



Don't be a spectator coach

By Jack Blatherwick

After coaching his team to three national championships at the University of Minnesota — after winning the Olympic Gold Medal at Lake Placid in 1980 — after coaching four NHL teams — Herb Brooks would quietly visit practices of youth and high school teams to learn.

He would invariably find a practice drill he thought would be constructive for his own team, perhaps in modified form. But when he saw a coach who simply diagrammed the drill, then leaned on the wall and let the team take the drill wherever they chose, he'd say, "Now there's a spectator coach. Those kids would be better off just scrimmaging."

"You must have a purpose — a reason to include the drill," he'd say. "Your job is just starting when you explain the drill. A good coach is constantly evaluating the progress toward that purpose. Get involved. Teach on the fly. Push. Prod. Be a coach, not a spectator."

Recently, I watched a bantam practice in Maryland, with Coach Brooks' advice in mind. The two coaches had excellent drills, but the missing ingredient was a well-defined purpose.

This became obvious toward the end of each drill. If it was a skating, passing, shooting drill, the shot — like thousands of shots taken in most practices — was an after-thought to the players. Think of it. The most important part of the drill was done with the least amount of intensity and focus.

At this critical, bottom-line point, the Russian coaches set the standard much higher, and teach young players to get shots off in realistic situations. Perhaps there is a fake, followed by a sharp cut and quick release before the shooter feels comfortable. Then each forward drives to the net for a rebound.

In a brain-dead practice, every shot is taken while the shooter is comfortable — while he coasts or skates straight toward the goal. This is a shot that rarely comes up in competition. So naturally, the goalie just sits on his angle; the shooter practices something that never happens; and the coach falls asleep.

The highlight of this bantam practice was a cool-looking, complicated drill at the start — some passing, a shot from the point, and then a full-ice 1-on-1 to the other end. The coaches started the drill by passing to a forward, so things went fairly well on this end of the ice. However, as the 1-on-1 moved toward the other end, things devolved into chaos.

If the forward became frustrated after losing the puck — from his own failures or because the D poked it off his stick — he just quit. If the D got faked out slightly by the forward — he also quit. In other words, the unintended message was ... when competition gets a little frustrating, just quit.

The coaches hadn't identified what they were trying to teach in the 1-on-1 drill. If they had, one coach would have followed closely behind the forward, encouraging — demanding a second and third effort, especially when things didn't go smoothly. After all, when skills break down in a game, quitting isn't an option.

A defenseman coach should have insisted that the D never stop competing — not only because this is absolutely the most important quality a defenseman can have. But the defenseman might just learn he can really make a difference — perhaps even catch the forward after falling for a fake.

The finish to any drill can never be left to the players. A competitive drill must teach second and third effort, and it doesn't end until the coach is satisfied the lesson has been learned. A shooting drill ends when the forward has become a better goal-scorer — not when he tosses a meaningless shot in the direction of the goalkeeper.

Even a skating drill must finish with greater effort than at the start, because players will find they are capable of greater effort when they are slightly fatigued than they might have thought. They should definitely not learn that when they get a little tired, they can just slow down and coast.

If a coach becomes a spectator during drills, bad habits are inadvertently taught. It is much better to scrimmage — every day for the entire hour — than to teach anti-competitive habits from brain-dead drills.

We seem to be victims of our own coaching clinics, and believe that a good practice must have a bunch of creative, cool-looking drills.

Good drills play an important role in the learning process, of course. "Good drills" ... as in ones that are well-coached. But drills in which the coach allows brain-dead repetitions are counterproductive.

In a scrimmage, players are unlikely to quit, and when they arrive at the bottom line — the point where they might score or a defender might prevent a goal — there will be a higher level of intensity than at any other point of the practice.

If you have no lesson to teach in a given drill — if there is no well-defined purpose — forget it. Close the drill book. Scrimmage in any number of creative ways. The game of hockey will produce a million opportunities for an active coach to be a constructive teacher.

Reprinted from Let's Play Hockey. Jack Blatherwick, Ph.D., is a physiologist for the Washington Capitals.