



Teaching passion at the youth level

Two questions that haunt me as a coach are: How do we detect or teach passion in players and how do we teach our players to play away from the puck?

As a coach, parent, or player we have heard the phrase “that player just has a passion for the game”. Or “he just doesn’t have his heart in the game”.

I have given those quotes a lot of thought this season and wonder how we can teach this passion or, in fact, if we can.

As a bantam coach for 30 years, I have been able to detect players with this passion but often too late. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to rate players on passion. We place players in levels of skill development but do we look into the passion side of it. I have selected many players in past years just because of the talent they have and neglected the passion they don’t have. The final result is normally a short career for that particular player. He probably doesn’t even play High School hockey. Likewise we ignore the passion in the player who lacks fundamentals and give up on him too soon, turning him off to the sport he may someday excel at.

I have enjoyed watching my grandson during his youth years. He is at the level now that I question his passion and I wonder what I can do to help. I know he enjoys the game and is blessed with some good fundamentals but how do I bring out the passion I hope he possesses?

One thing that comes to mind is which level we put our players at. Do we put them in over their head by placing them on teams they aren’t ready for? I think my grandsons’ placement this year hurt him and put his passion potential on hold. Had he played on a lower team his success ratio would have been much higher and the passion that might be there has a chance to surface and be worked on. I realize we want to challenge our players with good competition, but feeling good about oneself brings out passion and desire for more good feelings and that comes with correct placement. The sooner we realize this, the more chance we will have in developing any passion or drive he may have.

Comparing my grandson to my own sons, I really have a different perspective on which team he makes. I guess its called “live and learn.”

I look at former players who didn't have passion and drive. What goes through their minds? Are they thinking, I am playing only because of my parents—or my buds are on the team—or I can make the team just because of my size or athleticism? We choose them and in a few years they quit. I know that all team members can't have that extra drive and passion.

How can we as coaches bring this passion out of players that we often times give up on ? I look at some older, established, successful programs that seem to have more then their share of players with passion. Why is that? Is it because the parents and grandparents played there and have instilled passion to the next generation? Is it because of the smaller communities and pride that goes with it? Or are they just born with it?

I don't know the answer but would give plenty to find out. How can we as coaches be more aware of this gift of passion and tap into it?

Besides proper placement of players as they go through the various levels of youth hockey, we could educate our coaches on judging players not only on fundamentals but on what's inside them that you don't see. Why are they playing? How do they compete in other sports? What about school? Family? Character? Conduct away from sports? Conduct with friends. Seems like work but if you're coaching at a competitive level and you really want to get to the next level you must look into passion and drive. All players all have some and it's our job to tap into it and watch and see what levels it will take them and the team.

Good luck and if you come up with some good solutions please share them with us. Thank you in advance.

Oh ya the other question—“play away from the puck.” That's another tough one, how do we teach it to the kids on ice or in the classroom. It's challenging and sadly neglected by coaches. It's a topic we can discuss next time.

Dennis Bushy, Moorhead Youth Hockey Association; March 2006