



Thoughts from the Master

Ludek Bukac, from the Czech Republic, is one of the great hockey minds in the game today. At 70 years old he has spent the last 50 years playing, coaching and studying the game. He coached the Czech National team in 10 World Championships and 5 Olympics. I met Ludek in Prague, CZ four years ago and again in Rochester, New York at the USA hockey National Coaches Symposium this past summer. I would like to share with you some of his thoughts and observations regarding the development of hockey players. These are not in any specific order and I will make some comments and observations in italics where appropriate.

After age 15 players need to develop game skills. The only way to do that is for players to play. A good example is the recent success that the Austrian National Team has experienced as their players have had an opportunity to compete at a high level for several years. *(Before age 15 the Europeans have a 4 or 5 practice to game ratio. Having the third line sit on the bench most of the time during games also does not do anything for them as players. It is interesting that at the time when young players are most receptive to development we are busy playing games and when they are at the age where they are most receptive to developing game skills(16 and older) most have quit playing. I also find it interesting that we have game limits for mite, squirts, high school, college and professional hockey in Minnesota but not pee wees or bantams).*

Coaches need to manage the individual training needs of their players. Practices should be structured with game like situations that are linked to individual skills and development. The object is to harness the individual skills to achieve the desired outcomes.

Internalization of skills is the development of skills so that they become instinctive and allow a player to then adapt according to the situation. Jaromir Jager is a good example. Jagr is a left shot and normally comes up the right side of the rink. He essentially has only two moves. He has a forehand deke to the backhand and then one variation of that move. He adapts the precise use of the move to the situation. *(By mastering one move he can then focus on reading his opponents and reacting to the situations he is facing).*

Learn to play in various parts of the rink, for instance in the corners or behind the net. *(Use creative drills that simulate game pressure in this areas).*

Ambiguity is problem solving or finding solutions to specific situations. This requires decision making skills and viewing each challenge as a problem to be solved. The American notion of ambiguity is not well defined. *(To be more specific, one on one zone entry is a problem that needs to be solved by the attacker and the defender. The attacker has the advantage however yet rarely finds creative solutions to the problem and will take what is given without thought to creating opportunities).*

Perhaps one of the primary skills to problem solving (ambiguity) is change in lateral motion. In order to develop lateral motion players need coordination of legs and arms and a whole host of resources including power, speed & fitness. Rhythm plus inertia = energy needed. *(In order to develop these attributes requires lots of practice with a focus on development of lateral movement).*

Head coaches need to be experienced in order to be effective. They need to know their players and be able to work well with them individually and collectively. The assistant coaches need to be able to configure the exercises/drills in order to improve the skills of the individual players.

Associated Training is the process of practicing where the player adapts to the pace and the by product is fitness. *(rather than skate herbies or killers design your practices around individual skill and team skill elements that push the pace to game speed. Allow for adequate rest between work elements and your players will be in good game shape without the drudgery of “conditioning drills”).*

Ultimization is the mastery of skills that allows the freedom to create. *(This is a simple concept but to achieve ultimization takes years of development and focus plus the correct training & practice environment to achieve skill mastery).* **Practices need to be customized to the individual players needs not the collective needs.**

“Puckhandling skills plus skating skills are the key to success”

Some comments from me: The hockey federations in Europe are top down organizations where training and practices, number of games, and coaching programs are regulated at the federation level. In North America we do not have professional coaches until the college level which by that time 90 plus percent of our players have quit playing. In the USA youth hockey coaches are mostly volunteers with a wide range of coaching abilities, time and interest. To become a high quality coach requires many skills and years to learn. One quality that is very helpful is a desire to improve as a coach and to become more effective for your players. The ideas and concepts outlined by Ledek Bukac are the result of decades of study and coaching. He has refined the ideas to a few key areas that we can focus on in order to make our players better. Explore with some new ideas and approaches to your practice routines. Think about the ideas presented above and see if you can incorporate some of them into your team plan for the season. The success of the players you coach depend on you and what you teach them.

Hal Tearse
Coach in Chief, Minnesota Hockey
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