

## THE IMPORTANCE of TIMING to a GOALTENDER

By Joe Bertagna

For years, one of the prime tenets of my goaltending teaching has been captured in the following phrase: “Where you are is more important than what you do.” As is often the case, such attempts to encapsulate a complex idea in a catchy phrase risks oversimplification. It was my way of suggesting that a goaltender’s positioning, “where he is,” is the key to success, even more so than what he does when he gets there. This theory emphasizes positioning over athleticism and technique, with the understanding that all are important.

The more I work with goaltenders, and continue playing at an advanced age, the more I appreciate a third component that warrants inclusion in the discussion. Where you are remains key, particularly at higher levels of play. What you do is important (and how you do it.) But there is a third pillar of this instruction that is easily overlooked. WHEN you do it is important too. And that brings us to the importance of “timing.”

I have written about the problems coaches face when dealing with a goalie that drops all the time. The coach tells the goalie not to drop when, in fact, he really means to coach the goalie to drop at the right time (usually later than he normally does). A goaltender’s ability to balance the urge to act with the need for patience is a huge part of success as the goalie grows older and faces puck carriers who are also learning to be patient at appropriate moments. Often the battle hinges on who commits first.

When I think of timing, I think of not only the obvious physical test of not making a move until the right time. I also think of the more subtle ability to see a play forming and sense when it will all come together and the opponent’s options get reduced from many to few to one. One can’t make up their mind about what is going to happen until the options get reduced. One can’t guess or over-anticipate. The goalie eventually gets into a rhythm and the good ones feel the pace and time their movements with the flow of the enemy. It is one of the realities of goaltending that makes playing against mixed opponents more uniquely challenging. This dynamic is visible very early and very late on the hockey spectrum. Watch a mite game and watch a senior hockey league. The gap between the best and worst players is more pronounced at these levels, causing the goaltender fits as he or she adjusts to a faster pace with the better players and a slower pace with the worst.

This is also at play when you hear a goalie talk about how they feel they play better the more work they get. That is another way of acknowledging the effect of pace on performance. Conversely, a goalie on a very good team has a special challenge, one that most goalies would love to have. When you get four or five shots per period, in a game dominated by your team, it can be tough to stay positive, on your game, with that sense of timing being acute and appropriate.

Finally, the goalie’s ability to work on his timing can be compromised by the pace of drills at practice that frequently ignore the goalie’s needs. Set up drills to approximate what the goalie must face in game situations to better allow their chance

of improving this critical part of their game. Remember, the key to a goaltender's success is positioning and "knowing where he is."