

# What Does Being Coachable Mean?

## *Coaches must identify ways to help individual players get the message*

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**By Greg Bates, Special to AHAI** – When Brad Bialas first started coaching his triplet daughters when they were picking up hockey, there was quite a learning curve.

“What I quickly realized is that there’s different experiences for every player, and not every player wants to go D-I thus not every kid needs to be coached like they’re going D-I,” Bialas said.

That being said, 16-year-olds Ashley, Sydney and Sarah Bialas have taken different paths in their hockey careers. Each of the sisters has required, and desired, a slightly different curriculum plan on and off the ice.

“The first thing is for a coach to realize that the experience needs to be catered to the player’s desires, especially at the younger ages,” coach Bialas said. “*At the younger ages, we need to focus on fun, skills and having the kids leave practices and games being smiley and sweaty — not learning a left-wing lock at U10.* On the other side of that, maybe the player that has that D-I desire or national team dream but their lack of coachability might have been the biggest contributor to that player not realizing their dreams.”

Helping a kid reach his or her potential depends in large part on how they react to receiving instruction. Bialas noted that coaches need to realize that receiving guidance is hard, even for adults. He added that just like the basic skills required to play the game, coachability is a skill that coaches, players and parents need to work to develop over time.

“For me, it’s kind of frustrating when you see good talent not be able to reach their potential because they’re not coachable,” Bialas said. “That said, it’s equally refreshing to see the other side when average skills meet work ethic and coachability and you watch that player realize his or her dreams.”

Bialas, who most recently coached the Chicago Mission 14U Tier I AAA girls’ team two years ago, knows the importance of having coachable kids on a roster. *He believes the top trait of a coachable player is being open-minded and developing the skill of listening.*

“Especially as kids get a little bit older, they need to develop the skill of listening as well as being able to understand the message,” Bialas said. “Delivery of the message is also very important. Even if you deliver it as, ‘Hey, you did a couple of things good there, but we’d really like to see you improve on this.’ Some kids just aren’t capable of absorbing that kind of input, which is difficult. As a coach, I think you need to sit down with them and say, ‘Hey, what I’m going to tell you is going to be a little difficult. But it’s a good thing, because it provides a path for you to improve as a player.’”

In Bialas’ opinion, another important trait is having players understand they are part of a team.

“I’ve had situations where amazing players would listen to what you say but ignore the direction when you get back on the ice,” Bialas said. “They nod their heads to the direction and then they go out on the ice and do their own thing. That impacts the team, the team chemistry and is something that everyone watching the game can identify.”

During Bialas' time working with top Tier I players, he watched coaches try to deal with players who didn't take instruction well. ***Talented players with egos can certainly hinder the progression of that player's game as well as the team's chemistry.***

“At the higher levels, you are inevitably going to get some kids that have been so good for so long that it may be difficult to help them become coachable,” Bialas said. “Their parents, their friends, everybody's been like, ‘You are the most amazing player in the world.’ Then they show up and you say, ‘Look, you're good but you're going to go fourth line if you're not going to do any power play stuff.’ Then the parents are yelling at you, and you have to convince them that, ‘The game is bigger than you, the team is bigger than you, go play your role.’ Those are the kids that when they absorb that get the early commits [to college], because they're good kids.”

From Bialas' experiences, a player who is coachable at 6 years old will be even more receptive to feedback years down the line. However, ***a player who isn't coachable at a young age will only pose a more challenging mindset to change in the future.***

When he coached a co-ed team with his daughters, Bialas always pushed a subtle approach.

“We just had fun. If you win, you get a slushy,” Bialas said. “It was a low-stress environment — let the fun happen. Smiley and sweaty. If we won, we won. If we didn't, we didn't.”

The kids need to remember it's just a game and coaches are just trying to help them develop into the best hockey player they can be.