

## Off-Season for the Goaltender

By Joe Bertagna

A goaltender needs to take time off, if for no other reason than to re-charge the competitive juices before returning to the ice. So what activities should dot the spring and summer schedules for a young goaltender?

First off, take a look at the goalie equipment. What every goalie family wants to avoid is waiting until late summer or early fall, right before the season starts, to join all the other delinquent parents who rush fittings and orders at the local hockey shop. You can plan on what to buy and when, or you can wait until you absolutely have to buy (or repair) equipment. Families who wait too long end up rushing the process and making mistakes. Or maybe they want to custom order something and it ends up arriving too late because you put off addressing the situation.

At the end of the winter season, look to see what equipment needs to be replaced, because it is no longer functional or because the goalie has outgrown that equipment. If it is the latter, there are plenty of ways to either sell the equipment (hockey shops, goalie web sites, E-Bay) or donate it to a worthy cause (local youth program, younger goalie).

Some equipment can be repaired to get another year. Stitching the palm of a stick glove is an example of this. All equipment should be checked out with an eye toward simple repairs of existing equipment. Check all straps, buckles, rivets, hardware with screws, etc. This isn't just a cost-saving effort, staying in a favorite piece of equipment that is perfectly broken-in for one more year can be a blessing.

Then there are questions about how to use the off-season to improve one's game. First of all, don't underestimate the value of taking some time off completely. This could be in the spring or late summer but taking a break has value. Politically, this can be difficult if your child is getting pressure to compete year-round with kids from his winter team. One new development is for the local youth program to get into the camp business and expect or even require kids to attend (and pay extra) in the summer. As for getting on the ice, here are some options:

- *Traditional Summer Hockey School:* This is a week-long camp, either close to home or a sleepover camp some distance away. If you are looking for a general summer activity with a theme your child enjoys, this can work. If you are looking for specific goaltending instruction, this can be a gamble. Frequently, in general hockey camps, the needs of the goaltender are not the first thing on the minds of those directing the camp.
- *Traditional Week-Long Goalie School:* There are plenty of these around the country and they are geared exclusively for the goaltender. Just search the internet for goalie instruction and you'll be surprised at how many offerings there are. Contact the school's directors and find out how many goalies per coach and find out exactly who will be working the week your child is there. Don't settle for a roster of coaches who have worked in the past or who might work. Find out who is working with your child. And ask

a little about each camp's approach to the position. You'll know immediately if the school is legit or not.

- *Once-a-Week Goalie Instruction*: Increasingly, families are looking for an alternative to the traditional week at camp. Many opt for once a week for a number of weeks or all summer. These offerings might work better in a modern family's busy summer schedule.
- *Summer Leagues*: At some point in the goalie's development, they have been "camped out" and risk being "over coached." What the goalie needs is to take all that instruction and learn to apply it to game situations. Here's where playing games trumps another camp of drills. Just make sure the competition is appropriate and there is some coaching and proper supervision.
- *Showcase Leagues*: For many years, there have been summer leagues that aim to "showcase" young talent to junior coaches or college coaches. Some have delivered better than others. In my experience, those run by educators are usually more valid than those run by entrepreneurs. Do your homework on these leagues or "showcase tournaments."

I asked a veteran college coach if they still found a certain showcase helpful and the answer I got was telling, "Yeah, we use that one to eliminate kids off our list. We start with a large list of names and through that event; we see who can't make it." How would you like to be the parent paying big bucks to promote your kid only to discover the exercise only decreased his or her chances to make the next level? Also, some of these summer programs handicap the goalie. Often, so the promoters can make money, there are three goalies to a team, each playing only a period. If you have a bad period, that's it. No chance to dig yourself out of a hole. And these games are often characterized by plenty of offense, as kids try to impress onlookers with plenty of individual efforts; i.e., not a lot of "D" being played to help the goalie.

Then that brings me to Off-ice Training. Some families take a different approach. They put the skates away and opt to pursue physical training, sport-specific off-ice work. This is a great option provided that the director understands what the physical demands of goaltending are and can tailor a program to your child's needs. This is also, as one might expect, geared more for older (high school and above) goalies.

Finally, and I am deliberately repeating myself, doing nothing is a great option. Make sure whatever you pursue is because it makes sense to you and your family, and NOT because it seems to be what everyone else is doing.

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