

Goaltending, weaponized: How the next generation of goalies is ready to dominate

AVON, Conn. — A warning to shooters: You are in trouble.

The next wave of goalies is approaching. They are equipped with tools granted to no other generation.

Today's teenage puckstoppers are holding their edges, reading plays to their conclusion, stickhandling brashly, attacking pucks with their hands, studying video and building resilience. They are not going down automatically, camping out in reverse vertical-horizontal (RVH) position, sliding needlessly from side to side on limited threats, or hanging their heads after an early goal.

Meanwhile, NHL teams are learning that sky-scraping size is no longer a priority. Shorter goalies once bypassed without a second thought are now given proper consideration.

The result: a deeper pool of smart, technical, athletic and confident goalies.

"Now we have all this other information. Now we have all these other tools," said Jared Waimon, founder of Pro Crease Goaltending and goalie coach at Quinnipiac University (currently ranked No. 6 in the NCAA). "How can we use those? What's the emphasis? The emphasis is on reading longer, having great skating, having patience, having edge control. Then you can use all these other things we have developed over the past years."

So dangle, one-time, and go bar down as much as you want. The goalies of the future will stop most of them. The pucks that slip through will not bother them.

If anything, they will be more determined to keep everything that follows out of the net.

## **Thumbs down to being down**

Steve Mason is 30 years old. Only two years ago, Mason was Philadelphia's No. 1 goalie. But one reason Mason is unemployed is because the NHL's speed and skill ran him out of the league.

Like most goalies of his generation, the 6-foot-4, 210-pound Mason was taught to take away everything down low. He slid from side to side to make spectacular last-second stops. Mason incorporated RVH into his game, keeping his lead pad down and trail pad cocked at 45 degrees to seal strong-side posts and negate low-flying threats.

But today's turbocharged game has blunted these tools. Skaters fly. Passes are accurate. Pucks zoom off blades over shoulders or slip through slivers that bigger gear once sealed shut.

It's why goalie coaches like Waimon have turned their teaching manuals upside down. Stay up, they say. Shuffle, don't slide. Think through the game instead of executing pre-programmed technique.

Older goalies raised on going down are struggling to adjust movements long baked into their games. Younger goalies such as John Gibson (25) and Andrei Vasilevskiy (24) have had to relearn some of their tactics.

Teenage goalies have the least to rewire.

On Dec. 21, 18 youngsters, from bantams to collegians, attended Pro Crease's one-day clinic at Avon Old Farms, a boarding school and longtime hockey powerhouse in central Connecticut. During two on-ice sessions, the goalies worked at six separate stations positioned around the rink, overseen by Pro Crease coaches and targeted by shooters.



Pro Crease students stretch after their second on-ice session at Avon Old Farms.

The goalies were accompanied by one hockey reporter who is wobbly, at best, on his skates. But from the ice, instead of my usual seat in the press box, I could process some of the factors in play when it's time to make a save.

There are plenty: defensemen joining the rush, forwards driving to the far post, passes crossing the middle of the ice, attackers parked in front for tips. Everything is happening. It's why one of Waimon's principles is expanding the window of gathering information.

"The No. 1 thing I'm about now is reading longer," Waimon told his students. "I'm not saying 'patient' anymore. It's, 'read longer.' If you skim a page — I'm assuming a couple of us can read — versus read a page, you know the difference. The only way to do that is invest time in it. So off the play, we're going to read longer. Off the shot, we're going to read longer. We're going to push ourselves to wait it out for more. Results of that should be longer on the release, holding your edges more, more shuffles, hopefully some lateral release, and no slides."

Waimon's coaches were well aware of the latter. Before the clinic began, Waimon distributed printouts detailing the drills of the day.

For one drill, a two-pass scenario across the middle of the ice, Waimon dispensed with subtlety when describing how he wanted his goalies to play the situation.

"NO FREAKING SLIDES," read the instructions. "GET BETTER AND FASTER."

Waimon, like most goalie coaches, is leading a movement away from previous teachings. As recently as five years ago, they were telling their netminders to take away the ice. By going down, and often staying there, goalies could close off low pucks, remain tall enough to obstruct high shots, eliminate the holes that open by standing back up, and block everything that approached.

Shooters and their sticks have since progressed. Elite attackers think nothing of popping a puck past a goalie's ear when parked in RVH. They are good at exposing the goalie that slides to meet an expected shot and cannot recover when a pass cuts across the grain.

Sliding captures what goalies are doing wrong.

There are times to slide. Waimon is OK when a goalie slides to track a pass that travels below the hashmarks.

But in today's speed game, a slide should be a last-ditch save, not a crutch of a technique. Sliding and going down early are like a goalie crossing his or her fingers, hoping to arrive at the same time as the puck.

“Being down is becoming more of a style instead of a save selection. I think it’s becoming a problem at the younger ages,” former AHL veteran Scott Munroe, a Pro Crease instructor and assistant coach at Trinity College, told the students. “I really like how at Pro Crease, we’ve worked on holding edges longer. The one thing I’ve been talking a lot about in practice is making sure we see the puck leave the blade of the stick before we make any kind of reaction. Then we can go to the puck instead of dropping and having our hands come down. Then we have to react up from it.”

Every year, the NHL spits out goalies who cannot keep pace with modernity. Mason is a recent casualty. Cam Ward could be next. Part of the reason is that they were not raised on principles being taught today.

By contrast, when the 18 Pro Crease pupils execute their drills, going down and sliding are not common maneuvers. They are up. They are reading plays. They are slamming their pads down only when necessary.

These are the new-school goalies.

## **Hockey sense matters**

Waimon likes Arthur Smith. He believes the 14-year-old has the potential to play for USA Hockey’s National Team Development Program. Waimon notes Smith’s athleticism and tracking. He saves his highest praise for the most critical component of any successful goalie: intelligence.

One of the critiques Waimon has about goalies, in general, is their tendency to lean on prescribed movements. They are programmed to select saves that can be predictable.

Modern shooters incorporate deception to add another layer of devilry on their targets. Waimon believes goalies should respond in kind.

It’s why he likes to remind his charges they are hockey players first and goalies second. So when he runs clips of Mike Smith, Calgary’s puckhandling wizard, Waimon wants his goalies to process the game similarly. Look to one teammate and pass to another. Use the net as protection from forecheckers.

“Your chance to impact the game might not be a save,” Waimon told his goalies. “It might be a touch. It might be a stop, a quick up, and now you’re going 200 feet. Your guys score, or you have a chance.”

Mike Smith handles the puck like he’s Sidney Crosby. But the 36-year-old veteran could not stickhandle like he does without reading what’s happening and thinking about what he’d like to do. His brain is at work. Young puckstoppers are taught to mimic this trait.

Quick thinking is what Matt Michno, University of Connecticut goalie coach and Pro Crease director of coaching, explains to the students after the morning session. With

the sweaty goalies stuffed in a locker room, Michno connects his laptop to a TV and breaks down a clip of Adam Huska, his No. 1 goalie at UConn.

On a play against the University of Massachusetts, Huska reacts to a pass out front to an initial attacker. Huska drops into RVH to play the threat.

But when the puck pops over the attacker's stick and onto the blade of a second-wave forward, Huska has to react to the broken play. Instead of staying down, Huska gets back on his feet, giving himself more options. As he reads the release, Huska is square to the shooter. When the shot arrives, he goes down and gobbles up the puck.

"When he's back on his feet, everything is tracking toward where the puck is," Michno explained.

"These are really basic things. What are we looking for you guys to do? See the thing, not chase it. Not get crazy, reaching and sprawling for pucks. We want to see us put all the pieces together because our eyes are telling us what to do. When we get so caught up in, 'I need to go into RVH here, I need to keep my feet here,' we lose sight of the simplicity of the game. Which is, 'Where's the puck in relation to my body? Where's my body in relation to the net?' That's what we're looking for you to do with this theme of reading plays, reading longer."

Reading plays is not the only activity required of a goalie's brain.

## **Building resilience**

After the first on-ice session, the Pro Crease goalies gather for a presentation by Dr. Jason Emery, founder of Northeast Psych. The theme of the psychologist's talk is about fortifying the muscle that is regularly under attack from bad goals, surging crowd noise, teammates' misplays and equipment malfunctions. The trick for every goalie is to maintain performance when things go sideways.

"It's not a trait you're born with. It's just not," Emery tells the students. "Anybody can develop this. It is a process."

Emery presents a checklist for the goalies to follow to build resilience: be optimistic in problem-solving, be motivated, be robustly confident amid stress, practice selective focus, and insist on social support.



Video study is critical for any young goalie.

“Not doing this part,” Emery said, “is not training.”

Prior to the second on-ice session, which Emery joins for one-on-one chats with the goalies, he reminds the students it’s OK to fail. This aligns with Waimon’s approach.

During the clinic, Waimon wants his goalies to try a technique that isn’t comfortable, read a play a hair longer, or play a puck that might lie outside a comfortable perimeter. In fact, Waimon tells his coaches to take away the net if any of the goalies boil over after allowing too many goals.

So when the goalies return to the ice, they are pushing the boundaries of their abilities. As Waimon watches over Arthur Smith and fellow bantam Brendan Holahan, nodding his head forcefully in sync with every expected save, some of the pucks they should be stopping slip through. He has no problem with goals allowed at his clinic.

“Where do you want success?” Waimon asks Holahan with a smile. “Now, or at nationals?”

Holahan does not need to respond. The answer is obvious.

*(Photos: Fluto Shinzawa)*