

Teaching Backchecking in minor hockey
by Richard Bercuson

"BACKCHECK!"

It's a command that makes players jolt into high gear. They know they have to do it, but they sure don't like it.

Unfortunately, backchecking has come upon its reputation unfairly. It remains one of the few individual tactics that is either not taught or taught improperly. Too often it is considered an appendage to a playing system, ie. when you're finished forechecking, backcheck. A general direction is given, but the player doesn't really know what to do once there.

In fact, backchecking is a complex skill. A player needs:

- A change of pace and direction that allow him to react to visual cues sent by his cover and/or the puck.
- Excellent balance.
- Good control of his stick for blocking passing lanes, pokechecking or stickchecking at the right moment.
- To keep his eyes constantly scanning and his head on a swivel. He can then search peripherally for his check, the puck and other opposing players.
- To be able to judge distances while on the move using the stick and markings on the ice.
- To be able to adjust his position according to his team's system once the puck enters his half of the rink.

Until these skills have been at least introduced, it is unrealistic to expect players to be effective backcheckers. While that may seem a tall order, backchecking skills are actually not difficult to teach. In fact, given 10-15 minutes in each hourly practice, you can develop a squad of good backcheckers within 4-5 practices. Moreover, learning backchecking involves inherently competitive situations of 1 against 1 that kids enjoy practicing.

The following should be considered when preparing to teach backchecking:

- 1) Make sure the fundamental skating skills can be applied. Just because they've been taught, doesn't mean they've been learned.

2) Off-ice, teach the principles of backchecking (as outlined later in this article). These can be practiced in a gymnasium or on a field.

3) Teach backchecking before developing a forechecking or neutral zone system. It should be taught as a building block for defensive team play. In minor hockey, it is far simpler for kids to understand and adhere to one or two responsibilities as backcheckers than the array of options in a system. More importantly, the players will attain quick success.

4) Set aside a specific amount of time over a few practices to build a proper progression. This will also show players the high regard in which you hold the skill.

5) Gradually introduce more distractions for the backchecker. But make certain that every drill is designed for the backchecker to succeed at least once.

6) Start with a reduced coverage area. Keep in mind that in a minor hockey game, a player's check will rarely stray more than half a rink width from where he started.

7) It is important that the tactic be followed up in games. Assign one player on each line the key backchecker's role each period and congratulate them on what they did. Emphasize that the backchecker may not ever touch the puck. But when he does it right, the opposition offence may sputter and die. Point out specific situations on the bench immediately after they happen.

Principles of backchecking

Goalside-Inside:

The backchecker MUST stay between his check and the net and inside of him. This splits the offence and allows the defence to guard a smaller area.

Where's the gap?:

A player must judge the distance between him and the check according to

their speed and location on the rink. The closer the play gets to the checker's blueline, the smaller the gap. A stick length away at this point is as close as the checker should get unless the puck is on its way or in the vicinity.

"I gothca!"

Players might try repeating this phrase as they skate back. It serves as a reminder to look for and stay with their check. It may also distract the attacker from the play.

"All by my lonesome":

Backcheckers should be told that they are on their own and to expect little help for a while. With linemates possibly scrambling out of the forechecking zone and defencemen busy reading a rush, backcheckers have to be able to function alone until deep in their own zone.

Deep means Deep:

A backchecker must not stop backchecking until his team regains possession. This does not mean that the backchecker cannot help regain possession. If the backchecker is positioned correctly, he will be skating forwards into his own zone and ahead of his check. His defencemen will be going backwards and trying to stop a rush. If the puck is shot or dumped in, the backchecker is often the first player who can reach it. What he does with the puck is another problem altogether. The safest choice for minor hockey players is to have the forward immediately pass the puck into the opposite corner to a defenceman. Since the forward has his back to the rink, it's dangerous to expect much more than that! Teach the backchecker to approach the puck from an ^{an} angle to get the best view possible of the rink.

Be an opportunist:

While backchecking, a player can still pounce on a loose puck or stickcheck

a puckcarrier who encroaches in his area. This may mean leaving his check and is an instantaneous choice made by the player on the ice. Kids tend to take their coaches' instructions literally. If they are told to stay with their check "no matter what", they will do just that. Meanwhile, the puckcarrier may dippy-doodle right by and the backchecker won't budge from his cover. The kids have to be able to make certain decisions on their own. They will quickly learn what distance they can cover to reach the puck. This is particularly effective in the neutral zone.

Limited body contact:

The closer a backchecker skates to his check, the easier it is for the check to spin away (except near the boards). Making continuous physical contact with the check in minor hockey can easily tie up the backchecker or suck him out of the play. Even using the stick to tap the check's shinguards (as advocated by some) draws the checker's stick away from its prime purpose - to block or intercept the puck. It also pulls the backchecker too close to his cover. Stick contact (on the opponent's stick) should be initiated as the puck approaches. Body contact should be made when the attacker has possession and is at the boards.

The following is a four-practice guide for teaching backchecking:

Practice 1:

Drill 1 (6-7 minutes) - To teach basic positioning

- Pylons set up as shown on diagram
- Team divided into 3 groups (A,B,C) for maximum activity
- X is the checker, O is the attacker (without a puck)
- In each lane, X gets a slight headstart in the middle of the lane (as positioned on the diagram). Both players skate forward at all times.
- O tries to get inside and behind X by changing speeds and weaving. O

cannot cut back. X must maintain proper speed and position ahead of O. As they approach the far blueline, the gap must narrow. Inside the blueline, X must try to maintain stick contact with O who continues to weave.

- At the end of the lane, the same players are checkers. After 2 lengths by each player as checker and attacker, rotate the groups.
- In the middle lane, X must be more cautious about closing the gap because of X's increased skating room

Drill 2 (6-7 minutes) - To introduce read and react

- Same setup
- O is at far end ahead of X - Coach is in opposite end corner.
- On signal, both players enter zone. O reacts to coach's visual signal and either stops or turns to leave zone. X must react to this and adjust accordingly.
- Variation: On the way to the far end, O reacts to coach's new signal (a stick against the boards), doubles back to his zone, with X watching him. They then exit a second time with X backchecking.

Practice 2:

Drill (10-15 minutes) - Covering a wider area

- Pylons set up as shown with checker and attacker positioned.
- Again, O tries to dart past and inside X on the way to the other end.
- X must maintain proper position and gap distance on the way in

Variation:

- A puck is placed on the far blueline
- O can only touch the puck if he gets ahead of X. He then cuts to the net for a shot which X must try to prevent. Both players must skate forwards at all times. X must learn to angle player away from net.

Practice 3:

Drill (10-15 minutes) - Coverage after a pass

- Pylons set up down middle as shown
- P is a passer who skates along the pylons ONLY. X and O take up positions as in previous drills. P tries to pass to O who again weaves to evade the backchecker X.
- If O gets puck, he can return pass to P at any time.

Restrictions:

- P and O must be in the same zone when passing.
- X only tries to cover O, not P.
- O can go inside or outside to receive pass.

Variation - Either O or P, whoever has the puck, is permitted to cut back and go the other way. Then his partner must do the same. This forces a shadowing exercise to be included in the backchecking.

Practice 4:

Drill (10-15 minutes) - Selecting the player to cover

- Pylons on faceoff dots
- Drill is done from centre ice to both ends simultaneously
- A puck is dumped into a corner for either O₁ or O₂ to fetch. If O₁ gets puck, he moves up ice quickly into one lane. O₂ must take the adjacent lane. The attackers can switch lanes but cannot skate into the third one. O₁ and O₂ must exchange at least one pass before reaching centre ice.
- X moves to high slot - he cannot forecheck the puckcarrier. He must skate back now with O₂ and check O₂ when a pass is made. O₂ will try to get open and behind X to get the pass. If O₁ and O₂ switch lanes, x must try to stick with his check, unless the puckcarrier comes within checking distance.

Variation:

- From centre to just one end at a time. Whichever attacker has the puck at X's blueline must shoot from that lane. X must stay with his check and get rebound
- Use all 3 lanes. 2 attackers can enter any lane, but can only pass into adjacent ones

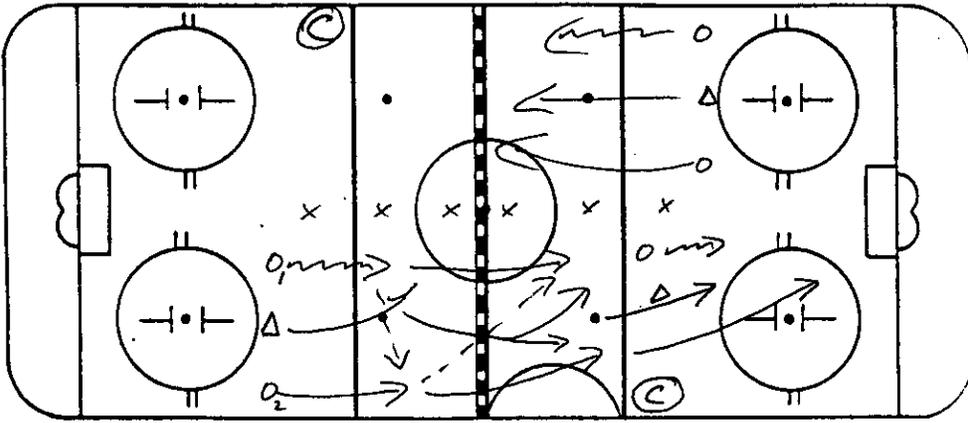
These drills illustrate the need for a progression when teaching backchecking, just as with any other tactic. In the three stage drill development advocated by the CAHA's coaching program, the technical and tactical drills provided here are sufficient to give most minor hockey players a solid foundation in backchecking. From here, the third stage - efficient game-like drills - could be used.

Teach backchecking efficiently and thoroughly and teams will find it tough to score on you.

BACKCHECKING SERIES

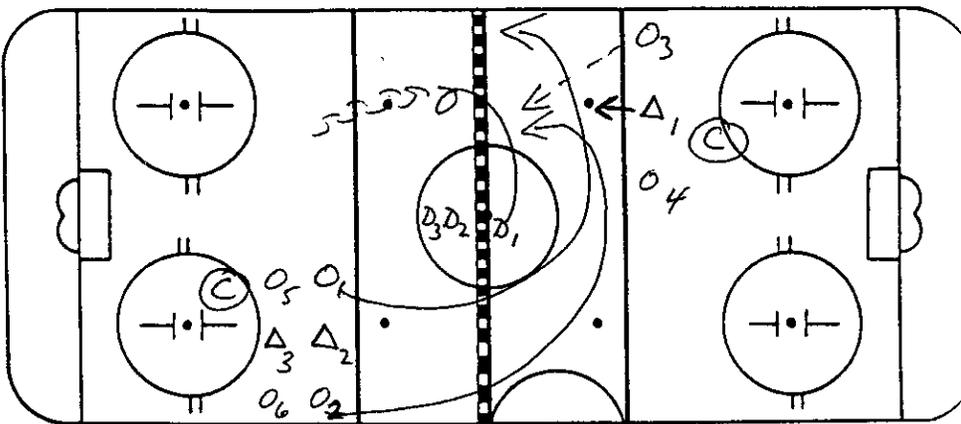
① 2 AGAINST 1 (5-8 MINS.)

- GROUPS OF 3 - START FROM TOP
- F CIRCLE (BOTH SIDES AT SAME TIME)
- O₁ & O₂ PASS & ATTACK
- Δ APPLIES PRESSURE, THEN CHOOSES A MAN TO COVER AT CENTRE ICE
- Δ STAYS DEEP TO COVER REBOUNDS



② 2 VS. 1+1 (15 MINS.)

- O₁, O₂ LEAVE, GET PASS FROM O₃
- D₁ SKATES WITH O₁, O₂ & DEFENDS
- Δ₁ LEAVES WITH PASS TO BACKCHECK
- THEN O₃, O₄ ATTACK, PASS FROM O₆
- D₂ DEFENDS WITH Δ₂ BACKCHECKER

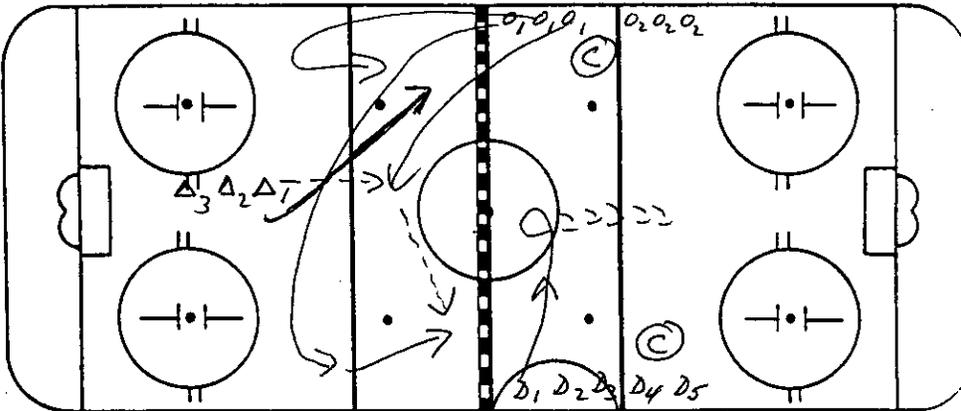


(ROTATE CHECKERS)

TAKE CARE D'S SKATE WITH ATTACKERS THROUGH MID-ZONE

③ 3 VS. 1+1 (10 MINS.)

- LINE OF O₁ SKATES THROUGH ZONE
- PASS FROM Δ₁
- O₁ LINE ATTACKS D₁ WHO STEPPED IN FROM FAR BOARD
- Δ₁ BACKCHECKS
- LINE OF O₂ STEPS FOR SAME SEQUENCE
- HAVE EACH BACKCHECKER TAKE 3 TURNS BEFORE ROTATING ATTACK LINES



X = CONES
 O = ATTACKER
 Δ = BACKCHECKER
 D = DEFENSEMAN
 C = COACH

IF USING 2 DEFENCE, REVERSE THEIR STICKS