

Tucker Hockey Initiatives

For the Betterment of the Game

The objective of this section of Hockey Zones is to discuss issues and offer potential ways to improve our great game. For this installment of Tucker Hockey Initiatives we will focus on the following discussion point.

Why are the shots on goal per game in the NHL often so low?

While watching the 2017 NHL playoffs we have noticed a common trend. Teams are having an alarming low number of shots on goal. So I thought to myself why? What's going on here? Here are a couple examples, during round 2 of the Pittsburgh vs. Washington series, game 1 first period shots were 6 to 4 and the Caps had only 1 shot in the first 13 minutes on their home ice! As well, during Stanley Cup Final game 1 of the Pittsburgh vs. Nashville game, the Penguins on home ice went an incredible 37 minutes without a shot on goal (with no shots recorded in the 2nd period)! That's unbelievable, with so many gifted offensive players on the ice such as Crosby, Malkin, Kessel etc. Where is our great game going? It seems not for the better? Many of the games have been quite boring! Let's yawn, yawn, and yawn some more shall we with this type of hockey!

Here are my views on this subject – I'm sure you have other points as well!

- **Passive Fore checking / Defensive Posture** – many teams are playing a more conservative defensive style of game today. Less run and gun for sure. For example, the Ottawa Senators had great success playing a 1 - 4 or 1 – 3 - 1 defensive style system and advanced to the eastern conference final. This coaching strategy involved less pressuring the puck in the opponent's offensive zone but rather sitting back to pressure in the neutral zone to cause opponent's turnovers and then counter attacks. Many teams are playing not to lose. An emphasize more on conservative play than offense. Often this style of play is robotic with limited creativity. Playing a low risk – keeping the play outside the dots area; a safe game. More and more teams are protecting the net / slot zones with a box type structure; this keeps the opposition on the outside and away from the prime scoring area. If you

watch closely the majority of play is outside the dots in most games. There's not a lot of flow (north to south) up the middle of the ice anymore.

- **Puck Possession / Management** – in today's game more teams are conscious of puck management. Rather than shooting the puck from anywhere and everywhere they are more precise in their shot selection. Often chipping or dumping the puck in the opposition's corners rather than on net to keep the puck away from their opponent's goalie and defensemen.
- **More Back Pressure** – most players' today attempt to play a 200 foot game. Strong play at both ends of the rink not just in the offense zone with the puck. We see very few 2 on 1's and 3 on 2's during a game. They are becoming a thing of the past. Forwards are skating hard back to their own zone to eliminate odd player rushes. More and more the game in each zone of the ice whether offensive zone, neutral zone or defensive zone will have 8 to 10 players in this smaller area. There's very little time and space. A player who has the puck maybe has a second or less to make a decision – this dynamic often forces lots of turnovers and changes of possession in a game.
- **Blocking shots and Active Sticks** – in today's game it's not only a select few that are blocking shots. Now even the superstar players like Malkin or Crosby are getting their bodies in the way to prevent clear shots to the net. Many of the shot attempts do not materialize in shots on net. Blocking shots is encouraged by the coaches and it's become a real art and big part of the game. As well, more and more players especially defenseman are using their sticks to deflect shots away from their goalie and out of play.
- **Goaltending** – overall the caliber of the goaltending is at an all time high in the NHL. There are very few goals scored now off the rush especially if the goalies can see the puck. So the odds of scoring are far less and players shoot less from outside or just inside the blue lines. Shooters are less confident that they can score from anywhere on the ice. Most goals in today's game are scored in close around the net or slot zones with lots of traffic and screens.

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- **Players Improvement** – today's players are stronger, quicker and faster. Players with the puck have less time and space to make a decision or make a play. There's a defensive player on them all the time. Everyone's a good skater even the 3rd and 4th liners. Forcing more turnovers than ever! Often there's lots of hacking and whacking among strums of players; many puck battles along the outside of the dots and along the walls with very little flow to the game.

I can't really say that most of the NHL playoff hockey games have been exciting. Definitely the first round was the most entertaining. Most of the games lack flow, action and entertainment for the fans that are supporting the game's success. I watched the Canada vs. Sweden Gold medal game from the 2017 World Hockey Championship on the bigger ice (15 feet wider and 3,000 square feet of extra playing space) and the shots were Canada 43 vs. Sweden 41. It was a thrilling game to watch on TV due to the coaching and teams style of play. Unfortunately, Canada lost this one in a shootout.

How do we improve on the hockey's entertainment for the betterment of the game?

1) Increase the size of the rinks – more time and space for the skilled players to be creative. This would involve quite the capital expenditures and lost of game revenue from this renovation. Can't see the NHL owners making this change in the very near future?

2) So in the interim, how about penalizing the coaches / teams so they play a pressure fore - checking game in the opponent's zone e.g. mandatory 2 players inside the opposition's blue line. Players get penalties for foul play. Why not coaches / teams being fined or be penalized for playing "soccer on ice" – boring hockey?! It's a far better game when there's flow! Do you agree?

Maybe you have other ideas / suggestions! We encourage readers to gather their own thoughts and let their opinions be heard! Letters to the editors are welcomed at programs@tuckerhockey.com.

