

Reality Check, Part 2: A Case for the Defence

Written by Glen Hoos

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Ed. Note: This is the second instalment in a series in which we'll look at different aspects of the NHL game and how to value them appropriately in your fantasy league scoring, with the objective of creating scoring systems that reflect real life value as closely as possible. [Click here for Part 1: The Power Game.](#)

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“Offence wins games; defence wins championships.”

It’s an oft-repeated sports maxim, and often true. But is it true in the fantasy realm? More to the point – should it be?

Historically, fantasy hockey has been the sole domain of the offensive-minded. As a Flames fan in the mid-90’s, Phil Housley’s frequent defensive blunders drove me absolutely up the wall; but as a fantasy manager, did I care? Not a bit! Keep putting up a point-a-game, Phil, and you can give the puck away in your own zone as often as you like!

As fantasy leagues have become more complex, things have changed. Wanting to reflect real hockey as closely as possible, many leagues have looked to incorporate a defensive element into their scoring system. But how is this best accomplished, and how much defence is too much?

Let’s be honest: as much as we may value realism, most of us have no desire to see someone

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take home the championship employing the fantasy equivalent of the neutral zone trap. And yet, a couple well-chosen stat categories can round out a league and bring fantasy value to players who would otherwise be irrelevant. The question is, which categories?

As we weigh the options, it quickly becomes apparent that there is no one stat that defines the defensive game. Defence comes in many forms. The best defenceman of our generation, Nicklas Lidstrom, relies on impeccable positioning to take away the opponent's time and space – something that doesn't show up on a stats sheet. In Minnesota, Greg Zanon sacrifices his body time and again as the NHL's shot blocking king. Brent Seabrook locks things down by taking opponents out, as his 227 hits last season attest.

And that's just the rearguards. Up front, you've got forwards who eliminate gaps with their speed; players who forget all about the puck and make their living shadowing others; guys who use their smarts to anticipate the play and create turnovers; and those who believe the best defence is a good offence.

All of this muddies the water when it comes to valuing defence in your fantasy league. Let's take a look at the options and see where we land.

Plus/Minus: For many years, plus/minus has been the go-to “defensive” stat for most leagues; mostly because it was the only option. However, that doesn't make it a good option. The shortcomings of plus/minus are obvious. Most significantly, it reflects the quality of a team much more than the quality of any individual player. Alexander Semin had the NHL's 23rd best plus/minus last year (+22), but nobody's ever going to mistake him for a top defensive forward. Meanwhile, a responsible player like Daniel Alfredsson clocked in at an ugly -19, largely by virtue of enjoying lots of ice time on a very bad team with suspect goaltending.

Beyond the team factor, plus/minus is a passive stat. A player doesn't necessarily have to do anything to earn a plus or minus. If a teammate makes a mistake that ends up in the back of the net, five guys get a minus – four of whom don't deserve it. These factors make plus/minus a poor representative of defensive proficiency.

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Blocked Shots: Shot blocks, along with hits, are the new kid on the block in many fantasy leagues. Most major fantasy platforms now offer blocked shots as an option, and many leagues have embraced them. It's an attractive option, to be sure. As a category, it's an individual stat that doesn't depend on the strength of the team a player suits up for. It's objective and easily measureable. Like hitting, shot blocking is a valuable real life skill that is easily transferred to the fantasy environment.

There's no real downside to including blocked shots in your scoring system. However, don't be fooled into thinking that all good defensive players are shot blockers. Norris-winner Lidstrom recorded 92 blocks last season – a respectable total, but nowhere near Dan Girardi's league leading total of 236. And perennial Selke-candidate Pavel Datsyuk had all of 20 blocks last season; clearly, he gets it done in other ways. So shot-blocking is not going to elevate the value of all defensive stalwarts, but it does capture a certain segment.

Takeaways and Giveaways: When the NHL started tracking these numbers, I had high hopes that they might prove useful for fantasy leagues. However, though some platforms now offer these categories, I remain unconvinced of their usefulness in measuring the top defensive players.

A quick scan of last year's league leaders in takeaways finds players like Joe Thornton (1st), Bryan Little (4th), John Tavares (5th), Josh Bailey (7th) and Michael Grabner (12th) at the top of the league. Last I checked, none of those guys have ever generated any Selke buzz. And with Frans Nielsen coming in at 14th, it's more than a little curious to find four Islanders in the top 15 of any defensive stat.

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Giveaways tell a similar tale. Seabrook, despite his reputation as an elite shutdown blueliner, had the 18th most giveaways in the league last year (69), while Zdeno Chara was 29th worst. Also, it's telling that Thornton didn't just lead the league in takeaways; he was also the second worst offender in the league when it came to giveaways. So is he a good defensive player or not? It would seem these stats are more directly related to time on ice than defensive proficiency.

Shorthanded Points: It's debatable whether or not shorties should even be considered a defensive category – after all, they're actually about putting the puck in the net, not keeping it out. However, many of the league's best penalty-killing forwards, like Ryan Kesler and Mike Richards, are consistent shorthanded threats. It's really the only individual stat we have at our disposal that relates in any way to penalty killing, which is a key defensive skill.

I find it useful to include shorthanded points, with one caveat: when I first set up my keeper league, I made the mistake of including shorthanded goals and shorthanded assists as two separate categories. This turned them into even more of a crapshoot than they already are; usually one goal or one assist was enough to win the category for the week. Since we changed our categories and lumped them together as shorthanded points, it's made it more interesting. Nevertheless, shorties are rare and unpredictable, adding an element of luck to the scoring that some poolies may prefer to live without.

At the end of the day, defence is a complex beast, and I'm not sure it's possible to fully capture the defensive aspects of the game in a fantasy scoring system. I wouldn't want any more than two defensive categories in my league, because ultimately, fantasy hockey is a celebration of goals and assists. With this in mind, I'd go with blocked shots and shorthanded points.

What do you think? What's the best way to make defence a part of your fantasy league? Do you even want a defensive element in your pool? And who is your all-time favourite stay-at-home D-man or two-way forward?