



Prepare to Win the Last Game

Winning the last game of your season is a terrific team goal. Preparing to win the last game is a roadmap to guide the coaches, players and parents. As coaches prepare their season plan they need to address development needs, competitive needs and individual player needs of which combine to determine the final outcome for the season.

Once the season begins many coaches feel rushed or pressured to prepare for the first few games or tournament in order to get their teams off on a winning track. In an effort to build the winning record important development and learning opportunities maybe sacrificed. This is especially true with many of our large association programs where winning every game is an expectation. If a coach has a good season plan and communicates it to the players and parents some of the pressure can be relieved. It is important to communicate the plan early and then often to the players and parents.

Youth players need development time during practice. This is time spent working on skating, puck handling/passing, and shooting skills. Some of the time spent on these skills need to be done slowly and with an emphasis on correct technique with correction offered by coaches. Skating development should be a consistent element of practice with a focus on knee bend, stride length, quick starts and transitions. Puck handling and passing require lots of repetition at slow speeds gradually increasing as competency improves. A season plan would have a considerable amount of time allocated in practice to these skills early in the season. As the season progresses more time can be spent on system types of activities however the skill development activities need to be part of every practice session all season long.

Playing good competition is also an important part of development. Game competition is the measuring stick for how well the players can utilize their skills under pressure. Coaches need to make sure that they schedule games outside of their District play that will challenge their players to perform well. The issue here is not to over schedule games because there needs to be a balance between development and application. Additionally, most injuries occur during games. The more games played the higher the likelihood of players suffering injuries during the season. A season with 90 games versus a schedule with 45 games significantly increases the probability of injuries. Too many practices or too many games, even if winning, is not appropriate for the long term development needs of the players nor for the winning the last game of the year. Find the right balance for the age player you are coaching.

Winning the last game or perhaps peaking at the end of the season requires good planning by the coaching staff from a scheduling point of view and having the right focus throughout the season. In a recent conversation with one of my former assistant coaches he told me how distressed his pee wee players were after losing a close game. He went on to say that the message to the players in the locker room was that it was OK. He told them they played hard and so did the other team. On that night the puck bounced the other way but it was early in the season and the coaches saw some things they need to work on to improve and there were a couple special teams' situations that they had not covered yet. He reminded them that playoffs do not start until mid February. Messages like this help players gain perspective and retain the proper focus.

The final piece in preparing to win the last game is individual player needs. By this I mean needs away from the rink. Youth players have many needs in order to perform well on and off the ice. The primary needs are rest and sleep. This is especially true for the Bantam/U14 age players who are all growing very quickly as they move through puberty and need nine hours of sleep every night. They typically skate late, often and hard. Then they have to go to school with only six hours of sleep. Over the course of four months of 7 days a week hockey they will not be ready to play their best game at the end of the season. They may have built an impressive win loss record during the season but are worn out at the end. Physically and mentally tired players do not improve nor do they achieve on the ice or in the classroom. Giving kids an extra day off every other week and even an entire weekend off each month will help insure that your players are still focused and rested at the end of the season when the games really count.

In conclusion, having a good season plan that takes into account the individual development needs, team competitive needs, and personal player needs will help insure that your team will have the best chance of peaking at season end and maybe they will win the last game.

If you only prepare to win the next game you most likely will not win the last game.

See you around rink...

Hal Tearse
Coach in Chief, Minnesota Hockey
November 2008