

Quick Hands, Quick Feet - It's a European Thing

By Jack Blatherwick

Most elite Russian and European forwards have an incredibly great habit -- moving their hands as quickly as their feet when they attack the offensive zone. We'll use the word "habit" because this is a skill they practice over and over their entire life until it becomes second nature -- like riding a bike.

North Americans must realize that good skill habits are just as coachable as the bad ones we practice inadvertently every day -- coasting before we shoot or coasting before we make a move on an opponent.

When Anatoli Tarasov and others started hockey in the Soviet Union around 1950, they did it with a plan. After analyzing film of some great NHL'ers, they decided practices would feature these same NHL skills -- but with a Tarasov twist. They literally had to force players to practice all stick skills while moving their feet quickly.

It wasn't practice as usual. The coach knew that if players were left on their own to practice stick handling or shooting, they'd do it standing still or coasting. So drills were planned to work on those skills -- initially at a comfortable learning pace -- then faster and faster, until they could be repeated at full speed. This was the Soviet plan -- not only for the National Team, but for all coaches in the youth development programs.

Of course, practices were frustrating -- as uncomfortable for the elite players as for the beginners -- because difficult skill habits were not yet second nature. Tarasov knew that everyone would like to show off in practice -- to take plenty of time to prepare and shoot hard shots in front of team-mates. But the Soviet coaches pushed them out of their comfort zone -- forced them to stickhandle through obstacles while skating quickly, to cut at 90° when they crossed the blue line and release shots without preparation. And they had to do it all while moving their feet.

This was also a feature of many dryland workouts: sprints, jumps, and slideboard drills while holding a stick and pretending to stickhandle. Young players were taught to use a "light grip" with their lower hand -- releasing it completely at times, letting it slide up and down the shaft at other times, so the top hand controlled the stick.

European and Russian players are brought up today with the same training, so by the time they reach the NHL, those skills they rehearsed in uncomfortable practices have become their comfort zone. Watch these great players and you can hardly see their hands and feet, they're moving so fast. Invariably they recall youth practices this way, "All we did was skate and handle the puck -- skate and handle the puck -- and it continued afterwards in dryland. Move your hands and move your feet."

Practice is about forming habits -- good ones or bad, and coaches should identify which habits we encourage in every drill -- some by accident. If North American coaches would analyze skill practices as thoroughly as we analyze systems, our players would have a much better chance of succeeding at higher levels.

Consider this one poor habit we "teach" by accident. Going over the tape of an NHL game recently, I charted shots attempted at full strength. There was not one shot on goal if it was taken while the player was moving toward the goal. In other words, the defense deflected the shot unless attackers would veer one way or the other at 90°.

This means we should practice cutting 90° and releasing quick shots. But we don't. If you watch practices at any level, almost all shots are taken while coasting directly at the goaltender.

The old coach would say, "Nyet. Nyet. Move your hands. Move your feet. Cut quickly and shoot. Don't coast and tell the D and goalie when the shot is coming." Tarasov was successful because he had the wisdom and courage to force his players out of their comfort zones in practice.