

THE BEAR ACADEMY

Session 10 – Toughness



Excellence in Education and Performance

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WHAT IS TOUGHNESS?

The “tough” players are the ones who win the hearts of the fans as they truly stand up for the team and do what most fans want to do when things don’t go well or if someone on the opponent team is not playing fair or irritating the team they support. You do have to be tough to fight, no doubt about that, but there are many components of being “tough” that are expected of hockey players.

Is it “tough” to fight all the time, or does it at some point become “stupid”? Is it tough to fight someone much smaller than you or does it only count when the player is bigger or of equal size? Would we appreciate a 250lbs boxer fight a 150lbs boxer? Would they both be tough or just one tough and one a coward for fighting the little guy?

Bear no mistake, fighting and irritating/instigating is still a part of the game. At the youth hockey and junior level it will go away shortly in my opinion and under no circumstances is fighting allowed on my team. By mistake or intent, you are going to get a hit to the head every once in a while and toughness in those moments is to just stand your ground and laugh it off. Stare the player straight in the eye and just laugh it off. If that player hits you again just put your arms out that you are not hitting back and skate away. You may draw penalties this way giving your team a power play which could win the game. Remember that nothing is personal in hockey. Your emotions will never be more important than the team winning the game.



TAKING A HIT?

Is checking or taking a check the toughest thing to do? Taking a check is by far the toughest thing to do. When you are racing towards that puck, knowing that getting there first you are going to get checked hard by the opponent, it is tough to put yourself in that situation for the benefit of the team while knowing you are the sacrifice making it happen. If you have the puck and you have to take those two extra steps over the red-line to avoid icing by dumping the puck, and by doing so the opponent gets a clear angle on you and an easy hard-hit, it is very tough to get that puck in the zone and taking the hit. This takes a lot of courage and integrity. The outcome of dumping a puck is not pivotal to the score, but now your tired teammates can change, the team is in good position with fresh players coming onto the ice for a fore-check.

Note: when taking a hit, try to lower and widen your stance while angling your body towards the player hitting you (if open ice). You get the most leverage from your skate digging into the ice and your legs angled at an angle towards the player. Your lower access point makes it harder for the checking player to get power into his check. Just make sure you don't lead with your head first!!

If you are on the boards, place your shoulder and hip into the boards so your leverage becomes the boards. If you leave a gap, you will be hit by the player and the boards which can cause more pain and damage.



BLOCKING SHOTS?

Blocking shots is a very scary thing to do in hockey. The technique used to be to throw yourself on the ground and make yourself as long as possible. Then defensemen got deceptive and coaches did not like players who left their stance only to be deked and a better opportunity opened up for the other team.

In today's hockey, you are expected to rotate your inside leg (the one towards the center line) outward while putting your arm across your chest (for protection) and taking a knee with the leg you put your weight on.

For older players not wearing a face-mask, put your glove over your face beneath your visor as much as you can for protection.

The video below is a great example of one of the best players in the NHL who is a point producer taking a few shots to the body to help his team in a crucial 3 on 5 penalty kill situation.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhD6kd2WxjA>

Blocking shots is a great sign of being “tough” and goes a long way on your scouting sheet.



PHYSICAL ENGAGEMENTS

When speaking with Canadian scouts they often refer to “chicken swede” or “typical American” in that the physical presence is much lower in these skaters. This is especially prevalent where Canadian players are taught from an early age to “take the whole hand when given a pinky”. These are some common situations where this is exposed.

1. Finishing a hit (especially forwards attacking a shooting D in the defensive zone).
2. Cut to the net. Canadian forwards are more likely to bury their inside shoulder and cut across the crease for a shot and a rebound while other skaters look for that fancy outside roof shot where it is hit or miss.
3. Skate through the battle. Canadian players poke-and-hit while other skaters resort to poke-and-box-out engagements.
4. Stay in the slot. When on a rush (say a 2 on 1 for example) skaters should avoid ending up behind the extended goal line after they finish. At least one skater should stay for a rebound. It is by default that players end up watching what happens to the puck while gliding by or away from the net. This is a bad habit and the kneejerk reaction should be to attack the rebound rather than being a spectator once the final attempt is made. Sounds easy but it is not. In practice, try to make it a habit to go to the net after you shoot or after a shot is made if you are coming at the net. This is the only thing that will really alter your intuition to make the consistently right decision. It is not always possible to do so depending on the situation but it is possible more often than players think.



SCREEN THE GOALIE?

So many goals are scored in the lower slots. Rebounds by goalies are common and at the younger ages they goalies have a hard time covering a puck immediately and they struggle putting pucks into the corner but instead leave the rebound right in front. Even so, not many younger players want to get in front of the goalie to make it harder on him/her. Here is what you should do.

- Make sure to not stand inside the crease (blue area around the net) as it could cause a disallowed goal.
- Stand directly between the puck and the goalie.
- If a defenseman is pushing you from the side, put your stick on the other side while staying in front of the goalie to show the shooter he should shoot on that side for deflection.
- You should be able to deflect pucks on either side of your body.
- DO NOT turn your body as the shot comes as it could cause injury. Equipment is very good these days that a shot rarely cause injury if there is frontal impact on a player.
- Once the shot is taken, make sure to quickly free your stick up so you can bang in a rebound. Try not to get your stick tied up. Rotate away from the Defenseman if he has the inside track on you so you can separate your body as well and get the needed separation to make a play on an open puck.

ALL players (even Crosby) are expected to do this every time an opportunity prevails. Nobody is too good to make it easy on a goalie, get in front when a shot is taken.

NOT SHOWING YOU ARE IN PAIN?

If you get hit and you go down where there is a whistle to stop the play, ***make sure to not go back on the ice the next few shifts***. You must resort to being hurt and not injured immediately. If you are actually injured, you can't get up and you should seek medical attention after the whistle. If you are **hurt but not injured**, you should immediately get up and skate to the bench for attention and can resume to play as you are feeling okay to do so. Toughness is very prevalent here where most players get a boo-boo and stay down to wait for a whistle. Every scout on the planet will watch you now to make sure you are actually hurt. Coaches at the upper levels don't want to be on an unexpected 4 on 5 because you are nursing a boo-boo but if you are injured it is of course understandable and accepted. Try to not show you are in pain as it motivates opponents to feed off the opportunity that your team is now weaker. Try to bite your lip and simply get off the ice. Also, you won't be freaking out your parents unnecessarily by skating off the ice to care for yourself. When you are really hurt, you will know such as blacking out or breaking a bone. In all other cases, get off the ice.



STAND YOUR GROUND VS. BIGGER/STRONGER PLAYERS?

Just because you are smaller does not mean you are weaker. The biggest mistake smaller player make is to be big in a physical battle when you should actually stay small. If you have ever had a “Charlie Horse” or a hard blow to your ribs or kidneys you will know how it feels to get hit there.

Just because you are hitting it does not mean you must hit the opponent in the shoulder height area. Engage physically at the angle where you are the strongest which is whatever height on the player you can engage on given your size. If you come up high, you will actually lose your stance and the chance of injury is higher. You **MUST however protect your head** so don't lead with your helmet but rotate into the body with your shoulder or hip and keep your stance as strong as you can. Also, velocity (speed) is not as important as the strength of your stance. Velocity cause injury and a strong stance cause separation which is the only reason you should hit in the first place. So stay strong on your feet, hit to separate and most importantly get the puck as soon as you are done with your check!

