



# ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

## THE PHYSIOLOGY OF HOCKEY

Let's Play Hockey July 12, 2001  
Jack Blatherwick

# Be a good receiver:



**Ben Smith** was the coach of the **US. Women's Olympic Team** that won the gold medal three years ago, the inaugural season for women's hockey in the **Olympic Games**. For thirty years Smith coached men's college hockey and National or Olympic teams before starting the U.S. women's program five years ago. He has seen as much of the European hockey style as anyone from North America, and no one appreciates skillful play making more than Ben Smith. His bias toward skillful hockey is seen in the style and beauty of the women's national team.

Some advice: whenever they come into town, get out to see a practice, and bring three kids with you. Their skating and shooting are awesome, but perhaps the most impressive team skill is their passing - - long rink-wide passes, short saucers with finesse, perfectly timed drop-passes. This is their team identity - - skillful play, making, sharp passes, accurate and hard from one stick to another. The style is a thing of artistic beauty, reminiscent of days when men's hockey wasn't dominated by defensive systems.

In this modern hockey world, playmaking has taken a back seat to neutral zone traps. Unfortunately, it is easier to teach a player to lockup his wing and finish checks. In fact, one of the hardest skills to teach - and therefore as a kill that has gone the way of dinosaurs like **Dave Keon** or **Stan Mikita** -- is the ability to receive passes. "Be a good receiver," coach Smith would yell in every practice. At first players thought he meant simply, "**Catch the puck.**"

But what Ben had seen in the great **Soviet** and **Swedish** teams was that receivers made the job easy for the passer. His simple phrase was, "Be a good receiver."

What it meant was, "**Get open. Present a target Create a good passing lane. Anticipate the next play. Support the passer: be available when he needs to outlet the puck, not at your own convenience. Accelerate into the pass; don't get ahead and have to slow down for the puck.**"

There are some players you just can't miss with a pass and others who seem to have their stick and body in a position that makes them impossible targets. The bad receivers always seem to be skating away from you when you need to outlet the puck. All you can see is the back of their jersey. The good receivers seem to show you the front of their jersey and their stick. They are moving into the right opening at precisely the right moment

**Herb Brooks** calls it, "... movement without the puck. To be a great offensive player you must anticipate and move intelligently without the puck."

Preparing in advance to be an effective pass receiver is certainly one of the most important skills in hockey; ironically, it is rarely a topic of conversation in coaches' clinics. Anticipation, movement, and preparation by the receivers are the critical elements in a successful passing game.

**Anatoly Tarasov**, the Soviet coach who directed the greatest passing teams in history said, "*Teachers of the game, you must get your receivers to work harder than the puck-carrier. Only then will you have an effective passing attack.*"

I'd paraphrase it a little less eloquently. Any hack can pass the puck. It is the receivers who make the passer look good.

Consider this misnomer: when a great center dishes the puck at just the right moment to a speeding line-mate who cuts toward the net and turns on the red light, the passer is called a creative play maker, and the speeding wing is called a power wing as if his play was a no-brainer.

But, is the passer any more creative than the speeding wing? Of course not. Had the wing not been thinking on the same creative wavelength as the center, there'd never be a brilliant pass. Some players do their most creative thinking when the puck is on their stick.

Others, like a **Troy Riddle**, are creating plays in their mind while accelerating into open ice without the puck. Riddle gets breakaways, not because of his speed, but because he uses that speed at precisely the right moment. A good receiver must be as creative as the passer.

Finally, the easy part: learn to catch a pass no matter where it comes - - no matter how hard. You might use your skates, or adjust your body. Master the skill of receiving on your backhand. Catch, every pass. Coaches should never allow players to finish a skating-passing drill without the puck that started the drill. That way they'll learn to make every effort to catch each pass.

In the good of days, when practice rinks were in the middle of a huge lake, and a missed pass might travel 3/4 of a mile, players learned to catch everything. The boards have allowed us to become mentally lazy and shake off a missed reception as though we don't need to improve the skill of receiving passes that aren't perfectly on our stick. Of course, passers should focus on hitting the target - - right on the tape. But, receivers must also learn that any pass within a stick length (in front, behind or in the -skates) is a good pass, one you have to catch.

Find a way. Get better at receiving bad' passes, or the player in the next neighborhood who can catch them all will take your college scholarship. Be a good receiver if you want to be an offensive threat at a higher level of hockey.

Words of considerable wisdom from three of the greatest coaches in history, "Be a good receiver"