



Read and React

As coaches we are constantly talking to our players about read and react skills and time and space. As adults, we understand what these mean as they are conceptual ideas. Young players even through bantams do not have the conceptual skills that adults possess, so we might as well be talking to the wall most of the time. Because we talk about this so much I wanted to get opinions from other knowledgeable hockey people and see if I could distill it down so a youth coach can help their players get better at playing the game. Several of the responses from other coaches are in the newsletter. I will add more thoughts to this in the June newsletter. This is my take on the subject. There are also some excellent video sections on this subject in the Hockey Canada Skills DVD packet. You can order the set at http://www.hockeycanada.ca/index.cfm/ci_id/16057/la_id/1.htm .

The areas that keep coming up are passion, skills, game like situations, small area games, fewer games and more opportunities to learn, over coaching, coaching to win, competitive situations and common reoccurring situations. This is a pretty inclusive list and I would like to address each of these areas as they apply to youth hockey coaches.

PASSION: Passion could be described as a burning desire to participate and get better. Some players have it and some do not. Coaches can have a very positive impact on young players by encouraging them and insuring that the playing environment is positive at all times. Locker room speeches that are punitive and negative to young players after a loss will kill the passion. Having some of them sit on the bench most of time during games will also extinguish any passion that might have existed. Encouragement of players even when they fail is essential to helping them build passion for hockey. Encouraging them to watch the game on television and in person will help

develop passion for the game. Mostly, if the players have fun they have a chance at becoming passionate about the game.

Skills: At the higher levels we talk about making choices or decisions in a split second. The puck carrier has several options to choose from and needs to select one. If the players do not have good skating or puck handling skills the options available are limited. It is essential that players develop great skating and puck handling skills so that they are able to execute the skills required to be successful. Youth coaches need to spend most of their time in skill development situations during practices. Good ice utilization and many repetitions are essential for the players to reach their potential.

GAME LIKE SITUATIONS: Practicing situations that occur in games at game like intensity will help players develop. For instance, a 3 on 3 down low drill will simulate a game like situation especially when you place a time limitation on the drill. Better yet a 3 on 2 down low drill or 4 on 3. These drills force the players on both side of the puck to react to the situation confronting them. Rather than instructing them how to play these situations discuss options with them and encourage them to seek multiple solutions. This is critical for the players who support the puck.

Timing drills that emphasize the idea that the non puck carrying players need to move into areas that will provide options to the puck carrier are very important. Canadian Hockey concepts emphasize the ideas of taking ice and saving ice. In our language it means slowing down and speeding up so that one arrives at the right spot at the right time and if the puck does not arrive then continuing to another spot that supports the puck carrier. These concepts need to be introduced to players with specific drills that teach players how to save ice and take ice so that they arrive at the pass reception area (PRA) at the right time.

SMALL AREA GAMES: Small area games are an effective tool to help insure players are forced to play in confined areas. I have concluded over the past several years that these are best when one team has a numerical advantage and forces the other team to react accordingly. Changing the numerical strength during the drill also forces players to react to the changes. For example start with an in zone 1 on 1 and then add one player to create a

2-1 for 10 seconds. Then add two players to the other side to create a 3-2. Then add a third to the first team and take one from the second team and you have reversed the situation. Then remove players until you are back to 1 on 1. The entire sequence should take about 45 seconds and has utilized 6 skaters and a goalie. Even strength situations may not result in the situations developing that you may want to emphasize. When using these types of games make sure you know what the drill is teaching. It is also a good idea to make sure your players understand the purpose of the game. A complete booklet on small area games is available in the coaches resource center at www.minnesotahockey.org

FEWER GAMES AND MORE OPPORTUNITES TO LEARN: It is essential that young players get lots of ice time doing activities that will help them improve and have fun. A *minimum 2-1 practice to game ratio* for pee wees and below are essential to development. Practice needs to involve many skill based activities including scrimmaging and game like opportunities. An idea I favor is for two teams to practice together and spend much of the practice on skills based drills, move to strategic and situational drills and finish with a cross ice game. Ideally, the players mix up and have an opportunity to compete in drills against the players from the other team. They also would run drills with players from the other team. Practice jerseys instead of game jerseys work better. A youth team with only 17 players, if they all show up, is barely enough players to run a comprehensive practice. If you double the number of players and coaches, have a good practice plan, and make it competitive, you will have a great practice session at half the cost. Everybody wins, especially the players.

Associations should also be encouraged to provide open hockey sessions for players of all ages through out the winter. Coaches need to encourage their players to go to these skating opportunities where the players make the rules and kids of all ages play together. Outdoor hockey indoors. An hour of this type of play is the equal of 4 games of youth hockey.

OVER COACHING: Adults tend to over coach the players especially during games. I believe that it is a good policy to coach hard during practice and then let the players play the game. Yes, during games you need to help them make adjustments, occasionally wake up a slow moving players, and sometimes re focus the group. In general the best approach during games is conversational and interactive regarding what the player saw and asking what other options the player felt were available. Players who receive

constant criticism during games are afraid to play for fear of making a mistake. Those players rarely move on and the coach is to blame.

Click on this link to see a fun video clip that speaks to this point.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HhE1qXOeD7g> Relax, It is Just A Game.

COACHING TO WIN: I have had former players tell me that they learned how to win playing on teams I have coached. Winning is a skill and an attitude. Winning attitudes can be taught by the words and actions of a coach. I had to reflect on the past teams those players were on and they were quite successful, but not among the best teams I have coached. I recently asked one of those players what he meant and how many games did we win? He told me that he had no idea how many games we won 25 years ago but he does remember that he learned how to win. We talked more and he commented about fairness in the treatment of all players, no short benches, and a sense of team. He felt that all players were valued and contributed to the overall team effort every night and that every player contributed. My personal belief is that the players learn the things they need to win at practice and apply those skills when the games arrive. The bottom line is that the game belongs to the players. Youth coaches who run short benches, constantly change individual players, run power play units and penalty kill units are coaching for themselves and their own ego. Done correctly a coach can give the team a chance to win by proper deployment of players. By relegating players to the bench on a regular basis destroys team moral and does psychological damage to all of the players. You may win the battle or the title, but you will lose the war. Hockey is a team game and everybody on the team needs to play. We are developing young people and hockey is the classroom.

COMPETITIVE SITUATIONS AND COMMON RE-OCCURRING

SITUATIONS: At the base level hockey is a 1 on 1 game that evolves into 2 on 1 situations and then to 2 on 1 situations with several options for the puck carrier. Cycling is a good example of creating 2 on 1 a situation out of 1 on 1 and developing movement patterns that help to sustain the attack. Practicing in competitive situations helps players perform under pressure as they develop a comfort level with the pressure. Maybe the most important thing a coach can do after individual skill development is provide a steady diet of common re occurring situations and offer multiple solutions to those situations. An example is a 1 on 1 zone entry. The puck carrier has several choices to make depending on how the defender reacts to the threat. The

puck carrier's options are a function of the skills that player has in order to execute the variety of moves. If a second attacker is added and a 2 on 1 created, more options are presented. Young players need to have thousands of repetitions of these basic situations that occur over and over again. 1 on 1, 2 on 1, 2 on 2, 3 on 2, criss cross plays, cut backs, hooks, chips, back passes etc. all need to be practice over and over so that they become instinctive when the game arrives. No time to think, just play.

CLOSING THOUGHT: Read and react is merely the recognition of a situation that a player has seen thousands of times and a learned response based on experience. We call it Hockey Sense.

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