



# PUCK HANDLING

## PUCK HANDLING SKILLS

Puck handling is a very important part of the game of hockey and it is one of the more difficult skill areas to learn. However, it is the skill area that players enjoy practising the most. Due to the importance of puck handling, you should have a thorough knowledge of its components.

### Chapter Overview

- Help your players select the proper stick for them
- Describe and instruct the key elements of puck handling;
  - Stick Handling,
  - Puck Protection
  - Fakes
  - Deaking
  - Face-offs

### The Stick

A coach must be able to help the player select the proper stick. To be a good puck handler, it is essential that the player understands the importance of stick selection, stick length, grip, and basic stance. The choice of a stick depends upon the athlete's strength, height, and skating style. For young players a wood stick is preferable to sticks in other materials. The coach should be aware of the difference the material the stick is made of can make. It can act in different ways depending on how the player is able to handle it.

#### Length

- A proper length stick permits the player to stick handle the puck from side to side with less difficulty
- As a general rule, when standing wearing skates the stick should be from the ice to between the top of the sternum and the nose
- If the elbow of the top arm has difficulty crossing in front of the body, the stick is too long.

#### Flexibility

- Flexibility of the stick should be proportional to the strength and weight of the player.
- Due to their lack of strength, younger players require a more flexible stick shaft,
- more flexible stick requires less force to attain a puck speed just as good as that achieved with a rigid stick.
- The flexibility is also very much depending on what material the stick is made of; wood is more flexible than synthetic materials

## Pattern

The stick pattern refers to the specific design of the stick this includes the angle of the blade in relation to the shaft, the lie, and the design of the blade. These patterns are identified by numbers or a players name on the stick.

## Lie

- A blade that remains flat on the ice in the basic stance position or when carrying the puck has the proper lie.

The lie is too low if the heel of the stick is off the ice when playing

If the end of the blade is off the ice, then the lie is too high

## Blade Curve

A curve can improve the precision and the speed of certain shots, particularly forehand shots it can also help with certain puck handling skills (e.g., tight forehand turn) Backhand skills, like passing and shooting, can be more difficult because of the curve, but by working on the technique of these skills they can be mastered.

When selecting a stick for young players they should look for one that is almost straight to it make easy to develop all the basic puck handling skills. As they get older and develop better puck handling skills they can decide to use a more curved stick.

Remember the curve of the stick can only be 1.5cm anything more than that is a penalty. Check before purchasing a stick as some sticks have curves that are illegal.

## The Grip

The grip on the stick varies continuously during a game according to the actions of the player. One of the most important components of puck control is the positioning of the hands on the stick. The hands should be approximately shoulder-width apart, with the arms and shoulders relaxed. The grip should be with the fingers and not the palms of the hand.

The players strongest hand should be at the top of the stick. This will enable them to control the stick in all game situations. The end of the stick should be in the palm of the hand but still held with the fingers. It should not stick out the side of the hand.

The lower hand should form a "V" with the thumb and forefinger of the hand on the top side of the shaft. It should be very flexible and move up and down the shaft of the stick, depending on how close the stick blade is to the body.



**Figure 1: Grip and Hand Positioning**

### **For younger players**

Young players should use junior size sticks with smaller shafts and blades for easier stick handling and puck control.

### **Stick Handling**

Stick handling is the skill of controlling the puck to maintain puck possession while stationary or in motion. The ability to skate in any direction while handling the puck takes time and practice. Effective faking, passing and shooting depend on the player's ability to control the puck effectively. Each time the player moves the puck while stick handling, it is essential to roll the wrists. This rolling action makes the blade of the stick turn and cup the puck increasing the control to the puck during movement.

#### *Key Points:*

- *The players must learn to see the puck on the stick without looking directly at it.*
- *The player's head should be up to see the game and what options are available. The player sees the puck out of the bottom part of their vision.*
- *Both hands should move in the same direction on the stick shaft. (e.g., when the stick and puck are on the left side of the body, the right hand is also on the left side of the body). The top hand must move across the chest.*
- *The lower hand should form a "V" with the thumb and forefinger of the hand on the top side of the shaft. It should be very flexible and move up and down the shaft of the stick, depending on how close the stick blade is to the body.*

- *The head should be up and peripheral vision should be used to maintain sight of the puck. (Note: Coaches should not expect beginning players to rely solely on peripheral vision as this skill requires considerable practise to perfect.)*
- *Knees should be bent in a comfortable skating position.*
- *The puck should normally be handled in the middle of the blade.*
- *Range of movement is improved if the hands are close together on the stick and if the elbows are away from the body in the direction of the puck.*
- *The stick movement must be smooth yet strong and rhythmical (e.g., avoid hard slapping movements).*
- *When skating with the puck in open ice avoid unnecessary stick handling as it slows you down. Take the lower hand off the stick and using just the top hand, push the puck along while skating*

## **BASIC STICKHANDLING MOVEMENTS**

The dribble is one means available to a player who wishes to become free of an opponent and maintain possession of the puck. There are three basic types of dribbles that players should master:

- Front
- Side
- Diagonal
- Toe Pull Back

### **Front**

Is executed directly in front of the player with the puck moving from side to side.

### **Side**

Executed primarily on the forehand stick side of the player with the puck moving forward and backward. This skill should also be practiced on the backhand side

### **Diagonal**

This is halfway between the front and the side. It can be used in many situations, such as a sweep or slap shot, passing in stride, or backhand passes and shots.

### **Toe Pull Back**

This skill uses the front or toe of the stick to pull the puck back to the puck carriers body. It is used when making a fake to one side and going over to the other side of the defender.

## Puck Protection

The skill of puck protection is the ability of the puck carrier to protect the puck from a defender who is trying to take it away. It is as simple as keeping their body between the puck and the defender.

Puck protection is different from stickhandling and deking because the puck carrier is just trying to maintain control of the puck, while stickhandling and deking are used to attack and go around defenders.

The player must use their body as a wall or shield as they perform a turn or crossover. This should be taught both to forehand and backhand sides. The bottom arm can be used to help protecting the puck on the backhand side by taking it off the stick.

A player should protect the puck anytime he/she needs to create time in order to find a teammate. It is used where time and space are limited.



**Figure 2: Puck Protection**

## Fakes

A fake is a move that is based on deception to mislead the opponent into believing that the puck-carrier is going to do something and should have all the appearance of reality. It may also precede a pass or a shot in order to mislead an opponent.

## Types of Fakes

### Body

- Changes of direction: The player fakes with the head and/or shoulders in one direction, then goes in the other direction.

### Skating

- Stop and start: The player skates at full speed as if to outskate the opponent then stops abruptly and starts in another direction.
- Change of speed: The player slows down forcing the opponent to do the same, then accelerates rapidly catching the opponent flat footed.
- Directional skating: The player does crossovers in one direction and when the opponent moves to cover, cuts back in the other direction.
- Using the boards: The player acts as if to skate between the player and the boards but cuts around the opponent, banks the puck off the boards, and then retrieves it.

### Stick

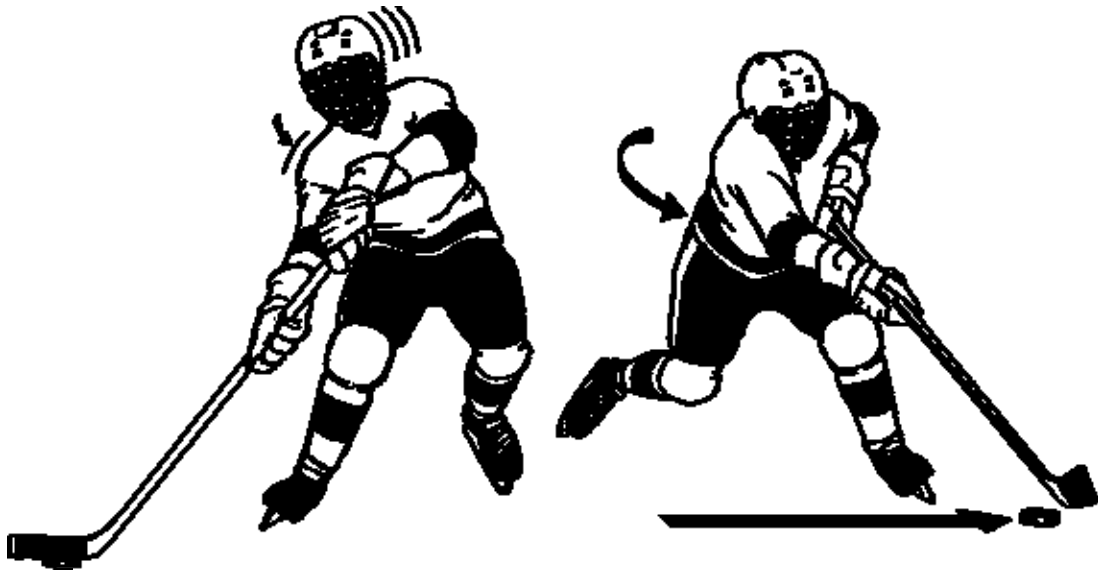
- Fake a shot: The player fakes a shot, waits until the opponent reacts, and then skates around the opponent.
- Fake a pass: The player fakes a pass with the head or the stick, then shoots on goal, or dekes the opponent.

## Dekes

The deke is a technique a player can use to go around an opponent and maintain possession of the puck. It may also precede a shot on a break-away.

### Key Points:

- *A fake must be made and have all the appearance of reality.*
- *The puck must be moved across the defender from one side to the other*
- *Dekes should be initiated at a sufficient distance from an opponent to avoid being stick checked.*
- *Acceleration after completing the deke towards the net is important (be certain that drills allow for practice of this).*



**Figure 3:**

Changes of speed and direction are important factors to the success of any deke

- If possible, dekes should be based on knowledge of the opponent's weaknesses.
- Between the legs: After a deke with the head, shoulders, or stick, the player slips the puck between the opponent's legs and recovers it behind the opponent.
- A deke must give the opponent enough time to go for the fake before the player undertakes the intended action.
- While deking an opponent, the player should make an effort to remain fully aware of the whereabouts of teammates and opponents.

It is important to remember that dekes are a creation of the imagination that can be perfected through practise. Some basic dekes which can be modified or combined in many ways to suit the situation, the skills and needs of each player are outlined below.

## Face-Offs

Gaining possession of the puck from a face-off will obviously give your team an initial offensive advantage. A team strong on face-offs will also be able to avoid dangerous situations when there is a face-off in the defensive zone.

A team will have a strategic advantage if there is both a left and right shot centre capable of winning face-offs. Now the puck can be drawn away from the net area to the boards to a safer defensive area.

The face-off person is responsible for the alignment of all his teammates. This should be based on the strategy to be employed by the team and the ability of the centre to win the face-off to a particular area.

The face-off person must be aware of the opposing face-off person and the alignment of the other opposing players.

*Key points:*

- *Concentrate – most importantly, be aware of opposing face-off person’s position and keep your eyes on the puck.*
- *Move both hands down the shaft of the stick to a position where an opponent cannot move your stick.*
- *Place the feet slightly wider than shoulder width apart to allow more body weight to be directed to the stick.*
- *Practice lining up in a legal fashion only.*

**To draw the puck between the feet:**

- Concentrate on the puck.
- Move the blade to the far side of the face-off circle.
- Push the top hand on the stick away from body.
- Pull the blade through the face-off spot perpendicular to its original position as quickly as possible, coming from behind the opponents stick.

**To draw the puck outside (forehand) skates:**

- Concentrate on the puck.
- Use quickness to contact the puck first.
- The stick moves from the side of the face-off dot diagonally.



## **To spin and draw the puck back:**

- Concentrate on the puck.
- As the puck is dropped, make contact with the opponents stick approximately 10 cm above the blade.
- At the same time, rotate your body to a position between the face-off spot and the opponent.
- Use a skate to kick the puck backward to a teammate.

## **To move the puck forward (shot on goal):**

- Concentrate on the puck.
- In the neutral zone, simply go the same direction as opponent is trying to draw the puck.
- For a shot on goal, the face-off person must be in the forehand position.

## **To neutralize the opponent:**

- Concentrate on the puck and the opponent's stick.
- As puck is dropped, place your stick against opponent's stick to prevent desired motion.
- At the same time, skate forward to push the opponent off the puck.
- A teammate should be assigned to pick up the free puck.

## **Coaching Considerations:**

- Take time to work with players on face-off tactics.
- Avoid obvious alignment and "telegraphing" what you want to do on the face-off.
- Use two centers on the ice for important defensive zone face-offs.
- Try to develop strong right and left shot face-off people to allow for more flexible strategies.