

Bro'mance In The Air

It's the only true partnership in hockey and it's one that can take many forms, just ask the guys who play together

BY RYAN DIXON

The nature of the relationship between Charlie Huddy and Paul Coffey was consistent across varied settings. On the ice, the defense pair had very defined roles. Coffey's job was to help the Edmonton Oilers live up to their reputation as the most dynamic offensive force the league had ever seen, Huddy's was to ensure goalie Grant Fuhr wasn't too overwhelmed by separation anxiety from the rest of the team.

"Guys used to bug me a lot and say, 'You just go back and get the puck and give it to Coff,' " Huddy said. "Well, yeah, I did, but that's the way it worked, that was his game. He wanted to have the puck. He knew, when he was skating and he was going straight ahead, that his game was going to be good."

Huddy, now an assistant coach in charge of the Dallas Stars defense, didn't just feed his partner passes. The pace of their approaches to hockey mirrored the speed of life away from the rink for both, meaning Huddy was more likely to stay at home and Coffey would occasionally drop by for a visit. "I was married and had a couple of kids and he was single, so we used to get him over for dinner once in a while," Huddy said, "which was good. It was all part of the connection of being together and it carried out on the ice, for sure."

The kinship speaks to the adhesive nature of one of hockey's more unique alignments: the defense pair, a unit that represents the only true tandem in the game.

Sure, there are two goalies, but only one is on the ice at a given time and no matter how well they get along, there's always that inherent element of competing for the same job. Up front, everybody knows three can be an awkward number. On the blueline, though, it's just you and your buddy - and in order to prevent bones from being consistently rattled, communication is paramount. A good defenseman always has his partner's back, especially when it's turned to a hard-charging forward. He's always providing an outlet when things get dicey and support when trouble stirs.

"The longer you play with your 'D' partner, the closer you get on and off the ice," said Stars defenseman Mark Fistric. "I think it develops a bond between the two of you. You're always looking out for each other. If the puck gets

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DYNAMIC DUO

Nicklas Lidstrom, left and Brian Rafalski are offensive guys who spend a lot of time together.



FIRE AND ICE

Charlie Huddy, left, and Paul Coffey were different sides of the same 1980s Oilers coin.

dumped in, you're trying to communicate to him so he doesn't get hit hard. You just kind of stick together, you stay tight and maybe if he makes a mistake, you're there to clean up for him and vice versa. It's a great relationship to have."

And it's one that can last. Luke Schenn is in his third NHL season with the Toronto Maple Leafs, but remains tight with his blueline accomplice from his days with the Western League's Kelowna Rockets. "Still one of my best buddies is Tyson Barrie," Schenn said. "We were partners pretty much the whole year in junior, you remain close when you're with that person every day in practice and on the ice."

Strengthening the tie is the fact defense partners often tend to be road roommates, which was the case with Huddy and Coffey during the Oilers' glory days of the 1980s. "We used to talk about the game a fair bit," Huddy said. "Coff was big on that, learning the game and understanding the game, knowing the players on the other team we were going to be playing against. We talked about the game a lot to know the situations that were going to happen on the ice and that helped a lot."

Of course, NHL coaches couldn't care less how frequently their defensemen send each other Facebook messages; they're far more concerned with finding the right composition among tandems on the ice. Just as a top defense pair is constantly matched against another team's top line, an elite tandem also requires a certain aligning of attributes that allows for each player to maximize his talents.

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"I look back to when the New Jersey Devils paired Scott Stevens and Brian Rafalski together," said Pierre McGuire, an analyst for TSN and NBC. "It was near the end of Stevens' career, so his skating wasn't great, but he was a physical, force. Rafalski was a new guy coming into the league; Stevens knew the league, Rafalski didn't. Rafalski could go back and handle the puck, Stevens could stay up and deliver big hits in the neutral zone."

Before getting into coaching and, ultimately, the media, McGuire manned bluelines professionally in Europe ("I wanted to be Larry Robinson, but I was about four inches too short."). He said teams will tinker with pairs based on opponents' strengths, sometimes even breaking up what would be considered an all-world

set. That's the case with the Detroit Red Wings, who have been known to separate Rafalski and Nicklas Lidstrom when lining up against more aggressive teams.

"When they start playing against more physical teams, Brad Stuart goes alongside Lidstrom and they put Niklas Kronwall with Rafalski," McGuire said. "They try to change their pairings that way to match a physical dimension the other team may present."

"That's where the magic of coaching comes in: identifying your team's needs, then blending the players into roles where they're going to be successful."

For chemistry to develop within a pairing, there must be an understanding of the other person's preferences, right down to some very small details. "Some guys like to get the pass on the backhand to move it, some guys like the forehand," Dallas' Fisric said.

Larry Murphy is a four-time Cup winner who still holds the rookie record for points by a defenseman with 76, set in 1980-81 when he was with the Los Angeles Kings. He skated alongside Norris Trophy winners such as Lidstrom and Rod Langway, but noted the most important trait in a defense ally involves the basic element of trust. "A player who utilizes his partner is a guy I want to play with," Murphy said. "A defenseman who just bangs the puck off the glass or off the boards is not utilizing his partner and that's a tough guy to play with. I'm sure there are guys who are more than happy to have their partner hammer it off the glass, (but not me)."

That definitely wasn't the case for Huddy, who developed a pretty simple system for how to best complement Coffey's wandering spirit. "It comes from playing with each other a lot and being able to read off each other," he said of 'D' chemistry. "Especially in the defensive zone, Coff was kind of all over the place. I used to always say, 'I go where he isn't.' That was the best logic I had for it."

Any successful partnership relies upon the parties involved to give everything they have, while never losing sight of what the other person is bringing. That was never a problem for Huddy.

"There were a million guys who would have loved to play with him," Huddy said of Coffey, "and I spent a lot of games playing with him, so it was pretty exciting for me and I was pretty fortunate to be in that spot." **TM**

HUDDY: BRUCE BENNETT STUDIOS/GETTY IMAGES; COFFEY: DENIS BRODEUR/NHLI VIA GETTY IMAGES