

Goal Scorers Hear a Different Drummer

By Jack Blatherwick

Number 8 in the Capitals' jersey attacked the zone with his usual disregard for the opponents' defense. Most "normal" folks see four people back, seemingly in perfect position to defend against the rush. But Alex Ovechkin sees openings, not bodies.

Attacking diagonally through the offensive zone, Ovechkin was moving his hands and feet with lightning speed, looking for that perfect moment — a chance to beat the defenseman or to shoot between the legs, using the D as a screen. But this time, as he carried across the zone toward his backhand side, No. 8 saw no perfect opening, and he carried the puck a bit too far. The night before, he did the same thing. Maybe even for him, as for mere mortals, skating toward the backhand side makes it difficult to pull the trigger.

But, the first night he scored in this same situation — not just a routine, one-point goal. This one made the highlights on half the 200 cable TV stations. Realizing he was worsening the shooting angle with each step, Ovechkin spun 180 degrees quickly in full stride and ripped a lightning quick forehand before the defenseman or goalkeeper realized what this nut was doing. It was in the net so fast, the goal-judge could only say, "Huh?" His finger was frozen next to the switch.

That was one of three highlight goals — the first of many hat tricks for this young phenom in a 3-2 overtime win. So the next night, it would surprise no one if he had visions of that highlight goal from 24 hours before. Again he carried the puck past the prime shooting area and shifted into auto-pilot — Ovechkin's unique combination of stick, shoulder, and foot fakes. Yes, we've seen it dozens of times on breakaways — those automatic fakes with his head, shoulders, hands, and tongue — and most times he briefly raises a leg like a dog — just for an instant while the goalie exclaims, "What the heck ... ?"

But tonight he tripped. We'll never know if it was the tongue or the leg, but he tripped and lost the puck for a second. But goal-scorers don't give up the puck that easily — especially in the offensive zone. So, with apparent visions of last night's spin-o-rama, he started to spin on the way to the ice — released his grip on the stick with one hand — shortened the shaft — and, with his back flat on the ice, he swept the puck toward the goal.

Goal-scorers have a sixth sense for the net — a gyroscopic homing device, even if they're spinning vertically and horizontally. Ovechkin swept the puck — without looking — straight toward the goal. Meanwhile, the goalkeeper was doing his own flopping spin-o-rama, perhaps to keep Ovechkin in proper visual alignment — and the puck found its way slowly across the goal line. "The greatest goal I've ever scored," Alex said later. I don't know. The three last night weren't bad.

What is it about goal-scorers, I asked Glen Hanlon, the Capitals' coach — himself a former NHL goaltender?

“They’re different,” he said. “**They have undying confidence** — never considering the possibility of failure. **They hardly see the goalie — just the openings. When I played, the goal-scorers loved to shoot in practice.** They had no respect for the goalie — high shots past your head — shots when you weren’t looking — anything to see that puck sailing into the net. They’re the same today, and they’ve been like that forever.”

Hanlon has seen it from the perspective of a goalie and a coach. **Goal-scorers love the shooting part of every drill.** They hate to skate back to their line without a shot, even if they have to shoot when the next group is attacking the goalie. When there’s a chance for a cool shot — practice or game — goal-scorers are zeroed in, eyes are dilated from the adrenalin. It’s like a dog that sees a rabbit within range. And, like a goal-scorer, there’s no such thing as a rabbit out of range. Anything’s possible. In fact, the slimmest of opportunities is a sure thing for these rare breeds.

Dave Snuggerud, a former Olympian and NHL’er, is now the coach at Chaska high school. “**We’re doing something wrong** in Minnesota,” he says. “We haven’t produced a 50 goal-scorer since Scott Bjugstad. Maybe **we have too much structure — too much emphasis on systems. We need great defense, of course, but we need goal-scorers too.**”

Snuggy **argues for more unstructured competition**, and he’s starting a 4-on-4 league this fall for high school players. “We won’t have too many whistles,” he says, “and the refs aren’t going to have the puck more than the players.”

Ovechkin has some genetic gifts, considering his mother was twice an Olympic gold medalist in basketball. But our questions can’t stop there. That’s out of our hands; as coaches **we need to ask what the Moscow Dynamo coaches are doing with young players to build these goal-scoring skills** — and perhaps that superhuman mind. Instead, we tend to build obedient robots who hustle north and south — and when they don’t out-number the defense, they honour the coach’s wishes and dump the puck deep.

Not too many years ago the Minnesota Wild were battling the highly favoured Avalanche in overtime of an important playoff game. The expert TV analysts had just lamented a fancy neutral zone miscue by the Wild, a turnover that gave the Avalanche a golden opportunity to dump the puck the other way. “No. No. No,” was the lecture to the viewers. “Not in overtime. Don’t get cute in the playoffs. Get the puck deep when you don’t have a numerical advantage.”

Fortunately, the Wild bench wasn’t listening. Forty seconds later, the late Sergei Zholtok carried the puck toward the offensive blue line with the Avalanche defense in perfect position. No numerical advantage; dump the puck deep — this was the conventional wisdom. But Zholtok swerved toward the middle after crossing the blue line, causing the defenseman in front of him to move laterally with him, crowding his own partner. When Sergei dropped the puck to Andrew Brunette, crossing behind him from the other wing, Brunette was left with open ice to the crease. A beautiful deke on the best goalkeeper in hockey, and the series was over. The Avalanche were off to the golf course.

Conventional wisdom has never entered the minds of goal-scorers, or offensive geniuses who make those creative assists. Their mind doesn't function like a robot's — actually more like hyper-active animals chasing a rabbit. For goal-scorers, the adrenalin rush is a goal — any goal, really — but especially a really creative new variety — a goal no coach has dreamed of, a goal that brings team-mates over the boards.

“How the kid got that one, I'll never know,” said one of Ovechkin's teammates. “But I can't wait for tomorrow to see what comes next.”

The greatest hockey player in history, Wayne Gretzky got 894 regular-season and 122 playoff goals in his career, of which 920 were creative highlights. As the coach of the team opposing the Capitals that night, Gretzky was visibly excited by Ovechkin's goal. That's the way it is in the brotherhood of goal-scorers. “That was special,” said the Great One with an unusual twinkle in the eye for a coach who has to explain a loss to the TV audience. Deep inside he was thinking, “I wish I got that one. That was special.” The rest of us just said, “Wow.”