



## PLAYING TIME

As the second season of the hockey season begins to ramp up so does the intensity surrounding each and every game.

The regular season is the regular season. A time to work things out. A time to sort things out. A time to see what you have. A time to see who can do what. While the games matter, compared to the second season, they really don't matter all that much in the eyes of many people.

League playoffs, district playoffs, state tournaments, national tournaments. Those kinds of events have a little more luster to them than your average run of the mill regular season game. The players get amped up, the parents get fired up and the coaches get tensed up. All of which can make for a cocktail of controversy in certain situations. And those certain situations get very much magnified in the most important games of the year.

One of the most common of those certain situations is playing time. Who gets it, who doesn't, when they get or don't get it and why they get or don't get it. In any youth sport, playing time is probably the most volatile element that can spark some fireworks within a team.

From a coach's perspective, I can somewhat understand the mindset of shortening the bench or playing certain players in certain situations. But only somewhat. I can't understand at all how any coach could not play one or some of the players on a team for most or all of a period or game. I really don't get that.

### THEIR FAIR SHARE

First of all, if the team is to play with any pace and intensity in the game, it is unrealistic to think that the best players can go out on the ice every second shift and perform at a high level. At least not for very long. They might be able to handle it for a period or half of a game, but it is pretty easy to see how they wear down over the course of the game.

From a productivity standpoint, do you really want your best players, the ones that have the ability to make the plays and be difference makers in the game to be deprived of that opportunity? It can be easy to think that getting them on the ice more often gives the opportunity to do more. But, at the same time, there is a point of diminishing return where they are unable to perform at the level that they are capable of because they are tired.

Secondly, does it make any sense at all for players to be on a team and not participate? I can't understand that at all. At every level of youth hockey the players (actually their parents do it for them) pay to play. With that comes the right to play. There shouldn't be any questions about that. If a coach has a problem with that, then they definitely shouldn't be coaching. If other parents on a team have a problem with that, then they should stay at home. They don't understand youth sports and the team would be much better off without them around.

Thirdly, I have no idea how anyone could feel good about themselves as a coach, let along as a human being, by not playing every kid their fair share of

a game. Yes, the hard part might be determining what exactly "fair share" means, but every kid deserves an opportunity. I don't know how coaches can look a kid in the eye after a game where they didn't give them a chance to be a part of the game.

### THE WHOLE TEAM

A coach's job is to coach all of the players on the team. Not just the better players. In fact, the better players are the ones that might need the least coaching. They often have the natural athletic ability, the skills, the drive and the confidence to be difference makers for their team. It's pretty easy to coach those kinds of players.

But a team is much more than just its better players. The best coaches understand that every player on the team is important. The best teams are comprised of players that feel that they are valuable, contributing members of that team.

Coaching all of the players on the team takes effort, commitment and determination. No different than playing the game if you really think about it.

Being in the position of a leader it would be pretty difficult to ask the players to give something that the coach is not willing to give. Some players present more difficult challenges than others when it comes to coaching. But they all deserve the same effort and commitment from their coaches.

There is no cookie-cutter approach to coaching each individual on a team. All players are unique individuals with different personalities, strengths, weaknesses and skill sets. No two players are alike and it is unrealistic to think that they all can be coached exactly the same.

Just as it is unrealistic to think that they all could be or should be played the same amount or in all situations in a game. Playing time will never be equal. That is impossible. But it should be fair.

Each player should get what they deserve. It is not a bad thing for players to be rewarded for great effort or an exceptional accomplishment. From a coaching perspective you get way more mileage out of rewarding good behavior or accomplishments than by taking away ice time as a punishment for lack of effort, or worse yet, lack of ability or skill.

It's a fact that some players aren't as good as others and might not even feel comfortable on the ice in certain situations. That in itself is a challenge for a coach. You want every player to feel comfortable and feel like they are a valuable contributor in every situation. But how can they do that if they never get a chance to kill penalties or play on the power play or get on the ice at the end of a game when pressing for or defending against a game-tying goal?

### CHICKEN AND THE EGG

That might be the biggest challenge for a coach. You want your team to be successful and winning games is obviously a part of that. But to win games, all of your players need to learn and improve and be counted on to contribute in all situations. It's a little like the chicken and the egg. Which comes first?

It can be very easy to be a sell-out coach and play the best players far more than the weaker players in games. But with a little effort, commitment and determination, it can be just as easy to give every player their fair share of opportunity to see what they can do.

Ultimately, what a coach sees on the ice is what they coached.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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