Class Is In Session

By PHILIP COLVIN

Level 4 Clinics Wrap A Wealth Of Hockey Knowledge Into A Single Weekend

For most veteran youth hockey coaches, spending almost two straight days talking hockey, thinking about hockey and learning about hockey makes for a perfect weekend. That 48-hour focus on the sport is the essence of the USA Hockey Level 4 Coaches Clinic, which includes an on-ice session and multiple presentations conducted by high-level coaches, some on specific topics, some on general principles, but all designed to make participants look at the game in a different way, which in the end will make them better coaches.

“When I first saw the agenda with the list of presenters and topics, I was really excited, but I wasn’t exactly sure what to expect,” said Chad Ellis, a fourth-year head coach at Dublin (Ohio) Scioto High School who attended a Level 4 clinic last May in Livonia, Mich.

“It was a great weekend. Everything was well organized and the content was all top-notch. I enjoyed talking to the other youth coaches, and learning strategies that higher level coaches have used with success was really valuable and a great resource.”

The chance to model and emulate what has worked for successful coaches at the highest levels of the game is an important component of the clinic experience.

“I think it is important for our youth coaches to hear from experienced coaches that a lot of what they are doing at the higher levels in practice isn’t that much different from what they are doing at the Pee wee or Bantam levels,” said Mike MacMillan, USA Hockey’s national coach-in-chief.

“And we also want to give them some of

ADM Regional Manager
Bob Mancini conducts the on-ice session as part of a Level 4 Coaching Clinic in Livonia, Mich.
the X’s and O’s that they crave when they get to this level so they are able to take the skill development information they received in earlier clinics and be able to bring it all back with them to their teams.”

In 2011, USA Hockey revised its Coaching Education Program to require youth coaches with nine years of experience to obtain their Level 4 coaching card. While many youth coaches may not get that far, USA Hockey wants the ones that do to get the complete package of high-quality instruction and camaraderie with their peers – all in a comfortable learning environment.

And while the presentations all come with supporting materials such as practice plans and diagrams of drills and small area games, a Level 4 clinic is no “info dump.”

“We strive for interaction and dialogue, because there are no right answers,” said Jack Witt, Michigan’s coach-in-chief. “Hopefully we can make them think and show them how to apply the things they hear with their own team.”

USA Hockey works to include the same high quality of speakers, content and energy at all of its Level 4 clinics across the country. Recent clinic topics have focused both on the practical and the ‘big picture’ and have included Off-Ice Conditioning and Training To Be A Hockey Player, Creating Scoring Opportunities, Developing Goaltenders, Establishing a Forecheck, Principles of a Power Play, Team Building and Teaching Life Skills.

The on-ice session usually consists of multiple stations that demonstrate American Development Model principles using skill-development drills and small area games.

“I can’t express how helpful these classes are,” said Bill Bowen, a Bantam coach from Royal Oak, Mich. “It was a great experience and inspires us as coaches to keep learning.”

That theme of continuing education and personal growth reverberates throughout the weekend.

“Remember that you don’t know it all,” said University of Michigan Head Coach Red Berenson, who played and coached in the NHL and has spent the last 29 years behind the Wolverines bench.

“Keep the game simple and keep it fun. If you are inquisitive and curious, and are humble enough to ask questions, there is a lot of information out there.”

That’s one of the key takeaways from a weekend immersed in hockey at a Level 4 Clinic – how to use all of that information to build a solid foundation with your team and how to become a better coach by helping your players enjoy the game and improve their skills.

“I learned something from every one of the speakers and loved even the smallest details of the clinic,” said John Shupe, an assistant coach at Bishop Dwenger High School in Fort Wayne, Ind.

“If the presentations were available on video, I would’ve watched them again already. I can’t wait for the season to start.”

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—RED BERENSON, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN HEAD COACH