

Thoughts from the Bench

April is the time to reflect on the past season and prepare for the next. This is the time to evaluate how you performed as a coach. What things that you did were successful and what were not? What could the staff have done better? What did the coaches learn this year that will make them better coaches next year? If you have not taken the time to reflect, this is a great time to do just that. Open and frank discussion amongst the staff is very useful. Getting some input from players is also very beneficial. We expect our players to be on a quest or journey that involves constant learning. Coaches also need to be on the same type of journey.

I recently saw an article about a soccer phenomenon that turned pro at 14 years old. He is now 20 and observers wonder if he will ever fulfill the expectations. He has great feet, can shoot and pass well and good speed. The problem is that he does not play the game very well. This young man was trained in the skills of soccer beginning at a very young age. He spent thousands of hours perfecting his skills and yet even with all of the skills he has not reached a level of mastery his skills would support. As I think of this it makes me wonder about the many "fads" we have seen in hockey through out the years. The Russians taught us a lot about developing skills so we adopted many of their ideas and techniques. The NHL became a lawless society with the Broad Street Bullies and full ice brawls in Boston Gardens. This approach trickled down into to youth hockey. The New NHL (kinder and gentler) now has an epidemic of concussions forcing the retirement of many players, some in the early years of their careers. Playing 3 on 3 in small ice rinks became the more recent "silver bullet" for development, never mind that some kids can hardly skate. Off ice training facilities have sprung up all over the landscape as this is now seen as the ticket to the "Promised Land." Skating coaches, shooting coaches, strength coaches, yoga instructors, boxing sessions, team psychologists to teach the "mental game" and nutritionists all circle the hungry parents of young players who dream of stardom for their kids. And what about the kids? Well they just want to play, have fun and grab a snack after the game.

So where does that leave the under paid, mostly under trained, regular season coaches? How do we balance the idea of development with the desire to simply play the game? Knowing that less than 1% of all players will advance to college level play and fewer than that to a professional level maybe we should ease back on the throttle a bit and make sure the kids are all having fun and spend a lot of time playing the game instead of training and working out all of the time. The idea that with proper training and skills coaching any kid can achieve greatness defies all logic and hard evidence. Yet this myth persists.

Coaches at all levels need to find the right balance of individual skill development, team development and having fun playing the game. Most of the players are there for fun,

affiliation, recognition and acceptance. As a coach, make sure your program is balanced to meet the needs and desires of all players on your team.

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