



*“In a perfect world, there is no such thing as a good penalty but it’s not a perfect world so some penalties are better than others”*

## **ALL ZONES – AVOIDING PENALTIES AND SUSPENSIONS**

I was at a coaches’ clinic and the group began talking about good and bad penalties. The leader of the clinic let the discussion go on for a while and then said “there is no such thing as a good penalty”. Somebody answered that everyone who has played a lot of hockey knows, for example, that once in a while when our player is beat and their player is about to get a breakaway that it’s not a bad idea to place your stick across his body or hook him to slow him down a bit and get a penalty – better than a breakaway right?

The leader answered: “If our player had been in the right position in the first place, he wouldn’t have had to take a penalty and cause his team to be shorthanded for 2 minutes. Two minutes ... that’s a long time.

Many games are decided by the number of power play opportunities we have for us and against us, and sometimes we lose games when a player who could have contributed a lot is sitting out a suspension. So we need a team strategy, player buy-in, self-discipline and mental toughness.

If we want to win badly, we will stay out of the box and avoid suspensions. Easier said than done when you get mad. You’ll have a better chance of controlling your temper if you think about what to do, or not do in advance.

Let’s get more specific. What are the problem situations and solutions? If you ask the players what they will tell you will go something like the following:

1. Their guy slashed me so I slashed him back  
Solution: show mental toughness and team play, don’t slash him back, let him take the penalty and score on the power play
2. The ref doesn’t call what he should so I’ve got to do something  
Solution: refs are no more perfect in calling a game than we are in playing it, and some are better than others. If you complain to them about their calling a penalty or their failure to call one, they don’t like it, will remember it, and you draw attention to yourself – bite your tongue and show mental toughness and team play
3. I was beat so I hooked him  
Solution: Take responsibility for your actions, go to the box and figure out what you could have done better to stop him without a penalty next time and move on, nothing’s perfect
4. My stick got caught in his skate  
Solution: Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn’t – no excuses



5. I went to bodycheck him but he is so small that my shoulder hit his head  
Solution: Make sure you get low enough next time or ahead of him so your shoulder contacts his arms and hands not his head or don't deliver the bodycheck just squeeze him out skating ahead of him
6. Just as I was about to bodycheck him he turned his back  
Solution: Be very aware of this particularly in the corners because he may have to turn suddenly sometimes to turn away from the boards, to reverse the puck or to get away from you – when in doubt skate in front of him and through his stick and if you can't take position on him in front of him don't deliver the bodycheck, just contain him by getting right up close to him making contact but not enough to knock him off his skates, just enough to make him lose puck control or to make him make a bad pass. Besides the penalty and the suspension for hitting from behind, it's dangerous, a spinal injury could result and we are just playing a game
7. I was frustrated coming into the game, was having a bad game and wanted to take it out on someone  
Solution: Get a hold of yourself for the good of the team, show mental toughness, self-discipline and team play and deliver hard clean checks if you have to get physical or get rid of your frustration by skating harder and winning one-on-one puck battles
8. When I stand in front of their net they elbow me, slash me, put their stick between my legs, I have to do something  
Solution: Always be moving, spinning and turning even if in relatively the same area to get open or to screen their goalie or to be in position for the rebound. Skates wide apart for stability, stick on the ice gripped hard for leverage. If he tries to push you away taking your ice away shoulder to shoulder push back. If he puts his stick between your legs push him away and tell him to stop in no uncertain terms. Don't make yourself an easy target, show mental toughness, let him take the penalty and we can score on the power play. Or make sure he goes off with you if penalties are called by not being goaded into doing something excessive and obvious with his subtle cheap shots. If there is no penalty called accept that life is not easy sometimes or fair
9. They jabbed at our goalie after he had smothered the puck so I decked him  
Solution: Wait for the ref to call the penalty, and if he doesn't go up shoulder to shoulder with their player and say quietly but sternly "didn't you hear the whistle buddy!" – be prepared for a shove, don't shove back, and let him get the penalty
10. Their player bodychecked our player from behind trying to hurt him so I paid him back by crosschecking him  
Solution: Pay back bodychecking against the rules may make you feel good for an instant but can hurt the team and your opponent seriously, so wait for your



opportunity to deliver a good clean bodycheck – no cheap shots, we don't want a bad reputation for our team or for our organization

11. I pinched at their blue line but their player chipped the puck off the boards going around me so I stuck my stick out and tripped him

Solution: Don't pinch when there is no forward support you can see happening before you pinch

12. I went to bodycheck him and he took one step to the side and my knee went between his legs by mistake

Solution: Try to improve your timing and accept that mistakes will happen sometimes

13. He speared me or butt ended me

Solution: If a penalty is not called tell the ref and your coach – these are serious, but still no retaliation, the pay back is when we score on the power play

Think about your equipment too. Make sure it is the right size and quality to withstand heavy stick work, including your helmet. Generally it's better to wear good size shoulder pads and elbow pads etc for protection and to make yourself look bigger. Some players will leave you alone more.

Also, the stronger you are in your upper body the better, particularly your arms. So work out and get strong. When you and another player get close together and make contact, they will instantly feel your strength and some players will leave you alone for that reason.

In reality, there are times on the ice when one of their players needs encouragement to stop playing dirty as it is clear that he is intentionally trying to hurt our players. Hopefully these times are rare, but in these circumstances our physically stronger players should stick up for their teammates and administer hard body checks and stern talk to an offender within the rules. However, remember, retaliation can escalate quickly into an ugly scene and has in hockey on occasion, so be careful and reasonable in what you do.

Sometimes the refereeing is so bad that penalty calls are being made against us on clean bodychecks or other plays and our players start playing non contact hockey out of fear of being called hurting our quality of play. Here the coach has to step in and say to the team either just continue to play normally taking the bad calls or ask the team to lay off the bodychecking because the penalties are killing us.

And remember when the team we are playing is losing badly they may start headhunting as they say and they usually pick on the best players or the smallest players on our team. Again, good clean hard hitting back and power play goals are the answers not stooping to their level of play. We're too good for that.



Let's think about some high and low risk bodychecking situations for getting penalties:

#### Low Risk

- Their player with the puck is coming at you and you are coming at him elbows down with your target the middle of his chest with your shoulder
- You are ahead of their player with the puck skating almost side-by-side and your target with your shoulder is his arms and hands with your stick going under his stick and through, making contact with the puck with your stick
- He is against the boards with the puck facing you and you will be skating right into him
- He is in front of his or our net with the puck and facing you and you will be skating right into him

#### High Risk

- He is against the boards with the puck with his back turned to you
- He is against the boards turned sideways with the puck and you are coming in at high speed taking aim at his shoulder, and he may turn his back at the last second
- He has the puck in a corner trying to skate away from you slightly ahead of you, and you have the angle but he may turn his back on you at the last second to freeze or to reverse the puck
- He has the puck in open ice and you are slightly behind him, so you want to put your arms, hands and stick in front of him

Stay away from the high risk bodycheck situations. Skate in front of him, stay wide on your skates for stability, turn your back into the front of him, tilt your upper body forward slightly, stick your rear end out into him when you are in front of him and take the puck.

**AND REMEMBER WHEN YOU GO IN FIRST TO GET THE PUCK CLOSE TO THE BOARDS BE AWARE OF WHO IS AROUND YOU AND HOW FAST HE IS COMING.**

**GO IN ON AN ANGLE HEAD AND ARMS UP IN CASE THE HEAVY HIT FROM BEHIND COMES UNEXPECTEDLY – YOUR ARMS AND HANDS SHOULD SHIELD YOUR IMPACT INTO THE BOARDS.**

**IF SOMEONE COMES AT YOU WITH HIS ELBOWS OR STICK HIGH AND IS GOING TO MAKE CONTACT WITH YOUR HEAD, RAISE YOUR FOREARMS IN FRONT OF YOUR FACE TO PROTECT YOURSELF.**