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Title: Serving Up a Review of PuckServer

Editor's Note: Scott Young averaged three shots on goal per game in his 17-year career. Only 45 NHL players averaged more than three shots on goal per game during the 2006-07 season. Young's best season was 2000-2001 when he took a career-high 321 shots and connected for 40 goals for the St. Louis Blues. For his career, he averaged 24 goals per 82 games played.

One of my greatest strengths as a hockey player was my shot. I think it was Wayne Gretzky who said, "... you don't score on 100 percent of the shots you don't take." I definitely subscribe to that theory. To score goals, you have to know when to shoot the puck, even if sometimes your first instinct is to pass or skate with it. And if you have a good shot, you want to use it as often as you can.

If I was in position to get off a good shot, I generally elected to take it, rather than risk trying to improve my position. Of course, if I could get a better shot for myself or a teammate I would move the puck. But NHL defenses have become so good, that when a shot opportunity shows itself, you generally take it.

Getting into good position on the ice is only part of what it takes to be a goal scorer, however. The other elements are a quick release and a hard shot. When I broke into the NHL with the Hartford Whalers, if I came down the wing and was able to get off a big slap shot, I felt as though I could pick a corner and beat the goalie on a regular basis.

But times have changed, and goaltending has come light years from where it was. Guys are bigger and more athletic. The equipment is bigger and better. Goalies today not only make the first save, but are capable of being square to the puck to make second and third saves. That puts a premium on a quick release and good velocity on your shot.

Having been known as a shooter during my career, I get a lot of questions from up-and-coming players, as well as parents and coaches, about how players can improve an individual's shooting. It's my feeling that it all comes down to enjoying practicing it. If a player enjoys shooting, he'll spend the necessary time working on it, either on the ice or off.

Since it's summertime, it makes sense to focus on what players can do off the ice to improve their shooting. When I was a young player, I would shoot hundreds of pucks at a time in my basement or garage.

But today, there are a variety of new products and services available to aid in shooter training. I recently had the chance to kick the tires on one such product, called PuckServer (www.puckserver.com). PuckServer gets loaded up with pucks, and then allows the player to feed himself those pucks in a good shooting position at whatever pace he desires.

In a way, PuckServer is akin to the old baseball pitchbacks that allowed a ballplayer to work on his game by himself.

Ordering and Setup

From the time I ordered PuckServer online, the product took about five days to reach me. I elected to purchase the Training Ice companion, also, so I could easily shoot real pucks off of a driveway or garage floor. Both products were packaged well and shipped right to my front door.

Setting PuckServer up was a cinch. It comes in two pieces, and I simply had to connect the puck tube with the base and I was ready to use the product in less than a minute.

PuckServer is constructed with durable materials (steel and commercial-grade tubing), and will withstand heavy usage.

Using PuckServer

PuckServer is smartly designed and a breeze to use. You start by filling the puck tube with as many as 15 pucks.

Next, you place the training ice (if you have it), next to PuckServer on the side you wish to shoot from. I'm right-handed, so I put the training ice to the left of PuckServer so I could be on my forehand (see Fig. 1).



Fig 1

To start a drill, you simply push the lever at the rear of the PuckServer base (see Fig. 2a) and a puck is dispensed from an opening in the bottom. The lever is easy to push down with the blade of your stick.

On a dry surface or Training Ice, pucks generally roll out of PuckServer, and need to be settled (see Fig. 2b). While that's not ideal for the perfect rapid shot drill, it's very easy and fast to settle the puck. And if you are not working on ice, it's difficult to imagine a device that would be able to feed pucks to you flat because pucks don't slide well on driveways.



Fig 2a



Fig 2b

Once you've collected the puck from PuckServer, you are in position to take a good shot (see Figs. 3a and 3b).



Fig 3a



Fig 3b

After shooting, you return to the PuckServer lever to retrieve a new puck and take another shot. I found that it took me 25-30 seconds to complete a round of 15 shots. And the more I used PuckServer, I got into a good rhythm of collecting a puck, settling it, and taking a good, hard, accurate shot.

Pricing

PuckServer can be purchased online for \$119.99. The PlayHard Training Ice is an additional \$29.99. Curiously, the products are offered as a "Combo Pack," but are not discounted. The Combo Pack retails online for \$149.98.

Overall

There are a number of ways out there to help players develop their shooting skills, ranging from shooting hundreds of pucks per day against a cement wall to high-end facilities, such as those developed by RapidShot (www.rapidshot.com). Among all of the choices out there PuckServer is a good one. It's well conceived and constructed, and it does what it says. It's also very durable.

On the plus side, I thought PuckServer was a very useful training tool. In doing a number of repetitions, my shooting rhythm became faster and more consistent. I could also feel that I was working the muscles required for quick, hard shooting.

In addition to it being a useful training tool, it's also simple and fun to use. That was really important when I introduced it to my son, who plays youth hockey at a young age. Because it's simple and fun to use, I think he'll be using it for many years to come.

The nature of the product is that kids can easily track their progress as a shooter, either through accuracy, timed shooting drills, or both (although for timed drills, a second person is a requirement). In fact, PuckServer easily allows for drill progression. For example, a player can work on releasing all 15 shots within 30 seconds, and then progress to releasing all 15 shots and hitting one specific target as often as he can. And then more targets. And then a sequence of targets. If you want to be an elite shooter, mastering these progressions will be key, and this is where PuckServer can excel.

I can see younger players setting up contests to compete against each other in these shooting drills, making PuckServer more entertaining for them to use.

PuckServer could be even more useful to a shooter if paired with a product like Shooter Tutor (www.shootertutor.com). PuckServer could also aid in goaltender training, but would need to be used on an ice surface.

For a shooter, PuckServer is especially useful when paired with Training Ice. In fact, you're going to want to have some sort of plastic sheet - Training Ice or another - to get the most utility out of PuckServer. If you were using the product on a coarse driveway surface, it would not work as well.

On the minus side, PuckServer is expensive. It essentially replaces the old drill of lining up 15 pucks and shooting them in succession. While I prefer the convenience and utility of PuckServer, \$150 might be tough for some families to handle.

I also would like to see PuckServer enhanced so that pucks are more consistently delivered to a player's stick without having to be settled. This will most faithfully recreate in-game conditions.

But if you're looking for a good shooter development aid, PuckServer is definitely worth a look.