

Chapter 1

Breakouts

A breakout is initiated when the puck is in a team's defensive zone. All five skaters and even the goaltender need to be involved to exit the zone successfully. Players react to the position of the puck to initiate or support the breakout. Breakouts can take place in four situations: (1) after a dump-in by the other team; (2) on a rebound off a shot; (3) after an intercepted pass; or (4) when a player takes the puck away from the opposition. The most difficult part in executing a successful breakout is handling pressure from the opposition and completing a good first pass. The first step is to realize where the pressure is coming from so you can execute the appropriate option to escape your defensive zone.

Reading Pressure and Options

When a defenseman picks up the puck to initiate a breakout, he could be faced with three different situations. In the first, there is no forechecking pressure; in the second, the forechecker is 6 feet (1.8 m) or more away; and in the third, the forechecker is right on the defenseman's back.

In most situations the defenseman has mere seconds to make a play, so it is often important to "buy time." To do this effectively you have to fake one way by looking at that option with your eyes while putting the puck in a passing position. The forechecker will often bite on this fake pass, or look-away, and turn his feet in that direction, which will give the defenseman more time to make a play. The art of deception is a skill that must be practiced; once mastered, it provides defensemen with both extra time in a critical area and less chance of being hit.

The following three examples for defensemen all deal with varying forechecking pressure that happens after a dump-in by the other team; after a rebound off a shot; after an intercepted pass; or when a player takes the puck away from the opposition.

- 1. No forechecking pressure.** In this situation the defenseman is concerned about getting back quickly, collecting the puck and turning up ice. Check your shoulder as you go back for the puck to read your options. Goaltenders should communicate options to the defenseman retrieving the puck. Simply using a verbal cue such as "time" is enough to let the player know he has an opportunity to look up and turn the puck up ice without having to protect it from pressure. Specific communication calls are critical to successful breakouts because the player retrieving the puck is focused on getting the puck and has limited opportunity to read the other team. His teammates, while moving to support the breakout, have a chance to read the opponent's forechecking pressure. When turning the puck up ice, get your feet moving right away while at the same time keeping the puck at your side in a position to pass. If there are no options, then put the puck out in front of you and jump up ice.
- 2. Close forechecking pressure.** When the forechecker is 6 feet (1.8 m) or more away, the defenseman should go back for the puck under control while checking both shoulders to read the forecheck and also the passing options available. This is an important routine to do regardless of the checking pressure. As you get close to the puck, square your feet, glide, and then fake one way and go the other. This will shake the forechecker and give you time to escape or make a quick play. The fake doesn't have to be complicated, just a slight movement one way with your stick or shoulder while tight turning to the other side. Take three quick strides in order to separate from the forechecker, and then make a pass or continue skating.
- 3. Quick, hard forechecking pressure.** In this situation the forechecker is right on the defenseman, and it looks as if the defenseman will get hit. When going back for the puck, check both shoulders and then slow down as you approach the puck. Your first priority is to protect the puck while at the same time leaning back against the forechecker to gain control over that player. Absorb his momentum, and either spin away with the puck or rebound off the boards in a position to make a play. Never expose the puck; stay on the defensive side and protect it until you can make a play.

Reacting to Support the Breakout

All three forwards have key positional responsibilities on the breakout. Breakouts are initiated by the defense, and most of the time the primary role of the forwards is to provide support options. The option of having forwards leave the zone early may be a team philosophy or a coaching philosophy, but it is worth considering allowing your wingers to leave the zone early on certain breakout plays—especially since the red line was removed from the game at all levels. The key read for wingers is puck possession and checking pressure; once you see your defenseman or center get the puck under control with minimal forechecking pressure, then move out into the neutral zone and look for the stretch pass (figure 1.1). The pass does not have to be a direct pass; it could be an indirect pass off the boards where the winger can skate into it. This type of strategy is intimidating for the opposition because they will generally move at least one of their Ds back and often they get caught with a soft or loose gap in the neutral zone. They will definitely be worried about giving up a breakaway and as a result may not hold the blue line as tightly. The space between the attacking players and defensive players is generally referred to as the gap. On offense, a loose gap gives you a chance to make plays in front of the defensive team and have more time. The defensive team wants to have a tight gap to eliminate time and space.

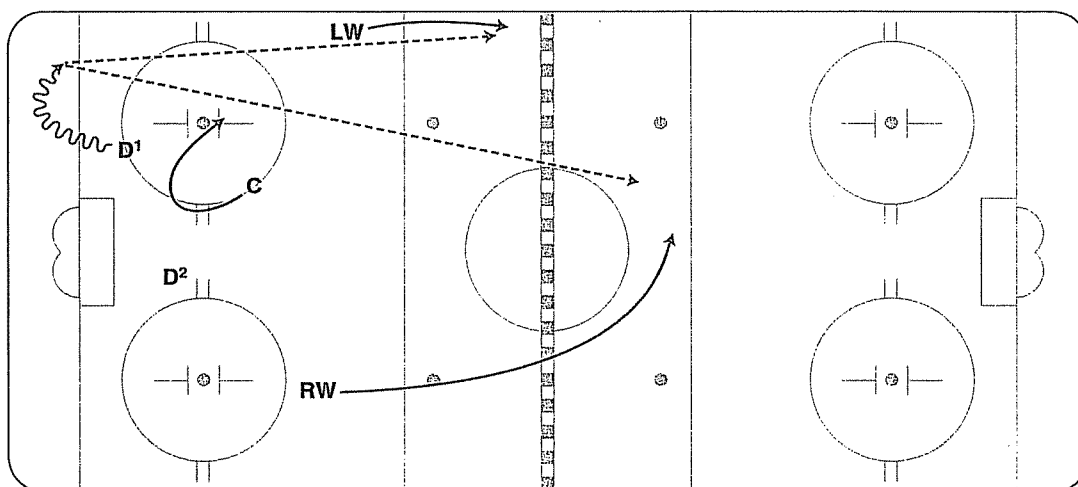


Figure 1.1 Leaving the zone early on the breakout.

Center

The center usually plays low in the defensive zone, but as noted under the section on defensive zone coverage, any forward could be the low player. The player who plays low defensively is usually very good in coverage and breakout situations. Often the low forward is involved in getting the puck back from the opposition, so other than a dumped-in puck, his position on the breakout will seldom vary. The low forward provides the defense with a mid-ice option on all breakouts. If the puck is passed up the boards, then

he is in a support position for the winger, who may bring the puck inside, make a direct pass, or chip it off the boards. The center or low forward must be available for a pass but also in a position to react defensively if there is a turnover.

When passes are made up the boards, centers need to come from underneath the pass and skate into a support position. It is important to be cautious in this position because anything could happen, and if a turnover occurs during the breakout, the center or low forward must be ready to defend.

Strong-Side Winger

The strong-side winger on the breakout must be available on the boards for a direct or rimmed puck. We like the winger to be in a higher position above the circles so that the pass from the defenseman or center advances the puck as far up ice as possible. If the other team pinches or closes down on the winger as the pass is being made, then it is important for the winger to fight the battle up higher on the boards. He can try to box out the pinching defenseman by backing into him as the puck is being passed up.. If the winger starts the breakout lower on the boards and not up higher as suggested, then it will take more time and potentially more passes to get over the blue line, which often results in turnovers. The winger must be strong in all board battles because a turnover here may be costly and lead to extended time in the defensive zone and often an opportunity for the opposition to create scoring chances.

Back-Side Winger

The back-side winger on the breakout may skate one of three routes:

1. As the puck advances up the far side, the winger may move across for support and a pass or move to a puck that is chipped off the boards into the neutral zone. The winger coming across creates more options than the winger staying wide, and the success of this strategy relies on short passes or chip plays. Short passes or chip plays are definitely easier to execute than long cross-ice passes, which are often intercepted.
2. As the puck advances up the far side, the winger may stay wide so that they avoid checking pressure from the other team. This wide pass is more difficult to make but once made usually provides more skating room for the winger because he will be on the outside shoulder of the opponent's defense and can drive in the wide lane.
3. Because of the elimination of the red line a few years ago, some coaches like to give the green light for the wide winger to leave the zone early and be available by moving in the neutral zone. This is effective because the opposition will have to back one of their defensemen out of the zone, and as a result the back-side winger can move into open ice much easier as the pass is made. The only problem with doing this is that playing four on four in your defensive zone is more difficult than five on five.

Goaltender

In most leagues goaltenders are restricted in the area they are allowed to handle the puck. At the NHL level, goaltenders may handle the puck anywhere above the goal line and in the trapezoid area below the goal line. Regardless of the level and restrictions, it is important that goaltenders learn to pass the puck up on line changes (figure 1.2), set the puck up for defensemen, and move the puck by forechecking pressure to a waiting teammate or to an area where teammates can get the puck first. When going out to play the puck, goaltenders must check their options first and then listen to the communication of teammates in order to make the best decision. Strong, confident puckhandling goaltenders are very valuable to a team because they provide an extra breakout player and often save the defense from getting hit by the forecheckers. Also goaltenders are always facing up ice, so they see options sooner. The only problem with goaltenders handling the puck is that their passing ability is usually not as good as a defenseman's because of their restrictive equipment.

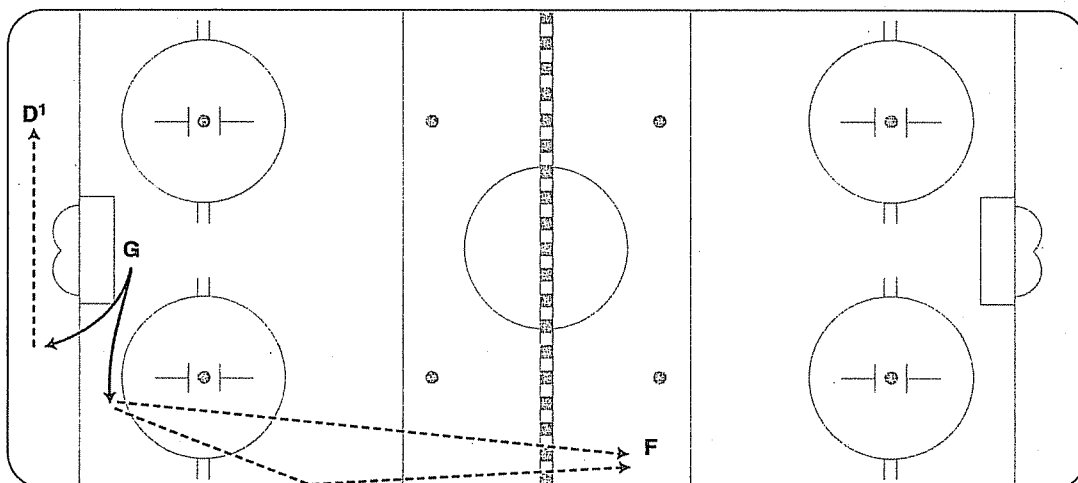


Figure 1.2 Goaltenders must learn to move the puck.

Defense

Coaches may have a different philosophy on this, but we believe the defense should be prepared to move into the breakout once a successful pass is made. Some coaches believe the defensemen should "stay at home," or always keep the play in front of them. This is a sound philosophy but significantly eliminates attack options. The key is a successful pass. The defenseman who jumps into the breakout should be the back-side D, while the puck-moving D holds a more defensive position after making the pass (figure 1.3a). The back-side D is in a better position to read the play because he is not involved in retrieving the puck and is generally waiting at the net for the play to develop. Sometimes in defensive zone coverage and in other breakout situations the center is caught low, so it is imperative that the net defenseman be ready and available for a breakout pass (figure 1.3b).

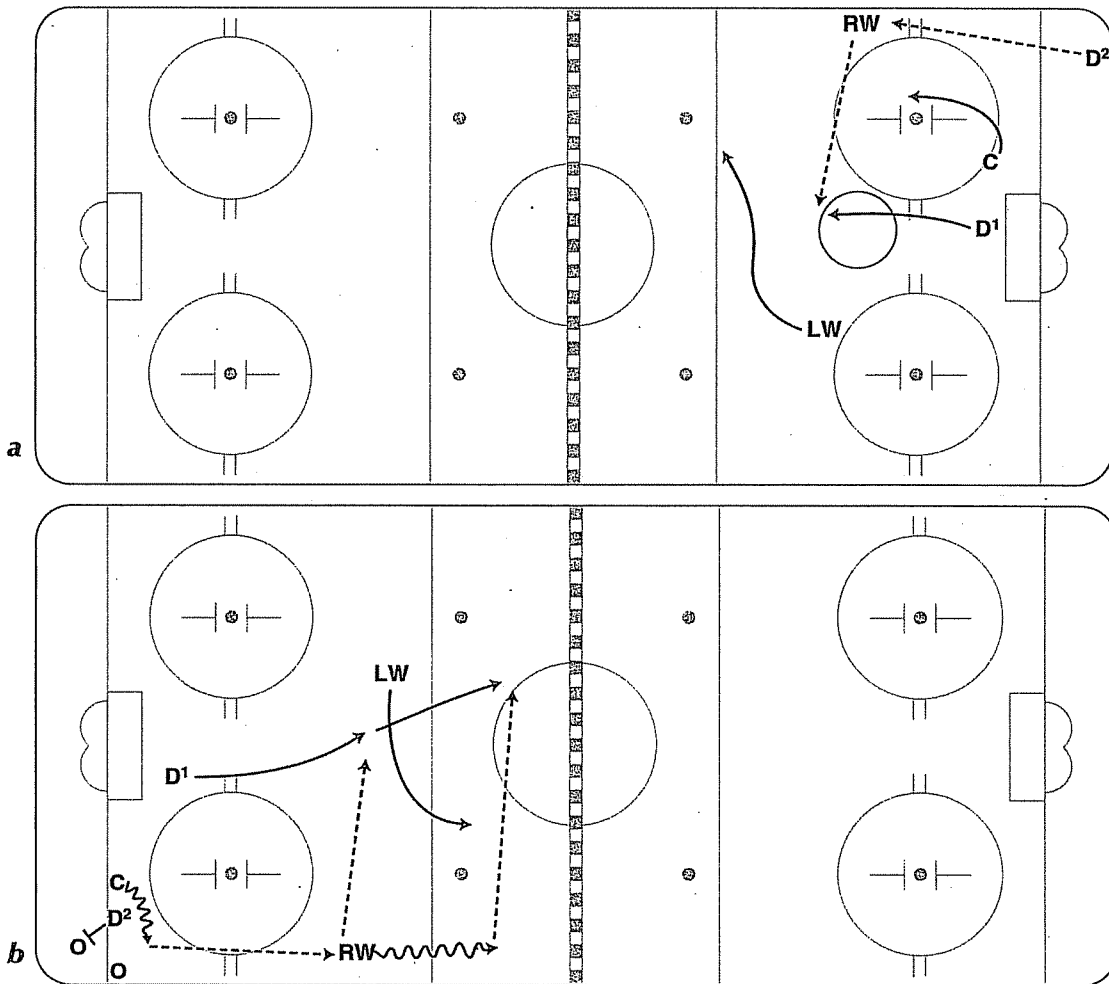


Figure 1.3 (a) The defense joining the breakout and (b) the center caught low.

In game situations it is also common to get the puck while in defensive zone coverage and then have to initiate a breakout. Using the calls “over,” “up,” “wheel,” and “reverse,” and “rim” players must read and react to the quickest escape option. Often when the defensive team recovers the puck down low, the best option is to break out by moving the puck away from pressure to the back-side D and up the other side. By breaking out on the back side, you take the puck to an area with less traffic and generally less checking pressure (figure 1.4).

Defensemen, especially young defensemen, must learn to make a strong first pass. Coaches and parents often yell to defensemen on the breakout, “Get the puck out!” What they mean is to keep the puck going up the boards or shoot it off the glass. Just do whatever you can to get the puck into the neutral zone without turning it over. At times in a game this may be the appropriate action but generally you want the defense to learn to read the play and make a tape to tape passes. It is important for defensemen to learn to make plays by picking the best option on the breakout.

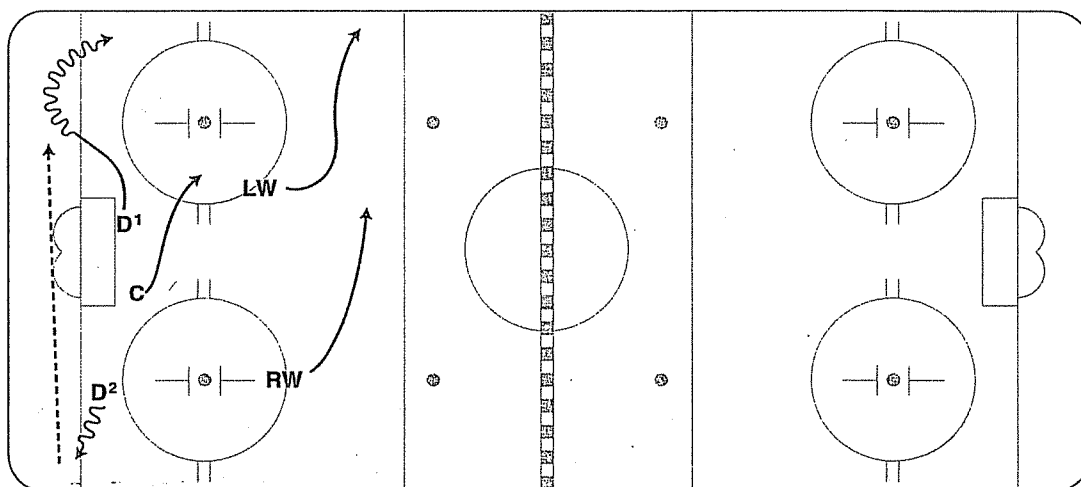


Figure 1.4 Breakout from a defensive alignment.

Sometimes the best play is an inside pass to the center or a back-side play to your partner because 80 percent of teams on the forecheck take away the boards; therefore, if you use the board option you are essentially passing into traffic and probably creating a turnover. The old saying of “never pass in front of your own net” should be thrown out the window because that is sometimes the only option, and you don’t want to be predictable.

Breakout Plays

When a player goes back to break out a puck, his teammates are his number one resource. It is important that his teammates communicate pressure and also make specific calls with regard to the appropriate breakout option to use. Players can make five calls: up, over, wheel, reverse, and rim.

■ UP

When D2 calls an "up," D1 knows right away that when he touches the puck his primary option is to turn up the strong side and make a play to the board winger (LW) or center (figure 1.5). D2 has read that the other team is taking away the net or back side, so the best option is to get the puck moving right away up the strong side. C supports low, and RW moves across the ice.

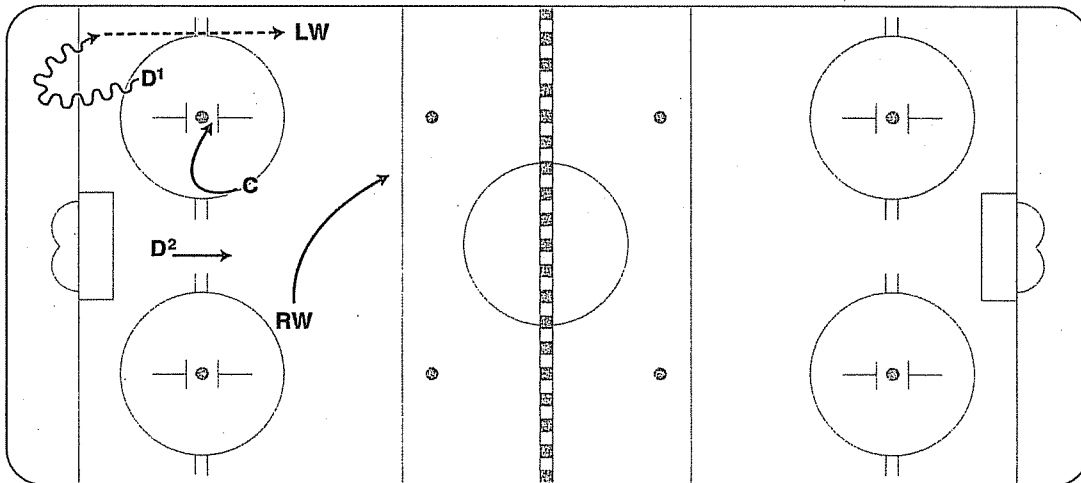


Figure 1.5

OVER

When D1 picks up the puck, D2 sees that the other team has flooded one side of the ice, so he moves to the opposite corner and calls for an "over" play (figure 1.6). D1 makes a direct pass or banks the puck off the boards to D2. D1 should move the puck quickly and not make the mistake of carrying the pressure toward D2 and then passing. If that were to happen, the forechecker could easily continue through and get on D2—as he receives the pass. C supports low, RW supports the boards, and LW moves across in support.

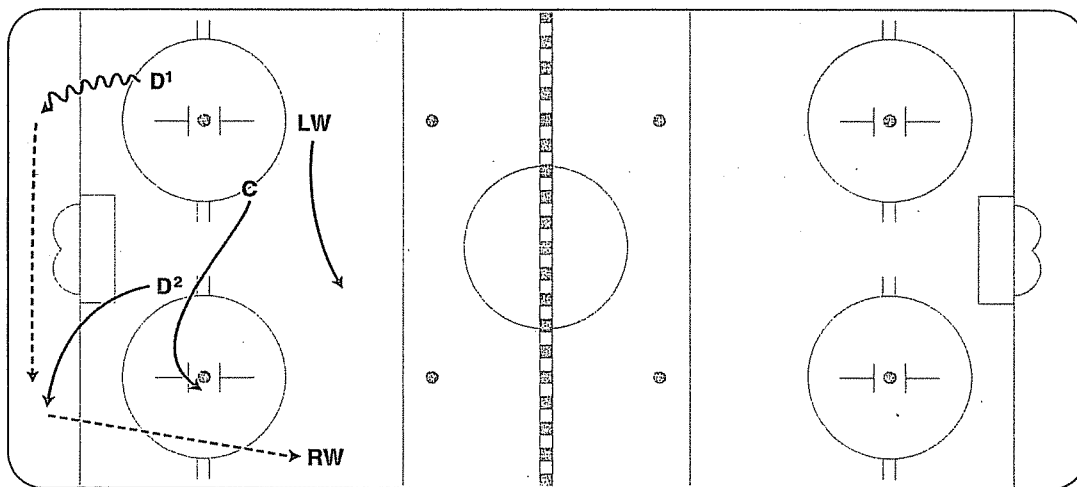


Figure 1.6

WHEEL

This is where D1 has a step on the forechecker, so D2 calls "wheel" and D1 quickly rounds the net, leaving the forechecker trailing. Use the net as a screen for the forechecker by cutting tight to the net on the wheel. D2 should hold the front of the net until D1 makes a play or skates up ice (figure 1.7). C supports low, LW moves across the ice, while RW provides a boards-pass option.

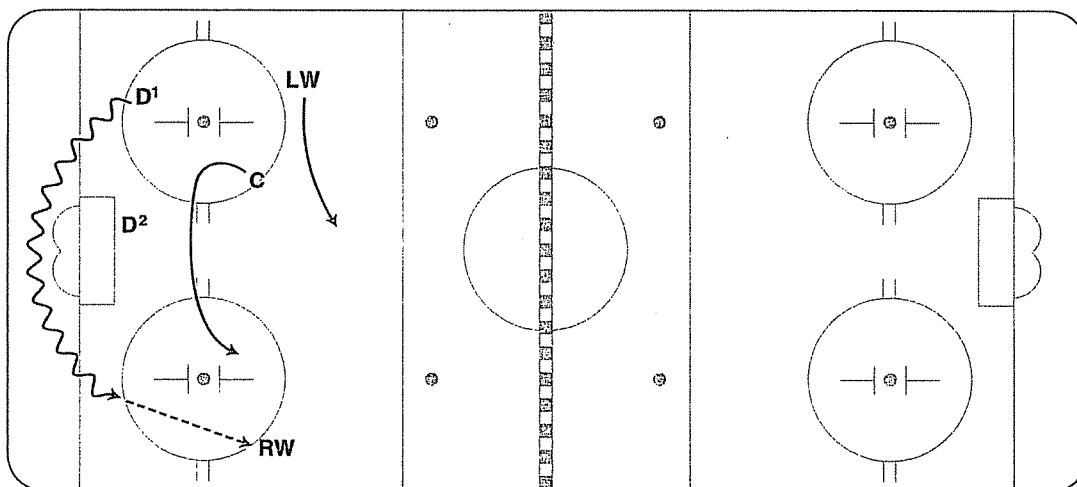


Figure 1.7

REVERSE

In this situation, D1 picks up the puck and attempts to lose the forechecker by going around the net. D2 sees that the forechecker is right on his partner, so he calls a reverse (figure 1.8). D1 banks the puck off the boards in behind the forechecker to D2. C supports by first moving with D1 and then back low through the slot once the reverse pass is made. LW moves inside and then out to the boards, ready for an outlet pass. RW initially is ready for the up pass from D1, and then when the reverse pass is made, RW moves across the ice to support the break-out. D2 passes to C or LW.

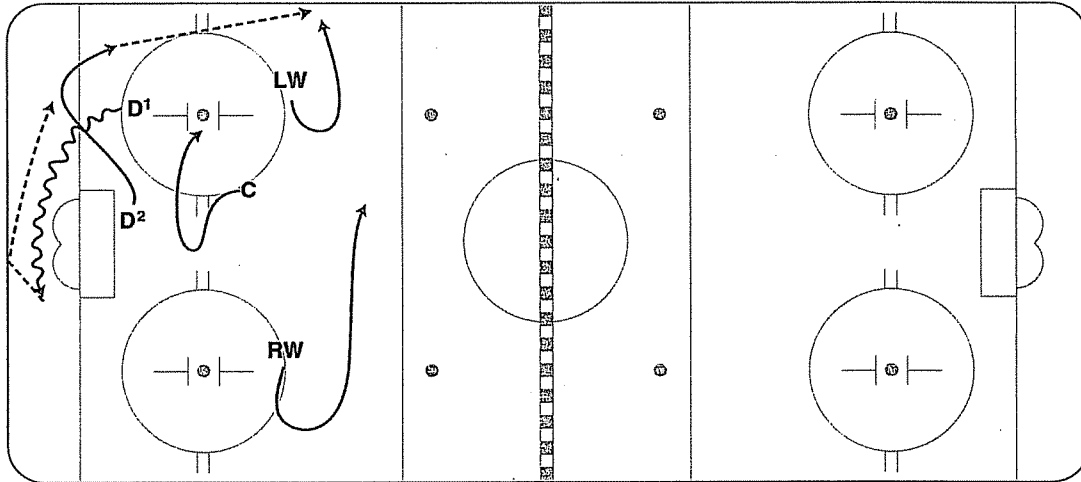


Figure 1.8

Sometimes coaches like the center and the winger to switch on reverse plays, which allows them to maintain speed—teams must make sure the exchange is done quickly so they don't give up defensive position at a time when a turnover may occur. As noted in figure 1.9, when D1 swings behind the net, C moves to support. If D1 reverses the puck, C can continue moving toward the boards, and RW can move to mid-ice to support the reverse pass to D2.

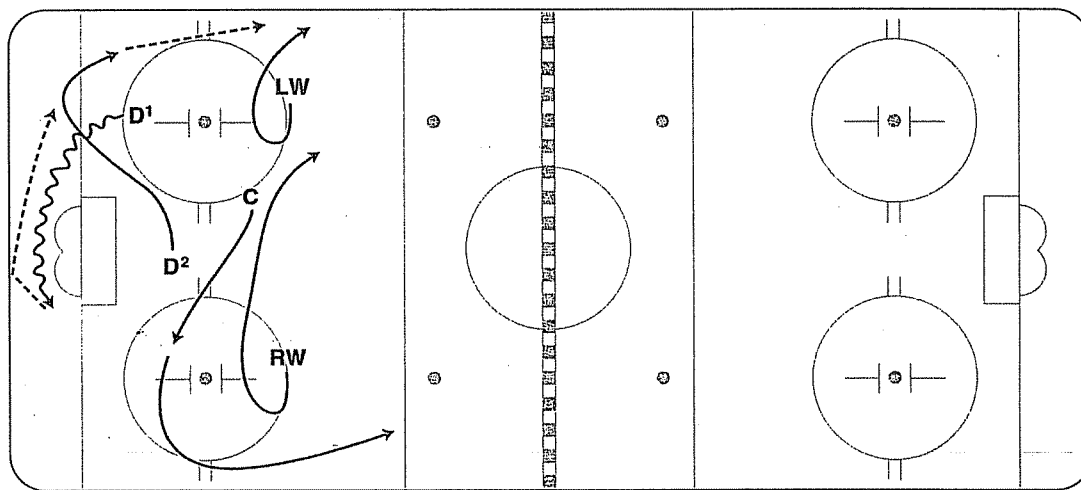


Figure 1.9

The final option for reverse plays is for D1 to reverse the puck to C in the strong-side corner. This allows the breakout team to spread out and makes it difficult for the forecheckers to take away all options. D2 supports the wide side, looking for an over pass, and D1 reverses the puck to C, who should call this option.

■ RIM

This option (figure 1.10) is often used when the opposition is forechecking hard and the best choice is to bypass the forecheck by passing the puck hard around the boards. D1 goes back for the puck and quickly rims the puck to RW. C supports from underneath, and LW moves across in support. Against teams who pinch down with their defense on rimmed pucks, the wingers who receive the rim must be able to protect the puck, control it, and then move it to support. In this situation, RW must be able to control the puck and make a play, skate with the puck, or chip it behind the pinching defenseman. As mentioned earlier, the ability to get pucks off the boards under pressure is a skill that also involves a component of toughness—especially if the other team's defensemen pinch down quickly to finish the hit.

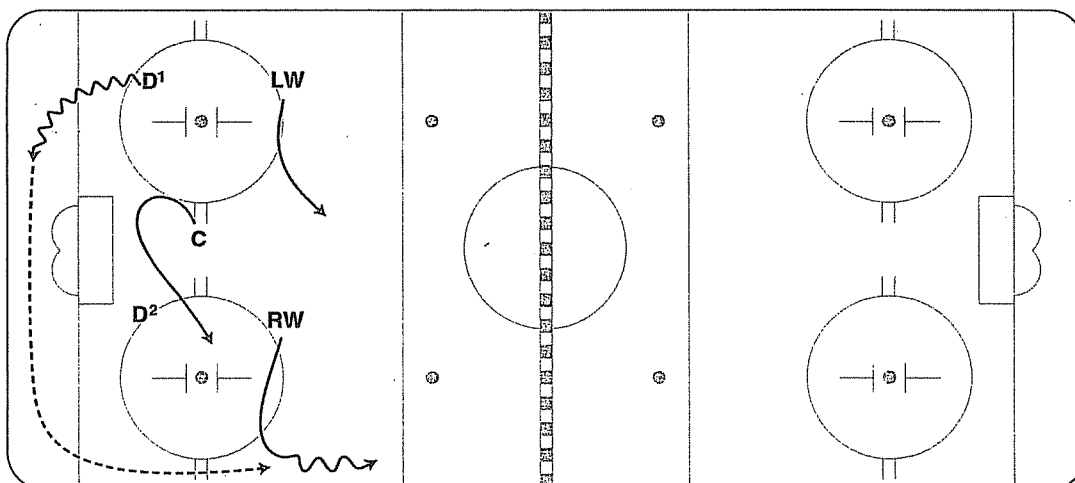


Figure 1.10

Control Breakouts

There are times when your team gets the puck and the opposing players have already pulled back into a trap forecheck. They are back toward the neutral zone waiting for the breakout to take place and looking to turn the puck over. Instead of freelancing your way through the trap and many times being unsuccessful, it is better to move out together in a coordinated fashion. This is called a control breakout.

Unless you come out of your zone in a controlled manner with set patterns for the five players, it is too easy for the opponent to create a turnover. There are two key factors in a controlled breakout: (1) the four players without the puck move with speed, and (2) the puck carrier knows the options and picks the best one. In a control setup, the puck carrier is like a quarterback who knows the routes of the receivers and picks which option is open. This section includes diagrams of three control breakouts where the effect of moving in a coordinated fashion will provide you with enough options to break the trap. They are all equally successful, but it is difficult to learn and execute all three, so coaches should pick one and practice it over and over until it becomes automatic. Often when these breakouts are run effectively, they not only result in breaking the trap but also generate a scoring chance.

In all control breakout situations, the idea is to give the defenseman with the puck more options than the opposition can take away. It is up to the defenseman to make the right choice, but the coaching staff must also prepare the team for specific options that may work against certain opponents.

■ BLUE-TO-BLUE STRETCH

D1 waits behind the net for C to move back with speed. C swings with speed behind the net. D2 swings into the opposite corner. LW waits at the corner of the close blue line. RW waits at the corner of the far blue line. There are four options available to D1. C can pick up the puck with speed and try to weave his way through the trap or move the puck to LW, RW, or back to D1 and up the other side (figure 1.11a). D1 can allow C to go through and then step out the other side of the net and pass to LW or D2 (figure 1.11b). If D1 passes to D2, the next primary option should be a stretch pass to RW moving across the ice or to LW, who bends his pattern through the center of the ice.

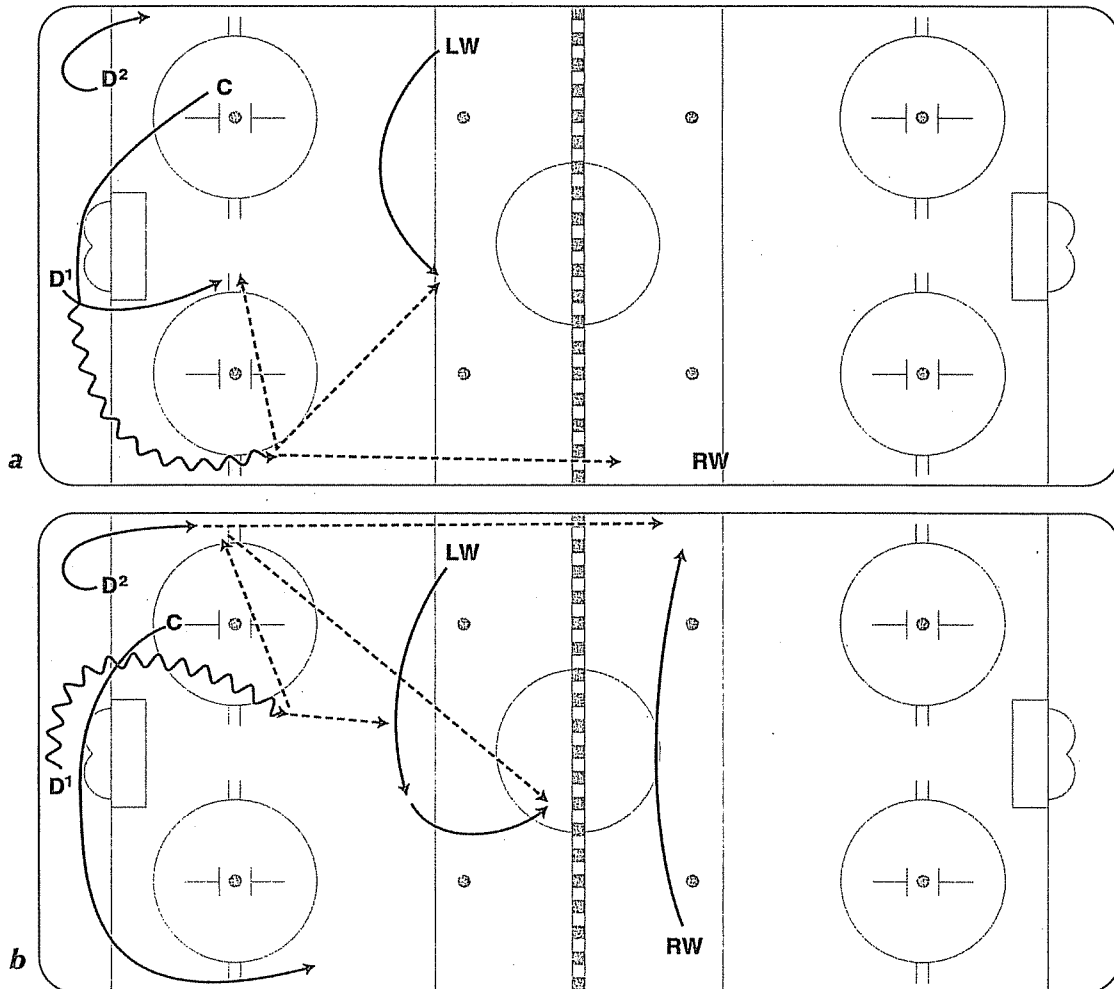


Figure 1.11

STRONG-SIDE SLANT

D1 waits behind the net for C to swing. C can swing behind the net or into the far corner. RW swings on the same side but a bit higher up than C. LW stations himself at center ice along the boards. D2 waits deep in the corner. D1 now passes to D2, who then has three options as he moves up ice: (1) Pass to LW, who can pass or chip the puck to RW as he slants across mid-ice; (2) pass to RW; (3) pass across to the center on the far side. The key players are RW and C as they move with speed to break through the trap (figure 1.12).

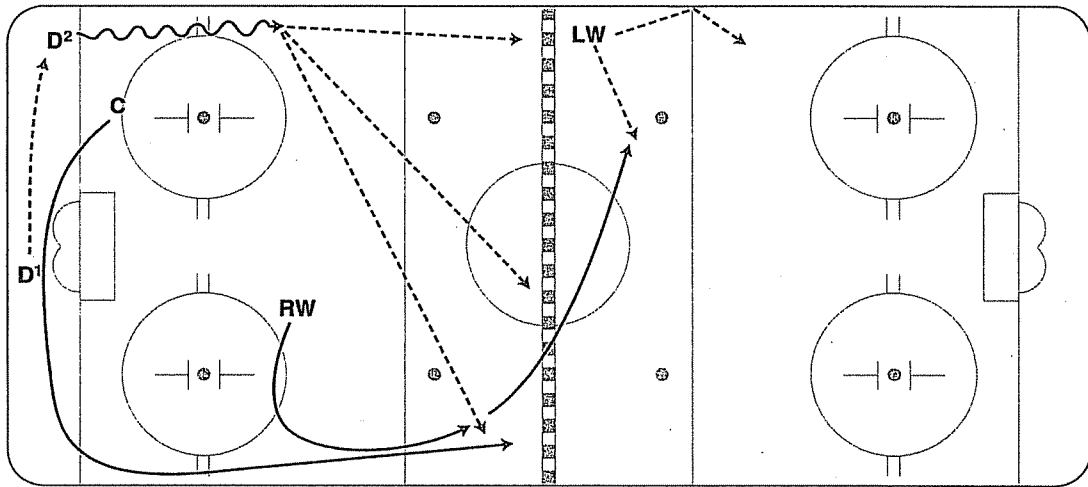


Figure 1.12

THREE HIGH

D1 waits behind the net for a few seconds. All three forwards stay out high in the neutral zone. D2 supports D1 by moving wide into one of the corners. D1 steps out and passes to C curling in mid-ice or to LW or RW, who are moving or posting up (stationary along the boards by one of the lines). If C is under pressure when he receives the puck, he may chip it by and create a foottrace for LW or RW (figure 1.13).

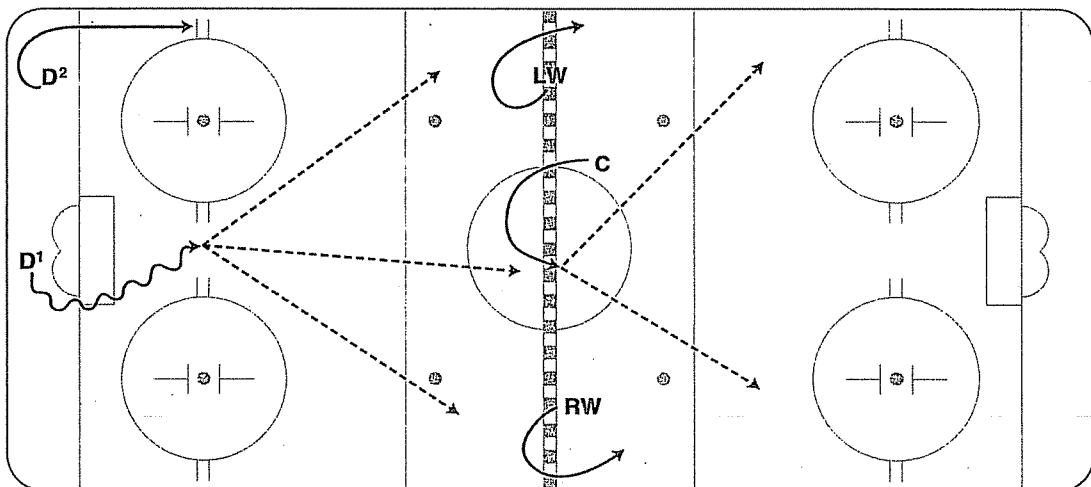


Figure 1.13