

It is all about Skills-At all levels

Youth hockey coaches across the country are busy training players that will soon be wearing the sweaters of the Division 1, 2 and 3 college teams. Some of those players will eventually move on to earn a paycheck in the game. So why do we hear the cry from college coaches, pro scouts and USA Hockey for better skilled players?

The truth is that most youth and many high school coaches spend most of their time on the ice teaching systems, and doing drills that are supposed to simulate games. It seems like the more complicated the drills the better many coaches like them. Everyday there are more and more sources to get drills. There are numerous on line services, books, manuals, and publications from USA Hockey, CAHA, and European Hockey organizations. But what about teaching basic fundamental skills like skating, passing, and stick handling?

In most all cases the systems and drills are like putting the horse before the cart. At the USA Hockey Coaching Education Program (CEP) clinics that I speak at each fall I pose the following question, “How many of you can teach basic skating fundamentals?” The average group was 175 squirt, peewee, and bantam coaches, and at each of the five clinics less than four coaches indicated that they could teach skating. That is astounding, especially in a hockey rich state like Minnesota. It means nearly 3,000 players have coaches who do not know how to teach skating fundamentals.

The stark reality is that to excel at the game a player needs to be an outstanding skater, passer and stick handler. But at what age level should coaches’ start working on systems? Consider these comments from the University of Minnesota Men’s Head Hockey Coach, Don Lucia, *“We are continually working on skill development at our level. During the first half of the season the majority of our practice time is devoted to individual skill development with skating being the number one focus. As the season progresses we gradually shift to more systems and special teams play as we prepare for the playoffs. I remind my staff daily that our focus needs to be on skills. We can run any systems when we have the skills to execute them.”* It is apparent that skill development is the top priority all the way to the pinnacle of college hockey and beyond. It is then logical that skill development should be the top priority for youth, high school and junior hockey players and teams.

College coaches can help their own programs by spreading this message to the hockey communities in their towns. A little involvement by themselves, their staffs and players (within the NCAA guidelines) can go along way. Particular attention should be paid to the youth hockey organizations in your communities. They need to know that your priority is skilled players and that the foundation for those skills are set in place at an early age. You can help by attending the first three levels of the USA Hockey Coaching clinics in your area as a presenter and skill instructor. Your presence and encouragement will go along way to help youth coaches keep the proper focus. Don Lucia advises youth

coaches, *“to work on the fundamental skills of skating, passing and stick handling. Be sure the players are progressing in their individual skills and make sure they are having fun.”*

Youth hockey needs and wants the college coaches input and participation. If there was ever a win-win scenario, this is it.

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