

Not Just Stick Blades Can be Used for Puckhandling

On several occasions last season, we watched National Hockey League games in a little different way. Each shift we were looking for how many times the puck was actually played by players utilizing their skates to receive a pass, to make a pass to a teammate, or to kick the puck up to their own stick. Not surprisingly, it happened a lot, anywhere from 2-4 times per shift on average. So it is important for players to not only use their stick blade, but also their skate blades properly in controlling the puck.

Balance

To be able to effectively utilize the skate blades, players need to have good balance on their skates. To use one foot to stop or kick the puck, a player needs to be able to balance on the other foot. Bending the knee and keeping the upper body upright are important components of balance. Leaning too far forward or too far backward with a straight leg almost guarantees that a player will fall down, and ensures that they will be at least off balance.

Skate Positioning for Passing

To pass the puck with the skate blade, a player should most often use the inside edges of the skate blade, for better control. The toe needs to be pointed to the side to effectively use the whole blade. Trying to kick the puck with the toe of the skate blade is pretty much useless, and somewhat dangerous. When needed players can use their outside edge to pass the puck, but they will have much less control than when using the inside edge.

Skate Positioning for Receiving

No matter how much coaches talk about it, and insist upon it, not every pass is going to be on the blade of the stick. Occasionally passes will come up short and the receiver has to use his skate blades to deflect the puck up to the stick blade. Most often the outside edge of the blade (of the skate nearest the passer) is used, and the player needs to angle the blade, with the toe turned in, so that the puck deflects off of the blade, with minimal slowdown, up to the stick blade. Once in a while, the inside edge (of the skate farthest from the passer) is used, especially if the puck behind the receiver and he needs to reach back to pull it up to his stick blade.

When to use skates

Controlling the puck with the skates would be used:

- Battling in the corner – Often in one on one battles in the corner, players are making contact with their upper bodies and cannot effectively use their arms, hands and stick to move the puck, either because they are battling for position or are pinned against the boards. In this situation, the skate blades can be used to kick the puck to an open teammate, or to open ice where they can retrieve it themselves.
- Receiving a pass and getting set to shoot – Often when battling for position in front of the net a player does not get his stick on the ice in time to receive a pass, or the pass is in his skates because he has been moving around. Using the inside of the skate blade to receive the pass and tap it up to the stick for a one-time shot is a useful weapon for goal scorers.
- Rebounding – Rebounds are very unpredictable. When players are in tight to the goalie, or moving toward the goalie for a rebound, the puck can go in a number of different directions. Being able to field a rebound with the stick and quickly move it to the blade for a shot can get you a lot of goals.
- Receiving a pass moving up-ice – Being able to catch a pass with the skates, without having to slow down, is really a skill that requires plenty of practice, but definitely one that can make the difference between getting a shot on net or not. Most often players would use the outside edge of the skate and angle the blade so the puck tips quickly up to the stick blade. But once in a while when the puck is behind a player, he can reach back with the other foot and use the inside edge of the blade to drag the puck forward to his stick blade.
- Retrieving a lost puck while stickhandling – Once in a while, you just lose the puck. It happens. Young players should be taught to handle the puck in front of their skates as much as they can when moving forward (unless they are going around a defender) so that if they do lose the puck, they can use the inside edge of their skate blade to kick it quickly back up to their stick.
- Receiving a hard-around pass on the boards – Sometimes a direct stick-to-stick pass is just not there and defensemen are forced to fire the puck around the boards to their wingers in their own zone. Wingers need to angle their skate blades on the boards so the puck deflects off of the blade and up to their stick blade.

Practice Tips

As with all skills, players need to work in a progressional manner, starting out slowly and mastering a skill before moving to the next, more difficult step. Using the skates should be practiced in a stationary manner, then eventually while moving slowly, then at a faster pace. At any age, especially for younger players, playing a cross-ice scrimmage with a soccer ball is a fun and productive way to improve footwork and balance.

- Puckhandling – have players stickhandle around the ice with a puck and periodically call out “FEET” meaning they need to use their feet to keep the puck moving forward. Make sure they don’t kick it to far ahead. Have them keep their stick blade on the ice and don’t allow them to kick the puck farther ahead than that. More experienced players can use two pucks, handling one with their feet and one with their stick while moving. The pucks can be alternated (meaning they can use skates and stick to handle them both) but an effort should be made to keep the puck directly in front of the skates, and to keep moving, however slowly that might be at the start, then faster as the player improves.
- Inside edge passing and receiving – have players stand facing each other, 10-15 feet apart, and use the inside edges of their blades only to pass and receive the puck. Make them stop (receive the puck) first before kicking it back to their partner. After they have mastered this skill, then let them kick it back while it is moving toward them. Then have them receive the puck with their skates, kick it to their stick and pass it quickly back to their partner.
- Outside edge receiving – have players stand shoulder to shoulder, 10-15 feet apart, passing the puck to their partners skates. The player needs to angle the blade, toe in, to deflect the puck up to the stick blade, without slowing it down. Once they have some success at this, have them start to move slowly with their partner, maintaining the same distance apart, and receiving the pass with their blades.