of **THE HOUSE**, which is the rectangle directly in front of the goalie. Anywhere inside the perimeter of the house is a prime shooting opportunity that needs to be taken away with good positioning.

In the diagram, the puck is deep in the top corner. Players should move to create a box around the shooting zone and the slot. The puck can then be attacked by our right defenseman, with support and limited attack by the center.



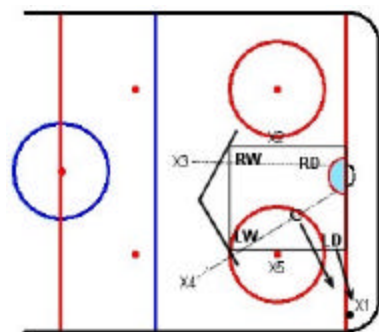
These two concepts—playing on a line between your man and our net and playing inside positioning from the middle core then moving out to attack the player with the puck—are good fundamental teaching blocks to work off.

In this example, the puck is in front of the net. Notice how the “house” has shifted and is centered on the goal. The “house” has also collapsed, or moved in to attack the puck and to get between the shooter and our goal.



This situation mirrors the first example with the puck now in the bottom corner. The house shifts toward the puck, allowing the left defenseman to attack the puck with support from the center.

This positional defense is reasonably effective and is designed to cut down on the number of shots our opponents take on goal. Also, once understood it is flexible and can be extended as discussed in the next section.

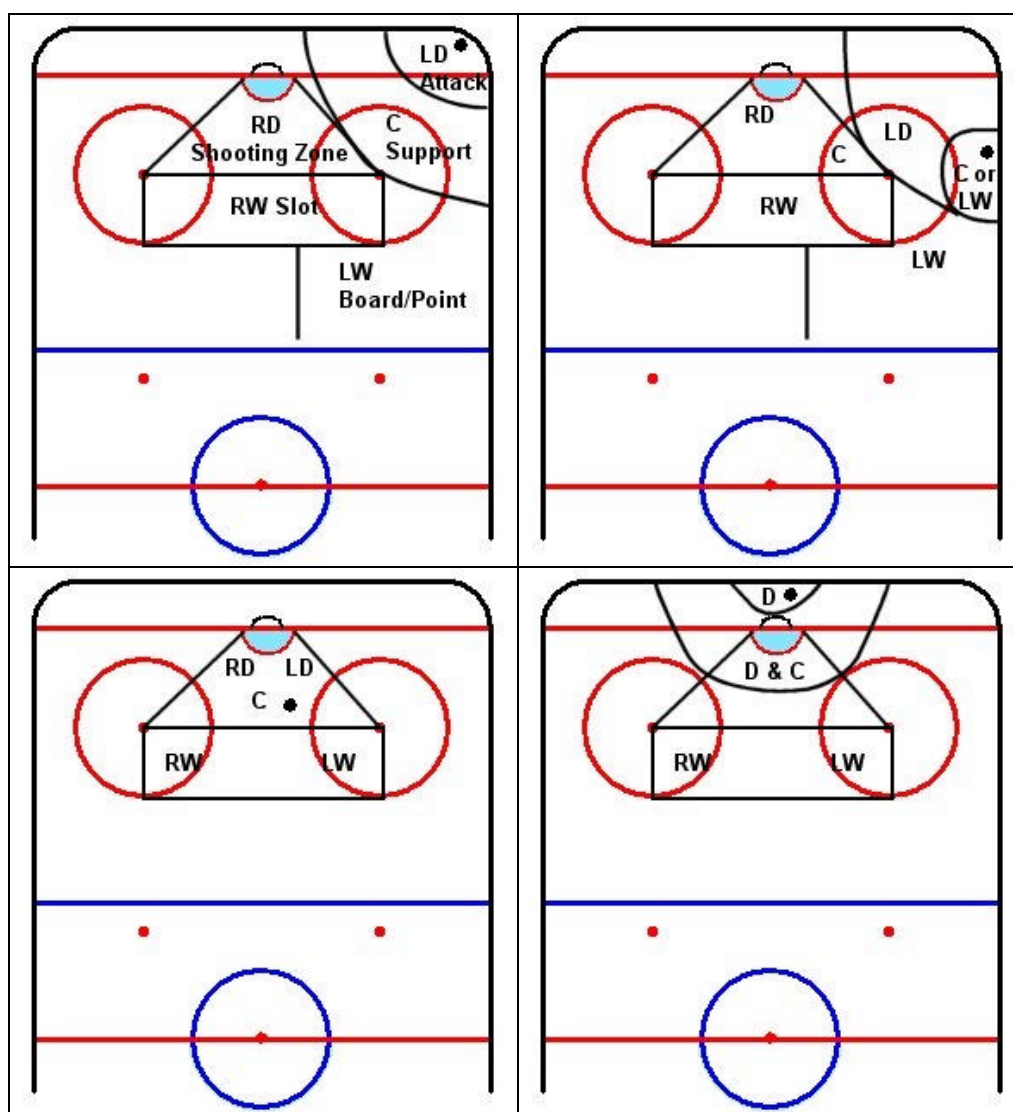


What Can We do Next?

It seems simple. If the puck is in the corner, set up the “house” and then have two players go after the puck, knowing that the goal is being taken care of by other players. But, and this is a big but, hockey is a moving game! Nobody should be standing still. So, sometimes the house may not look like a house! Yet, we still have the same objectives—keep a defensive player between our goal and an opponent and deny our opponents a place in the house (prime scoring territory).

The following diagrams show how the box-plus-one defense can be extended to other situations where the defense works by an expanded zone coverage. These defensive positions are built on the “house” concept, but are more advanced. To a degree, these extensions can help answer the question “Where am I supposed to be when the puck is in the corner (or side boards, in front, etc.)?”

Note that one player has the primary responsibility to “attack the puck” and take it for our side. This player is “supported” by either the center and/or a winger. We should not have three wingers and a defensive player chasing the puck (or worse yet, all five players).



“Triangle” Positional Defense in the Offensive Zone

In the offensive zone we are adopting a “triangle” defense. In the offensive zone, we are fore-checking, attacking the puck to take possession. Like the box-plus-one, the triangle has some advantages that include, 1) relative simplicity, 2) good position for when we recover the puck and transition to offense, and 3) relatively easy to move the defensive play to the neutral zone if they get the puck out of their defensive zone.

This diagram shows our defensive positions when the puck is in our offensive zone and we do not have control of the puck.

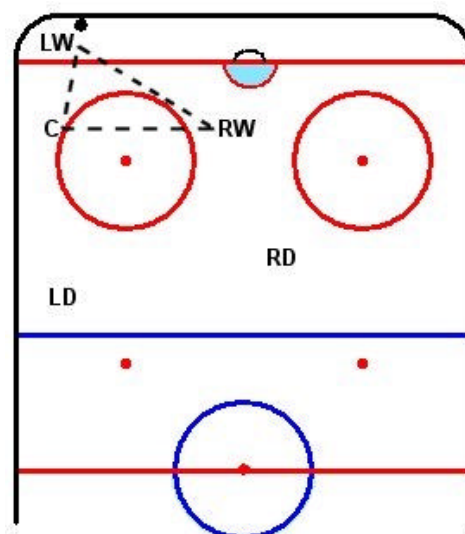
Three forwards form a triangle in the offensive zone. Either the puck-side wing (LW) or the first forward in the zone attacks the puck. The center backs up or supports the left wing, and the third forward (RW) is in the slot.

The defensive skaters set up generally on the puck-side (left side here) of the rink.

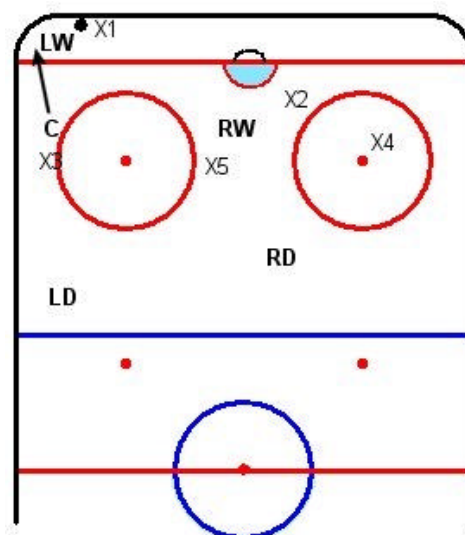
In this case, the left wing attacks the puck (the inner area in the corner).

The center supports the winger by staying away from the puck (until it springs loose), skating in the support area.

The right wing is positioned in the slot, but needs to keep moving, providing a second source of puck support and keeping the opponent guessing, as well as preparing for the transition to offense when our team recovers the puck.



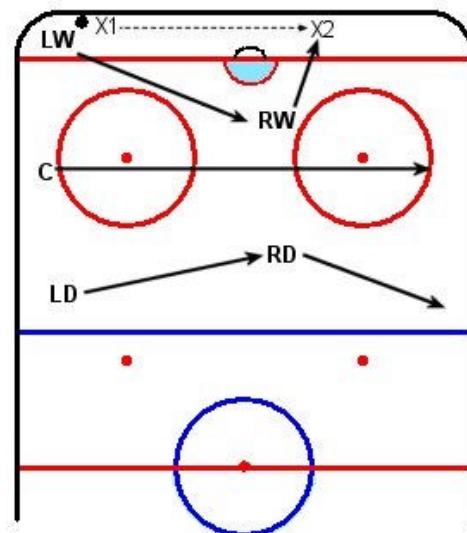
The objective is to pressure the puck carrier. Here, the LW challenges X1. The center positions him/herself to either move in and help the LW, or stay put and cover X3



If the puck is passed behind the net (X1 to X2), the RW moves in to challenge X2.

The center moves across to support the right winger, and the left wing moves to the slot, reestablishing the triangle.

The defensive skaters shift from left to right. The left defenseman now moves high above the slot on the right side of the rink, while the right defenseman moves to the right side boards.



Positional Defense in the Neutral Zone

The last place to play defense is in the neutral zone. Defensive play in the neutral zone may actually begin in our offensive or defensive zones and then move to center ice. For example, a missed pass from either our defensive or offensive zones results in our opponents recovering the puck in the neutral zone. We are now on defense in the neutral zone.

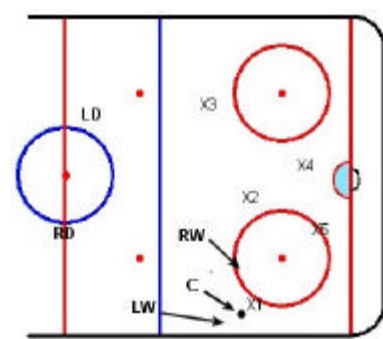
As before, there are many styles of neutral zone defensive play. We are going to try a modified modern defense. You have probably heard about “trapping.” Our kids are too young to play a true trapping defense, yet, I noticed that in our second game, Team 2, whether intentionally or not, ran an excellent trapping defense that successfully prevented us from moving the puck from our defensive zone to the neutral zone. Our team spent a lot of time on defense in our defensive zone!

Trapping Early

One type of trap is the New Jersey style which is set up in the neutral zone. Other teams (Florida) trap much earlier, in their offensive zone. This is what Team 2 used in our game with them. Consider the following diagram:

As the opposing team breaks out of their defensive zone, our defensemen back out of the zone and attempt to keep some distance between them and the offensive players. They are guarding against breakaways.

Our forwards, led by the Center, move out of their skating lanes and form an umbrella and attack the puck. They should try to move the player with the puck to the side boards and 1) cause a turnover, or 2) cause a pass. The supporting wings are somewhat spread out to prevent passes—to X2, in this example. If we regain position of the puck, we immediately either 1) move the puck to the slot and shooting zone, or 2) dump the puck deep in either corner, stopping their offense, and begin forechecking. The defensemen must be alert to the transition from defense to offense. If the puck is turned over, they need to skate back to the offensive zone and re-establish their positions.



If this fails, the players convert to a standard backchecking defense, moving to their respective skating lanes and covering opposing players, trying to intercept/stop passes, until they can trap again around the red line, or back into their defensive zone and set up to protect the “house.”

Notice that this defense requires that our forwards be able to assess when to leave their skating lanes, and when to reestablish their positions in their lanes.

One defense against trapping is to make a pass back to the puck-side defensemen or a hesitating wing in the center. Alternatively, when players feel pressured by the trap, they can gently bounce the puck off the boards into the neutral zone, or saucer pass (lift the puck) toward the center of the neutral zone. This forces the offense to have to 1) recover the puck (if they can; at least it’s a race), and to 2) regroup in the neutral zone. Our trapped players were often within four feet of our blue line and tried to skate the puck out 1-on-3! If they had simply dumped the puck to the neutral zone, the offense would have been substantially disrupted.

Situational hockey is difficult and requires players to think, not just react instinctively at this level. Let's teach them some of this stuff, keep our expectations realistic, and see how well they can do!

Coach, I Don't Understand Defensive Systems. What Do I Do?

Our players are young and few have played on a hockey team before. This stuff, while simple looking on paper, is not easy. This game moves, players go all over the ice, and the unexpected happens all the time. We want the kids to learn positional hockey, but what can they do as they develop the ability to react defensively? Here are some basics of defensive play that emphasizes some concrete things the players can do.

Defensive Play In Front of the Net

Positional play in front of one's own net is perhaps the single most important responsibility of the defenseman. Most teams have one or two high scoring forwards that must be controlled, and often the play of the defenseman in the defensive zone can be the deciding factor in who wins the game. Below is a list of tactics that can assist the defenseman to play a better game in front of his own net and encourage him to participate offensively.

- 1) **THE GOLDEN RULE**—Make sure a defenseman or center is in front of our net. If there is no opponent to cover, position yourself off the far post (away from the puck) so nobody can sneak in behind you.
- 2) **COVER THE MOST DANGEROUS MAN**—This is the player you think has the greatest scoring chance if given the puck. This player should not be allowed to stand alone in the shooting zone.
- 3) **COVERING THE OPPONENT IN FRONT**—When covering the opponent who doesn't have the puck; position yourself between him and the puck. Stay tight with him always making contact with your eye on the play. Know where this person is at all times! If your defensive partner beaten be ready to play the man with the puck if he is considered more dangerous, which he usually is.

DO NOT WAIT FOR YOUR OPPONENT TO COME TO YOU—GO TO HIM! Keep moving and watching the puck. Be prepared to move to an opposing player. Be prepared to move away from an opposing player. Be ready to pick up loose pucks and move them (skate or pass) away from the scoring zone.

- 4) **TIE UP THE OPPONENTS STICK**—Concentrate on tying up the opponent's stick rather than checking him to the ice. First, this is illegal in our league. Second, if you persist in checking your opponent to the ice you can take yourself out of the play. Only during scrambles in front of the net—when the puck is jumping around and your goalie is down—should you allow yourself to get tied up in a pile of players on the ice. Remember, you only need to lift your opponent's stick a couple of inches to disrupt a play or prevent a goal—you do not need to knock their stick out of their hands! After lifting or pressing your opponent's stick, lean on them and skate/guide them away from the scoring zone. When poke checking, use one hand that is initially kept close to your body. This extends your reach to the puck when you decide to check. Checking with your arm extended limits your checking range and tips your intention to your opponent.
- 5) **COMMUNICATE**—Point out the opponent in the slot. Yell to get the puck. Bang your stick on the ice if you are open and ready to receive a pass. This makes everybody's job easier.