

The Lost Art of Stick Handling

In the 1950's Bill Mosienko, 1960's Jean Beliveau, 1970's Bobby Orr, and 1980's Gilbert Perreault showcased exceptional puck handling skills. In today's game, players like Jaromir Jagr, Mike Modano and Peter Forsberg often turn defensemen inside out. However, there are fewer exceptional stick handlers today than in years past. It's becoming a lost art! Why? Basically today, at every level, hockey is so much faster than decades ago. Players skate faster and pass the puck quicker today. The arena ice, i.e. NHL standard 200' x 85', remains the same but the players are bigger, stronger, better conditioned and faster! As a result, there is less time and space for players to handle the puck. A player is pressured more often and as a result there are more turnovers and changes of possessions in a game than ever before. There is less time to stick handle with the puck. Secondly and probably more important, players who are developing in our minor hockey system do not handle the puck enough! In general European players are far superior to Canadian players when skating and stick handling with the puck. Too many minor hockey practices focus excessively on conditioning drills, tactics and team systems especially below the Bantam level. There are too many drills without pucks! It is my humble opinion that 75% of the drills conducted should focus on the technical / fundamental skills such as skating, passing, stick handling and shooting. There's too much emphasis on winning and not skill development at the lower levels of the Canadian minor hockey system. Knowing that some minor hockey coaches employ trap like tactics and emphasize defensive team play to win at the atom and peewee level is disturbing to say the least... since the main focus for this age group should be on skill development.

Stick handling is used by a player to maintain puck control while stationary or in motion. It is a very important part of the game of hockey especially for one on ones, maneuvering at close quarters, and close plays on a goalie. A player must be aware of when to stick handle and when to pass to beat an opponent. Generally, a player will try to stick handle around an opponent when there is no teammate in position to receive a pass... when a player is in a tight situation and a pass cannot be made... during one on one game situations, where there is no trailing teammate. When a player is the last one back in his / her own zone, that player should never try to stick handle around an oncoming fore-checker. As well, it's important not to use the same attack move all the time (i.e. a forward vs. defenseman... going wide on the backhand side) etc.

Stick handling is a very important component of hockey but one of the more difficult skills to master. For good stick handling and puck control skills it's essential to have a proper stick length. So many players at the minor hockey level practice and play with sticks that are too long. A stick which is too long adversely affects a player's stick handling and skating skills. As a general rule, the length of the stick should be between the sternum and the chin of the player, but definitely below the chin!

Last week, I watched Jim Hughson interview Howie Meeker on his Sportsnet program i.e. Snapshots. Howie, a master at teaching young Canadian kids the fundamentals of the game over the decades, still "believes with passion" that too many Canadian kids today play with a stick that is too long! I agree 100 percent! I have personally lobbied V.P 's of Hockey for Canadian Hockey, past V.P. Tom Renney and current V.P Johnny Misley to create a Corporate Sponsored "adopt a short stick campaign" to raise awareness in this area but no takers folks! Whenever I am teaching power skating I always check the length of the player's sticks and always emphasize to the group that a shorter stick will improve their skating and stick handling / puck control skills. It's amazing how many sticks are too long!

There are three basic types of puck dribbling 1) to the front, 2) to the side and 3) diagonal i.e. halfway between front and side. When performing the skill of stick handling, it is essential to roll the wrists. The rolling action will cause the stick blade to turn and cup the puck in the center of the blade. Cushion the puck, and slide the stick blade along the ice but do not bang it. There should be little or no noise created by the stick hitting the ice. Other key teaching points include: hands spaced approximately 8 to 12 inches apart on the stick in a comfortable position, top hand must move across the chest (if the stick is too long this becomes a problem), head is up and peripheral vision is used to maintain sight of the puck (a good test....the coach signals number of fingers... players shout out the correct number), knees are bent in a comfortable skating position and stick handling must be smooth i.e. soft hands.

An advanced area of stick handling involves deking. There are three basic dekes 1) body fakes... change direction (head and shoulders in one direction, than go in the other direction)... between the legs (after the deke with head, shoulders or stick, the player slips the puck between the opponents legs and recovers the puck behind the opponent. 2) Skate fakes...a player stops, starts, tight turn /pivot... changes speed and direction, uses the boards to bank a pass back to his /her self. 3) Stick fakes.... fake a shot or a pass.

Several key teaching points include: when faking an opponent out... allow sufficient distance from a puck carrier and the opponent.... to avoid being stick checked, change speed and direction on the ice and always accelerate after completing the deke.



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There are numerous drills which a player can perform to enhance his / her stick handling (dribbling and deking) skills and which “need to be practiced more often “ such as: stationary stick handling around a pair of gloves; stationary stick handling to the front, diagonal, side and between the skates; stick handling while moving e.g. between the blue lines; chaos drills (each player with a puck in a limited space on the ice); scenic and wave drills; stick handling around the rink /zones - clockwise and counter-clockwise; stick handling on a circle i.e. 6 and 12 o’clock drill; stick handling in all directions (i.e. stops, starts, tight turns, pivots, forwards to backwards and backwards to forwards); skating around pylons /coaches performing fakes on pylons / coaches and having players battle one on one puck protection / keep away i.e. puck carrier vs. checker.

A player can skate a hundred miles per hour but he or she will not be very effective in a game unless he or she can carry and make creative moves with the puck. The majority of players slow down when skating with the puck. One of the few players in the NHL who does not appear to lose a stride or reduce his speed when carrying the puck is Pavel Bure.

Food for Thought: Remember if a player, his / her teammates or in general a team controls the puck... they control the game and have a better chance of scoring goals and winning the game!

Yours in Hockey,
Coach Rex