State of the Game

by Lyle Phair

DOES COMPETING AGAINST BETTER PLAYERS MAKE YOU BETTER?

Being challenged is a very important part, and a very healthy part, of every sport, and of life for that matter.

Many people, when not challenged, quickly become bored and disinterested in what they are doing. Individually, most players are not capable of really challenging themselves and have to rely on their coach to put them in situations where they are challenged.

Team-wise the only way many coaches challenge their players is by whom they are competing against. Ultimately, it's the competition that becomes the challenge. A strong opponent presents a challenge, a weak opponent probably does not.

Most parents want to make sure that their kids are challenged playing hockey. Their thinking is that if their son or daughter is on the ice with better players, they will push themselves harder to become better players themselves.

In reality, many players do play to the level of the other players on the ice. It happens all of the time. Very often, a more talented team has difficulty when playing a team that is clearly inferior in talent, yet plays up to the level of a team that is better.

PLAYING UP

Individually as well, many players tend to step up to meet the challenge presented by stronger competition. As a result, many parents try to push their kids to play up a level, in age or classification, so they are always playing against better players, and to always be challenged. Is this a good thing?

It can be. But it can also be very counter-productive in terms of a player's development. Year after year, if a player is always pushing just to keep up or be in the middle of the pack on a team, he or she is probably not developing as they could or should. While it is good that they are on the ice with better players, and are pushed to be better by their teammates and the competition, it can also hinder them.

Physically, if they are pushing themselves as hard as they can just to play at that level, they will sacrifice development just to survive. They won't experiment, they won't try new things, they will avoid their weaknesses and do only what they do best, what allows them to play.

While there is something to be said for knowing your strengths and using them to your advantage, to really develop a player also has to know his or her weaknesses and strive to make them better. If not, development will be limited.

THE CONFIDENCE TO MAKE MISTAKES

Mentally, it is a great thing to be the best, or one of the best players on the ice. It is essential to a young kid's confidence. It allows them to be creative, to try new things, to experiment and even to work on weaknesses that they might have, knowing that if they make a mistake, they will have the opportunity to get back on the ice and make up for it.

You don't improve and learn if you don't make mistakes and if you don't have the confidence to try things that might result in mistakes, your growth will be limited.

As I grew up playing the game, all age classifications were two years. It allowed you to play with older kids your first year, and most likely be one of the weaker kids on the team, as they were a little bigger and stronger and faster. You had to push yourself to keep up. But the next season, you played with some younger kids, which meant you were probably one of the stronger players. You were relied on by the team to be better, you felt confident, were put in different situations where you could try new things and develop new skills.

GRADUAL DEVELOPMENT

At the junior and college levels, my first year was a whirlwind. The game seemed so much faster, the players so much bigger, stronger and more talented. In my first few games, I always wondered how I would survive.

But you were able to develop because of the system. The first year or two you pushed yourself to keep up and just play on the third or fourth line. You learned from the juniors and seniors what it took to be the best at that level. And by the time you were a junior or senior yourself, you took on new roles, and developed the confidence to hold onto the puck longer, to play on the power play, and be on the ice in the last minute of the period.

A friend of mine, Mike Donnelly, played high school hockey in Detroit, then after a year of junior hockey walked on at Michigan State. In his first year he played minimally and scored 7 goals. His second year he played more and scored 18 goals. His third year he earned more ice time and scored 26. His senior year, he consistently played on the power play and in all key situations and scored 59 goals. That didn't happen by accident. Over the years, he gradually improved his physical and mental skills and developed his game. There wasn't a chance that he would have scored 59 goals as a freshman, even with twice the ice time he had as a senior. Ultimately, he played professionally for ten years. But if he hadn't been allowed to develop gradually, over a period of years, it would never have happened.

At the professional level, each NHL team has a minor league system where they can develop their prospects at a level where they can taste success. There isn't that much difference between a fourth line NHL'er and a first line minor leaguer.

What's important is that they are in an environment where they can be the best, play in key situations and develop completely.

NOT THE WAY WE DO IT

Many players have had their careers ruined by being rushed into situations where they had no chance to survive because they didn't have the confidence or skills to compete at that level.

In terms of development, I think we make a big mistake in the way the current A, AA and AAA system is structured in Michigan. By having age groups comprise of only one birth year, we are not allowing our players to completely develop into what they could potentially be by not allowing them to play in different situations.

Each year, for the most part, kids play against the same kids. A top player one year is a top player the next year. A third-line player one year is most often a third-line player the next year.

Sure, we develop some good players. Our top players move on to the next level. But are they really as prepared, as confident and as skilled as they could be? And couldn't we produce more "top" players by giving them all a chance to develop completely?

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Girls12U
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