

The Importance of the Hockey Puck

The hockey puck is a little black rubber object... 1 inch thick, 3 inches in diameter and weighing approximately 5 to 6 ounces. Without the puck, a game of hockey cannot be played. This little black object takes a lot of abuse in a game... it is slapped around, passed around, tossed around and gloved /covered up repeatedly, etc. It often travels in excess of 100 miles per hour!

Depending how an individual is involved in the greatest game on earth, the following provides a different perspective on this little black object!

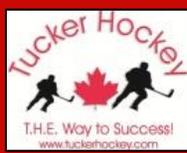
Viewers watching on T.V. – The eyes of the cameramen are your eyes. The camera man loyally follows the puck’s progress on the ice. Television viewers must be constantly focused to see this little black object on their screen. The puck can be difficult to see on occasion....innovative ways have been tried over the years such as the “Fox glow puck” to assist the viewer. However, this did not win over the traditionalist. Since the camera follows the puck, the television viewer does not see things developing away from the play. This is a luxury available only when watching the game in person.

Spectators in the Arena Stands – After the sad incident of the young girl being hit and losing her life by a puck at Columbus Blue Jackets game, it has made every spectator young and old conscious of the importance of keeping one’s eye on the puck i.e. like a goalie. After this unfortunate and tragic incident, the NHL has installed safety nets at every NHL arena. This will surely help.... but folks... always be alert to the location of the puck. The puck has a “mean streak”! Last Christmas, I caught an errant puck in the forehead while playing a fun pickup game. After receiving 15 stitches, it was time to “smarten up” and buy a visor for my helmet!

The Players - Wayne Gretzky had a playing philosophy...“It’s my puck... you get your own puck!” He loved to play with the puck, to control the “biscuit” and create beautiful plays / scoring chances. “If you control the puck, you control the game”. Most players when they skate with the puck skate slower than without it. Some players especially the offensively gifted players cannot play without the puck i.e. defensive hockey. It can drive coaches crazy when players are not complete hockey players and especially when players turn their back on the play i.e. puck. During an average game, a player will handle the puck no more than 25 to 35 seconds. Bobby Orr was the best at controlling the puck and therefore the tempo of the game but even the great Orr handled the puck less than a minute per game. Many players try to out-skate the puck but the puck usually travels faster than a player can skate. To support this statement, here’s a little food for thought... At this year’s NHL All Star game skills competition make a note of two things: The speed of the fastest skater (less than 30 miles per hour) and the speed of the hardest shot (close to 100 miles per hour). No matter what, the puck is always faster than the skater. If a coach stood on one goal line and a player started on the far blue line and had a race between a puck that the coach shot / passed and the player skated, the player would lose every time. If hockey is one of the fastest games in the world, it’s important to make the best use of the fastest object on the ice i.e. the puck. Two good passes can move the puck all the way down the ice faster than most players can stick handle with it. Therefore, it’s of paramount importance to “headman the puck” and use “give and go” tactics. As mentioned above, the puck can hurt if a player gets in the way of its travel... many defense men fearlessly block shots and goalies use any part of their body to keep the puck out of the net. Many observers may think a person must be a little crazy to play in goal... no just a little different!

The Teams – Many teams especially the European teams like to control the puck. The 1998 Czech Nagano Olympic team was very effective in their semi-final game against Canada when controlling the puck. As well, when they lost possession of the puck, they were very effective in blocking up Team Canada’s passing lanes. Therefore, Team Canada could not create many offensive plays and scoring opportunities, it was a tough loss! Many NHL teams like to get rid of the puck i.e. dump the puck into the opposition’s zone and fore check hard... looking for opposition turnovers. From a spectators view point this is a very boring play! During a speciality team play, the team on the power play attempts to gain the opposition’s zone to work the puck around, create a good scoring chance and produce a goal. While the opposition’s penalty killers, attempt to gain possession of the puck ... it’s a game of keep away. A “big flaw with our Canadian game” is that players and teams including coaches are often so focused on the contact i.e. hitting part of the game. As a result, they often forget there’s a puck on the ice! I strongly feel it’s important for a player to finish his checks if they are there but do not go running all over the ice just to deliver a big hit. I believe the European’s are far ahead of us in this area of the game!

The Coaches - When coaching a team, I have often told my players “ We need to obtain better control of the puck and get more shots on net.” It’s very difficult to score goals and to win hockey games if you don’t have possession of the puck. Many coaches design their team’s to play a pressure game i.e. pressure the puck. Don Phelps of the Calgary Junior A Canucks has done a masterful job over the years creating teams and enjoying tremendous success using this coaching philosophy. Even when you coach it’s



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important to keep your eye on the puck; flying pucks are a part of the game. I remember last season seeing Dave King, Head Coach of the Columbus Blue Jackets sporting a “Big shiner “!

The Officials - After the 2002 Salt Lake Olympics “quick face-off” success, NHL officials this season will be dropping the puck a little quicker. The 15 second rule, which requires opposing players to lineup for the face off, will ultimately speed up the game and reduce the verbal and physical scums between whistles. During the game, officials follow the play i.e. the puck and try to stay out of the way of flying pucks!! Whether the puck has crossed the goal line, whether the puck has been iced, whether the puck has been involved in an off-side or challenging calls and often controversial calls involving this little black object.

T.V. / Radio Announcers – Follow the puck’s every move up and down the ice... telling everyone who has the puck, who loss the puck, who passed the puck , who shot the puck, who stopped the puck and who scored with the puck! They are obsessed with the activities of this little black object!

Cartoon Characters – During the 1970’s, Hockey Night in Canada named its own cartoon character i.e. Peter Puck; who narrated some very interesting and insightful moments about our great game. This puck had quite a colorful personality!

Manufacturers – During an average NHL game 20 – 30 pucks are used. Many are lost in the stands... great souvenirs for many fans. When working at a hockey school in the Czech Republic, we lost close to 100 pucks per week... the Austrian, German and Czech kids loved to take a puck or two home with them! Great for the manufacturers / suppliers! Lately, the merits of using a lighter / smaller puck for women’s hockey has been discussed as well the “lighter blue puck” has been used at the beginner minor hockey.

The Queen – This weekend during a Vancouver Canucks vs. San Jose Sharks pre-season game, Queen Elizabeth II will drop the puck. It has made the Canadian news headlines and it is becoming a big event! This little black object sure receives a lot of attention!

Novice Hockey Observers - People who are not knowledgeable about the game of hockey often say why are a bunch of men chasing a little black object around a sheet of frozen water? For many of the 1 billion Chinese people on the other side of the planet... what is all the fuss and passion about hockey and chasing this little black puck? To most of this society, the game of hockey does not serve any great importance in their life!

Canadian Hockey Enthusiast – However, for many of the people living in Canada hockey is our passion. It is like a religion in many parts of our great land. We often eat, drink, sleep and breathe the game! We wear the Maple Leaf on our hearts! During a November 2000 meeting with Bob Nicholson, President of the Canadian Hockey Association prior to the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, I indicated to him... “The stakes are high!!” At the time, if he already had not, he sure did take these words to heart on the “Road to Gold” in Salt Lake... “Leaving no rock unturned”... leading Canada to double gold! The result of having more black objects in the U.S.A net than our Canadian net - for both women’s and men’s games - sure created a very special and proud moment in Canadian sports history! During the Olympics, this little black object called “the hockey puck - showcased its importance” to Canadians and placed a special smile on millions of enthusiast faces - coast to coast - from Victoria, B.C. to St. John’s, Newfoundland.

In conclusion, so many individuals world-wide make a living or volunteer countless hours to enjoy great personal moments and experiences, special team camaraderie and “life-long friendships” because of this little black object.

Thank you Mr. Puck!

Yours in Hockey,
Coach Rex