



by Lyle Phair



## TRYING OUT

The month of March might be one of the most interesting and entertaining times of the year to be in a hockey rink. Not necessarily just because of what is happening on the ice either. It's tryout time and the arena lobbies are filled with kids, hockey bags, registration tables and anxious, coffee-sipping parents looking to find a home. At least until next March.

It's a little like spring training in baseball and draft day for the Lions. Hope springs eternal. The slate has been wiped clean and everything starts anew. There are no losing streaks or last place in the standings. Only promise and promises, some kept, some not.

The cast of characters is the same at virtually every tryout. The players come in all shapes and sizes and mental states. Many of them are nervous, although some are over-confident with a dash of cocky mixed in. Some look downright overwhelmed or intimidated, appearing like they would rather be anywhere but there at that moment.

The parents are always interesting to observe. It's not that easy to spot the Negotiator, that guy who is always working the best deal for his player. His work is done long before the tryouts. But it is easy to pick out the Mr. Inquisitive, who starts out with one question for the coach that quickly turns into ten. Then there is Stat, who can recite his player's statistics in every offensive and defensive category since birth. Typically surrounded by the lobby's largest crowd of parents will be Scoop, who knows everything that you need to know (and plenty that you don't) about every team and every player and who is playing where and why.

Then there are the coaches. Some are all business, standoffish from the parents, checking the lobby only periodically to see who is there and who is not. Others will work the room like Bill Clinton.

### SIXTY KIDS AND FOUR SKATES

If you really think about it, the actual tryout process is inherently inefficient. We start with as many as sixty or seventy kids. We put them on the ice for 80 minutes and try to keep them all active and involved. We do that three or four times, hopefully with less kids each time. From that, we pick a team that we will have for the next year.

Is it really realistic to think that coaches can make a fair and complete evaluation of a player in three or four tryout skates? Can a coach really select a team with all of that going on with all of those players on the ice at the same time?

The answer to both is probably not. But in reality, it is the best we've got. That being said, the evaluation process really doesn't happen that way. Everybody does not start with a fresh sheet of ice and a clean comment section next to their name on the tryout list. The past is very much factored into the tryout present. It has to be. Coaches have opinions and have made judgments on players long before the tryout happens. They have formed

those thoughts and impressions based on what they have seen in games and practices and previous tryouts. They have to use every bit of information that they have in making a decision.

The players on the previous season's team will typically always have an advantage over the other players on the ice. That advantage is familiarity for the coach. The coach has the most information to work with on those players having seen them in practices and games and other situations for at least the previous year, maybe even longer.

I say typically because that familiarity might be a disadvantage to some players who might not have made a favorable impression with the coach. Or maybe the player was fine, but the parents didn't do the kid any favors with the way they handled themselves throughout the year.

In any event, coaches have had a birds-eye view for a year and all of the warts have been exposed. The challenge for a coach sometimes can be to not factor in those negatives too heavily. Who knows what lurks beneath the new stars that shine so brightly in the tryouts, players that look pretty darn good but that we don't know a whole lot about?

It can be pretty easy for a coach to cut the cord and continually bring in new blood year after year, but what does that really say about you as a coach? Ultimately, what you see is what you coached.

### THE CRYSTAL BALL

Essentially, whether they are up-front and tell you or not, most coaches have a pretty good idea of what their team will look like before the tryout even starts. They have to. They know which players from the previous team they want to keep, the ones that they might look to replace and they have a good idea who will be coming to try out.

Some coaches have gone so far as to recruit players from other teams to come play for them, a practice that I find kind of repulsive when it comes to youth hockey, but hey I guess coaches gotta do what they gotta do. Those who can't coach recruit and replace.

The actual tryout is really when the cards get dealt. People can talk all they want ahead of time about where they are going to try out and what they are doing, but until they actually do or don't show up at a tryout it really means nothing. Even then, it might not mean anything because there are some parents who run their kids around checking out tryouts to see if the team will be good enough for their player.

But attendance is the first step. Then it is up to the coach to determine whether to offer the spot or not and then up to the player again to determine if they will accept. While honesty is always the best policy on both sides of the equation it is always good practice not to take anything for granted or as the gospel until it actually happens.

### GETTING NOTICED

So how do players get noticed at a tryout if they didn't play on the previous team or the coach is not familiar with them in some other way? Is it even worth trying out? Absolutely it is. You never know where you fit or how you will do until you try it.

To get noticed players should do what they do best. Something "extraordinary" will typically get a player noticed in a large group during tryouts. Size is one of those things but that is the easy part. Then a big player needs to demonstrate that they can skate and handle the puck to play effectively at that size. Speed is another noticeable element. That will get you noticed, but you also need to show that you have the intelligence to use that speed to your advantage. There are plenty of players that skate like the wind and can cover a lot of ice but accomplish nothing.

To me skating is probably the most important skill, especially for younger players, but hockey sense is right there and becomes increasingly important as players get older. The game happens really fast and those players that make the best decisions are the ones that make the greatest positive impact for a team. Those are the players I want on my team. But they also need to have the desire to compete and they have to truly enjoy playing the game.

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