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ACE

focus

NEWS FROM AROUND THE COUNTY TO HELP THE ACE DIRECTOR.

Coaching Clinics

By now, your seasons should have ended. I hope everyone had a successful and fun season. During the off-season coaches should be checking the USA Hockey web page for coaching clinics they may want to attend this year.

Coaches that are moving up to a higher level of play most likely will have to also increase their certification level. This summer there will be a Level 5 Coaching Symposium held in Rochester NY, July 12-16. You can go online to register for this clinic. Level 5 is the highest level of coaching in the USA Hockey CEP. Topics presented during the clinic will deal with all aspects of the game of hockey. They range from game day bench strategy to tactical puck control to team building. The topics presented will be by prominent coaches from the NHL, AHL, Europe, and NCAA. Some past presenters and coaches have been Scotty Bowman, Cammie Granato, Ken Hitchcock, Bob Hartley and several others.

One of the great advantages in attending this clinic is the chance to meet other coaches such as you, and discuss coaching methods and techniques. There will also be a question and answer period after each presentation to ask the pros their thoughts and ideas. Although not every presenter will be available beyond their presentation, most will be available immediately afterward for one on one discussion. It has been my experience that they are very approachable and would love to talk hockey with you.

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ACE focus Newsletter

On behalf of the USA Hockey Coaching Program and our ACE Program, I want to thank all of ACE personnel for their efforts this past season. As our program continues to grow and gain credibility, it is in large part due to the local association ACE Director. I want to publicly thank Kevin Connelie our newsletter editor who has done an outstanding job this past season with our first three issues. I would like to welcome to our ranks two new District ACE Administrators from New England, Mr. Dan Daley and from Mid-AM, Mr. John Connors, welcome to the ACE fraternity. In closing, I hope all of you have a great summer and I look forward to our future success of the ACE Program.

Jim Cooney, National ACE Director, USA Hockey

Working with First-Time Players Part-3

By Chuck Gridley

My involvement with USA Hockey in both the CEP and ACE programs has given me the opportunity to meet many youth hockey coaches and administrators from all over the country. One thing that I have learned from talking with this diverse group of people is that there is no consistency in how youth hockey associations across the country structure their Mite programs. The introduction of USA Hockey's "Initiation Program" a few years ago certainly helped in this regard, but you will still find a wide variety of approaches to handling the "Under 8" division. Despite these differences, you will find similarities in all divisions from one association to another. This is to be expected, and is, for the most part, not a problem. What can be problematic is when associations structure their Mite divisions the same as their Pee Wee or Bantam divisions, with 30 – 40 "full-ice" games and practices that focus on systems rather than skills. No matter how you structure your "Under 8" division, you should consider the following:

- 5 & 6 year olds do not need to understand off-sides, icing, or the "left-wing-lock". Don't waste time trying to teach these concepts to children this age. Most of them won't understand it and at this point in their hockey career, they don't need to.
- All games for children in this division should be "**Cross-ice**". This is not only a very practical idea, but will help accelerate their skill development, and contribute to their enjoyment of the game.
- "Small games" should be used in place of traditional "line drills" for the older Mites whenever possible. This will improve their basic skills as well as their hockey instincts. You will also find that kids really enjoy this type of practice structure.
- In general, players should leave the Mite division with a solid base of skills and a strong desire to continue playing hockey.
- Here is a basic structure for an "Under 8" Mite program:
 1. 1st year players
 - a) Focus on Skating and FUN!!
 - b) 3-5 Cross-ice games at the end of the year.
 2. 2nd and 3rd year players
 - a) Continue skill development.
 - b) Introduce small games into practice.
 - c) All games should be Cross-ice.
 3. 4th year players and above
 - a) Continue skill development.
 - b) Increase use of small games.
 - c) Introduce simple team concepts.
 - d) Continue Cross-ice games.
 - e) Play a few full-ice games.



Now that we have looked at an overview of the Mite division, let's take a closer look at that all-important 1st year. As mentioned above, the focus needs to be on skating and fun. This forms the base upon which a successful hockey career is built. If a child cannot skate and is not having fun, they probably won't be playing hockey very long. Here is a quick look at what a 1st year program might look like:

- **1st Month** - The priority is to help the kids feel secure on the ice. They need to know that they will not get hurt if they fall and know that when they fall, they can get themselves back on their feet. I spend a lot of time having the kids fall (on purpose) and get up, roll around and get up, etc. I want them to feel comfortable being down on the ice. I also emphasize the “ready position” (knees bent, head & chest up). I use agility drills to help improve balance, which is an essential skill to develop in the first month.
- **2nd Month** – I continue to reinforce the ready position. I also add elements to their skating routine to improve edge control and agility, and introduce turning (controlled and basic cross-over) and stopping.
- **3rd Month** – I will continue to reinforce ready position, turning, stopping, edge control and agility. The next step is to introduce the hockey stick and basic stick handling. We will start playing cross-ice games at the end of practice.
- **4th month** – I continue reinforcing all of the above, and play a few games at the end of the season against another club . . . Mom and Dad will get a kick out of that!



In order to be successful, you will need a coaching staff to assist you. A ratio of 1 coach to every 4 -5 players is ideal when coaching first year players. It's important that all of your assistant coaches understand the program, and exactly what their role in it is. Everybody has strengths and weaknesses. Try to take advantage of the strengths of each individual on your coaching staff. A preseason meeting with coaches is a great way to communicate to your coaching staff what you want to accomplish and how you plan on doing it. They may have some ideas that you haven't considered that could be

incorporated into the program. You may need to work one-on-one with some of your assistant coaches during practice. Coaching may be new to many of them. You may need to “mentor” some of them to help them get comfortable in this new role.

Another group that may be new to hockey will be the parents of your players. This may not **only** be their first year as a hockey parent, it may be the first sport that their child has played. You will undoubtedly need to educate the parents about the following:

- The Program – What do you want to accomplish? How will you go about doing it? What will practices look like? How can parents help?
- The Equipment – What equipment do the kids need? Does their equipment fit them? Where is a good place to buy equipment? etc.
- The game – not all of them will be “hockey people”. You may need to help educate them about the game of hockey itself.
- Keep the lines of communication open between the parents and yourself. This will help solve many problems before they start.

Helmets for Coaches: A Logical Choice

In January 2006, the Coaches Section submitted a helmet proposal to the USA Hockey Board of Directors. After review and discussion by councils, sections, committees and the Board of Directors, the proposal was amended to read as follows:



All ice hockey coaches and instructors of USA Hockey youth, girls'/women's (19 & Under and below) and High School programs must wear a properly worn HECC approved helmet during all on-ice sessions, including practices, controlled scrimmages, camps, seminars and clinics.

Excluded from this proposal are USA Hockey Junior programs, non-registered High School and Prep teams and National Junior teams.

This amended legislative proposal will be submitted to the Board of Directors for approval at the USA Hockey Annual Congress June 8-11, 2006. **THE PROPOSAL PASSED.**

Needless to say, there has been passionate discussion about this proposal. I am sure it will continue up until and even after the Board of Director's vote. The Coaches Section has discussed the helmet issue for several years. In 1998, the coaches section proposed and the Board of Directors passed language that "**strongly recommended**" the use of helmets by coaches for all on-ice activities. This was done following fatalities of two youth hockey coaches in Michigan. In December 2005, a Minnesota 8 & Under coach, who was a proficient skater (four year letterman at Colorado College), fell over backwards and was seriously injured. Since 1998, five USA Hockey youth coaches and two Canadian youth coaches have died as result of head injuries incurred while coaching their respective teams. USA Hockey Risk Mangers have records indicating that coaches made 36 injury claims between September 2002 and September 2003. In addition, there were 47 injury claims between January 2004 and December 2004. Clearly coaches can be in harms way. These are the number of claims that were actually submitted by coaches, so we do not know the total number of injuries that occurred during this time.

The Coaches Section took a leadership role and submitted the 2006 mandatory helmet proposal. The helmet proposal for on-ice officials was originally passed in 1987 and was revised in 1997 to specify the type of helmet worn. In 1999, Michigan made helmets mandatory. Several leagues and affiliates around the country have similar helmet requirements. Since the current helmet proposal was submitted, Minnesota Hockey and the Southeastern District have mandated helmets beginning in the 2006-2007 season. The Rocky Mountain District has mandated helmets for all on-ice coaching education activities, as well as its Player Development Programs.

This is a proposal that goes against tradition. Whoever thought the NHL players would wear helmets? I remember strong opposition to NCAA players wearing full-face masks. I also remember opposition to domestic juniors wearing facemasks or half shields. Then there are the seat belt laws, as well as helmets for motorcycle riders. The argument I hear most often is "we are a free society and should be able to make choices." Another is: "I am a former player and proficient skater and need not wear the helmet." There is no evidence that coaches of 10 & under players are more or less prone to accident. In addition, there is no clear evidence that poor skaters are more prone to accident.

Let's put the helmet on coaches. If it saves one coach's life or prevents one serious injury, it is worth it. Further, we believe it sets a positive example for the players.

Al Bloomer
USA Hockey Director
Coaches Section

Bottom up Approach

By Bob McCaig, Southeastern District Coach-in-Chief

Written in 1992. Re-written in 2005.

There are many ways for players to develop in the sport of hockey. The optimal way for players to improve is by playing unstructured games - in particular shinny hockey. However, in today's world of adult organized leagues, teams and practices, shinny hockey (one of the best methods for young players to develop overall hockey playing ability) is under utilized. Players need to experience the pure joy of the sport devoid of adult misdirection, judgment and criticism.

One of the most critical fundamentals of the sport is decision making: the ability to make productive choices, i.e. when to pass, when to shoot etc. We often confuse working on particular skills in an isolated way with enhancing the development of young hockey players. This approach has been called into question by researchers Vickers and Bails (University of Calgary) in their study Decision Training.

"Bottom-up methods appear to be limited in helping the athlete understand what really needs to be done. There is too much emphasis on isolated skills and not enough attention to the strategic complexities of the sport."

"Bottom - up method" is the part - whole method. That is, taking the skills of a sport and working on them independently, hoping that they will come together and make the individual player better. It may seem to make sense but does it in a transitional sport where the mind needs to be highly attentive?

For years coaches have overworked basic skills when their players have progressed beyond them. In doing so, these players usually have lacked the ability to think the game. However, if their skills were measured individually they may have a nice level of technique.

The question becomes: "Is something lost, namely ability to make productive decisions, by spending too much on ice time on 'fundamentals'?" Can't some of these skills be worked on off ice just as well? What good are fundamental skills if it does NOT improve one's ability to play the game in a productive manner?

In Vickers and Bails' minds any training that may impinge upon one's ability to receive and process information may be detrimental to transitional games, such as hockey.

The sole use of bottom-up methods may lead to the athlete perfecting certain aspects of their sport at the cost of essential other areas. Critical aspects are simply not trained. Because the athlete appears to be successful in practice they develop a type of false confidence that crumbles in the face of tough competition. In fact, these athletes have limited training in what really occurs.

Decision training develops the following:

- 1) Attention
- 2) Anticipation
- 3) Concentration
- 4) Memory retrieval
- 5) Problem solving
- 6) Automaticity
- 7) Creativity

Youth hockey coaches routinely gather their players before games to lecture them on systematic or tactical play. Does this method actually enhance these traits? Would players learn these aspects of the game through either unstructured play or games in practice in which conditions are placed? Or is the best to learn by copying others?

These sessions (coach lectures) only serve to inhibit players or confuse them. The great players develop their instincts over time when they are young. They develop them by watching older players and would, if allowed, from unstructured play.

Jack Blatherwick, physiologist and former US Olympic Strength and Conditioning Coach, wrote in 1999, "Hockey Skill Development: What's missing?"

I've always been the greatest admirer of a Neal Broten, a Brian Leetch or a Mike Modano, three of the most skillful American players in history. And I know those skills were not taught by the book.

In fact, if someone had gotten out the book and insisted the skill be taught this way or that [way], these superstars probably would have jumped ship and played basketball.

We don't need to intellectualize a simple process. We just need to create an environment where kids want to become skillful magicians. In many cases, just throw out pucks and let them experiment.

The game has to be given back to the players for its long term good. Harry Howell, Hall of Fame defenseman with the NY Rangers, in 1992 said when commenting on such stars as Sergei Federov and Alexander Mogilny, "when Russians are young they are allowed to play shinny - that is handle the puck a lot and skate. Our players are over coached when they are young. I watch North American players and all I hear is 'shoot it, pass it, get rid of it!' As a result we don't have the puck handlers the Europeans do."

In a Sports Illustrated article (3/14/2005) A Whole New Ball Game by Michael Bamberger Frank Robinson laments the same deficiencies in baseball, "The typical modern player would never have made it in his playing era, 1956 - 76: 'They're over-coached from the age of six. Somebody is always telling them what to do, so they can't think for themselves. Some unusual situation comes up, and they don't know what to do with the ball.' "

A player must not only develop the skills, but also develop a feel and a passion for the game in their formative/developmental years. Bobby Orr and Don Cherry spoke about the misdirection of youth hockey on Cherry's early 1990's television show "Cherry's Grapevine."

Orr explained how he developed—by playing on ponds as a youngster. Orr said, "That's the way we learned our skills . . . without adults, just drop the puck and go."

Cherry agreed with Orr, saying that he too is bothered by adult over involvement in youth hockey. Cherry said, "You know what bothers me . . . when I go to the rink and I hear the coach saying 'pass it, pass it.' I mean, if you (Orr) had done that you would never have made the NHL."

In their conversation Orr reiterates that he learned the game by playing, not adult scheduled leagues or tournaments or "exposure camps," on the pond and having fun. Orr says, "In many cases kids would be better off than waiting for adults to organize it."

Orr goes on to say, "I don't know if I could play today, I keep hearing about all these systems. We learned the fundamental skills shooting, passing, handling the puck, skating These systems are unbelievable!"

There it is, from the best player to ever play the game saying that it should be fun. That too much adult involvement is taking the joy and creativity out of the game. He does not know if he would enjoy playing under these circumstances. Who would?

Soccer is facing many of same problems brought on by uneducated youth coaches in an article written by Roy Rees the US National U - 17 coach (1/10/91 issue Soccer NE), Mr. Rees defines the goal of a youth coach as "drawing out of individual skill."

He goes on to write, "If a coach imposes rigid discipline on his players he can hardly expect them to play with joy and abandon. A coach who restricts the creativity and inventiveness of his players is doomed to produce journeyman soccer players in mundane boring teams." Mr. Rees could very well be writing about hockey.

The soccer star Pele, who was to his sport what Orr was to hockey wrote an article in Sports Illustrated (SI 3/25/91): "Many coaches fearful of losing their high paid jobs no longer play to win, they play not to lose. That subtle shift in attitude has far reaching effects at all levels of the sport, from the mechanized way kids learn the game to questionable defensive tactics pros use to frustrate their rivals."

"To create a goal is a complex task that requires dozens of split - second decisions and the imagination to anticipate 3, 4, 5 moves ahead. Most of today's players, who are products of the over - emphasis on defense (systems in hockey) aren't afforded the opportunity to master these skills. What has been lost in the process is the very heart and soul of the game."

Adam Crowe, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, speaking after Desert Storm said, "The key factors in success were . . . initiative and imagination, more so than planning."

Isn't this what is lacking in so many hockey players today?

Coaching Clinics Cont'd

Besides the Level 5 Symposium, there are also Level 4 clinics being held throughout the country. Like the Level 5 clinic, these clinics are filled with prominent coaches who are happy to share their stories and philosophies.

If you are attending your first Level 1 clinic or the level 5 clinic, I would urge you to "step outside" your comfort zone and meet some of your fellow coaches. You will be amazed at the amount of knowledge you can gain. I have yet to attend a clinic in which I did not get something out of it.

Kevin Connelie
Chair National ACE newsletter.