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Zone entries: Individual contributions to team success

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This is part two of today's look at [zone entry](#) data from this season; you can find part one [here](#).

In the first part, we focused on team-level metrics. We are now making use of Vic Ferrari's script for parsing scoring chances to get information about who is on the ice for each zone entry. This allows us to use those same team-based metrics to look at how individuals help drive team results.

In the past, our zone entry data has been limited to a focus on puck possession: which individuals moved the puck into the offensive zone and what outcomes followed their individual play. By bringing in the data about who else is on the ice, we can look at people who help bring the puck forward with off-puck decisions and before-the-blue-line passes. We can look at who helps generate shots after the puck enters the zone.

And most importantly we can look at defensive contributions for the first time: which players help prevent their opponents from carrying the puck in and limit their opponents' shots per entry?

The metrics

As described in part one, there are a few metrics that we'll focus on most when assessing how the team did:

- **Neutral zone winning percentage:** what fraction of the occasions that the puck is in the neutral zone does it get pushed forwards into the offensive zone? (Team total: 51.2%)
- **Decisive neutral zone wins:** what fraction of the neutral zone wins result in entering the offensive zone with control of the puck? (Team total: 56.5%)
- **Decisive neutral zone losses:** what fraction of the neutral zone losses result in the opponents entering the team's defensive zone with control

of the puck? (Team total: 51.2%)

- **Shot generation:** how often does the team generate shots when they enter the offensive zone with possession of the puck? (Team total: 0.51 shots/entry)
- **Shot prevention:** how often does the opponent generate shots when they enter the team's defensive zone with possession of the puck? (Team total: 0.51 shots/entry)

See the earlier article for more detail about why these metrics are considered important. Let's see what we can say about how certain players have started the season based on how the team did in those metrics when the players were on the ice.

Sample size

In the previous article, we mentioned that the sample size for team-level data is just starting to reach the point where we can make tentative predictions about the future. However, at the individual level, the sample sizes are smaller since players don't play the whole game; no Flyer had even 120 minutes of 5-on-5 ice time through seven games (the Toronto game has not been worked up yet).

As a result, descriptions here should be taken in much the same vein as most statistics at this point in the season: Giroux having five goals in seven games suggests he's played well so far, but it doesn't mean he's going to make a run at a 60-goal season. In other words, the individual statistics can describe who has been successful to start the season, but we don't have enough information yet to infer their talent levels or make predictions about their long-term results.

With that important caveat, let's delve into how the team has done with certain players on the ice.

Defensive forwards

A good defensive grouping would be expected to have a good neutral zone winning percentage and rarely lose the neutral zone decisively. They would be expected to limit shots against per entry into their defensive zone. However, limited effectiveness entering the attack zone would keep them from getting the two-way forward label.

Andreas Nodl, Sean Couturier, and Maxime Talbot fit this bill perfectly.

They have been strong defensively through the neutral zone, rarely allowing their opponents to carry the puck in -- they rank second, third, and sixth in opponents' dump-and-chase percentage. They are even stronger in the defensive zone, rankings first, second, and fourth at preventing shots from those controlled entries.

They have been an overall clear net positive, ranking first, second, and third on the team in neutral zone winning percentage, consistently pushing the play forwards.

And yet they have clearly been weak offensively, both in the neutral zone and the offensive zone. They rank ninth, tenth, and eleventh in winning

the neutral zone decisively, and while Couturier has been effective at generating shots from those entries, Talbot and Nodl rank tenth and eleventh in shots per controlled entry.

While the sample size is small, it is clear that thus far this group has been strong enough defensively to provide a net boost to the team despite failing to generate offense.

	Talbot	Couturier	Nodl	Team
Neutral zone win %	54.9%, 3rd	55.0%, 2nd	56.7%, 1st	51.2%
Decisive NZ loss %	44.6%, 3rd	44.4%, 2nd	48.9%, 6th	51.2%
Shot prevention	0.34, 1st	0.47, 4th	0.41, 2nd	0.51
Decisive NZ win %	49.4%, 9th	47.5%, 11th	47.5%, 10th	56.1%
Shot generation	0.41, 10th	0.62, 1st	0.39, 11th	0.51

Too fancy?

Jakub Voracek, Wayne Simmonds, and Daniel Briere are the top three on the team in being on the ice for controlled entries -- when their line brings the puck into the offensive zone, they carry it across nearly two-thirds of the time. However, these decisive neutral zone wins haven't necessarily been a positive thing.

The three of them are all among the bottom four in neutral zone winning percentage, suggesting that their efforts to carry the puck in have frequently been turned back. Moreover, when they do carry the puck in, they haven't been particularly successful at it -- despite the skill of these three players, they are only slightly above the team average in shots per controlled entry.

Overall, this paints a picture of a line that is pressing too hard. It would seem that they are trying to force decisive entries even when the play isn't there, resulting in modest numbers in the offensive zone and a lot of neutral zone losses. This could easily just be simple variance that hasn't evened out yet -- it *should* be a good thing that they have the skill to win the neutral zone decisively -- but if this trend persists, a change will need to be made.

The top defensemen

Among defensemen, it should not be surprising that Chris Pronger and Kimmo Timonen stand out as being most successful, but it is interesting to see the differences in how they achieve that result.

Pronger leads the team in neutral zone winning percentage (the team gets 54% of the zone entries when he is on the ice), and a lot of those wins are decisive. However, he has been less effective at defending his own blue line, allowing the opponents to carry the puck in on a team-worst 58.4% of

their entries.

Conversely, Timonen is only a little above average in winning percentage (51.9%) and controlled entries for, but he has been outstanding at breaking up the opponents' rush, allowing them to carry the puck in on a team-best 43.8% of their entries. Moreover, once they get into the defensive zone, Timonen holds the opponents to a team-best 0.35 shots per controlled entry.

In other words, Pronger is playing an offensive defenseman role, winning the neutral zone but allowing some chances against. Timonen is excelling in the defensive defenseman role, forcing a lot of dump-and-chase and preventing shots when the opponent does get set up.

Conclusion

The addition of information about who was on the ice for each zone entry really increases the value of this data by allowing us to assess individual contributions other than puck-handling. The sample sizes are not yet large enough for the conclusions above to be taken as anything other than a description of what has happened so far, but as the season progresses, this kind of analysis will provide valuable insight into players' roles and contributions.



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