

Face-Off Tips

Face-Off Tips from the Best: Andy Towers

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(from a recent interview by Great Atlantic Lacrosse)

I first became interested in facing-off when I was a tenth grader and playing for the junior varsity team at New Canaan High School in Connecticut. I had been cut from the varsity and had to play on the JV team. There was nothing wrong with playing JV, but I thought that I was good enough to play on the varsity that year. Three weeks before the first game, I spotted Carl Nisson who starred at NCHS and had gone on to play for Princeton. Carl had coached me when I was growing up and had extensive knowledge of the game of lacrosse and more importantly for me facing off. Carl showed me some things/tricks that day that I really worked on. He stressed quick hands, balance, and technique. Just before the first game, the JV scrimmaged the varsity. In that final scrimmage, the varsity beat us. However, I won enough face-offs to not only be brought up to the varsity, but to start the first game. I ended up starting the rest of the year. Facing-off gave me the opportunity to shine when my skills were still very limited. It was through this experience that I became infatuated with facing off. It became a game within the game. It became a separate way of measuring my performance, and it was fun.

As I got older, I began to see how having a dominant face-off man could change the course of the game. It can make or break a game. It starts fast breaks and creates scoring opportunities. It also prevents an opposing team from gaining momentum by possessing the ball after EITHER team scores. It has become so important that college coaches are now recruiting the best face-off guys in high school even if all they do is face-off. However, the game is more fun if you develop in all areas: offense, defense, and special situations.

There are two parts to facing off: the physical side and the mental side.

The Physical Side

When talking about the physical part, I am talking about everything from the set up to executing the move to picking up the ball. There are many different moves and counters. There are also counters to the counters. It's very similar to the game rock, paper, scissors. However, there are some things that stay consistent throughout these many different moves and counters.

First, the set up should always be the same on every face-off. The set up entails the stance (foot and hand position) and head of the stick position in relation to the ball. Every player will have a slightly different stance. All stances are correct provided that the player can execute all moves and counters from that stance. The player's stance must allow him not to put any weight on his hands. Quickness is everything. If a player has weight on his hands the first thing he must do when the whistle blows is take that weight off his hands.

When going against a good face-off man having weight on you hands will insure that you lose. The other thing that must stay the same is the player's hand position on the stick. The right hand is placed as close to the neck of the stick as possible. The left hand is placed in the middle of the stick. With this hand placement you should be able to execute every move, while not making any changes in your stance, or hand placement on the stick. The player should be able to get in his stance and be able to lift up his hands and not lose his balance. This is your stance.

When approaching the ball before the face-off, make sure that you "crowd" the ball. Line up as close to the ball as you can. Remember, if you line up close to the ball on one move but not the other, then you are making yourself readable in the eyes of your opponent. Your stance together with crowding the ball is your set up.

There are many different moves. All of these moves are designed to start a fast break. Technique refers to how you execute a certain move. There are also counters to all of these many different moves. There are also counters to these counters. A good face-off man understands that he must know and feel comfortable executing all these from his set up without changing his stance or head position in relation to the ball.

The first move to learn is the clamp. There are three different techniques of clamping; the basic quick clamp, the top corner clamp, and the power-down-the-line clamp. All of these moves require staying low and clamping down on the ball with a different part of the back of the stick and then raking it forward for a fast break. Each is effective for different reasons. Clamping is currently the most popular move in the game. Most people clamp (ROCK).

There are three different counters to these three types of clamps. These clamp counters are called over the ball or topping moves. All entail doing a reverse clamping motion to the area of your opponent's stick where he is clamping the ball.. With the left hand gripped firmly roll your knuckles up to face the sky as you extend your left hand up and out. Your right hand remains loose and jams into you opponent's stick to stop his clamp. Be careful not to grab your opponent's stick as this will result in an immediate loss. While the left hand is extending out and up, pivot off the bottom right corner of the head of your stick which is on the ground. This movement will prevent the clamper from finishing his clamp and will give you a good opportunity for a fast break (PAPER).

The counter to these topping moves is the punch rake. Because all of the topping moves entail coming over the ball, they are susceptible to being beaten underneath. That is where you beat them with the punch rake. When executing the punch rake make sure that the handle of your stick stays on the ground by keeping your left hand down and still. Put slight pressure on your right hand. When the whistle blows make a punching motion forward and keep your right hand low. This will spit the ball forward for a fast break (SCISSORS).

Remember the clamp beats the rake. The top beats the clamp. The rake beats the top. It's

rock paper scissors. But if you don't line up the same way every time you will make yourself readable which will eventually catch up with you. The best way to solidify your techniques is practice with two friends. Have Friend A act as the referee and set up a fair face-off and blow the whistle. Friend B does the clamp 10 times while you counter his clamp with ten topping moves. Then rotate this sequence so that all three have done ten clamps, ten tops, and ten punch rakes. This will help you identify any problems with your technique and help you improve faster. Remember only through repetition and readjustments will you improve. A player can't work on the technique of his moves enough.

The Mental Side

You will get to the point where your technique is very sound through execution of all moves and counters. The next step is to start the read, identify, and execute or mental side of facing-off. Before each face-off we talked about lining up the same way every time. This was called our set up. The same stance, same hand placement on the stick, and same head position in relation to the ball before the whistle blows, is essential to successfully masking your move.

While we do everything we can to insure that we mask our move, we also should do everything we can to read our opponents move. All players are readable in some way. The most common changes in a player's set-up are their wrist position and the pressure on the bottom, right sidewall of his stick.

Here are the three most common scenarios:

- 1.) Our first read is our opponents left wrist. If his wrist is down, he's usually clamping. That is the read. Then we identify the counter to his clamp; the top. Then when the whistle blows, we execute the top for a break or behind us for possession.
- 2.) If his left wrist is up, then he's doing either a top or a punch rake. We need to make a second read. That's the bottom right sidewall of his stick. If it's up also, then he's topping. That's the read. Then we identify the counter and execute it.
- 3.) If the sidewall is down then he is raking. That's the read. Then we identify the counter and execute it. It's becomes simple through practice.

Conclusion

The best academic institutions in the country play lacrosse. Now with the college game becoming more and more specialized, if you're good enough at it you can be recruited just for facing-off. I began doing it because it was fun. I kept doing it because it helped me get on the field. It entails being disciplined, competitive, and most of all smart.