



Off Season Camps and Clinics

January is the time to start thinking about off season skills programs and camps for your players. As a coach you may want to share some ideas and thoughts about the subject with the parents of the players on your team. I get numerous inquiries each year from parents wanting to know what is the best program for their child. Since there is no best program to develop hockey playing abilities, each family needs to evaluate what works best for their family in the context of their child's age, ability and interest levels. Below I have tried to shed some light on the subject.

There are so many off season programs available in Minnesota and around the country that a player could spend most every day in the spring, summer and fall training for hockey. In fact, there are so many options that they are overwhelming for many parents. In order to help separate the wheat from the chaff, I offer several considerations to help a parent evaluate what a player might want to consider.

- 1) Age of the player?
- 2) Interest level of the player?
- 3) The skill level of the player?
- 4) How do these programs fit into the family time and finances?

The age of the player is quite important. Extensive research has determined that there are several developmental stages a player moves through as he/she grows older. Each stage is important and should not be skipped if a player is to reach his or her potential. Use these guidelines:

Under10/Squirts: Very limited off season hockey camps. At this age kids need to be playing many different sports as they all contribute to overall athleticism and provide a well rounded athletic experience. Camps/clinics at this level should be focused on developing skating techniques and puck handling skills. Three times a week for two or three weeks in the summer is plenty.

Under12/Pee Wees: At this level more skill work and a wide variety of small area competitive games to begin developing on ice vision and learning how to read and react to common reoccurring situations of the game. This requires patient coaches who will let the game teach the game. Off ice training should focus on agility, balance and core strength using body weight only as resistance. Baseball, lacrosse and soccer are great complements to hockey.

Under14/Bantams: This is the level that players begin to learn how to play the game. They have (or have not) learned the fundamental skills they need to begin to play

the game instinctively. At this level more small area competitive games are valuable and where possible 3 on 3 games in smaller rinks are fun and help with transitions and quickness. Off ice training should focus on strength building but each player must have a program that is individually designed based on his or her level of physical maturity. One size definitely does not fit all in this category.

15 and above: As players move into this stage and beyond they must focus on strength and power in their skating, upper body strength and quickness. Playing full ice competitive games is important for their development at this stage.

The second point of consideration is whether the player really wants to do to attend a summer hockey camp. Time away from the game is highly recommended by experts in child development. In the non-traditional hockey states the season begins in August so summer camp should perhaps be limited to a week and the rest of the summer spent doing other activities. A parent must really be sure that their child wants to attend a camp or skills program. Often times they feel pressured to attend but would rather be involved in other activities.

Point three is skill level. Top level players seem to find top camps and programs that will help them develop. A one or two week camp will not make an average player a top level player. Be realistic about the player's abilities and what you want from a camp.

The fourth point is making sure that the off season camps fit into your family plans and finances. You can spend a considerable amount of money on camps that might be better spent elsewhere.

Once you have determined that a camp or skill program is something you want to do then you will want to select the type of camp/program that fits your player. Programs and camps mentioned below are examples of the many fine camps that are available and this is not meant to be an endorsement of the camps but merely a starting point for parents and players when considering what to participate in the off season.

Residence Camps: These camps are typically run at college locations or prep schools where housing is available for the campers. They offer one week sessions that normally consist of a practice session in the morning and a game in the evening. During the middle of the day there are other activities or dry land training sessions. Coaches are typically high school or college coaches and players. Some camps are all hockey related and some mix hockey and more typical summer camp activities.

Day Camps: These camps are run by high school coaches in Minnesota and college or AAA staffs in other parts of the country. In Minnesota the old STP model which evolved into hockey school is typically run for skaters in the school district. These camps generally run for 6 weeks and include on and off ice training. Many of these are 5 day a week commitments. Out state Minnesota and other parts of the country run day camps that are shorter in duration. These will cover all age groups.

Skills Clinics/camps: The Turcotte stick handling camps and GDI goaltending camps are operated all over the country. Most hockey areas also have skating camps to work on proper skating techniques and developing strides. Some of these are one week camps and some can be attended for longer periods of time. In Minnesota Rob Stauber coaches goaltenders from all over the country, Diane Ness teaches Power Skating and former Minnesota Gopher and LA Kings forward Scott Bjugstad teaches proper shooting techniques. Most hockey areas have similar skill specific programs available.

Off Ice Training: This is an important component for the serious player. It needs to be age specific but today's game requires strength and agility combined with speed and multi tasking abilities. This can be developed off ice. Players of all ages and abilities can benefit from a well designed off ice program. In Minnesota, Total Hockey, Acceleration Minnesota and the Herb Brooks Training Center are three examples of the types of programs available. Players all over the country can easily find a local facility to spend time working out. Mike Hartman at www.hockeycoach.com offers an on line customized training program for players and there are numerous similar programs available on the internet.

It is important that parents remember that "player development" is a big time big money business in this country. Coach to player ratios are typically 10 or 15 players to one coach. The lower the number of skaters to each coach is best. The on ice coaches may or may not be skilled at teaching the skills that your child needs at that particular stage of their development.

Back to the original question of which camp or skills program is right for each player? I think that if you use the age category recommendations above you are well on the way to establishing some common sense into your child's program.

Residence and overnight camps are very popular for the older players. They usually have a strong on ice component or a strong off ice component. It is uncommon to find a camp that offers both. Therefore a parent must decide what their objective is for the summer camp. Some camps offer mostly skill based activities and some offer more competitive playing opportunities. Some offer many other recreational opportunities like swimming, and more typical summer camp experience. The best way to figure out what a camp offers is to check out their websites and then talk to players who have attended the camps. Younger players prefer to go with teammates and friends. The downside to these camps is that they are typically only for one or two weeks and it is hard to add much in the way of skill development in just a week or two.

Day camps are available in many areas in Minnesota and around the country. Typically these are 3 or 4 times a week for 6 weeks and will include on ice and off ice training activities. The downside to these camps is that they consume a big part of the summer break as they can require as much as 5 hours a day and overlap with other sports and family vacations.

Skills programs are available nearly year around. These include on ice skating instruction, on and off ice shooting instruction, and a variety of off ice training programs. These can be excellent as they focus on one type of activity and can often times be scheduled over longer periods of time to reinforce and enhance development. Off ice training for U14/bantam and above is very beneficial.

Finding Camps & Clinics: Most camps have a website that explains their philosophy and schedule. If you Google Hockey camps, MN for example to find camps in Minnesota you will get plenty of camps to review. For those of you that live in other states simple replace MN with your state.

USA Hockey also has some excellent advice and recommendations for training young players. You can find an article about summer training in the USA Hockey Magazine. Cut and past the link below.

http://usahockeymagazine.com/story.php?left_nav=0708&article=playbook0708&right_nav=normal . This article discusses several summer training exercises that players can do at home easily and inexpensively. This article and many others are available in the USA Hockey Magazine section of the USA Hockey website.

The Bottom Line: There are no shortcuts to success and training programs alone will not create the player. Each individual has a finite potential in regards to skill acquisition and their eventual ability to play the game. Learning to shoot well requires shooting tens of thousands of pucks in the driveway. Shooting instruction at a clinic will help but a player still needs to shoot pucks to develop the skills. Skating at an elite level requires practice, instruction and strength which is developed over thousands of hours of off and on ice activities. Camps and skills programs are very valuable when used in conjunction with the work a players does on their own. There is a difference between being a hockey player and merely playing hockey.

In Closing: Hockey is the greatest game on earth and it does require lots of skills to play well. Very few youngsters ever learn to play at an elite level but they do enjoy the game, friendships and experiences they have over the years. Off season camps are part of the experiences and memories that kids carry for the rest of their lives. When you are selecting off season camps, be sure to balance the having fun part of the camp with the hockey experience.

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