



“Power up your power play”



Part 1 of 3 part series on 6/5 play

For the past several years I have been searching for better ways to teach the power play especially as we have gone through a period of significant rule changes impacting on this, the most important determining factor in the end result of most games.

There are so many factors affecting the choice of 6/5 formation (4-2 or 3-3 or combinations of these two); placement of athletes; choice of pass combinations; variations of 6/5 tactic depending on the style of defense (blocking vs jumping) There is no way to claim that one system is better than another or that there is one way to success in 6/5. Success in many respects depends upon the relative quality of the two opposing teams facing each other and the special characteristics each team has. If the attacking team for example is superior in skill to the defending team and/or the goalie is of a relatively weak standard, then almost any style of 6/5 could achieve success.

I believe firmly that the foundation of any tactic is based on certain key principles that have a universal quality and application. In my mind one of the most important realizations a coach comes to after many years of work is that superior technique is a more powerful weapon than the most intricate of tactics and that the foundation of successful systems of play largely depends on the skill of the athletes executing them. Furthermore, the perception (game-awareness) and decision-making capability (mental skills) of the athletes will also form a key element in the ultimate success of any tactical system. The patterns of passing or movements employed in the 6/5 attack are quite simply the framework for the decisions of the players in the water. It is possible to create some “pre-set” plays and to have success in some special situations, but not, in my view on a consistent basis at the highest levels.

A key assumption behind this article is that we are striving to create a 6/5 system that will succeed against the highest quality opponent and I am aiming all my comments and suggestions with this in mind. As well I am not able to cover in detail all aspects of the 6/5 as this would require a lengthy chapter in a book. I hope that this 3-part series will stimulate ideas and provoke you to re-consider some previously held ideas or perhaps reaffirm some others.



“Power up your power play”



There are six essential principles which I believe form the foundation of modern power play theory.

- I Ball in motion
- II Threaten to shoot (provoke)
- III Find free space
- IV Precision passing
- V Deceive the opponent
- VI Shoot for success

I *Ball in motion*

With only 20 seconds or less to set up the formation and complete a power play the idea that passing will play a key role in destabilizing the defense just doesn't hold water any more in my view. With the elimination of the two hand block as a highly significant factor assisting the attacking team plus the fact that coaches spend time developing shifting patterns in anticipation of a relatively limited number of passing combinations in the 6/5 the coach must find a more effective way to find success against the highest quality opponent.

The first key is for the player with the ball to quickly go in motion. This motion can be forward, sideways or even backward (in the case where the attacker is confronted by an aggressive defender) and its purpose is to challenge the defender to move into a new location other than that prescribed by the defensive system being employed.

By moving with the ball to a new location the attacker can also create some instability for the goalie as the original “blocking agreement” between the goalie and the player blocking the ball has to be re-organized or re-negotiated quickly.

Sideways motion with the ball by either the 2 or 4 attackers helps to create previously unavailable laneways for a potential shot or pass and this movement forces the defense to adjust in ways that simple faking cannot accomplish.

The technique of **sliding with the ball** in a variety of directions while faking and while remaining in a stable position for a potential shot is a critical component to the success of this first principle.



“Power up your power play”



Another situation requiring motion occurs when the player with the ball faces a static defender whose intention is to stay in their current location and to block a section of the net from this spot. In this case the attacking player with ball moves quickly towards the net in a threatening manner choosing a path that creates a new laneway for a possible shot. This example highlights the second principle.

II *Threaten to shoot (provoke)*

At every opportunity the player receiving the ball needs to immediately address the goalie and the defender he/she faces in such a way as to provoke a response. It is essential that the goalie believes that a shot could be imminent. This helps to destabilize the goalie and to set up the next action by the attacking team by focusing the concentration of the goalie fully on the possible shot rather than allowing him/her to prepare for the next movement of the ball. The combination of motion and threatening a shot (principles I and II combined) is a very powerful tool in the “time-sensitive” environment of the 6/5.

As a coach I suggest you audit your athletes while they are passing the ball during the power play. You will be amazed how few of the players receive the ball and address the goalie or defender. They have, generally speaking, been indoctrinated with the idea that they have to keep the ball moving and they turn their attention quickly to the next person to receive the pass. Having spent a great deal of my time during the last 8 years working with goalies in both Canada and Brazil I can assure you that this point has not gone unnoticed. The goalie often counts on this ineffective approach to save time and energy and to stay in a relatively secure position in the middle of the net. The goalie learns to study the intention of the player with the ball and to read through his/her body position and eye movements the next movement of the ball. This applies equally as well to the most intelligent defenders.

While the player with the ball applies the two first two principles the 5 other attacking players must simultaneously apply the third principle.



“Power up your power play”



III Find free space

In order to destabilize the highest quality defense the attacking players must move to a new location (find free space or open water) that allows them to potentially receive a ball and shoot.

This simultaneous movement of 5 attacking players in a synchronized manner has a far more profound impact on a defense than could ever be achieved through a system of quick passing since the defending team has to compensate for this movement by similar movements which require them to cover a much broader area. The possibility for confusion is increased significantly. These movements by the offense have to be done in a technically correct manner (one which allows the player to still receive a pass at any moment and be ready to execute a shot on the net). The specifics of these technical sliding movements are beyond the scope of this particular article.

The movements of the post players (positions 3 and 6) are of particular importance to the success of the third principle. Each of these two post players finds themselves in the middle of a triangle of defenders.

Let's examine and follow one example.

In the case of post player 3, he/she is located in the middle of a triangle created by the positions of A, B and E-defenders. Post player 6 is in the middle of the defensive triangle of players B, C and D. In most cases, the “free space” to be found by the post players is the new middle of the triangle which is constantly being created when the defense reacts to the motion and threatening action of the player with the ball. If for example, the A-defender suddenly attacks offensive player 1 who has the ball then *the shape* of the A-B-E triangle changes and a new middle of the triangle exists. By moving to this free space post player 3 will force some kind of response from the defense. It is possible defender B may follow or defender E may drop back. In either case, these “reactions” by the defense open up new possibilities for post player 6. If B follows the movement of 3 then the shape of the triangle of B, C and D has now changed and post player 6 should move to the new middle of this triangle. If C follows then player 5 has new free space at a much closer location to the net and with a much better angle to shoot from. It should be clear therefore from this simple example that the action or



“Power up your power play”



movements of one attacker will have an impact on the situation each of the other attackers finds themselves in. The converse can also be seen to be true; lack of movement by one attacker will restrict the options available to the next attacker in the 6/5 formation. Simultaneous movements in a coordinated fashion such as I am suggesting will have a profound impact on the defense!

IV Precision passing

This system of motion with the ball, threatening to shoot and finding free space sets a tempo or rhythm for the offense which must be maintained through precision passing. Precision means that the ball arrives to the new player in the ideal location for a potential immediate shot or the next pass. If the passes are precise and we assume that the catching skills of the players on the attack are highly developed then the defense will find itself reacting rather than controlling since they will be required not only to shift constantly to follow the movements of the players but they will have limited time when confronted by the player receiving the ball and it is their turn to block or attack. Furthermore, the movements of the post players will have a tendency to force the defenders A, B and C through a wider area of responsibility and this opens up previously restricted shooting lanes.

It is important to stress here just how critical good leg work is for the attacking team (as well as the defense of course). Players in position 1 and 5 in particular, must have superior leg power and jumping ability in order to receive and give passes. Their location in the 6/5 formation requires the most options and their ability to catch the long pass from 1-5 or 5-1 when it occurs is a key to maintaining this rhythm. The specific location suitable for each player to receive the ball tends to be very individual and the passer should be accustomed to this degree of detail including the “weight” of the incoming pass for the player receiving it. Another factor affecting the location of the pass is obviously the position of the defender(s) near the player who will receive the ball.

The pass location needs to take into account all these factors but the passer must also know what the player receiving the ball could or should do with it next.

The mind of a great playmaker (passer) operates at the highest level of perception (game awareness) and decision making and coaches very often place



“Power up your power play”



this particular individual in the 1 position on the attack. Precision passing and the ability to deceive an opponent is the other bench mark of the great playmaker and this brings us to the 5th principle.

V *Deceive the opponent*

The best players are able to hide their intention from the opponent. This can be especially effective on the power play in combination with the application of the other principles since by definition this deceptive action tends to hold the attention of the goalie and/or defender in place while providing time for the next player to take a decision (in most cases a shot at the net).

One of the biggest mistakes inexperienced players can make on the 6/5 is to look directly at the player they intend to pass the ball to (for example the post). I am aware that many coaches do not agree with so-called “no-look” passes. I would agree that this is a matter of debate depending upon the ability of the athletes in question. On the other hand however, it is very difficult to achieve success against a formidable opponent by showing them your intention.

The key in my mind is to train your athletes to practice over and over the combination of catching while in motion, attacking with the ball while sliding and gathering quickly information (perceive) so a decision can then be made (pass or shot).

To give the best possible chance to a player on the post to score the passer must know before receiving the ball that the pass can be made (perception); he/she must know where the pass must arrive (ideal location) and before sending the ball to the post the passer must deceive the goalie and defenders about their true intention.

VI *Shoot for success*

The final step is of course the shot at the net and the last principle deals with this aspect. Shooting for success means; trying to maximize your chances to score.

The ideal scenario is that the attacking team has applied the other five principles so effectively that the defenders and the goalie have been pulled so far out of



“Power up your power play”



position that one player eventually receives a pass and has a clear laneway to shoot with the goalie having almost no chance to touch the ball.

Of course this is not always possible especially against the best teams. As well, it is difficult to predict exactly the reaction of the goalie in all situations. Each of the 6 locations on the power play offers unique circumstances which the shooter must consider. The type of shot; the timing of the shot; the location in the net will all be affected by the position of the defenders and the goalie and the sequence of events leading up to that shot. I am not able to go into a great deal of detail in this article about all the possible combinations/permutations of shots but I will give a few basic words of advice.

- 1 Shoot mostly down (low) below the blocking arms and close to the body
- 2 Post players should move to meet the in-coming pass in T-formation
- 3 Correct body position with strong leg support is critical
- 4 Players in 1 and 5 should use skip shots *under* the blocking arm whenever possible.

Part 2 of 3 part series on 6/5 play – “Formations and Combinations”

Introduction

In the first part of this series we examined the core principles leading to success in modern power play offense. In the second installment we will look at and discuss different formations and combinations of the attack.

We cannot discuss formations and combinations on the attack without first examining defensive play since it is the style of defense and the tactical advice given to the defending team which most often determines what options are available to the attacking team. An inherent assumption throughout much of this article is that the defending team chooses not to single out one or two players and force these players to shoot; if this would be the case then any tactical plans made by the offensive team coach would be irrelevant.

I will give specific comments about combinations against various styles of defense later in the article.



“Power up your power play”



There are two main 6/5 attack formations:

4-2 formation

3-3 formation

3-3 Formation

Some might question why I have chosen to begin with the 3-3 formation since the 4-2 formation has a wider appeal within the sport.

The 3-3 formation is the one I feel should be taught first at the Atom and Bantam levels because it provides a less complicated environment (from the perceptual point of the athletes) and it allows more time (space) for decision making and therefore it compensates for what is most likely the biggest limitation to success at this level; relatively under-developed passing, catching skills, limited perceptual skills and problems with decision making leading to a loss of possession. The passing combinations are relatively simple and the most important skill involved in creating a scoring opportunity is the ability to slide through the water while faking with the ball; something that takes less time to develop than placing the emphasis on passing/catching skills.

When using the 4-2 formation (even with higher level teams) there is always the danger of the first pass being intercepted; especially when the defending team checks tight against the 2 and 4 positions and only allows the long and dangerous 1-5 or 5-1 pass. By setting up 3-3 the coach avoids this easily applied tactic by the defending coach and the attacking team is able to move the ball toward the net in relative safety.

From the point of view of combinations the 3-3 offers a very simple set of options and ultimately places the emphasis on shooting rather than on combinations of passing-catching-shooting. I remind the readers here that depending on the relative level of skills of the two teams facing each other this will have a significant impact on many of the points I am making. As I mentioned in the previous article if the attacking team for example has passing, catching and shooting skills vastly superior than the jumping and blocking abilities of the defending team (mostly based on leg work) then the choice between 3-3 or 4-2 formation seems irrelevant in this case. On the other hand if the defending team



“Power up your power play”



is stronger than the attacking team then 3-3 formation is most likely a more secure environment for the attacking team.

The one danger presented by the 3-3 formation comes from a sudden loss of the ball allowing a possible 2 on 1 counter attack and this has to be taken into consideration when using and teaching the 3-3. Players need to practice covering against the counter attack especially in the case of a shot from the 3 position.

The players in the 2, 3 and 4 positions of the 3-3 must ensure a triangle formation with the 3 position back far enough that he/she can see both defending players who are in position to jump back and forth; failure to ensure this triangle position is the most common reason for losing possession of the ball while in the 3-3 power play formation. The player in the 3 position is allowed to move forward with the ball, but not without the ball. This simple advice will solve a lot of problems.

From the technique point of view I am encouraging more and more my athletes to hold the ball with a “quiet body” which means that the arm is not using a pumping and faking action and there is no wrist twist if you can pardon the expression. In my opinion this waving of the ball prior to a shot (or even a pass) is the most common factor resulting in an imprecise pass or a shot which travels over top or wide of the net. This quiet body technique combined with strong leg work is really disturbing to the defense and goalie since they cannot predict when a shot or pass will be made. If you spend time on this I predict that your athletes will have more success especially in the 3-3 formation.

A variation which is often used is to set up in 3-3 formation to ensure a safe environment to begin and then to shift into a 4-2 formation in an effort to force the defense to adjust in a manner which provides a good scoring opportunity.

The first method involves moving the 4 position player into the 6 post when either 2 or 3 has possession of the ball. This movement of 4 is designed to create a reaction from the C defender and most often results in the 5 position being open for a pass and possible shot.

A second method involves the 5 position moving into the 6 post when 3 has the ball. The C defender once again is forced into a decision (whether to follow or



“Power up your power play”



not). This second method usually provides a scoring opportunity for the 4 position player and is the safer of the two methods in my opinion since the pass from 3 to 4 is far less dangerous than the pass from 3-5 or even 2-5. The choice of tactical solution should always be determined by the level of skill of the athletes and the coach needs to know his/her athletes and match the choice of tactic accordingly. Failure to ensure this is the most common reason for lack of success.

The shift from 3-3 to 4-2 can also be accomplished on the right side of the attack by having the 1 position move to the 3 post and the 2 player drop down to create the 4-2 formation. This is an especially effective tactic when a left-handed player is placed in the 2 position.

4-2 formation

This is the most common attack formation for power play.

Placement of players in the various positions is an important aspect leading to success since the players have different abilities and qualities and the various positions in the 4-2 formation each demand different types of skills and perceptual abilities as well.

As a general comment I feel very strongly that young players in Atom, Bantam and even Cadet levels need to learn all the various positions on the power play and I strongly discourage specialization at this level. The coach must balance the need to win with the more important obligation to ensure the long term development potential of the individual athletes.

Since I have already covered the core principles involved in the attack I will now focus upon the various combinations possible.

I have found it very helpful in the teaching of the 4-2 theory to discuss the concept of “triangle of superiority” whereby one side of the attack has a 3 against 2 situation while the other side has a 3 against 3. The Triangle of superiority is the location of the most probable solution for scoring.

The position of the B defender is the key to understanding this idea. If the B defender is for example checking the 3 post when the ball is in the 1 position then the triangle of superiority is located on the left side of the attack (offensive



“Power up your power play”



players 4-5-6 against defensive players C and D). The usual advice to the attacking team is to find the triangle of superiority and move the ball quickly and safely to that side in an effort to find a solution and create a scoring opportunity.

Once the ball has been sent to this triangle of superiority there is a brief moment during the shifting of the defense when a scoring opportunity can be found; but this depends on the precision of the pass, the catching skills of the player receiving the ball as well as whether or not the principles of movement with the ball, deception and finding free space have been followed.

Any combination is possible providing the skills warrant the choice.

The simplest and most effective combinations useful to Cadet and younger teams would in my view include:

- 1 Passes from the 2 and 4 position to either 1 (if left handed player in this position) or 5. A very important piece of advice is to set the post players (3 and 6) at the 3 meter rather than on the 2m line. This usually forces the A and C defenders to play further from the net and takes them out of the most effective blocking lanes. The 2-5 combination or the 4-1 combination followed by a skip shot under the blocker's arm are the most effective.

Another interesting and effective set of combinations involve 1 position entering with the ball inside the 2m area and threatening at the net. The 3 post steps back into open space around the 3m area in the middle of the defensive triangle. The 6 post moves along the 2m line toward the ball and the 5 position curls up to the 3m line area. This creates a kind of zig-zag formation with more passing lanes and therefore more potential combinations. Combinations involving 1-3, 1-6 or 1-5 all become possible depending upon the reaction of the defense.

I would like to re-iterate here one more time that a pass-shot combination depends upon the skill of participants but do not forget as well, the core principles I recommended in the first article.



“Power up your power play”



Combinations/Solutions against specific defensive formations

There are so many possible options to consider here so I will focus one example and try to point out the main principles involved.

Combinations/solutions as mentioned earlier depend upon the shifting patterns of the defense. Ascertaining these shifting patterns offers the first clue in determining options for the offense.

Let's examine the shifting options of the B defender.

Each defender usually has a primary and a secondary responsibility as assigned by the coach. In the case of the B defender he/she must jump between the 3 and 6 post players. His/her movements will depend upon the location of the ball and the perceived danger of the various offensive players. Some coaches insist that the B defender moves to the same side as the ball; in other words if the ball is passed to 1 or 2 position, the B defender controls the 3 post while if the ball is passed to the 4 or 5 position, the B defender moves to control the 6 post.

Once the attacking team is able to determine through some preliminary passes what the predicted reaction of the B defender will be, then this offers some potential combinations.

A simple example would be a 4-1-6 combination. The 4 player provokes to the net then passes the ball to the 1 position and the ball is sent immediately but with deception to the 6 post (the 1 position player doesn't look directly at the 6 post but instead turns as if to challenge the goalie and A defender as the pass is made. This 3-way combination tries to catch the B defender making an “automatic” shift without first considering his secondary responsibility as an option and it also relies on a momentary relax of concentration by the C defender. If the timing and location of the pass are good then the 6 post player will have an excellent chance to score into the open section of the net (the goalie obviously has to protect against the possibility of the shot from 1 and has just shifted to the left side of the net, following the 4-1 pass.

Another 3-way combination which follows the same principle and based upon the same known shifting pattern of B would be the 1-4-3 combination. Why?



"Power up your power play"



I will leave you to figure out the reason and I will explain the answer in the 3rd part of the series.

David Hart