

The Full Season is the Reason

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A hockey season provides many months of lessons for the players, parents and the coaches. A team comes together in the fall and over time chips away at the many aspects of the game, which need to be addressed. This group will partake of an emotional journey through practices, travel, bad rink coffee, hot pizza, laughs, tears, injuries, poor directions, broken skate laces, highlight goals, big wins, frustrating losses, report cards, Santa's visit, cold and flu season, pig piles and Big Macs. This experience will provide all involved with a wide-ranging education ranging from stick handling to discipline to friendship and everything in between. Yes, a hockey season represents a wonderful opportunity for all involved with a wide-ranging education ranging from stick handling to discipline to friendship and everything in between. Yes, a hockey season represents a wonderful opportunity for all involved!

However, as one travels around in October and November one hears consistent refrains from coaches of all amateur levels. "The kids I have are clueless", "we do not have our legs yet", "there is so much to teach these kids", "we can't run drills correctly", "we are running around in games" and on it goes. I wonder, did these coaches think they were going to show up in September and have Yzerman, Sakic and Messier for a first line, Bourque and Leetch on D and Curtis Joseph in the net? There is a reason awards are given out at the end and not the beginning. There is a reason the games at the end are usually considered 'bigger' than the games in the fall. The end should represent an indication of progress over the winter months

It is vital to understand that any one coaching amateur hockey is doing just that; coaching amateur hockey. Whether they are youth players, high school kids or even college players one must understand and accept the fact that they are young, inexperienced kids who are playing mainly for fun and to get a bit better. You do not get a two- week training camp and ten exhibition games at these levels to straighten some things out. You do not get to make trades to address areas of weakness and you certainly are not working with pro players whose only job is to play hockey and who may have been playing professionally for many years with outstanding teaching. As the saying goes, it is impossible to be young and experienced.

The advantage is what you do get to work with are young, enthusiastic kids aged 6 to 22 years old who want to have some fun, improve and learn a bit about the game. The advantages one has are that these teams usually have a great deal of enthusiasm and energy. They have chosen to play, they want to play, they want to play well and have success. They want to please themselves, their parents and peers. They may not know how to channel this energy and they certainly do not know everything about hockey but neither does any coaching staff. So why not get better together.

The kids need to believe you are committed to them as people and that your intentions are sincere and you care about them. There is another saying that, "the kids don't care about what you know until they know you care." One must create and maintain an environment that is fun, challenging and interesting. Accept the fact that hundreds of mistakes are going to be made both early on and throughout the season. John Wooden believed that, "The team that makes the most mistakes will win in the end." These mistakes will allow you to have teachable moments. I do not believe music teachers feel that a young person will perform a full concerto on their second or even seventy-second attempt!

The goal of any youth coach should be to improve the individual skills of the players. Over months the players should become better skaters, stickhandlers, passers and shooters. There are also various tactical principles, which should be relayed depending on the age of the players. USA Hockey provides quality guidelines and direction through their literature.

There are many fine drills and games, which will aid the teaching process. However, as a general rule a coach/teacher should indicate what he would like the players to do, not always telling the team and players what they are doing wrong. If you are always telling them what they are doing wrong then they never really know what it is you would like them to do. They will inevitably become afraid to do anything at all and play tentatively with little enthusiasm and creativity. Remember, the enthusiasm and creativity are two of your strongest assets!

This past summer Mike Eaves, our US National Coach offered the analogy of watching a young child walk across a room with a loaded tray. He suggested not telling the child, "...not to drop the tray", but to provide positive instruction such as "...take your time, walk slowly and balance the tray with both hands." One can picture a six-year-old thinking, "I know I don't want to drop the stupid thing but tell me how I can avoid this, not just 'don't drop it'."

A youth coach must also accept that it will take many episodes of teachable moments for some lessons to sink in. Quite frankly, a small percentage of your player may never figure out some lessons. They may not possess the mental aptitude or they may not be 'into it'. Although this is frustrating one must accept reality and move on.

It is also important to understand that the reason you have a season is to improve throughout the year. Hopefully a team will follow a learning curve throughout the season and will be playing to its potential down the stretch. Hoosiers, The Mighty Ducks and The Bad News Bears are excellent stories with a good dose of truth. The coaches in these movies generally exhibited patience, brought the group together by maintaining discipline and always seemed to allow some fun in all situations. Granted, this is Hollywood and in the real world there is not always a happy ending but that is also a reality. You got what you got, you do your best and let the chips fall where they may. Also, when you have a group of kids aged 8 to 20 you are going to have radical differences in physical, mental and social levels. A kid who is 12 may actually have the intellect of an eight year old while on that same team you may have a thirteen year old with the mental acuity of a seventeen year old. This certainly poses a major challenge for all aspects of training this group!

A coach's focus for his group must lie in the continued development of skills such as skating passing, shooting and handling a puck. Keep in mind that these kids show up at the rink with enthusiasm and energy. A quality coach will harness this energy and use it to their advantage? Do you do full ice-skating to enhance their stride? Sounds boring to me. Do you have them pass back and forth for fifteen minutes to improve their passing? Sounds boring to me. Do you have them shoot against the boards to get a better shot? Sounds boring to me. I believe you must create competitive and fun situations that will keep the young players enthused, engaged and challenged.

For example, to work on skating you can put two kids inside a face-off circle and have them play tag without sticks. Allow them to go on for about twenty seconds and then two more jump in. Watch how competitive they will become. There will be all sorts of stops, starts and evasive maneuvers. I have never seen a drill that will address such a variety of skating positions at such a high tempo. The ideal would be to have about eight to ten kids at each circle. You want to match kids of comparable ability and this also works well for goalies and their footwork. This is one example of taking skills such as skating and teaching it through a small game.

Recently, I watched the New York Rangers practice. For about thirty minutes they were playing 3V3 in the neutral zone. You had Mark Messier (40 yrs. Old!!), Eric Lindros, Brian Leetch, Theo

Fleury passing, shooting, skating competing, laughing while Mike Richter handled literally hundreds of attempts in net. The players were engaged, enthused and playing hockey. The coach had harnessed this energy into a game and allowed the players to do what they wanted to do: play hockey.

Small games will enhance your most skilled player as well as your least skilled player. They will engage your most focused player while including and roping in your least enthused player. They will provide you with many teachable moments involving technical, tactical and social principles. Your players will get many meaningful touches with the puck while your goalies will face a variety and quantity of shots unheard of in a regulation setting. Again, I have never seen a 'drill' that addresses so many areas of the game, is not predetermined and will foster such a high intensity and engagement level from your players!

The simple tag game and a simple cross-ice game are two small examples of harnessing your players' energy while developing their skills for the game. Our next article will delve deeper into the tactics of engaging players during practice.

The first step for a youth coach is the acknowledgement that a season is a journey. The players are young and inexperienced. They may very well be poorly disciplined or possess inadequate skills early on. It is the journey that provides the coach the opportunity to chip away at the group's inadequacies and parlay this into overall improvement. Yes, it would be easier to make trades but it isn't going to happen.

Good luck!