

Execute Your Stickhandling and Puck Control Like The Pros

(Originally submitted as an article by Greg Siller for Hockey Player Magazine - www.HockeyPlayer.com)

Wayne Gretzky, Mario Lemieux, Sergei Federov, Hardy Sauter, Victor Gervais, and Vadim Slivchenko; what do these NHL and RHI stars have in common? Your first answer might be the large number of points that each player obtains during the season. But how do these players get their phenomenal numbers? Five words: *Dynamic Stickhandling and Puck Control!*

Stickhandling and *puck control* are skills required to maintain possession of the puck, advance the puck into the offensive zone, skate in close proximity to opponents without losing control of the puck, create open space which the puck carrier (and team) can work in, and maneuver close-in on a goaltender to set up a scoring opportunity.



Stickhandling is the process of moving the puck with the eventual goal of setting up a scoring opportunity. Although many hockey players possess good skating skills, when the puck is introduced, their level of skating ability drops off due to the added task of keeping the puck on their stick and moving it up the playing surface. A developing hockey player is not expected to learn the combined skills of skating, stickhandling, and puck control overnight. Eventually, through much practice, you must demonstrate that you can skate and perform equally well with or without the puck if you hope to advance. The skating ability of proficient hockey players does not drop off when they are in possession of the puck; they are proficient (naturally and/or taught) skaters *and* puck carriers. One of the most important yardsticks for gauging the potential of players, particularly at a young age, is controlling the puck while skating.

Factors that affect a player's stickhandling ability are hand positioning on the stick; maneuvering the stick blade to keep the puck on the stick; and head and eye coordination.

- **Hand Positioning.** Proper hand positioning is crucial to being able to control the puck. Placing your hands too close together on the stick creates a weak grip and decreases your stickhandling control, making the puck easier to knock away. Placing your hands too far apart will decrease the distance that the puck can be moved and will offset your balance. The top hand (right hand for left-handed shooters) should be at the top of the stick, just below the knob. The grip by the top hand should be firm and yet relaxed. The bottom hand (left hand for left-handed shooters) should be approximately 18" below the top hand. The grip by the bottom hand should be somewhat loose or *soft*, allowing the player to cushion the puck as he stickhandles. **Soft hands** is the ability to control and manipulate the puck quickly, accurately, and consistently by feel. There are two ways to develop soft hands. First, practice stationary stickhandling with your eyes closed. If you don't have soft hands with your eyes closed, the puck quickly slides off the blade of your stick. The second way is to improve your hand-eye coordination. Practice bouncing a ball or puck repeatedly off the blade of your stick. Bounce

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it five consecutive times and you are doing well; ten or more consecutive times and you are doing excellent!

- **Stick Blade Positioning.** To keep the puck on your stick, you need to cradle it halfway between the heel and toe on the blade of your stick. When moving the puck, it should be feathered back and forth along the playing surface with a light, smooth touch in a series of short or long sweeps by rolling your wrists. There should be little or no noise created by the stick hitting the playing surface. One problem players have when stickhandling is having the puck roll off their stick blade. This is caused by incorrectly positioning the blade of the stick by the hands and wrists. To keep the puck on your stick, the top edge of the stick blade should be slightly over the puck and the toe of the blade should be turned in towards the puck.
- **Head Positioning.** Proper head positioning allows the player to more accurately read (or perceive) the playing environment by providing the player with the necessary information to react. The common expression *keep your head-up* is often used by coaches to refer to the importance of players *reading* what is around them. The intent is to develop a player's peripheral vision as well as line-of-sight vision, thereby increasing the quality of the read and the likelihood of a good reaction. Total situational awareness and accurate perception form the basis on which effective stickhandling and puck control occurs. Ideally, you should keep your body and head in such a position to maximize your vision, both peripheral and line-of-sight, recognizing that this is not always possible in tight playing situations. Once a player has learned the skill of controlling the puck on his stick, without looking at the puck too often, he or she will then be able to look ahead and increase the scope of vision, awareness, and options.

Puck control is the process of maintaining possession of the puck against one or more opponents and can be performed either individually or as a team. When you combine puck control with puck fakes and body deception, you have a potent offensive toolset that can be used to beat the best defenders, but we'll touch on that in another article. In many playing situations, it is necessary for the puck carrier to protect the puck in order to maintain control of it. Puck control also allows you to *buy time* until a teammate becomes available or you successfully get by a defender. One form of puck control is to keep your body between a defender and the puck to maintain control of it. It is most commonly used in tight coverage situations such as near the corners, along the boards, and around the net. A player can do this by using one hand to control his stick and the other hand/arm to keep the defender away. To employ this technique, the puck carrier should lean slightly into the defender and use the inside arm to keep the defender from trying to obtain possession of the puck, without holding the defender or his stick. The outside arm and hand are used to control the stick and puck.



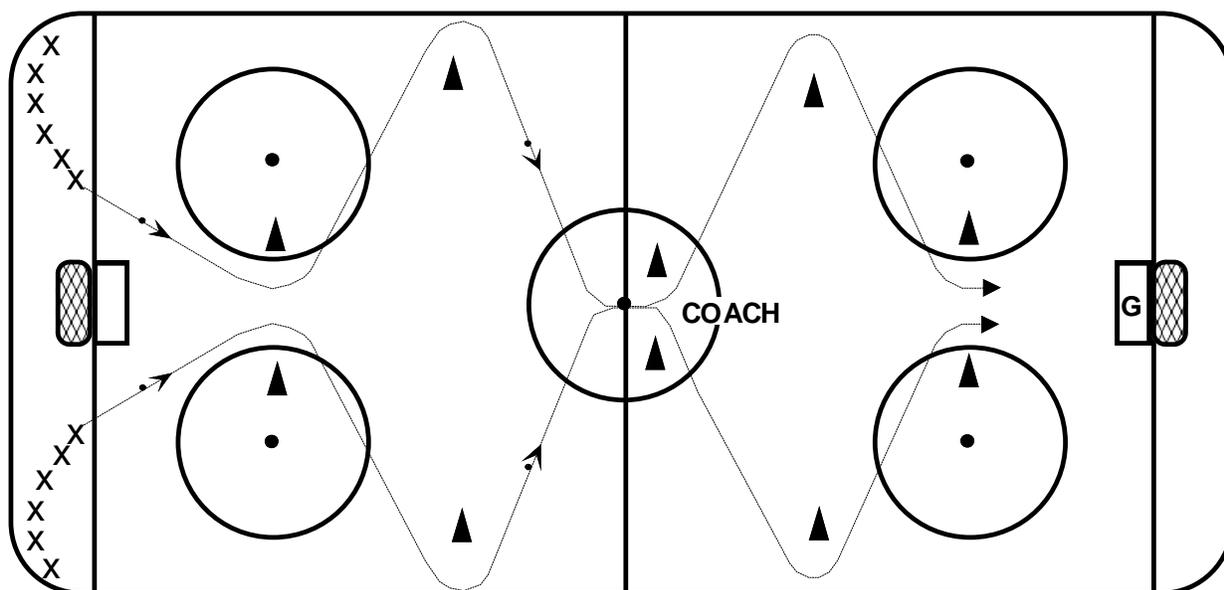
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Improve your stickhandling and puck control skills. A good drill I like to use to improve stickhandling and puck control skills is called **Puck Control and the Coach**. This drill provides players with practice skating, stickhandling, controlling the puck, as well as some reading and reacting based on the coaches signal. Set up the pylons in a pattern shown in the diagram below. Divide the players into two lines starting on the goal line. At the whistle, the first player from the bottom line skates and stickhandles, at 1/2 speed, in and out of the pylons toward the far goal line. As he reaches the center red line, the coach signals (either with the hand or the stick) which way the player should proceed. If the coach points to the left, the player will proceed down the left side of rink; if the coach points to the right, the player will proceed down the right side of the rink; if the coach points down at his feet, the player will move the puck through the coaches legs, and skate around him and in on net.

The benefit of this drill is that it provides some realistic exposure to game situations. As the puck carrier maneuvers the puck toward the goal, the coach acts as a defender by providing information to the puck carrier as to which way he should move to get past the defender. The puck carrier is forced to keep his head up at this crucial time (relying on his soft hands and peripheral vision), read the defender (coach), and react to the cues he receives to move past the defender (coach). In a real game, the puck carrier will have to choose which direction to move to get past a defender based on his stickhandling, puck control ability, and the cues the defender provides to the player. This drill will begin to instill learning and confidence in the players' ability to move the puck anywhere on the playing surface. Variations of this drill include increasing the pace to 3/4 speed, varying the pylon pattern, or adding one or two additional "coaches" to force the player to read and react additional times. The secret of good stickhandling and puck control is effective practice. If you devote a few minutes to proper stickhandling and puck control drills each day, the results will soon show in your game. It will be time well spent.



Drill; Puck Control and the Coach.

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