



Bob Richardson

Hockey

Written in 1992. Re-written in 2005.

There are many ways for players to develop in the sport of hockey. The optimal way for players to improve is by playing unstructured games - in particular shinny hockey. However, in today's world of adult organized leagues, teams and practices shinny hockey one of the best methods for young players to develop overall hockey playing ability is under utilized. Players need to experience the pure joy of the sport devoid of adult misdirection, judgment and criticism.

One of the most critical fundamentals of the sport is decision making: the ability to make productive choices, when to pass, when to shoot etc. We often confuse working on particular skills in an isolated way with enhancing the development of young hockey players. This approach has been called into question by researchers Vickers and Bails (University of Calgary) in their study Decision Training.

"Bottom-up methods appear to be limited in helping the athlete understand what really needs to be done. There is too much emphasis on isolated skills and not enough attention to the strategic complexities of the sport."

"Bottom - up method" is the part - whole method. That is, taking the skills of a sport working on them, in the hope that they will come together and make the individual player better. It may seem to make sense, but does it in a transitional sport where the mind needs to be highly attentive?

For year's coaches have over - worked basic skills when their players have progressed beyond them. Our coaching methods have resulted in players that usually lack the ability to think the game, although if their skills were measured individually they may have a nice level of technique.

The question is: is something lost, namely ability to make productive decisions, by spending too much time on ice on "fundamentals"? Can't some of these skills be worked on off ice just as well? What good are fundamental skills if it does NOT improve one's ability to play the game in a productive manner?

Because hockey is a transitional game, any training that may impinge upon one's ability to receive and process information may be detrimental. In Vickers and Bales' minds it is.

"The sole use of bottom-up methods may lead to the athlete perfecting certain aspects of their sport at the cost of essential other areas. Critical aspects are simply not trained."

"Because the athlete appears to be successful in practice they develop a type of false confidence that crumbles in the face of tough competition.. In fact, these athletes have limited training in what really occurs."

Decision Training Develops the Following:

- 1) Attention
- 2) Anticipation
- 3) Concentration
- 4) Memory retrieval
- 5) Problem solving
- 6) Automaticity
- 7) Creativity

Youth hockey coaches routinely gather their players before games to lecture them on systematic or tactical play. Does this method actually enhance these traits? Would players learn these aspects of the game through either unstructured play, games in practice in which conditions are placed or the best way that people learn - by copying others?

These sessions (coach lectures) only serve to inhibit players or confuse them.. The great players develop their instincts when they are young over time. They develop them by watching older players and would if allowed from unstructured play.

Jack Blatherwick Physiologist, former US Olympic Strength and Conditioning Coach wrote in 1999 Hockey skill development: What's missing?

"I've always been the greatest admirer of a Neal Broten, a Brian Leetch or a Mike Modano, three of the most skillful American players in history. And I know those skills were not taught by the book."

"In fact, if someone had gotten out the book and insisted the skill be taught this way or that, these superstars probably would have jumped ship and played basketball."

"We don't need to intellectualize a simple process. We just need to create an environment where kids want to become skillful magicians. In many cases, just throw out pucks and let them experiment."

The game has to be given back to the player's for it's long term good. Harry Howell, Hall of Fame defenseman with the NY Rangers, in 1992 said when commenting on such stars as Sergei Federov and Alexander Mogilny, "when Russians are young they are allowed to play shinny - that is handle the puck a lot and skate. Our players are over - coached when they are young. I watch North American players and all I hear is 'shoot it, pass it, get rid of it!' As a result we don't have the puckhandlers the Europeans do."

In a Sports Illustrated article (3/14/2005) A Whole New Ball Game by Michael Bamberger Frank Robinson laments the same deficiencies in baseball:

"The typical modern player would never have made it in his playing era, 1956 - 76:

"They're over-coached from the age of six. Somebody is always telling them what to do, so they can't think for themselves. Some unusual situation comes up, and they don't know what to do with the ball."

A player must develop the skills, but also a feel for the game and a passion for the game in their formative/developmental years. Bobby Orr and Don Cherry spoke about the misdirection of youth hockey on Cherry's early 1990's television show Cherry's Grapevine.

Orr explained how he developed, by playing on ponds as a youngster. Orr said,

"That's the way we learned our skills...without adults, just drop the puck and go."

Cherry agreed with Orr, saying that, he too is bothered by adult over - involvement in youth hockey. Cherry said. "you know what bothers me...when I go to the rink and I hear the coach saying pass it, pass it. I mean, if you (Orr) had done that you would never have made the NHL."

In their conversation Orr reiterates that he learned the game by playing, not adult schedules leagues or tournaments or "exposure camps", but on the pond, having fun. Orr says, " in many cases kids would be better off than waiting for adults to organize it." Orr goes on to say,

"I don't know if I could play today, I keep hearing about all these systems. We learned the fundamental skills shooting passing, handling the puck, skating...this systems are unbelievable!"

There it is, from the best player to ever play the game saying that it should be fun. That too much adult involvement is taking the joy and creativity out of the game. He does not know if he would enjoy playing under these circumstances. Who would?

Soccer is facing many of same problems brought on by uneducated youth coaches in an article written by Roy Rees the US National U - 17 coach (1/10/91) issue Soccer NE), Mr. Rees defines the goal of a youth a youth coach as "...drawing out of individual skill." He goes on to write, "if a coach imposes rigid discipline on his players he can hardly expect them to play with joy and abandon.

A coach who restricts the creativity and inventiveness of his players is doomed to produce journeyman soccer players in mundane boring teams." Mr. Rees could very well be writing about hockey.

The soccer star Pele, who was to his sport what Orr was to hockey wrote an article in Sports Illustrated(SI 3/25/91): "Many coaches fearful of losing their high - paid jobs no longer play to win, they play not to lose. That subtle shift in attitude has far - reaching effects at all levels of the sport, from the mechanized (Isn't that what working on isolated skills produces in hockey?) way kids learn the game to questionable defensive tactics pros use to frustrate their rivals."

"To create a goal is a complex task that requires dozens of split - second decisions and the imagination to anticipate 3,4, 5 moves ahead. Most of today's players, who are products of the over - emphasis on defense (systems in hockey) aren't afforded the opportunity to master these skills."

"What has been lost in the process is the very heart and soul of the game."

Adam Crowe, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff speaking after Desert Storm said, "The key factors in success were...initiative and imagination" more so than planning." Isn't this what is lacking in so many hockey players today?