

The Art of Checking DATE 2/02

Hockey is one of very few sports that allows intentional body contact with an opponent and it is a very big part of the game. Every player on the team is affected by physical contact whether it's a skill player who is willing or unwilling to take a hit to make a play or a "grinder" who is willing to sacrifice his body to eliminate an opponent from the play. The purpose of body checking is not to physically injure the opponent, but to eliminate or "take him out of the play" and then beat him back into the play, resulting in a manpower advantage for your team. Hockey is an extremely fast game and if you can get the edge, if even for a split second, it can result in a great scoring chance or an excellent defensive play. Body contact also has a big impact on the "mental" side of the game affecting a player's willingness to take a hit to make a play.

Teaching players the proper mechanics in giving and receiving a check will result in increased confidence when carrying the puck in traffic, reduction in penalties and prevention of injuries due to improper and illegal technique.

Open Ice Body Checking

Occasionally, a player will be caught in open ice carrying the puck with his head down or receiving a pass from behind him and he becomes a prime target for a bone-jarring body check. In this instance, the checker should be taught to:

- Turn to use his shoulder to make contact with the chest of the puck carrier

- Maintain good knee bend stability and balance, driving shoulder upward into chest of puck carrier

- Make sure to keep stick and elbows down

- After check, beat opponent back into play

Body Checking Along the Boards

Most body contact occurs along the boards. Checkers are taught to "angle" puck carriers toward the boards. This checking technique allows the checker to take away the middle of the ice, limiting the puck carrier's options and eventually running him out of room, at which point the contact is made.

Angling – easily the most important aspect of checking. It is important even in leagues where body contact is not allowed as it limits the puck carrier's options and forces him to an area where it is most difficult for him to make a play.

- Checker should approach puck carrier under control and from the side, taking away the middle of the ice, forcing him toward the boards

- Checker should keep stick on the ice taking away passing lanes

- Checker moves parallel to the puck carrier matching his speed but staying about a step behind. Timing is crucial. The checker can't get too far ahead allowing the puck carrier to cut behind him to the middle of the ice. At the same time he must not allow the puck carrier to get too far ahead where he can beat the checker up the boards and down the ice.

Body contact – objective is to knock the puck carrier off the puck to force a turnover and then beat him back into the play.

- Checker approaches puck carrier from the side under control

- Checker should have two hands on his stick for strength – stick and arms should be down

Knees must be bent for balance, stability and power

Use upper body (shoulders and arms) to attempt to turn the puck carrier toward the boards. This will effectively eliminate him from the play, allowing the checker to control his movement and eventually beat him back into the play. Players will find that they will be more effective on their stick side than on the non-stick side and they will really have to use their arms more when making contact on the non-stick side.

Once the puck carrier is turned facing the boards, the checker must position his back leg between the legs of the puck carrier squeezing him against the boards so he can't spin off and escape from the rear.

Once the puck carrier is stripped of the puck and under control against the boards, the checker can either retrieve the puck himself or jump to beat the opponent back into the play.

Timing and control are crucial – checker must not let the puck carrier escape ahead or behind him.

Receiving a Check – Being body checked is inevitable and being willing to take a hit to make a play is a very valuable asset. Players should strive to maintain control of the puck or move it to an open teammate when possible. When being checked along the boards, the puck carrier should:

Maintain good knee bend for balance and stability

Try to keep feet moving to power through the check

Skate close to boards and at point of contact, use leg, hip and shoulder to lean against the boards to absorb the force of the hit

Keep stick and elbows down

If pinned along the boards, use arms to “push off” to create room to escape and beat opponent back into play

Avoiding a Check – When handling the puck players should always have their heads up so they are able to recognize situations where they are about to be checked. Many of these situations can be avoided by:

Using a net, a teammate or even a referee or linesman as a “shield,” keeping it between you and the checker

Using stickhandling and head or body fakes to motion one way, get the checker to commit and then move the other way (faking toward the boards and moving toward the middle of the ice usually is the best option)

Using a change of pace to slow down and speed up will affect the checker's timing and control on his approach

Making short, smart passes to move the puck quickly

Checking From Behind – Very serious issue. Must be addressed with players from a checker and puck carrier perspective. Puck carriers should:

Be aware of potentially dangerous situations where they are picking the puck up along the boards with their back to the play

Look over their shoulder to size up the situation on the way to get the puck and know what they are going to do even before they get it

Whenever possible approach puck on an angle so their back is not to the play and face to the boards when picking up the puck

Because this is not always possible – practice faking one way by dropping the shoulder, then moving the other way while picking puck up along boards. Players should be equally adept at this in both directions and at a high rate of speed.

When approaching a puck carrier who is facing the boards a checker should:

Approach under control – try to stay about a stick length away from the puck carrier (to eliminate accidental contact that could knock him off balance and into the boards but also to be able to react to whichever way the puck carrier turns with the puck. If checker is too close, a sharp turn would quickly lose him and he would end up chasing the puck carrier).

Be patient and allow the puck carrier to turn with the puck. At this point, contact can be made safely and effectively from the side.