

The Right Team vs. Elite Team

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By Michael Caples - Special to USAHockey.com

Keeping up with the Joneses may as well be an epidemic for the hockey community.

What is he or she doing this summer to get ahead? What team is she playing on next year? Who are they working out with now?

Finding a spot on an elite youth or high school team is one of the most worried-about aspects of a hockey player's development and advancement.

It doesn't need to be, however. Sure, playing on a top team in your age group or making a showcase squad for a major tournament may help in the quest for more exposure and better skills. But it's not the most important thing for a hockey player's growth overall.

The best hockey players will be found, no matter where they are playing. Opportunities will come to those who earn it.

Minutes and Responsibility

Mike Cavanaugh, head coach of the University of Connecticut hockey program, said that when it comes to being the best hockey player you could be, getting the opportunity to compete and lead your team is more important than what jersey you are wearing.

"I think the most important thing for a hockey player is being put over the boards every third shift and having a chance to play on the special teams," Cavanaugh said. "Essentially, the most important thing is that you're getting quality playing time, because if you want to play at a higher level, but you don't see quality minutes, as far as special teams and a regular shift, you're not going to develop."

Blessings in Disguise

Cavanaugh, in his third season with the Huskies after spending 18 years with Jerry York at Boston College, said that not making the elite team may benefit the player in the long run.

"If you don't make the team that you always dreamed of making, usually you're going to be put down a level, and that may be a blessing in disguise," Cavanaugh said. "You may get power-play time, penalty-kill time, play in all crucial situations – up a goal or down a goal – and it may end up developing you more as a player, as opposed to playing on that 'A' team where you're not getting quality minutes."

Players – and their parents – should be focusing on their own development, rather than what team they are on. Without the proper skills and confidence, a player won't be able to succeed when the scouts do show up for a particular game or tournament. So don't worry if you don't make a particular AAA team; figure out what you need to do to become a better player, and take advantage of the opportunities you will have playing on a lower-level team for the upcoming season.

Effort Ignites Ability

According to Cavanaugh, one such example of a player seizing their opportunities would be Brian Dumoulin. The Pittsburgh Penguins defenseman capitalized on his ice time with his local high school team and turned it into a professional hockey career.

“[Dumoulin] played at Biddeford High School in Maine through his junior year, then played one year of juniors for the New Hampshire Monarchs, and then he came to Boston College,” Cavanaugh said. “He was always playing quality minutes, and now he's playing in the Stanley Cup Playoffs for the Pittsburgh Penguins.”

The key, of course, is that a hockey player has to work hard when nobody's watching. Sure, it's easy to get fired up when scouts and coaches are sitting in the stands – but what are you doing when you're at the gym or at practice?

“There's an old saying that effort ignites ability and turns it into accomplishment,” Cavanaugh said. “No matter what you do in life, if you're not going to put effort and work into what you're trying accomplish, it won't happen. It's always important, whether you're going to be an accountant or a hockey player or a fireman, you have to work to perfect your trade.”