

Mental Toughness

Creating and Maintaining the Edge

We often hear that the game outcomes depend on 10 % skill and 90 % mental toughness. Clearly, we know that goaltending can have significant impact on outcomes. That being said the team that can consistently make good decisions with and without the puck should be successful. The coach that gets off the bus with the more skilled players should win. We know that this is not the case. The team that is the most prepared, works the hardest, and makes the fewest mistakes in critical areas of the ice usually wins. Hard work, discipline and preparation will “trump” a team that just tries to out skill you.

Assuming you accept the above premise, why do most coaches spend most if not all the practice time working on physical skills and concepts? Most coaches do not spend adequate time training players to be mentally tough. There have been a number of articles written on preparing athletes to be mentally tough; most are very technical and speak in terms unfamiliar to the average hockey coach. I will try to minimize the “psycho babble”.

The difference between the best and the rest is often between the ears

*The most powerful force in an athlete's life is not skill;
it is their **attitude** and their **mental toughness***

The players' mental preparation starts with the coach. Do the players clearly understand the coach's philosophy and the team objectives? Do the players understand and accept their role on the team? Understanding these things certainly reduces and possibly removes uncertainty from the players. If the players know, the coach's philosophy and team objectives they can better understand how and where they fit. Clearly, philosophy and objectives will vary with age level and team classification. For example, is the coach win centered (game driven) or is he more athlete centered (skill development). Is the team's primary objective to win championships or prepare players for the next level? Sometimes coaches are either one or the other, but typically, the objectives modify as the season progresses. Younger teams are, or should be, more focused on development and preparing players to compete at the next level. Skill development should always be an objective but Tier I midget and junior teams may be more outcome based particularly in the last third of their season. If players understand the team philosophy, it significantly reduces anxiety and does not become a distraction.

Players do not perform well if they are fearful of making mistakes. I used to think that the team that makes the most mistakes would typically lose. A few years ago, Ben Smith who was coaching the national women team told me “hockey is a game of mistakes, where the mistake is made is more important than the number. He also told me “typically the team that makes the most mistakes is the more creative and is playing to win. The team that concentrates on making

the fewest mistakes is typically playing not to lose and is vulnerable”. If we want players to play hard and be creative, we must create an environment that allows them to make decisions – hopefully more good than bad. One way of reducing negative thoughts from a player is to communicate with each player using positive terms. After coaching for over 35 years, I know this is a challenge for most of us. However, try to deliver your message by telling them what they can and should do rather than telling them what not to do. Any statement you begin with the words “do not” or “can not” can be re-worded by telling what you want them to do. For example: “do not pass the puck through traffic in danger zones – can be delivered by saying - “pass the puck with a purpose, make high percentage – low risk passes particularly in danger zones - avoid turnovers”. Another simple example: “do not be late” can be replaced by “be on time or be early”.

Positive “self-talk” is another strategy I have used to help players keep positive thoughts. I give each player, by position, a sheet with positive words or phrases. I ask them to read them often. Where possible post them in their respective lockers. Goaltenders – square to puck, challenge shooter, out and big, focus, etc; Forwards – drive to net, protect puck, win battles, compete, quick release, miss goaltender, etc; Defensemen – narrow gap, stick on puck, D-side positioning, control body, head on swivel, first pass transition, etc. Positive self-talk and visualizing success can be very effective. Prior to the game, ask players to visualize making the right play or the great play. Visualization should always be positive.

Coaches and players often struggle with matching a player’s potential with the player’s actual performance. Early in a player’s career and even early in a season the gap between potential and actual performance is large. Our challenge is to close the gap so that actual performance matches potential on a consistent basis. For a player to perform to his capabilities the player should consistently exhibit the following characteristics: enjoyment, confidence, discipline, commitment, determined, positive, and focused yet relaxed. These characteristics will empower the player to perform their potential.

Mentally tough players have the ability to push talent and skills to the limit. Mentally tough players consistently are:

1. Flexible – deal with distractions, remain calm, and exhibit the positive emotions mentioned earlier.
2. Responsive – do not withdraw or sulk when things get tough, remain alert, and engaged in the practice/game.
3. Strong – stay in contest no matter what,
4. Resilient – does not dwell on mistakes – learns from them and then moves on.

At the older (post-pubic) classifications, physical conditioning has an impact on mental toughness. When the physical demand exceeds the athletes’ level of conditioning the athletes performance will rapidly decline. De-hydration also contributes to making mental mistakes.

Players should drink water during practices and games – they should drink before they are thirsty.

Reducing or removing distractions allows players to focus on the tasks. In today's world of cell phones, face book twitter, i-pods, etc the distractions can be formidable. The best way to minimize distractions is to establish routines.

Locker Room

- Players' place

- Take pride in the room – clean, neat, and safe

- Inspirational messages

- Seating with a purpose

Practice

- Lesson plans – coach's preparation increases player confidence

- Practice like a Champion – objectives, outcomes and consequences

- Create stress, confusion and chaos – how do the players react?

- Create situations – up a goal, down goal, pull goaltender

- Players will not rise to the level of competition – they will fall to the level of training

Pre-game

- Establish rules/routines

 - Dress code

 - Arrival time

 - Music – rules when played, when turned off

 - Stretch

 - Meetings – coaches should be very brief. Make salient points do not lecture.

- Visualization – positive thinking

- Dynamic team stretch

- On Ice warm up should have some jump – good warm up leads to good start.

Game

- Maintain discipline and focus – stay off the referees and each other

- Confident – Positive do not dwell on mistakes

- Coach communicate clearly – think ahead do not over coach – coach's job is to get the right players on the ice at the right time

Post-game

- Control emotions – stay calm win or loose

- Remain positive – talk about things done well

- Discuss mistakes during next practice – immediately following the game things are never as good or as bad as you may think – allow time to discuss with assistants, review tape, and cool down.

I have just scratched the surface on this complex yet important topic. To help improve the mental toughness of your players you can utilize team building exercises, conduct "fire drill

practices, establish routines, utilize goal setting sessions, conduct positive communication strategies and perhaps above all create an atmosphere where your players will play without fear of making mistakes.

Al Bloomer
USA Hockey Director Emeritus