



The Real Value of a Coach

With the culmination of the Winter Olympics we are once again reminded that the North American model of player development is out of date. Our focus on winning games robs our kids of the opportunities to learn to love the game for the sake of playing, and we certainly short change them in the skill development area. This is not new information and to fill the gap the for-profit sector has spawned countless programs and skill development programs. This places the responsibility of skill development into the hands of each parent to seek out and then pay for the development opportunities. Perhaps this is how it should be but the cost eliminate many players along the way.

The process to develop highly skilled players is well known and yet we refuse to acknowledge our failings instead falling back on yep you guessed it, playing more games. Games are easy for coaches. Yell at the players, yell at the officials, and decide who plays and who does not. In spite of what we would like to believe, on game day we really have only a limited impact on the outcome of the games.

The real value of a coach is at practice. This is where our kids learn the game and the skills they need to play it at the next level. Teaching skills requires having some to start with, being able to evaluate what skills your players have and then designing effective and compelling practices to help the players acquire new skills. In other words, to be an effective coach requires planning, organization, and imagination. Coaching takes serious effort and time. If we take short cuts as coaches, our players will take short cuts and eventually they will get cut, perhaps sooner than they would if their youth coaches provided the proper development programs.

These observations are also not new and certainly not the first time they have appeared in publication here or in other esteemed hockey journals. Coaches per se are also not to blame. Our entire structure of hockey with a

focus on high school hockey as the pinnacle is to blame along with the multitudes of egocentric parents who have transformed a kid's game into a family recreational activity. Games are more fun for the family than practices. The reality is that this will not change due a lack of leadership in youth hockey at the State level and more importantly at the local levels.

As coaches you can make a difference, You can impose strict practice to game ratios, design fun and effective practices, and educate the parents on the real lessons to be learned playing hockey. Games are important, do not get me wrong on that issue, but they need to be in the proper balance with well designed practices, some cross ice activities and plain old "sticks in the middle" unstructured play.

While your players are off at specialty camps and doing their off season training, coaches should also be spending time learning to be better coaches. There are literally hundred of videos and books about coaching hockey and about coaching in general. Minnesota Hockey has eight skills videos and they are free by asking your District Coach in Chief. The USA Hockey CEP classes are required and many have outstanding presentations. You might consider attending another one, without registering, to see if there are some new ideas you could incorporate during the up coming season.

As coaches our season are never over. The off season is a time to recharge, plan, and learn. Have a great off season.

Hal Tearse
Minnesota Hockey Coach in Chief
March 2006