

## Power Plays

Talk with any business person for more than a few minutes about corporate strategy and the sports metaphors begin to pour out. “The bases are loaded,” “you get three strikes and you’re out,” and “we were thrown a curve ball” are favorites from baseball. Football brings us “we’ll need someone to quarterback this job,” “it’s time to punt,” and “we’re fourth and goal” to name a few. Even basketball contributes a few terms such as “full court press” (which is actually a defensive rather than an offensive strategy) and “it’s a lay-up.” Business articles and analyst commentaries are equally thickly littered with analogies to these three sports.

That analogies for corporate strategy are drawn predominately from the world of basketball, baseball, or football, is easy to understand. After all, these sports are an integral part of American culture. And they are the “big three.”

But the country’s number four sport—ice hockey—is growing fast. And, in my opinion, the top three all fall flat in providing parallels to business. In today’s fast-moving climate, hockey is a much closer to business reality.

## Business as Hockey

Here’s why hockey offers the best analogies for today’s business.

Speed. In the early part of the last century, baseball became the “America’s pastime,” and business was a lot like baseball. It took place at a leisurely pace. There was no premium on speed or innovation. It was a game of averages. A few superstars “pitched” new ideas, but strategic thinking amounted to little more than betting your “players would connect with the ball at least one time out of four.” You won by “throwing out” your competition, and by winning more times than the next guy over a long, leisurely season.

After World War II, the American public seemed hungrier for the rough and tumble of football, and it took over as the most popular sport. Likewise, business picked up the pace a bit. It became tougher. It required set plays, one-player decisions (quarterbacking), more complex strategy, and more people who were specialists in a variety of positions. Still, companies had time to regroup, opportunities to rest, and as much time to plan as to act.

The last two decades have seen a rapid increase in speed and intensity, with technologies of all kinds suddenly requiring every company to move quickly—if not at the speed of light, at least at the speed of hockey.

As I wrote in the introduction to my latest book (co-authored with the team’s owner, Craig Leipold), *Hockey Tonk: The Amazing Story of the Nashville Predators* (believe it or not, it is a business book!):

“Of all major team sports, hockey is the fastest. It is played by men traveling at speeds up to 30 miles an hour, using long curved sticks to finesse a small, hard rubber puck on a small, hard, icy surface confined by wood and glass. A hockey player requires great individual balance, agility, skill, and strength, all the while closely coordinating his actions with five other teammates. Together they execute their artistry in a strategic, free-flowing architecture of complex offensive and defensive maneuvers, carrying or deftly passing a puck that travels at speeds over 100 miles per hour. It would be a virtual ballet on ice, were it not for an opposing group of fiercely determined players trying to do exactly the same thing, only in the opposite direction. Both sides are on an emotional high, intent on creating havoc by checking the play with sticks, skates, and crunching bodies.

Such conditions test the body and sharpen the mind.”

Rapid reactions, quick-thinking teamwork, and on-the-fly strategy are the hallmarks of business success today. Hockey, like business, is a game of speed.

**Globalization.** Baseball has in recent years become more international, adding players from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Japan, and basketball has been adding players from Europe and Africa. Even so, the percentage of players from around the world remains low. Hockey, like business, is truly global. Roughly one in four National Hockey League players comes from outside North America, with players from nearly every continent.

**Continuous Intensity.** Baseball and football are games often won by “the big play”: A game-winning homer or double play in baseball; the long pass for a touchdown or blocked kick in football. In basketball, the scores are huge, but often you really only need to catch the last two minutes to see who wins!

If business were like these sports, one great decision could result in a company leading its industry. One lucky break could turn the tide against the competition. In reality, great plays (strategies) are needed, but strategy alone seldom wins. A great strategy, poorly executed is not a recipe for success. A less perfect strategy, executed with skill and determination, wins more often.

In hockey, speed and stamina throughout three periods is the key to victory. Players are constantly jostling and hitting, scrambling for the puck. With typically low scores, defense often wins the match;

ties are common, and one fortunate break seldom results in a win.

In most seasons, whoever wins the battle of the stats, especially “shots on goal” (or more precisely, “scoring chances,” a measure of both effort and skill) will come out near the top. The case is similar in business, where, in the short term, ties and rapid changes in momentum are common, but the company that consistently puts up the best stats (revenue, growth, and earnings) will take home the trophy for market leader.

**Two-Way Players.** In football you have two distinct teams: one playing offense and one playing defense. Most baseball players do both, but they play it in a formal, defined sequence (innings).

In hockey and basketball, it’s often hard to distinguish offense from defense (a great defensive play often results in a new offensive opportunity). The same is true in today’s business. All players, whether the CEO or the customer service rep on the phone, must constantly be on the offense (advancing the company forward with innovations) and on defense (keeping competitor’s innovations from stealing market share).

In this case, basketball shares some similarities with hockey, but it follows a pattern that has players playing a few minutes in each direction. In hockey, the play shifts constantly between the two. Hockey features a “neutral zone” where (to many casual fans) a lot of seemingly unimportant action takes place, but in reality this is where the creativity of both offense and defensive strategy originates.

But, most important, hockey switches from offense to defense (and the reverse) at a speed that resembles the changes in most industries today. For hockey players, like businesses, the speed of change is the dominant feature of the action.

**Contact.** Today’s business is a contact sport. Not even the best player escapes the rough contact of the marketplace. While not literally physical, it is, nonetheless, not a game for the faint of heart.

Baseball is the only sport where a player uses his body to score, rather than an object (ball or puck), and no one can dispute the physical play of football or even basketball. But hockey, with its constant, bone-crunching physical contact, is the most demanding. And, the result of two players colliding is usually further contact with hard, unforgiving ice, boards, sticks, goal posts, glass, or, sometimes, fists.

So with its speed, intensity, two-way play, global players, and tough physical contact, hockey offers strategists better imagery to communicate their strategic intent.

## A Hockey Dictionary for Business

Here’s some hockey terminology and how it might work for you.

**The Power Play and Killing Penalties.** In one important way, basketball, football, and baseball are very different than real life: Teams always have an evenly matched number of players. In business, of course, this is never the case. Where resources (capital, labor, technology) make a difference in sales or service, companies with plenty of capital can easily out-hire and out-recruit smaller rivals.

Hockey is truer to the business world, with its “penalty killings” and “power plays.” When a hockey team gets hit with a penalty, a player must leave the ice and sit in the penalty box while the rest of the team, short a player or two, continues the game. This, of course, is when the opposing team launches its power play.

**Reading the Play.** Although all sports have “set plays,” the big three use them extensively. Players memorize playbooks or learn specific plays by rote. Hockey, however, is a game of endlessly shifting patterns. Players develop their skills by reacting to the constantly changing positions of opposing players, teammates, and the puck. The winners are the ones who are best at “reading the play”—understanding the evolving patterns of individual plays and the flow of the game. The same kind of pattern recognition is now the key skill for the strategist.

**Keep Your Head Up Coming Over the Blue Line.** A key problem for strategists is looking backward (at trends) instead of forward (understanding how the world is changing). It’s the same in hockey. Players must keep track of the puck and the movement of nine other players.

As players move “up ice” from defense to offense, they have a tendency to narrow their focus to the puck and look behind themselves as they cross the blue line and leave the defensive zone. That wariness is typically rewarded by a hard body blow (check) from an opposing player. The result: broken play. Poor strategy!

**Two on One.** Some of the most exciting action in hockey happens when one team gets an “unfair advantage” when two of its members isolate one opposing player. Sometimes this happens as a “breakaway,” resulting from a deft “reading” of the opposing team’s offensive passing pattern, intercepting the pass, and then “breaking out” of the defensive end with one, two, or even three players against a smaller number of opponents. Isolating one player against two happens most frequently, though, from the hard work of “fore checking” (pressing to keep the puck in the offensive pattern).

In hockey, getting an unfair advantage results in goals scored and winning games. Corporate strategists should think hard about how to get an “unfair” advantage either for a breakaway or in the hard work of “forechecking.”

**Soft Hands.** Many people think of hockey as the “roughest” of all sports, with constant body checking and occasional fighting. And a big part of the game is hard work in the corners, with physical strength at a premium. But it’s what players call “soft hands” that wins games. Soft hands refers to the deft, skillful use of the stick, often with split-second timing in tight quarters, that puts the puck in the net.

All sports require power, strength, and stamina. Hockey requires that and more. It’s the small, quick movement of soft hands that frequently carries the day. In business, too, success often requires brute force combined with small, nimble moves guided by adroit strategy.

## The Business of Sports

As the Wall Street Journal recently reported, a football team’s advancement to the Super Bowl is often a ticket to the poorhouse. The NFL’s revenue-sharing programs and salary caps ensure that the NFL champs are no better off than the also-rans. In hockey and baseball, a championship team is assured bonuses, increasing revenue, and the ability to bargain harder for the best players. The NHL (with its various drafting and agency rules) keeps this lead from becoming insurmountable, however. If business were like Major League Baseball, General Motors would be the Yankees—nearly invincible and always on top. America’s largest corporations, like baseball’s dynasties, would never be threatened by smaller companies with less capital.

In hockey, few dynasties have endured over time, and the champions are just as likely to be the underdogs (the small market clubs) as the blue chips. As the league has expanded, the field of Stanley Cup winners has widened: Nine different teams have ended up on top since 1990.

When executives are looking for answers, they often get “down in the trenches” to see how the business is really running by making customer or plant visits. For a sports parallel, you can’t beat the Pittsburgh Penguins, where owner and CEO Mario Lemieux returned to the ice after his three-and-a-half-year retirement. In the first month after he rejoined the lineup, the team moved up in the standings, and the team has now sold out almost every game.

The greatest hockey player of all time is the recently retired Wayne Gretzky. In fairness, we’ll leave the last word to him, as he comments about

the basis of his success, and perhaps the greatest skill of the strategist, anticipation. “I skate to where the puck is going, not to where it’s been.”

So, next time you think strategy, think hockey!

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