

# The Skill (& Art) of Making Saves While Playing Down on the Ice

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I have been getting a lot of requests on articles and questions about the topic of playing down, how much should goalie play down, when to play down etc... What I mean by playing down is the difference between making the actual save standing up or making the save with 1 or both knees down on the ice. First of all the issue is not whether you should make saves standing up or playing down on the ice! The issue is about timing, reading the play right and what has the goalie done before going down. I could also add that it is also vital how the goalie goes down and he moves / operates while down on the ice.

Modern hockey has been getting faster and faster over the years. As a result the way goalies play the game has changed too. All goalies at the top level like NHL and European pro leagues make +90% of their saves with 1 or both knees on the ice today. This is a statistical fact and I have been following this trend since 2002 at NHL, Finnish Elite League and World Championship levels. This has been done by recording a minimum of 10 games at each level and listing all the saves. Since 2002 the number of saves done while playing down has actually been slightly increasing.

Another fact that we should also take into consideration when discussing this topic is where do the shots come from. My stats clearly show that the % of saves made down on the ice will go up significantly when shots are coming from a close distance and from so called scoring sectors.

So when does / should the goalie make saves standing up? There are a few situations where stand-up saves are a natural choice. One of them is long distance shots where goalie has no need to go down when puck can be handled and controlled well standing up. The other type of situation is shots from narrow angles where the goalie has to cover the entire height of the net. This can be done without exposing any other areas open for scoring.

This leads us to the point itself in this article. Modern goalies makes most of their saves with 1 or both knees on the ice, BUT:

1. Timing is everything! If a goalie goes down prematurely he often takes himself out of the play and gets scored on too much or at least raises the opponents probability of scoring a great deal. This is an issue where a

goalie really needs help from a qualified goalie coach as it is hard to fix timing on your own. If your timing is not correct it doesn't matter how good your technique is, how fast and wide your butterfly is etc...

2. The second important piece of this puzzle is a goalie's ability to move on his skates. This is something a goalie must practice more than anything else from day 1 of his hockey career. Skating ability should be so good that a goalie can follow plays at increasing speed as he moves up in the level of play and always maintain readiness for making saves while staying at the optimal position. The key for the readiness is balance and proper body positioning that allows moves to any direction in minimal time and at maximum speed.

3. The third piece is a goalie's ability to read the game / plays. Even if the goalie is the greatest skater, it doesn't matter if he can't read the plays right. Without good reading ability, a goalie will not be able to time his movements and go down at the proper time either.

*Personally I always work with these issues when I am on the ice with my own goalies and goalies that I work with regularly. It doesn't really matter whether I am working with experienced NHL goalie like Nikke Bäckström (Minnesota Wild), a seasoned pro like Ari Sulander (ZSC Lions) or young up and coming talent like Lukas Flueeler (ZSC Lions), timing, skating/moving and reading the plays are always on our training agenda. A goalie coach has great responsibility in the development of his goalies in these areas and making sure the combination / big picture works.*