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PICKPOCKET

“. . . and I want Charlie, Simon and Gabriel as the other line. We only have about ten minutes for a scrimmage — but too much drilling dulls the senses. We need to put some of this stuff into action.” Clark blasted his whistle. “Line ’em up, boys.”

Simon tapped Charlie on the shin pads. “Let’s wheel and have some fun.”

“Sounds good to me,” Charlie said. He could tell Simon loved to play, and that he was never happier than when a coach announced a scrimmage, even a short one. He knew because he was the same way.

“This is our puck,” Gabriel said, joining them as they skated to centre for the faceoff. “Careful of neutral zone turnovers — and we go hard on the forecheck.”

Savard’s line was out against them. Richard was on the left, and a kid named Tan was the right winger. The two lines were evenly matched. He knew all about Savard, and Charlie vowed to watch him all over the ice. Richard was a tough-minded player, kind of like Simon,

although maybe not quite as skillful. Tan was a bit on the small side, but his speed was a killer, easily a match for Gabriel.

Trevor dropped the puck hard and it bounced off the ice. Their sticks clashed and on the rebound Savard was able to swipe it to the boards with his forehand. Richard and Simon were on it, but Simon got there a touch faster and he flipped it back to his D, who rifled a pass across to the right defenceman. Charlie anticipated the play and curled deeply in the neutral zone and cut up just as the defenceman took the pass. The puck barely touched his stick before it was on Charlie's — a perfect pass. Savard reached in to head him off just as Simon came off the wall at a 45-degree angle. Charlie took a step and snapped a pass. He had to put it slightly behind him to avoid Savard's stick, but Simon kicked it up to his stick easily.

The right defenceman stepped up to force him, and Simon flipped the puck up high into the near corner. Gabriel let Simon continue on to force the play, and he glided in behind to add pressure. Charlie hovered up high, worried about leaving Savard alone. Simon went in hard and jarred the puck loose. Gabriel jumped on it and went behind the net. With the puck in his possession Charlie switched into offence mode and moved into the slot. Miller had told him to be confident, so . . .

The left defenceman charged at Gabriel in the corner. The left winger backhanded the puck along the boards. Charlie swept in to retrieve it, and immediately felt Savard's presence. With not much choice, Charlie

moved it back towards the blue line slowly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Simon creep in behind the net. They were set up for the cycle. Charlie didn't hesitate. He backhanded it to Simon, who took it to the other side, where Gabriel moved in to help out. Three times Charlie had the puck behind the net or along the boards, and each time he chopped it down low to a waiting linemate. It was grinding hockey, and all three forwards took some punishment, but it was also satisfying to keep the puck for so long. Finally, Charlie spotted his right defenceman open at the point and he snapped a carom pass to him along the wall.

Simon immediately crashed the net. Charlie remembered Clark's advice and the drill they'd done. Keep those feet moving, Joyce, he said to himself, and so rather than wait for the shot he charged to the slot. The defenceman faked the shot and passed it across to his partner, who let it rip from about five feet inside the blue line. Simon offered himself as a screen, so Charlie decided to camp out at the top of the crease to the goalie's left. The goalie ducked low and dropped into his butterfly. The puck bounced off his left pad and ricocheted off Charlie's skate. For a second he thought he had the short side open, until Savard lifted his stick momentarily and the left defenceman swept the puck out of danger into the corner.

Richard swooped in neatly and drove up ice. Exhausted after a hard shift, the right winger dumped it in and changed up, as did all the players on Charlie's side. On the bench, Charlie took several deep sips of

water, and passed the bottle to his linemates.

“Good effort,” he said. “We had the puck the entire shift. We’ll put one in next time.”

Simon sent a small stream of water onto the ice in a high arc. “I should’ve tipped that shot. Just missed it.”

“The D got his stick between my legs and got me off to the perimeter before the shot. I was useless. At least Charlie got close to the puck,” Gabriel said.

Charlie thought all three of them had played great. Simon and Gabriel had worked like monsters on the boards, cycling the puck, and the shot was right on. If Savard had been half a second slower, Charlie would have scored. They were so hard on themselves, but it was in a good way. It fired him up to work even harder. He turned his attention to the game. The play raged back and forth at a tremendous pace. He found himself getting antsy watching — he had to get back out there!

Soon enough the centre signalled a change and Charlie hurled himself over the boards. Jake had the puck in his own end, curling in front of his net, moving slowly. Charlie went straight at him, figuring he’d be tired at the end of a long shift. Jake saw him and looked to his right to pass to his winger, so Charlie held his stick out to intercept. That changed Jake’s mind and he swerved back to his left, one hand on the stick, driving hard for open ice.

Charlie had the advantage of being well rested, and he was able to double back and swing his stick as Jake crossed the blue line. He caught a piece of the puck, and it hopped over Jake’s stick. The two defencemen had

spread out wide to give Jake an outlet, which meant Charlie had an unobstructed lane to the net. Charlie kicked it forward with his right foot and brought the bouncing puck under control by tapping the top of the puck with the bottom of his blade.

The goalie immediately came out, crouched low, his glove held out wide a little over waist level. His name was Theodore; lightning quick and fearless, he loved to challenge shooters on breakaways, and he was very difficult to beat on a deke. His only weakness was his height. Not the tallest kid, he could be beaten upstairs. Both defencemen were charging to close the gap, so he didn't have too much time. Charlie dragged the puck behind his back foot, feinted to his backhand and then took a step to his left as if he wanted to deke stickside. The goalie backed up, ready to drop into the butterfly.

"Perfect," Charlie thought. He pulled the puck towards his skates with the tip of his stick and snapped a forehand to the top corner. The goalie had given him too much net, and the puck flew over his arm and in.

Charlie curled back to his end, stick across his knees. It was only a scrimmage, so he wasn't going to make a big deal over a goal, although it felt awesome to pick Jake's pocket. In fact, he saw Clark speaking to Jake against the boards. Jake was looking at the ice, nodding occasionally. Maybe that would shut him up.

Gabriel and Simon held out their hands and he high-fived them.

"That's the way to forecheck," Gabriel said. "Let's keep getting on them real quick."

Charlie rapped his shin pads with his stick and lined up for the draw. Savard came out for Jake.

“That’s almost two goals in two shifts,” Savard said to Charlie. “Take it easy. You’re making us look bad.”

That was typical J.C. He always made it seem like everyone else was amazing and he was just an average player. Charlie had played against him enough this past year to know he was capable of scoring two goals on any shift if the other team wasn’t careful.

“This time Gabriel’s gonna score, so don’t worry about me,” Charlie said, to his right winger.

“I thought I was gonna get two?” Gabriel said.

“Can we play some hockey already?” Richard growled.

Clark obliged, dropping the puck. Savard showed he was ready by winning the draw back to the right D. Charlie scolded himself for losing the draw so easily. He hadn’t been focused and Savard made him look bush.

He forechecked, one hand on his stick to take away the inside lane, waving it side to side slightly to make it harder to pass. The defenceman was smart and only faked the inside move, hitting Savard with a pass in the seam about six feet from the boards. Simon left his man to force Savard, who deftly flicked the puck over Simon’s stick to Richard. The burly winger took three powerful strides over centre and dumped it into the opposite corner for his left winger.

Charlie hustled to cover Savard. But he wasn’t the easiest guy to keep in check. He took off without warning to the left side and before Charlie could get there

the puck was on his stick, courtesy of a sharp pass from the winger who had outraced the defender to the corner. Savard threw on the brakes at the hash marks, with his back to Charlie, as his teammates streamed into the zone. Charlie felt good, however. He had Savard trapped against the wall, and there wasn't much he could do.

He couldn't have been more wrong. Savard whirled towards the blue line with the puck on his forehand and snapped a pass down low to the left winger who had managed to sneak past the defenceman. The winger one-timed it across the crease to Richard, and the puck was in before Charlie or any of his teammates could move.

Charlie slapped the ice with his stick. "We were supposed to score," he said to Savard in admiration.

"That wouldn't be fair," he replied good-naturedly, as he skated to the net to congratulate Richard.

It was a different Charlie Joyce who lined up for the faceoff this time. Corey had said it all: You can't take a shift off. This time he blocked Savard's stick, and knocked the puck with his forehand to the boards close to his right defenceman.

In a repeat of the previous play, Savard forechecked and Charlie took a short pass from his defencemen. He spun and headed up ice, crossing the red line before firing it into the corner for Simon. He corralled the rolling puck and ringed it around the wall to Gabriel. Charlie followed the play intently, looking for an open seam. Gabriel didn't hesitate. He took the puck, drove hard

back behind the net, and cut into the front of the net past a startled defencemen. The goalie dropped to his knees and pressed up against the post.

That wasn't a problem for Gabriel. He pulled the puck back a fraction and flipped it up under the crossbar, before taking a late hit. He spun to the ice on his knees and popped back up seemingly in one motion.

Charlie marvelled at his right winger's skills. What a goal — truly worthy of the highlight reel. As they lined up for the faceoff, Charlie noticed Savard was dead serious for the draw this time, as were all the players. Lesson learned by everyone: don't take a shift off or the puck's in your net.

Charlie leaned into Savard and inched his stick forward in anticipation of Clark dropping the puck.