



Learning the Language of Hockey

There is a difference between playing hockey and playing the game of hockey. Over the past decades we have gotten away from playing the game to simply playing hockey. This may seem like an odd statement but I think that upon reflection we can begin to see the truth in this idea.

I presented the idea to a high school team and received the typical teenage blank stares. What the heck was coach talking about? Then I said "let's change the concept to golf and make the same statement." The golfers in the group immediately recognized the difference between simply playing golf and playing the game of golf. When one plays golf it is merely for fun, the rules are somewhat flexible, and it really does not matter. When someone plays the game of golf the rules matter, there are no gimmes, and one would actually play the course to score. People who play the game of golf are challenged to get better and are constantly working on lowering their score with skillful shot making and putting. Golfers who play the game have developed a feel for the game and make it look easy.

The same could be said of hockey players. So many are simply playing hockey and a few are playing the game of hockey. The difference between the two is that hockey is a team sport that requires all of the players to participate and whereas golf is simply one person versus the course. Most youth teams have a couple players who are playing the game and the rest are just playing. This is hard for both types of players when they are all together in a competitive situation. It leads to short benches, specialty teams, hard feelings, jealous adults and envious players. All of course for the sake of winning.

Both sports are filled with mediocre low skilled players and a few outstanding ones come along with great touch and feel. What makes these players different? Why so few? Are more skills sessions the answer? Perhaps more games will fix the problem. I think the answer is obvious as we have youth teams approaching 90 game seasons and it is not fixing the problem.

In hockey I believe that the over structuring of the game at the lower levels has created tens of thousands of hockey players that cannot execute a 2-1 or 3-2 with any consistency. If you doubt it watch a youth team practice. This problem reaches all the way to the top of the game. The Phoenix Coyotes are searching for goal scoring and at a recent practice were working on 2-1 dills. Incredibly the first shot on goal came on the 11th try. This is a symptom of to many years of regimented drills, pressure to win games, and players who were pigeon holed into one position at an early age.

We know that if we want our children to become fluent in another language it is far easier for them if they are exposed to it when they are very young. Instead of rote learning as teenagers, if they are allowed to learn the language in a relaxed and easy environment without tests and homework they become fluent in just a few years. Learning a second language in high school or beyond, with the structured programs, courses and exams is a daunting chore for most of us.

Learning to play the game of hockey is the same as learning the language of hockey. To become fluent in the game a player must have low stress opportunities to develop skills, make mistakes and improvise. Similar to learning a second language, youth hockey players need many hours of unstructured time on the ice to learn the language of hockey. Just like learning a second language by hearing it spoken by older people who help the learning process, hockey players learn best when they can be on the ice with older players who can share the tricks of the trade. Today we see youth players attempting the cool stick moves of the exceptional players they see on television or replayed on videos. Imagine if a group of squirt and pee wee players could skate with bantam and high school players all on the ice together, sharing the language of hockey. Unfortunately with the exception of communities like Warroad, Moorhead and Roseau these opportunities are far and few between and sadly, most kids watch very little hockey on TV or in person. It is hard to watch hockey when we spend so much time rushing off to structured practices and endless numbers of games.

We have become a culture of personal trainers, customized off ice training programs and whatever quick fix that promises to get your kid to the next level no matter what the cost.

All of these programs have value but none of them teach the language of hockey and it can only be learned one way, on the ice with friends, buddies, older kids and younger kids. Creativity, give and go, playing in tight spaces through fifteen players and all of the other nuances of the language of hockey is best learned by trial and error where a player is not afraid he or she will fail or disappoint teammates, coaches or parents.

Here comes the hard part. If we really want our young players to learn the language of hockey and to become fluent in playing the game we must rethink what we do with our younger players. We must provide countless opportunities for them to be able to go to the rink and play with kids of all ages. We must allow them to learn the language of hockey from the older players and develop the passion and dreams that will fuel their desire to excel as they get older.

Taking this approach means significantly reduced game schedules and traditional team practices. It means developing programs and on ice opportunities for our youngest players in our own communities and making sure they get all the ice time they want. It means reversing the 2 hours in the car for 15 minutes of ice time to 15 minutes in the car and 2 hours of ice time, or maybe 4 hours with a break for hot dogs and a soda. It means giving the game back to the kids and let them pass the language of hockey down from one generation to the next.

This is not something USA Hockey or Minnesota Hockey should mandate but rather it should be done at the local level by wise, caring adults who understand that this is the right way for our young players to play the game and learn the language of hockey.

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