

THE NEW ROLE OF THE CENTER HALF IN HIGH PERFORMANCE HOCKEY

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Contents

- Introduction
- Evolution and new role of the Center Half
- What is happening? ... Why?
- Complementary Information
- Game Analysis
 - Statistics
 - Conclusions
- Top Coaches opinion
- Final Conclusions

Introduction

Obviously the hockey is changing and consequently a lot of new things are appearing during, before and after the game.

The coaches have more information about the games and we can analyze and to control more and more our own team, the other ones and their tactics.

Easier, we can discover the weakness and strengthness of everybody.

At the same time, the rules, the hockey material (composite sticks,..), or the physical condition, for example, are also changing. Consequently, during the game the tactics used by the coaches are in continuous evolution and, on the same way, the role of some players.

I think that one of the most important change is the role of the Center Half in the last ten years, and consequently his characteristics and skills.

Evolution and new role of the Center Half

Some years ago, the Center half of the top hockey teams used to be the most important player, mainly when the team had to build up from his circle to the other circle. All of us can remember, for example, Birmingham (AUS), Delissen (NED) or Dinares (SPN), as they played the ball, in the 70 % or 80% of occasions when the team was “in possession”.

Currently, the Center half is also an important player but he is not the playmaker and this importance remains shared with other players.

Now his role is very different. He is more important as a tactical piece than the architect that the team needs to build-up. He has more defensive tasks and probably he is the “leader” of the defensive system and the pressure system when the other team is in ball possession. His role in this situation is very important and maybe his main task.

When his team is in ball possession, the Center half is very important for the midfielders movements, and with them, to keep the ball controlled and protected.

On this way, at the top level we can see today Center halves as Livermore (AUS), Delmee (NED), Weissenborn (GER) or Fabregas (SPN), who are important team pieces but his main role is very different than the driver of the most balls in possession. Probably their coaches expect other tasks from them.

What is happening? ... Why? ...

Obviously all tactic change, in defensive or attack systems, have consequences for the Center half, because he is in the middle of the team.

In modern hockey all the top teams try to reduce spaces, mainly at the center zone, and that is increasing a lot the pressure and the marks to the midfielders, and specially to the Center half.

Once he receives the ball he has a lot of pressure, not only from his “couple” (the other Center half),he receives the pressure from two or three players more, just as the Center forward, inside right or left, one full back ...

At the same time the coaches want more security, no risks and no loose the ball because the turnover is normally very dangerous.

Currently, the intensity and the rhythm are very high and it is too much for only one player. The team needs more players on the field and on the banch for to maintein this intensity. The TEAM as “global” concept is every day more important,more than the individual concept.

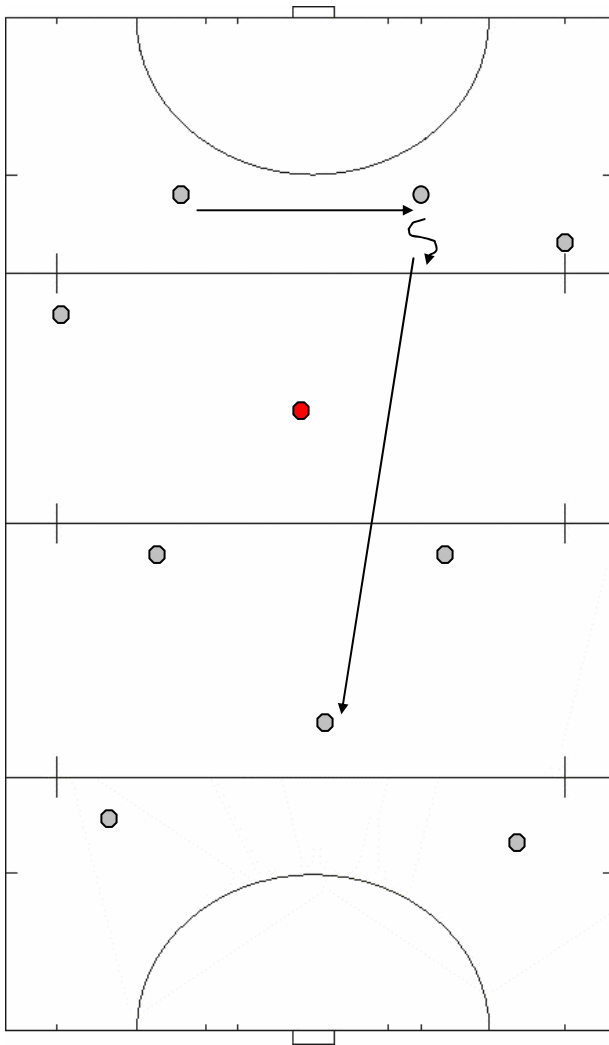
For all this, when the teams are building-up for the 22 line, they usually prefer do not play the ball with the midfielders area, specially with the Center Half driving the ball and they use other alternatives.

These other alternatives usually are:

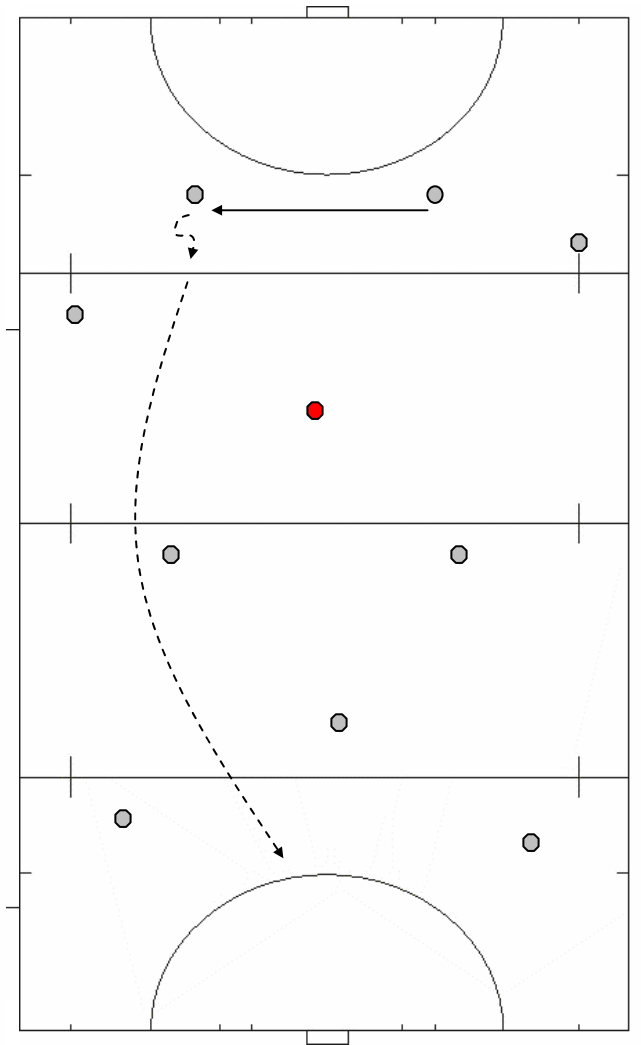
- Direct transfer from defence to attack, hitting the ball.
- Direct transfer with aerial balls (flick).
- Transfer for outside lines.
- The Center half as a PIVOT.
- Others.

In the next page we can see the graphics of the three first alternatives that the teams are usually using at the moment.

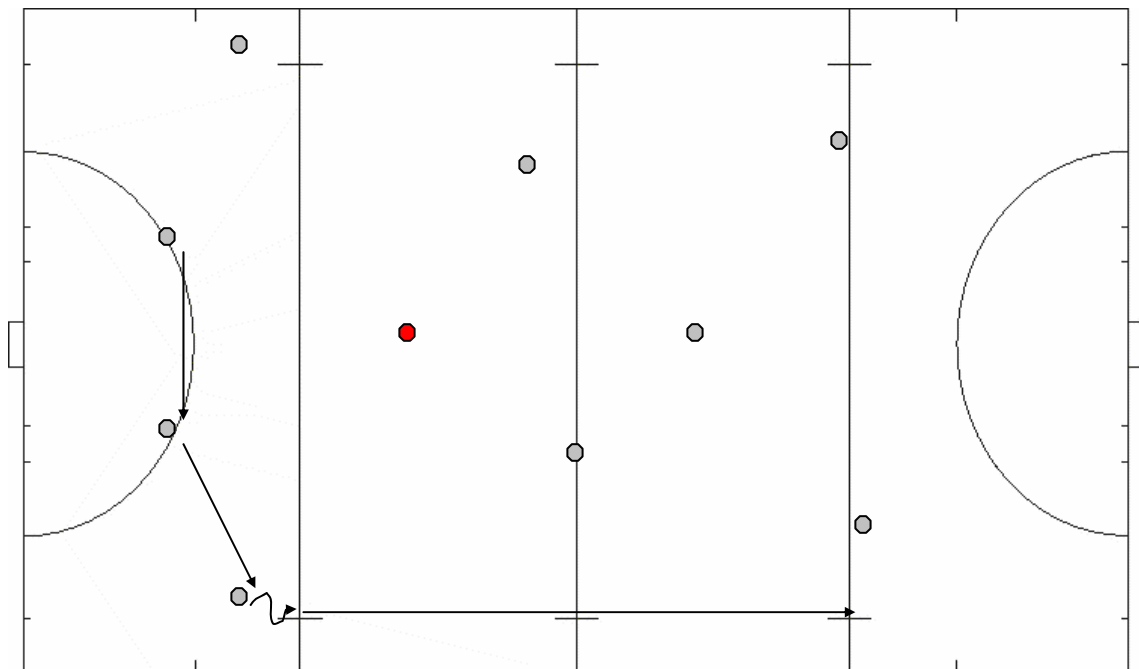
Direct Transfer, hitting the ball



Direct Transfer aerial ball



Transfer for outside line



Consequently, when the teams are using these alternatives there are two players with more tasks; the two fullbacks are more and more important when the team has to build up, because they have a lot of ball possession and a lot of times they are who decide the pass from the back line to the attack.

On this situation the role of the Center half is not yet to receive the ball from the defence and drive it until to make the definitive pass to the forwards, his role "in ball possession" is really very different:

- He has to improve a lot of movements with other players, midfielders and forwards. He starts it.

- He has to create spaces for the direct transfers, from the defence to the forwards.

- He has to actuate as a PIVOT for:

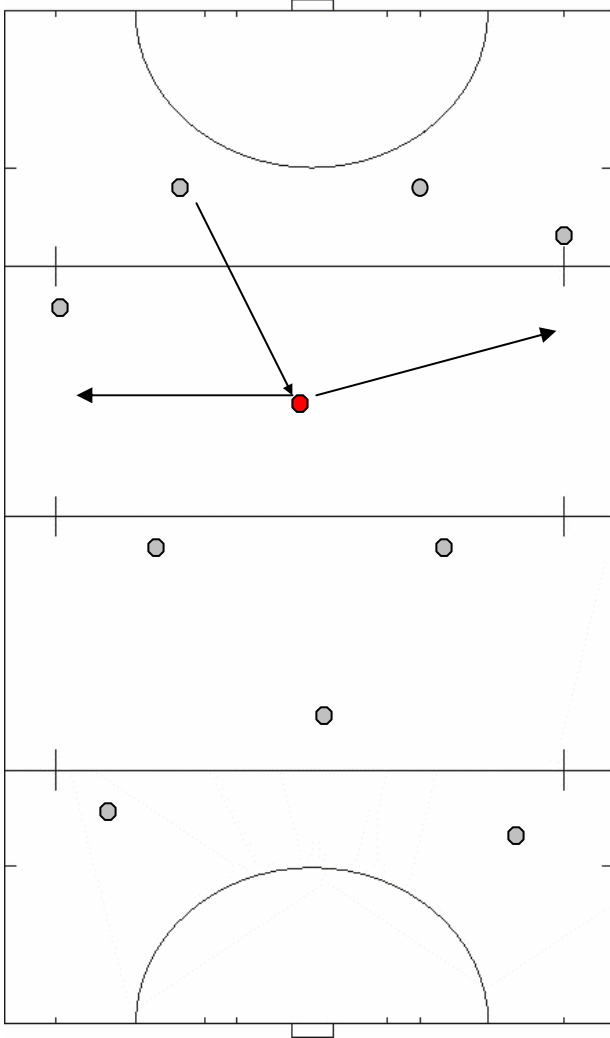
- Open the ball to the sidelines.
- Play the ball with the fullbacks.
- To make deflections for the other midfielders or the forwards and play just with one touch.

This task as a Pivot, is a security action because the team is moving the ball and interchanging player positions, and all without risk by lose the ball.

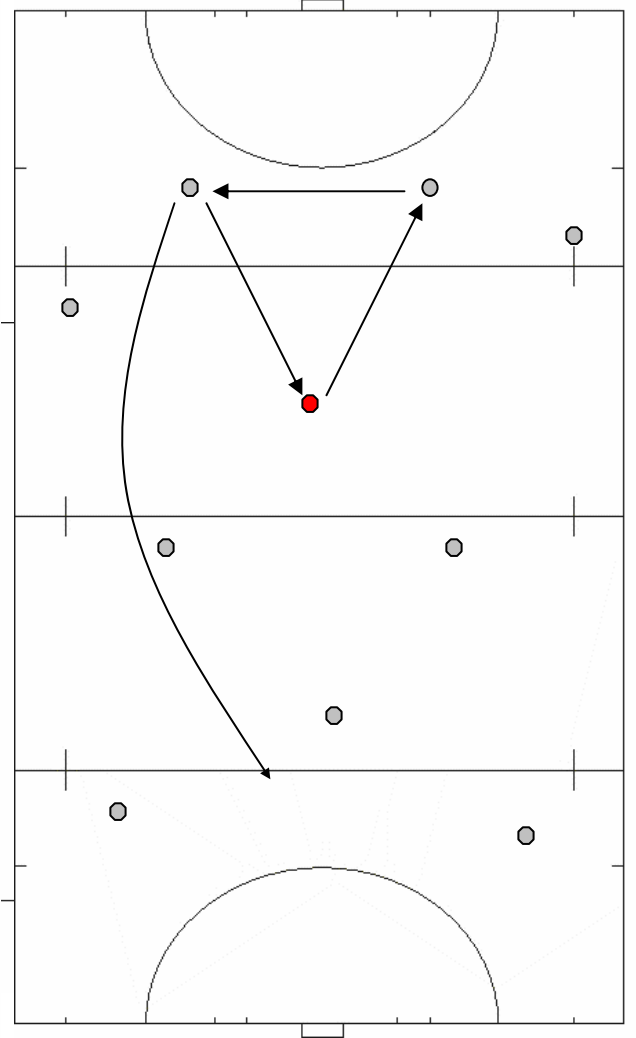
- He has to protect the ball and keep the control.

On the next page we can see the graphics with these three actions of the Center half playing as a Pivot.

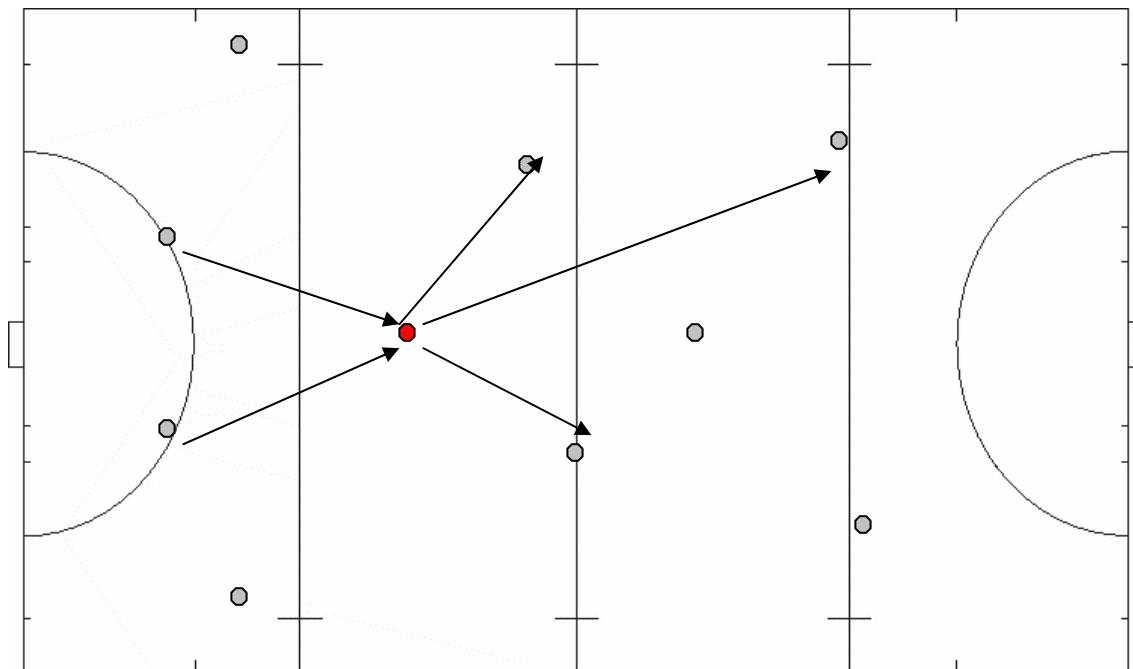
Open the ball to the sidelines



Play the ball with the fullbacks



To make deflections with midfielders or forwards



Complementary information

To support this topic, I have had the analysis of many top levels games during the international tournaments during the last 3 years, just as the Preolympic Tournament and Olympic games in 2004, European Cup in 2005 and Champions Trophy in 2006. It will be also very interesting to know the opinion about it from the five top coaches at this moment, just as Bernhard Peters (GER), Roelant Ottmans (NED), Colin Batch (AUS), Sergio Vigil (ARG) and Maurits Hendriks (SPN).

Game Analysis

The analysed games are the following ones:

- Preolympic Tournament (Madrid 2004)

India – Belgium
Spain – Southafrica
Netherlands – Great Britain
Japan – Spain (2nd half)
Poland – Japan (2nd half)

- Olympic Games (Athens 2004)

Spain – Australia (semifinal)
Germany – Netherlands (semifinal)
Netherlands – Australia (final)

- European Cup (Leipzig 2005)

Spain – Netherlands (final)

- Champions Trophy (Terrassa 2006)

Pakistan – Germany
Argentina – Spain
Australia – Netherlands
Germany – Argentina

In these games, I have analysed what the teams do when they have to build-up from the 22 line and the role of the center half:

1. Center half drives the ball and build himself.
2. Center half as a pivot.
3. Direct transfer from the back to attack (hit, flick ...).
4. For outside lines.
5. Others....

Statistics

The results of the analysis have been the following ones:

ACTION	QTY	%
Total build-up from 22 line	588	100
1.CH Driving the ball	37	6,3
2.CH as a pivot	104	17,7
3.Direct transfer from defence to attack (hit, flick ...)	221	37,5
4.Outside line	154	26,2
5.Others	72	12,3

Conclusions

With the results of the analysis, we can see that the most part of times, the teams are building-up with direct transfers (37,5%), for outside lines opening the field (26,2%), “pivoting” with the Center half (17,7%) and just only on 6.3% of the occasions, they play with the Center half as a driver.

These results confirm that the Top teams are building up mainly with this three alternatives and consequently that the new role and the new characteristics of the Center half in modern hockey are changing.

The Coaches opinion

The game analysis is very important but the opinion of the five top hockey coaches in the world can also be very interesting . Thus, I have done a short interview to them about this issue.

The five questions to address to them are:

1. Is this new role of the center half the expected evolution of high performance hockey?
2. Why the role of the center half is changing?
3. What do you expect from your center half?
4. Tell me two strengths of your center half
5. Finally, do you think that the “creative center half” could be come back?

Bernhard Peters (GER)

1. Is this role of the center half the expected evolution of high performance hockey?

Yes, now the role of the players are more shared. The team concept is more important, because the intensity and the speed are very high.

2. Why the role of the center half is changing?

Because now not only one player has the role to be the architect of the team. The pressure systems are too much for only one player.

3. What do you expect from your center half?

In possession: protect the ball and good vision for transfers

Not possession: with the fullbacks, they are the leaders to make pressure and defence.

4. Tell me two strengths of your center half

Creativity.

He must be the leader in important moments, good communication.

5. Finally, do you think that the “creative center half” could be come back?

No, because we need more leaderships and not only one, and the physical and speed conditions are very hard.

Roelant Oltmans (NED)

1. Is this role of the center half the expected evolution of high performance hockey?

Yes, because the hockey is changing, the rules, the tactics etc.. Now it is more physical and fast.

2. Why the role of the center half is changing?

Because defensive systems are more closed and it is very dangerous to loose the ball for the turnovers.

3. What do you expect from your center half?

In possession: keep the control, the speed and “tempo”.

Not possession: he should be the leader of the pressure; he has to decide.

4. Tell me two strengths of your center half

Very good vision and decision.

Passing and receiving skills.

Excelent physical conditions.

5. Finally, do you think that the “creative center half” could be come back?

No exactly, but I would like a combination between “creative”/”physical” center half.

Colin Batch (AUS)

1. Is this role of the center half the expected evolution of high performance hockey?

Yes, I am not surprise; it’s normal, it is the logical evolution.

2. Why the role of the center half is changing?

Because all the teams make a lot of pressure to him.

3. What do you expect from your center half?

In possession: skill to receive the ball and good vision.

Not possession: leader of the pressure.

4. Tell me two strengths of your center half

Ability to find space and receive under pressure..

To organize midfielders defence.

He has to run a lot ∴ Good physical conditions.

5. Finally, do you think that the “creative center half” could be come back?
No, now more players can drive the ball, not only him. For example, the fullbacks have more and more possession.

Sergio Vigil (ARG)

1. Is this role of the center half the expected evolution of high performance hockey?

Yes, before center half was the “boss” of the mid field and he controlled and managed the rythms from his position, but now the game is more intensive and one player cannot be static.

2. Why the role of the center half is changing?

Because the defensive systems have changed. The center half is under pressure by two or three players. Normally, one team starts his pressure when the midfielder receives the ball.

His role has been split with others midfielders and the fullbacks have to start building-up most times.

His role has been reduced in building-up but and increased in defensive tasks.

3. What do you expect from your center half?

In possession: He has to decide the movements of the player,he starts.The important is not only the center half,all the midfield is important

Not possession: He leads the pressure. Intensity.

4. Tell me two strengths of your center half

Tactically intelligent and dynamic

5. Finally, do you think that the “creative center half” could be come back?

It is difficult; the center half has to manage other tasks, he has increased. He needs more technical, physical, conceptual and mental intensity.

Maurits Hendriks (SPN)

1. Is this role of the center half the expected evolution of high performance hockey?

Yes, because the time and space exploitation are in continuous evolution.

2. Why the role of the center half is changing?

Because we have more and more information to analyse and all tactic change affects the midfield.

3. What do you expect from your center half?

In possession: he should participate in all vertical passes and mainly in the decisive ones.

Not possession: the “boss” on defensive system.

4. Tell me two strengths of your center half

To keep the vision in reduced spaces.

To able to control the ball under pressure and make a pass.

Good physical conditions to play a lot of minutes.

5. Finally, do you think that the “creative center half” could be come back?

No, because hockey is in continuous progression.

In this interviews we can observe that the answers of the five coaches are very similar, they say more or less the same with different words.

They have similar point of view about the new role of the center half in modern hockey, about his logical evolution and the reasons, which is this role and the expected characteristics and skills in high performance hockey.

Final conclusions

Certainly with the observation of the top level hockey games, the statistics and the opinion of the coaches, we can conclude that the role of the current center half is very different than the one he used to be. He is a very important player for the team but different than some years ago.

Now his tasks in ball possession are going down and his tasks in not possession are going up, with a role more practical and less creative because he has to be more secure and defensive.

This is a reality. As a coach I agree that currently, if you want to win, this tactic concept maybe the best way, but it is a pity to lose the creative hockey. We perhaps would have to try to potentiate again the players creativity, specially of the center half. At the last Champions Trophy (Terrassa 2006), the public opinion was that "all the games are very similar", because all the teams play similar from the spectators eyes.

Obviously, not for the coaches, but which is the way ?