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Scoring Strategies from Behind the Net

There are very few constants throughout the course of a hockey game. One, however, is that the surface area of the ice does not change. The ice surface is the same size during warm-ups as it is when the final buzzer sounds. Sure, there are many Olympic sized rinks in the US, and ice surface dimensions vary from rink to rink, but when was the last time you saw the ice surface expand during a game? It first happened in the NHL in 1979, when Wayne Gretzky introduced the hockey world to “His office”. Wayne has done some amazing work in his office. In fact he captained the Edmonton Oilers to four Stanley Cup victories, tallying nearly 1,700 points in 9 seasons, many of which originated behind the net.

Gretzky’s vision (and that of other current hockey stars such as Peter Forsberg and Joe Sakic) and creativity should be studied by all hockey players and fans. He was so good that he discovered a portion of the ice that was rarely used and turned it into a scoring factory. He “created ice” and literally increased the workable skating surface by more than 10%. He formed a cushion of open ice around him, allowing time to set up literally hundreds of goals.

Up to the day he retired, Wayne set up plays behind nets as if it was just another day at the office. Just when defenders thought they had Wayne right where they wanted him, he continued behind the goal-line and began negotiating another great play. As a result, players of all ages and ability levels, including Paul Kariya and Keith Tkachuk conduct successful business in “their office”.

Traditionally, players have not ventured behind the goal-line. It is almost impossible to score with the puck behind the net, but as Mr. Gretzky has taught the world, it is a deadly place to initiate great scoring opportunities.

Why setting up plays Behind the Net is effective:

- Creates confusion and “blind spots” - Your opponent must scan the ice and manage play that is now 360 degrees around them, instead of directly in front of them. As they turn their head, the play changes, briefly blinding their focus.
- Creates time - by creating ice (finding open ice) you create time.....for a great play.
- Opens up ice - pulls defenders down low and opens up the slot or a high pass to your defensemen. Luring an opponent below the goal-line will open up prime scoring space in front of the net.
- Great vision - you force the other team to play with their heads on a “swivel” while you keep the play (all the other eleven players) in front of you.

Plays from Behind the Net:

Whether you are in front of the net, or behind the net, the same three options apply; pass, skate or shoot. Shooting is generally the best choice while you are in front of the net, however, your best choice from behind the net is to set up a shot by passing to a teammate.

- **PASS** - this is the best of your three options. Use the net as protection. Nobody will skate through the net, so use it to your advantage. This takes stickhandling skill and “Gretzky-like” vision. Plays can not be set up from behind the net if you have “hands of stone” and if your head is down. Vision and timing are paramount. Try to be convincing through fakes to manipulate the opposition, opening up passing lanes to awaiting teammates. Make sure that your pass is perfect. A poor pass will result in a costly giveaway and a failed scoring chance.

- **SKATE** - if a pass isn't there, if someone tries to flush you out, or if you are trying to move someone in front of the net, make a convincing fake or two and sneak out the other side of the net. Along the way, look for a pass to open up as you will undoubtedly meet resistance. If your teammates are moving to open ice and you are creative, you should have an easy pass out from behind the net every time.
- **SHOOT** - it is rare that you will be able to "walk" out from behind the net into a great scoring position. Try a "wrap-around shot" or throw the puck low and on net as you sneak around in front. Always "follow" your shot hard to the net. Hey, anything can happen.....and often does in hockey!

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