THE TRANSITION GAME
"WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO TEACH IT"

PRESENTED BY TIM TAYLOR
FOR MASS. DISTRICT USA HOCKEY COACHES CLINIC
The Transition Game – What Is It And How To Teach It.

The Dictionary definition: Transition - Passage from one place to another - The process or instance of changing from one form, state, activity or place to another.

Counter Attack - An attack launched to recapture a position - Return Attack - A blow given while receiving or parrying another.

GENERAL

What are the key elements in the development of the transition game?

1) A commitment to play and practice at high tempo, whether individual skill drills or team tactics, goal must be to execute at top speed - quickness in all phases of game...

2) Reduce transition time in all situations.
   A. Quick counter attack from all turnovers.
   B. Quick break-out from D-zone coverage.
   C. Neutral zone counter-attack employing defensemen.
   D. Quick transition to defense from forechecking situation or following turnover.
   E. Quick transition from forechecking to attack when possession of puck is secured.

3) A commitment to attack - to turn every defensive situation into an offensive situation (ie Edmonton Oilers).

4) Puck must be passed !!! - (refer to Tarasov quote)

5) Both puck movement and player movement must be to open ice...
   A) Willingness to use full width and depth of ice available.
   B) The two zone mentality - creativity - element of surprise.
Specific Situation
Transition from defense to offense after gaining possession in own end - resulting in rapid counter attack.

Note: If playing an opponent of equal or superior strength, it is safe to assume that at least 50% of attacks will be launched from own half of the ice.

A. The role of the defenseman - they are the key element of the transition game. They are both the stopping point and the starting point of the action. It is out of the defense that the offense emerges. Special drills and practice time are required for defensemen.

Teaching Points for Defensemen

1) Play swivel headed.

2) Retrieve loose puck behind goal line and rapidly initiate counter attack through:
   A. Long longitudinal pass (1st option).
   B. Quick outlet pass (2nd option).

3) Avoid being forced to back-hand unnecessarily. (refer to chapter in Intermediate Coaches Manual)

4) Give and receive lateral pass from partner to open up passing lanes.

5) Use of indirect (board) pass.

6) Blocking out to give partner time.

7) Breaking to open ice to be involved in attack, forming second wave of attack.

B. The Role of The Forward -

Forwards must be anticipatory and have a sense of when to move where. Their job is to switch to ideal offensive position before their checks can move to ideal defense position. All this must happen at the moment of transition.
Teaching Points for Forwards

1) Break for openings, making whole width and depth of ice available - Passing angle important here...

2) Spread out defense to create space.

A. If defenders move to cover high breaking forward, other forwards should move into open space underneath their coverage.

3) Over-load area of puck after attack is initiated.

A. Goal is to have man-power superiority in area of puck.

4) Employ creative yet practical pass patterns to get open the instant the transition occurs.

Drill Suggestions

The following drills all pertain to some aspect of transition hockey, and progress from the very simple to the very complex. I am sure many of you have utilized these drills before, but perhaps you have not emphasized the point of transition as it occurs during the drill.

It is important during all these drills that the coach be active, and demand a very high tempo and quickness in all things.

Drills 1 through 8 pertain to the transition from defense to offense, primarily from deep in end.
Drill #1  Quick Outlet Pass Drill

Purpose: To teach defensemen to retrieve loose puck and pass quickly.

To teach wings to one touch puck to center or bank puck off boards.

Teach forwards to stop and backcheck after shot.

Many Variations To This Drill

Drill #2  Long Longitudinal Pass Drill

Purpose: To Teach Defenseman long Longitudinal Pass

To Teach Forwards Timing and angle on this Pass
Drill #3. **Continuous One on One**  
(with Defense Getting puck up)

**Purpose:** To teach defenseman to think transition immediately after playing the one on one.  
To teach forwards to move to open ice on good receiving angle.

Drill #4. **Continuous one on one with Backchecker**

**Purpose:** To teach defenseman to think Transition after playing one on one.  
To teach Backchecking, forward quick transition to offense.
Drill #5 Continuous 2 on 1 with High Forward Backchecking

Purpose: To teach defenseman to think transition after playing 2 on 1.

To teach high forward transition to defense.

Drill #6 Continuous 3 on 2

Purpose: To teach defense quick transition in simulating game (5 vs 5) situation.

To teach forwards to anticipate counter attack and move to open ice.
The final two drills pertain to different aspects of transition.

Drill #9  One on One two whistle drill
Purpose: To teach defenseman quick transition to defense.

Drill #10  Forechecking drill with attack on good-followers by hard backcheck...
Neutral Zone Transition and Counter-Attack

In the neutral zone the transition game most often is initiated with a lateral or back diagonal defense to defense pass or forward to far defense pass.

1) If possession is gained in the area along the boards between the red line and your own blue line, the puck most often should be moved quickly to the far defenseman.

   A. Far defenseman must know the position of everyone on the ice. There is no excuse for him not knowing this. It's up to him to move the puck quickly to a fast moving, counter-attacking forward. He is the quarter-back of the attack

2) Lateral movement of forwards should be at top speed - Read coverage, and break away from it.

3) Find the seam between the on-rushing forecheckers and the opponents defensemen, who quite predictably are slow to move up to take away ice. (time & space)

4) Should have two options.

   1. Basic flow pattern calling for two men to swing one way, one man the other. Concept of hitting the 2nd man through an area with either a longitudinal or diagonal pass.

   2. Moving puck back to area whence it came - to a second player moving into an area just vacated. This often requires passing to an area or to a man who is coming at our defense.
Summary

I have been careful not to tell you what system of play to employ, and I feel that the quick transition game can and should be employed with any system you are currently using. The important thing is for you, as coach, to emphasize the transition game at all times.

Key Points

1. In teaching transition you must constantly explain what you want done and why. You must teach concepts as well as detailed specifics. Player must have a belief in and understanding of the transition game. The concept must be emphasized in every drill or tactic that relates to the transition game even in the slightest way.

2. All five skaters must react in a manner that all are familiar with. In other words go to area and skate pass patterns that have been practiced.

3. Emphasize the importance of communication - calling for the puck, recognizing pressure, communicating with team-mate. The goalie can certainly be involved here in this area.

4. Teach the transition game from various situations. We have discussed and diagramed the transition process from deep in our own end; It should be also practiced from a neutral zone turnover situation.

5. All players must read the situation at all times. Quick transition hockey should be aggressive and brash, so to speak, but should not be high risk hockey. (Example of defenseman filling an open lane or being involved in the puck when he knows we have opponents caught with one or more of the opponents players trapped.
"Our school of hockey differs from the Canadian school in that Soviet hockey players pass much more frequently than do the Canadians. The opposing team must respond to every pass. Therefore the greater number of passes increases the effect of an attack. After all, the ultimate aim of a pass is to get a free player. So if our opponents make 150 passes in a game against our 270, this means we had 120 more playing opportunities i.e. we had better chances of developing an attack... and in the long run more chances of turning on that red light. But it is not only a matter of the number of passes. A pass must have a purpose; it must be an accurate pass; an unexpected pass; What is more, the pass must be an active pass, that is to say the puck must not simply be passed to a free player, but to the man who is in the best position for developing the attack. And this pass to a partner in the best position will be all the more dangerous if not one, but two or three players strive to occupy different but menacing positions for the enemy.

If a Canadian or Swedish player has an opening ahead of him, he will sooner plunge through himself with the puck. However our hockey player will act differently; speeding up the counter attack, he will immediately pass the puck forward to his partner.

Someone has to mastermind the pass... Among overseas players this function is usually performed by the man who has the puck. Among Soviet players it is the man without the puck - the man who has taken the best position. This means that among overseas hockey players four men depend upon one man, while in Soviet hockey, one man depends upon four. That is why it is more difficult to play against us, because it is harder to look after four men than it is to look after one.

Ken Dryden "The Game" 1983

Then came the Challenge Cup. I don't know when it happened. I don't know how. I don't know even if I understand it the same way the Soviets understand it. I am convinced only that it happened—that the Soviets fundamentally changed their approach to the game, that they understand finally that hockey is not a possession game, nor can it ever be. Possession was what they were supposed to be about: passing, team play, always searching for the open man, regrouping to start again if their possession seemed threatened. But a puck cannot be physically carried up the ice like a football; and a hockey player is not protected from physical battering as a basketball player is. He can be overpowered, the puck can be wrested from his stick by one or two or more opponents, with little recourse except to pass it on to
someone else soon harrassed the same way. A possession game is hyperbole. The puck changes teams more that 6 times a minute, more than 120 times a period, more than 400 times a game, and little can be done to prevent it. And when it is not changing possession, the puck is often out of possession, fought after, in no one's control. It is the nature of the game, North American or European. There is sustained possession only on power plays. There is possession involved several seconds at other times only when a team regroups to its own zone to set up a play. If possession is team style, it will be frustrated. Worse, if it is attempted, it will make a game cautious and predictable.

Instead, hockey is a transition game: offense to defense, defense to offense, one team to another. Hundreds of tiny fragments of action, some leading somewhere, most going nowhere. Only one thing is clear. A fragmented game must be played in fragments. Grand designs do not work. Offenses regrouping, setting up, meet defenses which have done the same, and lose. But before offense turns to defense, or defense to offense, there is a moment of disequilibrium when a defense is vulnerable, when a game's sudden, unexpected swings can be turned to advantage. It is what you do at this moment, when possession changes, that makes the difference. How fast you can set up. How fast you strike. What instant patterns you can create. How you turn simple advantage into something permanent. It is this the Soviets have learned to do, and the balance has been swung.

In the Challenge Cup, for the first time the Soviets joined in the game. They had always stayed a little separate from it, not adjusting and readjusting opponent by opponent, moment by moment. It was as if they feared that the compromises of a particular game and a particular opponent would distract them from a course they believed in; certain that eventually they would raise the level of their game to whatever was needed so that is wouldn't matter anyway. Then, to weeks ago, they entered our game, found its weaknesses, and exploited them. They chased the puck in the offensive zone and the neutral zone, turning the tables and using the smaller ice surface to their advantage. They got the puck, with forty feet of ice, or fifty, or eighty, with two teammates or three, and created something with it; no regrouping, no setting up, a teammate in motion, the defense off-balance, a pass, a 3-on-2, a 2-on-1-instantly. It was all-ice commitment, but always under control. It as our game played their way, a game exactly suited to their skills. Their smaller bodies were strong enough, tough enough, to stand up to the game, to wrestle for the puck, to get it and move it, if rarely to punish. Their short, choppy, wide-gaited stride was quicker to start up, quicker to change direction, quicker to gain advantage and keep it. And finally they had an opportunist's touch, a model transition game.