



A GRIT HOCKEY RESEARCH REPORT

BACKWARD SKATING IS DEAD

We counted the backward skating in a full NHL game — every skater, sampled whistle to whistle. What defencemen actually do now will change how you watch your kid play defence.

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START HERE

The three numbers

For generations, defence was taught as a backward-skating position. Gap up, back in, match speed, steer him to the boards. So we tested it against the modern NHL: one full game, sampled every 20 seconds, every skater on the ice classified — forward, backward, lateral, or standing still.

2.8%**DEFENCEMEN IN TRUE
BACKWARD SKATING**of 567 sampled observations
of NHL defencemen**0****FORWARDS IN TRUE
BACKWARD SKATING**out of 865 sampled
observations of forwards**16****TRUE-BACKWARD PLAYS
IN THE WHOLE GAME**14 of them defending a rush
or entry at speed

“True” backward skating had to pass the one-second rule: a skater travelling backward for **more than a second** without changing direction. Every borderline case was re-measured frame by frame on a quarter-second grid before it was allowed into the count. A quick backward touch to turn, open up, or angle a rusher did not count. That distinction is the whole story of this report — because when you make it, backward skating nearly disappears.

What did defencemen do instead? Mostly this: **58.9% of their sampled play was lateral** — open-hip, side-to-side movement in coverage and at the point — and **25.4% was forward skating**: retrievals, breakouts, pinches, and skating forward onto puck carriers. The backward-skating position has become a lateral-and-forward position with one backward job left.

One job. Sixteen times in an entire NHL game. Page 4 names it precisely.

THE COUNT

How we counted

No league or tracking company publishes time spent skating backward — the NHL's own tracking system records where a player is and how fast he is moving, not which way his skates are facing. So we counted by hand, from the broadcast of a full game.

The sample

Every 20 seconds of the game, we froze a three-second window and classified every skater in it: 252 windows, 193 of them live play (the rest were stoppages, replays, and close-ups), for **1,432 skater observations** — 567 defencemen and 865 forwards. Borderline windows were re-checked frame by frame before they were allowed into the count.

The one-second rule

Modern defencemen constantly brush backward for a fraction of a second — to rotate, to open their hips, to start an angle. Counting that as “backward skating” would be like counting every shoulder check as a U-turn. Our rule: if a player's direction changed within a second of going backward, it was logged as **transitional** and kept out of the true-backward total. In the first pass, a skater counted as true only if he was backward at both the start and the end of a three-second window. Then every case that fell short was re-measured frame by frame: how long did the backward skating actually last? Seven defenceman cases the window test had filed as transitional turned out to run 1.25 to 2 seconds, and they were moved into the true count. The numbers in this report are the one-second rule applied case by case — not a window trick.

Read the caveats on page 9 before you quote any of this. They are part of the finding, and we put them in big print on purpose.

THE EXCEPTION

Where backward skating still lives

Sixteen true-backward plays in 1,432 observations. Fourteen of them were one situation wearing slightly different jerseys. The other two were slow glides, and they are named honestly at the end of the list. If your kid is a defenceman, this is the one backward job the modern game still asks him to do.

1 • The strong-side defenceman against a rush with speed — 7 of the 16

The puck carrier comes through the neutral zone carrying real speed. The defenceman on his side is already set in a backward stance around the red line, and he backs in — red line to his own blue line, sometimes down to the top of the circles — buying the seconds he needs before he steps up, angles, or the play dies. It is the classic picture of defence, and in a full NHL game it happened seven times.

2 • His partner, on the same rush — 1 of the 16

Once, the weak-side defenceman mirrored backward alongside his partner as a pair backed in together through the neutral zone, protecting against the cross-ice pass on the same Toronto rush.

3 • Shorthanded, against a power-play entry — 1 of the 16

The penalty-killing defenceman took a backward stance against Toronto's power-play carry through the neutral zone — the same job as the first one, down a man: a carrier arriving with speed, an entry that has to be slowed at the line.

4 • The same back-in, caught by the re-measure — 5 of the 16

Five more rush plays only showed their true length when we re-measured them frame by frame: defencemen in continuous backward travel for 1.25 to 2 seconds against entries — one backing in from his blue line all the way to the net front — whose skating simply didn't line up with the edges of a sample window. Same job as the first three: a carrier, at speed, coming at them.

And two honest exceptions — both slow, neither at speed. Once, a defenceman glided backward for a second and a half inside his own zone during coverage. Once, a defenceman gapped up backward against a regroup. In a full game, that is every second of true backward skating that happened outside rush defence.

That is the whole list. A carrier, at speed, in the neutral zone, against a defenceman who is already set — plus two slow glides. Take away that one picture and backward skating, sustained the way it is still drilled, essentially did not appear in an entire NHL game.

THE REPLACEMENTS

Everywhere it doesn't

The more useful half of the count is where backward skating never showed up at all — because in each spot, the modern game has quietly replaced it with something else.

Regroups	Defencemen gapping up against a regroup skated forward to close space early — with exactly one exception all game: a single slow backward gap glide of a second and a half. One play is not a system.
Retrievals	Every coded retrieval was skated forward around the net . Defencemen turn and go, shoulder-check, and take the puck in stride — nobody backed in to pick up a dump-in.
The point	Point men walked the blue line laterally, hips open . The one play that looked like backward quarterbacking was checked frame by frame: lateral, not backward.
D-zone coverage	In front of their own net, defencemen moved in lateral steps and glides . All game, coverage produced exactly one true backward play: a slow second-and-a-half retreat glide. Everything else was open hips, sticks, and positioning.
Backchecking	Forwards came back forward, through the middle of the ice — 865 forward observations without one sustained backward stride. The backcheck is a forward-skating job now.
3-on-3 overtime	The regroup-and-possession game produced zero true backward skating. Even with the whole rink to play in, skaters kept possession moving forward and laterally.

What replaced it has a name in today's coaching language: **surfing** — the defenceman skates forward and across, angles the carrier where he wants him, and only turns his hips at the last moment. It is faster than backing in, it kills plays at the line instead of at the hash marks, and it is what the count keeps showing: forward first, lateral second, backward almost never.

THE ILLUSION

The transitional majority

*If backward skating is nearly gone, why does it still look common when you watch a game? Because brief backward touches are everywhere — and they outnumbered true backward skating **nearly two to one** for defencemen (29 transitional plays to 16 true ones). Of every three backward touches a defenceman made in this game, two were over within a second.*

A defenceman facing a rush will often touch backward for half a second — a pivot, a rotation, the first move of an angle — and then he is gone: stepping up, skating forward onto the carrier, turning to chase. Your eye registers “backward skating.” The stopwatch says it never really happened. One Toronto entry in this game ended with the Islanders defenceman skating **forward** into the carrier at his own blue line and putting him on the ice. Backward skating involved: none.

This is also why old drills lie to you. A practice built on long backward laps is training the transitional illusion — the touch — as if it were the job. The job, at speed, is the pivot itself: how fast a defenceman can start backward for a heartbeat and be somewhere else, forward, with his stick in the lane.

Count every backward touch a defenceman makes and you get 7.9% of his sampled play. Count only what passes the one-second rule and you get 2.8%. Both numbers are in this report, side by side, because the gap between them is the finding.

THE SHIFT

Then and now

The one older published count we could find — a time-motion study from the pre-tracking era, counted by researchers from game film — had defencemen skating backward about **19%** of the time and forwards about **5–6%**. Those were different players, a different level, and a different counting method, so treat the comparison as a direction, not a decimal (the caveats page is blunt about this). But the direction is not subtle: against that backdrop, this game's defencemen skated backward for more than a second at a time in just 2.8% of sampled play — roughly one-seventh of the old share — and its forwards never did it at all.

The coaching world has been saying the same thing in plain language. Defending by *skating forward* — surf, angle, hold the line, pivot late — is now taught by name at the top of the sport, and NHL veterans describe the old passive back-in as a style the current rules and speed simply no longer allow. The rule changes of 2005 — the two-line pass removed, obstruction called — started it; two decades of faster, more east-west hockey finished it.

And nobody official can overrule the count with a better one: the NHL's tracking system measures speed and distance, not skating direction. The number in this report exists because somebody finally sat down and counted. If a league-wide count ever gets published, we will update ours against it.

THE TAKEAWAY

What this means for your kid

Nothing here says “never teach backward skating.” It is important, and it should be trained — in its proper context. Backward skating's real value is serving transitions: pivoting, opening up, and moving around the ice without turning your back to the opponent. What it should no longer be is a means of defending — or a defenceman's primary mode of locomotion.

- **Defencemen: build the surf first.** Closing forward, angling a carrier to the boards, and killing the play at the line is the modern default. Forward speed on the angle is defensive skill number one.
- **Make lateral movement a daily habit.** Open hips, mohawks, side-to-side mobility in coverage and at the point — that was 58.9% of what NHL defencemen actually did in this game.
- **Train the pivot, not the lap.** The valuable backward skill is a heartbeat long: touch backward, rotate, go. Backward skating trained as a transition tool — and as a way to move without turning your back to the play — is modern development. Backward laps as a conditioning staple are training for a game that no longer exists.
- **Retrieve going forward.** Shoulder checks, timing the turn, taking dump-ins in stride — retrievals at the top level are forward skating, start to finish.
- **Keep the one backward job sharp.** Against a carrier with speed in the neutral zone, your kid still needs a real backward gap: stance, stick, and the patience to back in from the red line and pick his moment. Rare is not the same as gone.
- **Forwards: own the middle coming back.** The backcheck in this game was pure forward skating through the middle of the ice. That is the habit that lets defencemen hold their line instead of backing in alone.

The encouraging part: none of this is a talent verdict. Angles, pivots, lateral mobility, and forward retrievals are trainable, repeatable habits — exactly the kind of skills a kid can build with good coaching and honest reps. The game is not asking young defencemen to be something rarer. It is asking them to be something more specific.

BEFORE YOU QUOTE US

The caveats — in big print, on purpose

This report makes a loud claim, so here is every reason to hold it at arm's length, in one place, at full size. A finding you can't caveat is a finding you shouldn't trust.

READ THIS PAGE BEFORE YOU QUOTE THE COVER

- 1. One game.** Toronto at the New York Islanders, January 3, 2026. Two teams, one night, one set of systems. Another game — a different opponent, a playoff game, a blowout — could count differently. This is a case study, not a league average.
- 2. We sampled; we did not time every second.** Three-second windows every 20 seconds: 193 live windows, 1,432 skater observations. The percentages are shares of those sampled observations of live play — the same way the older research was counted — not a stopwatch on all 60 minutes.
- 3. The one-second rule was applied case by case — and it moved the number.** Our first pass counted backward skating as true only if it spanned a full three-second window (1.6%, 9 plays). Then every one of the 36 transitional defenceman cases was re-measured frame by frame. Seven ran longer than a second — 1.25 to 2 seconds — and were moved into the true count. The 2.8% here is the re-measured number.
- 4. Three plays sit exactly on the line.** Three defenceman cases measured almost exactly one second. The rule says *more than* a second, so they stayed transitional. Count them and the headline is 3.4% instead of 2.8% — a different decimal, not a different story. Count every backward touch of any length and defencemen reach 7.9% — still less than half the historical figure.
- 5. Broadcast video has limits.** The game was coded from the 360p broadcast feed. Where a player's stance was too distant or unclear to judge, it was not counted as backward — again, the numbers lean conservative, but picture quality is a real limit.
- 6. Roles were judged by formation, not by roster.** A forward caught playing the defensive position in a given window was counted as a defenceman for that window, and the reverse. That is how the position is actually played shift to shift, but it is a judgement call, made 1,432 times.
- 7. Only broadcast-visible live play was counted.** Stoppages, replays, and close-ups were excluded. What a player does in the corners of the rink the camera ignores is not in this count.
- 8. The historical comparison is directional, not exact.** The ~19% / ~5–6% figures come from a different era, a different level of hockey, and a different counting method. We use them to show direction and rough scale — not to claim a precise league-wide decline of an exact size.
- 9. There is no official number to check ours against.** NHL tracking does not publish skating direction at all. If it ever does, this report's numbers should be re-tested against it — and if they are wrong, they should be corrected in public.
- 10. “Dead” is the headline, not the whole finding.** Backward skating survives in one specific, important job — defending a rush at speed (page 4). What is dead is backward skating as the default way a defenceman plays: the long back-in as the position's home base. Read page 4 before you argue with the cover.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Defence is played going forward now.

The defencemen in this game were not worse skaters than the ones who backed in for a living — they were better, in more directions. They surfed forward, moved sideways with open hips, retrieved pucks in stride, and kept backward skating in the one place it still earns its keep: a carrier, at speed, coming through the neutral zone. Teach your kid the whole picture — in proportion — and you are teaching the game as it is actually played. At GRIT, we prepare kids for where the game is going. Not where it is — and especially not where it was.

GRIT HOCKEY

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Method and full caveats: pages 3 and 9 of this report. Counts: Leafs @ Islanders, January 3, 2026 — 252 sampled windows, 193 live, 1,432 skater observations. Historical comparison: time-motion research from the pre-tracking era, as cited in Schulze et al. (2024). Coaching sources: Ice Hockey Systems (Duhamel; Baumgartner); Sportsnet (2023).

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