



**OTTAWA DISTRICT HOCKEY ASSOCIATION  
OTTAWA DISTRICT MINOR HOCKEY ASSOCIATION**

**1996 ONTARIO ADVANCED COACHING SEMINAR**

**"TRANSITION HOCKEY"**

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## Transition Hockey

### Introduction

Over the years the word, Transition, has been used to describe many different parts of the game. You can say, it became in, to explain almost any appearance in hockey tactics as transition. Areas like; **Generating Speed, Change of Pace, Changing Position, Puck Motion** and others have all been referred to as the game of transition. In today's hockey however it has generally been accepted, that the expression, Transition, stand for the motion taking place, when the puck is turned over from one team to another. In short:

**Transition = Turn Over**

This gives us two main areas of transition.

- A. Transition from offense to defense
- B. Transition from defense to offense

Both areas consist of two parts, defense and offense. When one of the two is played, all teams have their well trained systems. For example in the offensive play they all have pattern for; Break Outs, Breaking in to the Zone, Attacking on the Rush, Attacking in the Zone, etc. The same goes for the defensive play. Every team is good organized, when they are playing defense in their own end, forechecking, backchecking or playing the trap in the neutral zone. Everyone seems to know what to do, when his team is defending or attacking. The game however is just rarely completely offense or completely defense. It changes back and forth with such a speed that it becomes very different to separate the two areas from another.

The problem is not **what** to do,  
but **when** to do it!

That players often are doing the right thing at the wrong time,  
is illustrated by the following example,  
which we all have experienced:

*You've just had a goal against, and you hear your winger explain:  
„I did not cover my point, because I thought we had the puck. I took off to create an option for a long pass. It could have been a break away, you know!"*

In this situation it was obviously the wrong decision. But the next time, in the very same situation, it might be the right thing to do. The same action can lead to a goal for us as well as a goal against. It can make us win a game as well as lose one. When is it right, and when is it wrong?

The easiest way to coach is to get mad, and blame the player, each time there is a goal against, and praise him each time we score. Now, the easiest way is probably not the most effective way. More effective would it be, if we could train our players what to look for, what sign to read in the moment of transition. If we could train them to take advantage of all the situations which will create a scoring chance for us, but still be cool enough to stay long enough in the defensive positions, so we don't give up any goals. Our objectives must be to make every transition safe and effective.

Being organized in the offensive play and the defensive play is not enough. You have to be organized in the transition play as well. The game changes back and forth so fast, that's impossible for the whole team to regroup from defense to offense and back again, each time the puck changes possessor. On international top level, for instance the 1994 World Cup Final, the puck possession changed from one team to the other 7,7 times every minute, and the average time one team could keep puck possession was 4,7 seconds. There's just no time to get the whole team 100 % into its defensive position, before it's time to attack again.

To react on what's happening in the present, is most of the time too late. You always have to read the next move, to be ready to transfer into the next situation. You're consistently balancing on the rim between offense and defense. Ready to attack. Ready to defend.

You're consistently playing  
TRANSITION HOCKEY.

**General Facts of Transition**

**The Importance of the Transition  
in today's hockey**

According to an analysis made in 1990

In this analyze games from;  
the German and Swiss leagues,  
the World Championships Pool A and B,  
and the NHL

were broken down into pieces, and every transition were studied. Of greatest interest was the outcome of every transition. What happened, where did it happen, when did it happen and how did it happen. The results of this study should make it possible to determine how many goals were scored on transition, and how many were scored on controlled attack.

First the meaning of the word transition had to be classified. Basically the transition is the length of time, on team needs to get all its players from their offensive into their defensive positions (and vice versa). This takes for most teams around three seconds, but the advantage of the transition however last until the defending team controls the opponents. This subjective norm was not enough to clarify, what is within the period of transition, and where's the boarder between transition and controlled attack. Requested were objective categories. After studying a number of situations it was clear, that this border is somewhere in between the 5:th and 10:th second after the turn over. This means that all goals scored within 5 seconds after the transition for sure are transition goals, and all goals scored more than 10 seconds after the turn over, are for sure scored on controlled attack. Still left to analyze are the goals scored in between the 5:th and 10:th second after the turn over.

These time intervals made up a norm, with which it was possible to separate transitions goals from the others just by using a stop watch. To get a little more depth, all the goals were divided into seven different categories (see next page). Based on these facts one can say how many percent of all goals were scored on transition, and objectively clarify the importance of the transition in today's hockey.

All goals at the 1990 World Championship divided into 4 categories according to the time interval (between the transition and the goal) and 3 categories of special situations.

Nr.	% of all goals	Character of goal	Classification
1.	27 %	Goals scored within 5 seconds after the transition	Transition goals
2.	27 %	Goals scored between the 5:th and the 10:th second after the transition	Twilight zone / Each goal has to be judged individually
3.	3 %	Goals scored between the 10:th and the 15:th second after the transition	Controlled Attack Goals
4.	4 %	Goals scored after more than 15 seconds after the transition	
5.	10 %	Goals scored after winning the puck on a face off	Special Situation Goals of no interest for this analysis
6.	23 %	Goals scored on a power play	
7.	6 %	Goals scored short handed	
Σ	100 %	All Goals	

After taking a close look at the goals in the 2:nd category (the Twilight Zone), it appeared, that no goal in this category was scored after the defensive team got organized defensively. Therefore one can say, that all the goals in the first and second category are a result of the transitions.

By adding up the first and second category, these figures show, that 54 % of all goals were scored on transition. To the transition classification we can also count the short handers, as we can presume, that all shorthanders were scored on transition.

This means, that

**60 % of all goals are scored on transition.**

It also means that almost

**three times as many goals are scored on transition, than on the power play.**

Finally (just considering the play with equal strength after the initial play on the face off) it means, that **88 % of all equal strength goals are transition goals.**

In short:

**The transition is the most important offensive part of today's hockey.**

**The importance of the transitions  
According to the scoring chances**

Just analyzing the goals, are not always the best way to get a clear picture of a game. Scoring chances however occur almost ten times as frequently as the goals, and are therefore a more objective tool. Scoring chances can also be divided into different levels, which gives more detailed picture, of what actually happens on the ice. So what the statistics on scoring chances tell us about the importance of the transitions, is most likely more accurate, than what we learned studying the goals.

<b>The levels of Scoring Chances</b>	
<b>1:st Class</b>	Break Away Two on One Controlled Rebound Controlled Tip In
<b>2:nd Class</b>	Shot from the Slot Three on Two Screened Point Shot Stressed Rebound Stressed Tip In
<b>3:rd Class</b>	Poor Angle Shot Shot from the Neutral Zone

This formula was used to divide the scoring chances into different categories in the diagram on the following page.

All scoring chances\* at the 1990 World Championship  
divided into categories according to the:  
Time Interval (between the transition and the chance)  
Level of Scoring Chance

Interval/Level	Goal	1:st Class	2:nd Class	3:rd Class
0-5 sec.	44 %	50 %	27 %	4 %
5-10 sec.	44 %	44 %	43 %	33 %
10-15 sec.	5 %	3 %	18 %	33 %
15+ sec.	7 %	3 %	12 %	20 %
$\Sigma$	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %

\* = Equal strength only / Not considering scoring chances on the face off

The figures above do not only confirmed the importance of the transition (as documented by the analysis of the goals). They even state an increased importance. As the two first categories indicate the scoring chances on the transition, it tell us that as much as 94 % of all first class scoring chances are created on transitions.

These two analysis from the World Championship shows the importance of the transitions very clearly.

One can, based on facts, claim:

If you want to be  
**GOOD** at the **GAME OF HOCKEY**  
you have to be  
**GREAT** at the **GAME OF TRANSITION**

**The Advantage Zones  
of Transition Hockey**

It's already been documented, that the transition is the most important offensive part in today's hockey. Consequently must the capability of playing the transitions right in all three zones be very important. Furthermore if there are some areas, where the transitions are more likely to lead to success, it must be tactically wise, to force the opponent to a turn over in these areas.

Logically it must be easier to score, the closer to the opponent net you win the puck. The following analysis will try to clarify, if this logic also is confirmed by what's actually happening on the ice. The figures are a mixture of facts from North American (NHL), European (Germany and Switzerland) and International (World Championships - Pool A and B) Hockey. The analyzed games showed no distinguished different between the different leagues, so one can say that the figures below are representative for modern ice hockey.

**The Analyzing Method**

Every time the puck was turned over, the actual place was marked down. Additionally, what ever happened on that specific play, it was documented as well. The outcome of every play was thereafter divided into two basic groups:

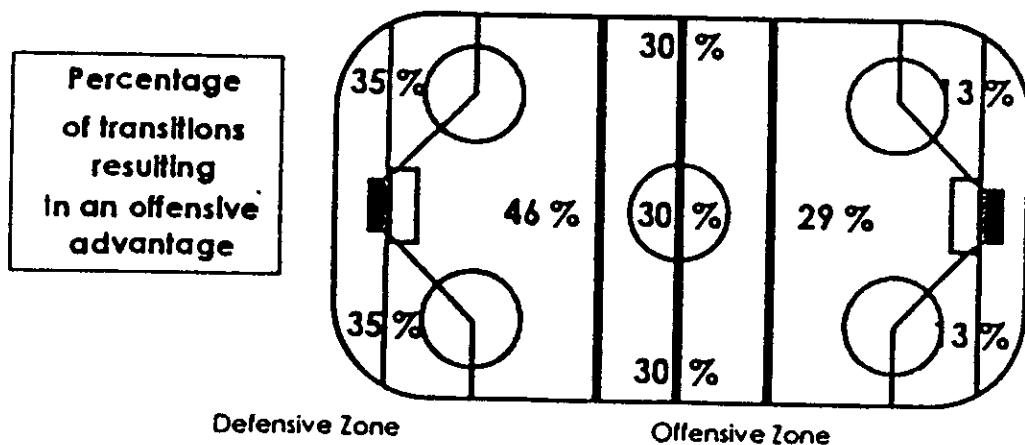
Offensive Advantage

- Goal
- Scoring Chance
- Power Play

Nothing Gained

- Puck was turned over again
- Puck out of play  
(off side, icing, over the boards, etc.)

Based on these facts the likelihood of an offensive advantage was calculated for every area on the rink. The results (diagrammed below) show, that the most effective transitions are the ones taking place in your own end, or in the neutral zone.

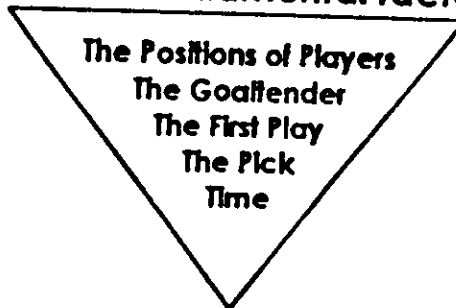




**The strategic necessities  
of transition**

To form your strategic team play, so it responds to the reality of today's hockey, there is no other way, than to form it so it responds to the reality of transition. Playing tactically smart, means that your players know exactly what to do in the transition situations. There are five necessities, which are decisive for how effective your transition play will be.

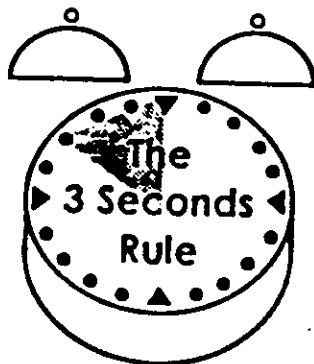
**The five fundamental factors**



The first fundamental factor

Time

88 % of all goals\* are scored within 10 seconds after the turn over has taken place. But the time interval of the factual transition only last for about three seconds. Three seconds is the time a top level team needs to regroup from offense to defense. If you'll get an advantage, depends on, how well you can surprise your opponents. Surprise them, by attacking when they're still in their offensive positions. This means, you have a three second limit to make a decision and an action, which will determinate the success of the whole attack. One can say there is a „Three Seconds Rule“ in ice hockey.



*If you play right in the first three seconds  
of every transition,  
you'll play right in the whole game.*

\* = Equal strength only / not considering goals scored on the face offs

The second fundamental factor      **The  
First Play**

If playing right in the first three seconds of each transition, is so decisive for the outcome of the game, the first play must be very important. To make that first play right, means to make it in a way that surprise the opponents. This makes it possible to maintain the advantage from the turn over all the way to the net. One substantial component of the first play is the direction of the puck. If the puck is moved up the ice, across the ice or towards your own net, will influence the success of the whole transition. The importance of the direction of the first play, is documented in the statistics below.

First Direction of the Puck Motion In the Transition and the Outcome of the Play						
Out come Puck Direction	Goal	1:st Class Scoring Chance	2:nd Class Scoring Chance	3:rd Class Scoring Chance	No Scoring Chance	Σ
Forwards	3 %	11 %	26 %	7 %	53 %	100 %
Sideways	5 %	9 %	33 %	5 %	48 %	100 %
Backwards	< 1 %	< 1 %	12 %	6 %	80 %	100 %

The figures shows very clearly, that moving the puck backwards after the turn over, reduces the chances to score (or getting a good scoring chance) to less than two percent. However by moving the puck forwards or sideways the chances to score increase almost ten times.

The third fundamental factor      **The  
Puck**

At the moment of the turn over it is substantial, that the balance between offense and defense is kept. Just because your team has the puck, doesn't mean your whole team should attack. On the contrary, teams who finish their defensive duties carefully, are more successful in the transition play. The keys are to finish the checks and pin, pick or screen the opponents. This way the potential backcheckers are delayed, and the puck carrier has more time for the determining first play. By holding back two backcheckers, you give your forwards more space to maneuver. More space is probably the reason why, it's offensively better to play three on three than five on five. What's more in case there's a new turn over, you already have two of their players covered.

The fourth fundamental factor

**The  
Goaltender**

The one man advantage your goalie gives you in your end, is a major help for a good transition. In addition the goalie is the player, who gets the most occasions to make the first play, as he stops around 30 shots every game. Even though it will be difficult to make a great pass on most shots, the passes the goalie does make, are often very surprising for the opponents, and surprise is what we want.

The fifth fundamental factor

**The  
Positions of Players**

As the game is shifting back and forth from defense to offense and vice versa, there's no time for major changes of positions. Therefore it is of great concern, to have each players offensive and defensive positions as identical as possible. This will guarantee an ultimate quick transition, to either start an attack or to stop the opponent.

Besides making it possible, to make the first play in the right direction, it's preferable, if the positions could force the turn over to take place in a high percentage advantage zone. Still being organized, to take advantage of any turn over in any zone.

**Transition  
Team Play Strategies**

Analyzing games this way, it appears as if all the good plays are always made by the great players. They seem to sense; how to make the first play, when to go for a break away option, and where to position themselves. It also appears, that most of their good plays are not very difficult to do. No extreme skill or speed is required. Of course they sometimes do spectacular plays too, but most of their good plays are within the skill level of most players. Somehow they read something in the play, which make them react in a correct way. If we could figure out, what makes them react, we could train all players to react the same way (and all players would play like great players).

This is the approach we use, to make our players adjust to the reality of transition. First of all we make all our players realize the importance of the transition. Teach them the key points, and train them to act, and react, after those principles. Finally we try, to get them organized in a team play concept, which tactically take advantage of the transition situations. This concept is the content of the following text.

The concept is based on the five fundamental factors, and is aiming for a quick transition attack from any spot on the ice. It's principles are:

**1. Stretch the transition interval,**

to give us more time to execute a transition attack,  
and to regroup back into the defensive positions.

**2. Pull the opponent team apart,**

to avoid playing 5 on 5 offensively,  
to create 3 on 3 (or better) attacks,  
and to have one man advantage in the defensive play.

To succeed with both the first and second principle, the keys are:

**Finish All  
Checks**

If we physically neutralize two of our opponents, they can't fore-check, and they'll be too late in the backchecking. Besides they are already covered, if a retransition attack should occur.

The disadvantage is of course, we'll have two players less in our attack, but the purpose is to create a 3 on 3 (or better) attack.

**Get the  
Puck Deep**

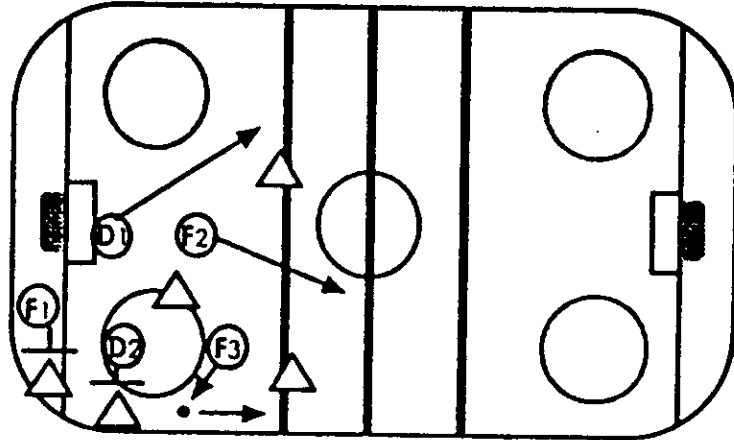
If the puck is always way in front of us, when it's turned over to the other team, they have to attack 5 on 5, and we have time to get our defense organized.

**The basic pattern  
of the transition attack  
in the three different zones**

○ = Team A  
△ = Team B

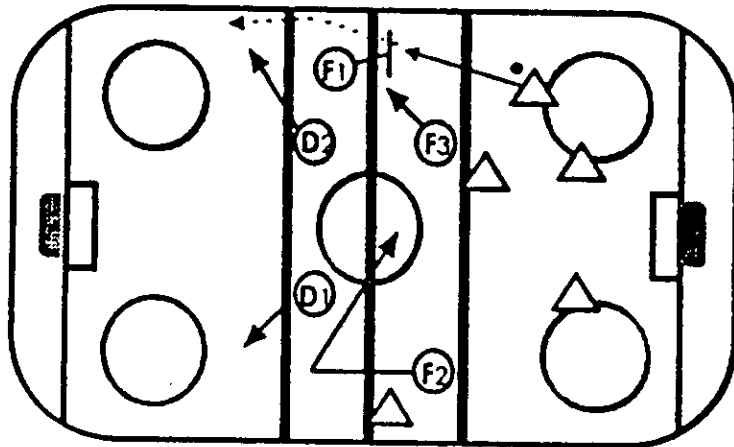
**Defensive  
Zone**

D2 = Check and Pin  
F1 = Check and Pin  
D1 = Wide Option  
F2 = Stretchman  
F3 = Picks up lose Puck



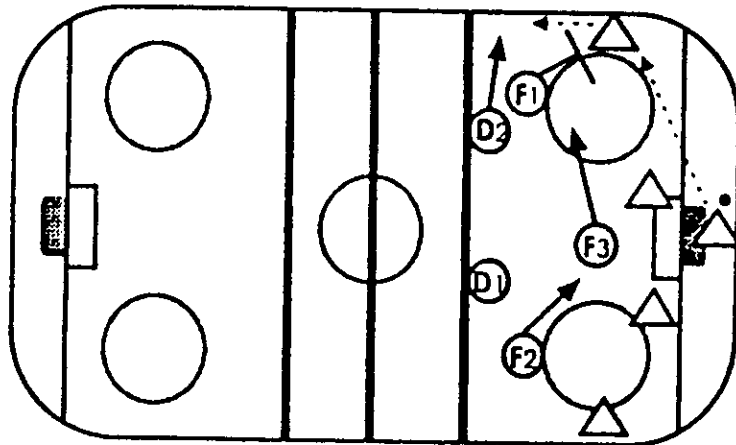
**Neutral  
Zone**

D2 = Picks up lose Puck  
F1 = Check and Pin  
D1 = Wide Option  
F2 = Stretchman  
F3 = Steers



**Offensive  
Zone**

D2 = Picks up lose Puck  
F1 = Check and Pin  
D1 = Wide Option  
F2 = Stretchman  
F3 = Steers



Around these basic patterns a number of variations are created.

**Transition  
in your mind**

Even if your team dominate the game, and control the puck. One thing is guaranteed. Sooner or later the opponent will get the puck. Statistically they'll get it over 200 times every game. 200 times when they might surprise you on the transition. A surprise is something unexpected. So their chances to surprise you don't depend so much on what they do, as it depends on what you expect. Different players react on what's happening in different ways. But generally speaking, there are two natures of characters:

**The Calculator**

- „Now, me might lose the puck,  
but I'm ready.“

**The Consequentor**

- „Dam it! We just lost the puck.  
Now what? GOD BLESS OUR GOALIE!“

We all have both these characters on our teams, and we all need them. We need the Consequentors intensity and working ethic. We need the Calculators smart thinking and coolness. But most of all we need to get those qualities united under one philosophy. To make the Calculator explode and go, when the chance occur, may be a challenge for most coaches. But to make the Consequentor, think ahead and be aware of what most likely is going to happen, is by far a greater challenge. Actually it's pretty easy to figure out, what most likely is going to happen, since **a turn over is always the most likely thing**. But the players capability to read that, and play the game one step ahead in their minds, is still a tough skill to teach. To often it tends to make the players passive (thinking instead of working). It takes a lot of drilling and concentration, until they learned:

to be ready for the next step,  
to prepare the next step,  
but still give it all in the present

**Attack Intensively,  
but think defensively!**

or

**Defend Intensively,  
but think offensively!**

If the transition already has taken place in your mind, you're ready when it takes place on the ice. Of course you can't give it all in the present, if you consistently worry about all the things that might happen. But since the game is played in small battles (like one on ones and two on twos), three or four players aren't fully involved in the present play, and can prepare themselves for the next situation. Also the knowledge of where the risky areas are, makes it possible, to sometimes be more cautious, and sometimes just give it all.

**Transition  
Team Play Strategies**

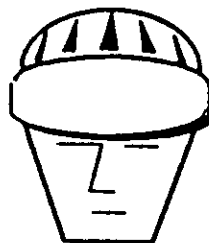
It sounds paradox, but if you possess the puck, the opponent is more likely to score, than you are. Not to mention, if you possess the puck in the offensive zone and even worse if you've already kept it for over ten seconds, than it really gets absurd. In those situations the chances the next goal will be a goal against are over ten to one. It's paradox, it's absurd, but it's true.

One of the reasons for this reversed logic is, that the puck carrier doesn't only wants to control the puck. On the contrary he is more than willing to take risks with it. In other sports like football for instance you don't take such risks.

Short comparison:  
Ice Hockey verses Football

In football...	In ice hockey...
...there's no worse thing the quarter back can do, than to throw an intercepted pass.	...we see those intercepted passes all the time.
...you don't try anything fancy on your last play. You bring your kicker, to make sure the ball ends up way down the field.	...your last play before the transition is often an attempt to a dribble. Statistically are the chances of keeping the puck after a dribble only 8 %.
...even your offensive line up only includes 3 or 4 offensive players. The rest are blocking, screening and picking the opponents.	...there's often on passer and four players all trying to be receivers.

The basic idea of both sports are very similar, so why should hockey players take risks when football players doesn't? I don't know why. But I do know, that if there was a little quarter back an a little kicker in every hockey player, the transitions wouldn't be so dangerous. So if we could teach our players, to think a little in football terms, we would achieve a better balance between the two considerations:



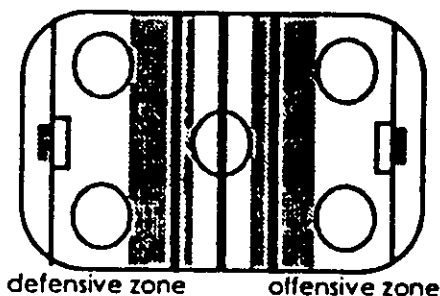
What do I gain,  
and what do I risk?

**Three Hints to prevent transition surprises**

**Hint Number One  
The Gray Zones**

The diagram on page 7 shows the areas where you favor to win the puck. When you already have the puck, there are other areas where you don't want to lose it. **No Risk Zones** or **Gray Zones** as we prefer to call them. The Gray Zones are the areas around the blue lines. In these zones one should never risk a transition. On the other hand if you can get through these zones you might get a scoring chance. That uncertainty, of what's the right thing to do in the gray zones, is the reason for their name. The "play it safe" and "go for it" situations are not as easy to separate as black and white. One has to read the details to make the right play.

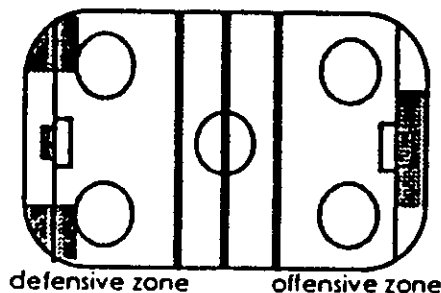
**The  
Gray  
Zones**



**Hint Number Two  
The Green Zones**

There are also areas, in which you can allow yourselves to give the puck away. We call these low risk zones for **Green Zones**. Green (like a traffic light indicating that the road is clear) indicates that it's OK to play the puck into these zones. For instance, it's better to put the puck into the corner, than to lose it in front of your own net. The ultimate Green Zone is the area behind the opponents net. Even if they control the puck there, you still have your whole team in between the puck and your own net. So giving up the puck in the Green Zone is always a safe play.

**The  
Green  
Zones**

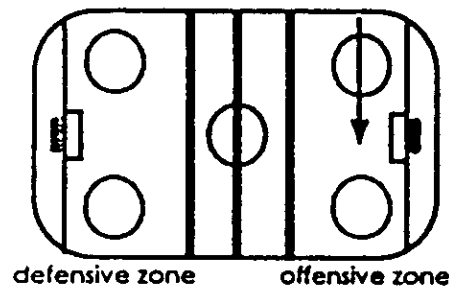




**Hint Number Three  
The Logic of Passing Directions**

The figures on page 9 tells us, that forward or sideways are the two favorable directions of the first play. We also know that the time interval we have to make this play is three seconds. The worst turn overs must logically be, when the opponent intercept a pass going across or towards our net. An inaccurate pass from behind the net in the offensive zone into the slot can turn out to be a great transition play against us. Further more all passes going across the ice have a high potential of being intercepted. For example 29 times out of 30 will a penetrating pass from the offensive zone half board lead to a puck possession for the defending team.

**Penetrating  
Pass**



One risk with these three hints is of course, that the players focus to much on what *not* to do. This tend to make any player passive. Setting up priority lists, is one way to create directed action. Below two examples of such priority lists.

**Priority Lists**

Priority No.	Break Out	Offensive Zone Attack
1	Always give up the puck smart	Always three players high
2	Get the puck over the blue line	Get the puck into the Green Zone
3	Get the puck over the red line	Keep the puck deep
4	Get the puck into the offensive zone	Support the puck carrier
5	Score	Score

**Summary**

Transition is not a major part of the game.  
Transition is the major part of the game.

Transition is "time wise" the major part.  
(Studies shown, that the average time one team can keep the puck is 4,7 seconds  
and the average time it takes to regroup from defense to offense is 3 seconds.  
There is actually not much time where you're not playing transition.)

Transition is "for the out come of the game" the major part  
(Most goals and most penalties are caused during the transition)

Transition is "tactically" the major part.  
(Any part of your tactical game (for example the break outs, the attack on  
the rush, offensive play, the forechecking, the backchecking etc.) has to be  
based on the facts of transition to be effective.)

**Hockey is the name of the game.  
Transition is the game**