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Association Coaching and Education

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USA HOCKEY

News from around the country to help the ACE Director.

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The much awaited and anticipated Skills and Drills DVD is out. If you have not had a chance to see it, I would highly recommend buying it. This is a very useful resource for all coaches, parents, and players. Also released last September were the Small Games Book and CD to help coaches teach skills in confined areas and game like situations.

As always, if you have any comments or articles that you would like to share please send them to me at kconnelie@verizon.net.

Thanks and have a happy and safe new year.

Kevin Connelie,
Chair National ACE
newsletter.



ACE focus Newsletter

Hi Everyone,
Hope you all enjoyed the Holidays, which for me signaled the half way point in the current season. Hope all has gone well with the new Standard of Play. I know that most players have adapted to the rule enforcement and I feel it has helped our game. I'm pleased to hear that Coaches are wearing helmets at practice, thanks for your help on that directive. Please check out the USA Hockey web site as there are a number of Power Point presentations available. Click on Coaches, then ACE, and then Presentations. You can utilize the presentations with your own associations. Best wishes for the New Year.

Jim Cooney, National ACE Director, USA Hockey

“The Importance of Practice “

There have been numerous clichés' written about practice. “Failure to prepare is to prepare for failure”, “you play like you practice”, “practice without improvement is a waste of time”, “practice is the study (preparation) for the weekly test (game)”, practice is for learning and development, the game is for execution and implementation” and many others. We **talk** about the importance of planning and executing effective practice plans at all levels of the Coaching Education Program. USA Hockey has developed and published numerous books, videos and DVD/CD's on teaching skills, concepts and tactics; the most recent being the *Age Appropriate Small Games Handbook* and the *Complete Skills and Drills DVD*. USA Hockey and Hockey Canada have published numerous studies regarding puck possession and puck touches in games vs. practice. The bottom line in all these publications and studies is that players learn and develop skills at practice. We need to put developing players in situations where ice time, puck touches, and decision-making are maximized. We often ask ourselves, can hockey sense and game understanding be taught? The answer is an overwhelming, yes if they participate in effective and challenging practices. When discussing development with our counter parts around the world the overwhelming recommendation for development of skills is that the practice to game ratio should at a minimum be 3 to 1; three hours of practice to one hour of game. Do we follow this guideline? Clearly too many of our associations are game driven. Perhaps that is what the membership wants. If so we need to recognize / accept that player skill development expectations will be diminished.

If the Michigan State University Study, which paralleled the Hockey Canada Study, is correct, 70% of kids drop out of hockey by age 14 because they are not having any fun. The second reason is increased costs to play. Kids enjoy participating in activities that they are good at. It is not about winning, it is about participation in an activity and doing it as well as you can. If all these studies are correct, should we not be working harder to improve our players' skills and conceptual understanding of the game? With game understanding and skill improvement come enjoyment and appreciation of the game.



If we believe what experts tell us that games are 90% mental and 10% physical? Then why are practices structured and controlled? Players will follow the specific drill format as drawn, very little thinking and creating. Should our practices mirror the game situations in terms of mental creativity and decisions? Certainly when we teach specific skills related to skating, passing, receiving, shooting or angling we need to slow things down and be specific. Once the fundamental stage of learning the specific skill set is completed, then the coach should move into transition stage of combining skills and adding components of traffic, speed and competition. At this point I believe the drill sets should become less controlled and structured and the players must begin to make decisions based on on-ice situations. Certainly, we will need to go back to repeat and refine the skill sets. Repetition is a key component to learning skill sets. Effective practices must have purpose. Drills should have outcomes and consequences. The use of *Small Games* can accomplish many if not all these things. *Small Games* with a purpose are less structured, allow players to make decisions with and away from the puck and have outcomes and consequences. Bjorn Kindling, former Switzerland and Sweden National Team Coach and a regular speaker at USA Hockey Coaching symposiums, completed a detailed study in 1994 indicating that **only** 2 to 3 players' typically touch the puck during a team's possession in a regular game. The implications of this statistic suggest that players must be proficient in 1 vs. 1, 2 vs. 2 and 3 vs. 3, as well as odd man situation involving these combinations.

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“BACKCHECKING”

By Michael Powers Connecticut ACE Administrator

What is Backchecking?

Effective Backchecking takes the advantage away from the opposition when they have the puck. Good solid Backchecking teams are going to be very difficult to play against. Backchecking is nothing more than hard work and tenacity.

How do you Backcheck?

Backchecking begins with proper positioning while forechecking.

Backchecking Rules of Thumb:

1. After an aggressive forechecking assignment, it is vital that our forecheckers recover quickly and sprint back through the middle of the ice to create support (use center ice circle as a visual reference). If executed properly, we will effectively eliminate late pass outlets and disrupt the opposing attack by taking away the middle of the ice. It is vital that forecheckers recover quickly and that backchecking pursuit be conducted with high intensity.
2. When caught behind the play, backcheck hard through the middle of the ice to the defensive slot, (protect the house) there must be a sense of urgency!

Why Backcheck The Puck Carrier?

- A. To create backside pressure on the puck carrier and attempt to deny him the middle of the ice.
- B. To prevent the puck carrier from having an unobstructed 1 on 1 “run” at our defenseman.
- C. To enable the structure of the line rush to sort out before establishing defensive coverage away from the puck.

If the backchecker is too far behind the play to have any hope of creating backside pressure on the puck carrier, simply roar back through the middle of the ice and prepare to support the rush by picking up any trailers or open opponent. Once you establish coverage on your backcheck, attempt to stay between your man and the puck. Be no more than a half stick length away. NEVER leave your man (once coverage has been established) while backchecking or the puck will most likely go to him. Cover your man all the way to the back wall if necessary until we get control, or you know we are going to get control, or you have tagged off with a defenseman. After tagging off with a defenseman, go to your defensive zone coverage or breakout position.

What happens when you backcheck effectively?

- A. Frustrate a lot of teams into drawing offsidings, retaliation and/or cheap frustration penalties.
- B. Cut down our goals against.
- C. Create more offensive opportunities (turnovers/transition)
- D. Become awfully tough team to play against.

Four most important keys to backchecking:

1. How to.
2. Understanding that position as a team is vital and is the job of every player on the team.
3. Communication
4. Practice

What are the Attributes of Effective Backcheckers?

1. Determination, Hustle, Knowledge and Communication
2. Unselfish pride. The type of player who takes as much pride in preventing goals, as he does in scoring them.

“You can skate too much, you can shoot too much, you can even pass too much, but you can never backcheck too much” —RH “Bob” Peters

The Opponent

A rare and treasured thing for any team or player is a treasured/good opponent. It is what the Yankees are to the Red Sox and what Frazier was to Ali. For a good opponent defines a player or team. By forcing you to be as good as you can be, such an opponent stretches the boundaries of your emotional and playing experience, giving you your highest highs and lowest lows, your best and your worst and hardest moments.

When you get to an age or to a moment that causes you to look back, you realize how important that is. After years of games and feelings, it is only those boundaries, those special highs and lows, that remain; the rest, with nothing special to distinguish them one from another, gradually just disappear.

It is why good teams and good players, good enough to stand alone, stand straighter and more vividly with a good or treasured opponent. So when a career or season ends, when the passion of the game subsides, towards a good opponent you feel only gratitude.

This excerpt was taken from the book "The Game" by Ken Dryden.

The Evolving Game

The new hockey season has brought much discussion, concern, rumor, and anxiety. Players, coaches, parents, administrators, and officials alike wondered aloud how the emphasis placed on penalizing stick infractions and interference (similar to the effort made by the NHL at the beginning of last year's season) would affect youth hockey. Much of the discussion amongst youth hockey's stakeholders likely focused on the influence of the rules emphasis on the time and flow of the game, giving offensive players a serious advantage over defenders, lopsided power play opportunities, a lack of playing time for non-special teams players and the outcome of the game being decided by penalties. Hopefully, more conversations led to how players could successfully stay out of the penalty box and play skilled hockey.

Coaches certainly were concerned about having to teach players differently in the evolving game; the trusty stick between the legs and grabbing some jersey would no longer be tolerated. And, according to some coaches, the impact is greatest on defenseman who often relied on "tricks" to even the playing field with speedy forwards.

The game of hockey is evolving. USA Hockey has made it clear that coaches should teach and reward speed, skills, smarts, and tenacity not hooking, hacking, and holding. This evolving skills game penalizes players for cutting corners, getting out of position, slacking on the ice, and attempting to compete using illegal means. It rewards players for skating, playing their position, moving the puck, and making skillful offensive and defensive plays. In the short term, the rules emphasis will create a lot of penalties, odd-man advantages, increased blood pressure, and psychological stress and emotional pain. However, if we think long-term development, the rules emphasis makes great sense.

The rules emphasis is important to the long-term health of the game. American players must develop their skills, not learn tricks or illegal tactics, to succeed in the evolving game. Skating and positional play must be taught instead of short cuts. At the professional or international level slow-skating, large players are no longer an asset. A team can no longer use their brute size and strength to manhandle a smaller and faster team. The playoff series between Philadelphia and Buffalo epitomized this evolving game. The Sabres often won the puck battles, picked up loose pucks, and skated circles around the Flyers defense. Philly back checkers were unable to consistently recover and eliminate late men from getting quality scoring chances and scoring goals. In response, Flyers' management has acquired

quicker, better skating players that should flourish in the evolving game and give them a better chance to compete against the very talented Sabres and Hurricanes.

Youth hockey is the grass roots of professional and international hockey. If we do not adapt to the evolving game we will fall behind other countries in the development of talented, skilled players. Even more importantly, with the rules emphasis players will now be allowed to demonstrate their abilities with less illegal infractions occurring on the ice. In turn offensive and defensive players will be forced to improve their skills to compete in the evolving game. No longer can a forward be lazy and then hook an opponent to eliminate an advantage. The rules emphasis will enhance the quality of the hockey being played, it may just take a season for everyone to adapt and compensate. Think of it this way; most of us give the least amount of effort or work needed to be successful in a given situation. For example, students often do the minimum amount of studying they think they need to get a "B" on a test. Why do more studying when you can "get by" with less effort? The same phenomenon applies to hockey. Players often will give just enough effort to be successful. In allowing players to cut corners and use illegal means to be successful we are not challenging them to develop their game to a higher level. They can "get by" with a lower level of skill development.

This article is not an indictment of all coaches – many coaches do teach the evolving skills game very well. Yet, as a group coaches must effectively adapt to the changes thrown upon them. Coaches must find what it means to be successful in coaching the evolving game of hockey. How do you do this? First of all, be a student of the game. Watch other coaches, talk to them, go to coaching clinics, read books, and watch videos. Improve your coaching knowledge as well as your teaching abilities. Second, emphasize to players the skills of the game instead of focusing wasted energy on complaining about the rules emphasis. Spend much of your time refining the foundational hockey skills of your team so that they have the advantage. Third, work with your players on handling adversity. They should expect games where they are shorthanded 10 times or more. When talking to coaches in the first two weeks of the season I learned that this had already happened! Prepare your players for these situations so they can be more resilient and refocus on playing the game instead of focusing on their frustration or anger about the stringent officiating. Fourth, prepare your parents. USA Hockey developed a DVD that overviewed the rules emphasis. Make sure your parents understand the rule emphasis and why officials have been given the mandate to call everything that is illegal. Then, talk to them about reinforcing a positive response to negative situations such as being down two skaters late in the third. They should model emotional control for the team, just as you need to be the "model" of emotional control for everyone in the rink. Instruct parents to take a deep breath and remind themselves of what the game is truly about – fun, development, safety, and friendships.

Ultimately, we all need to support the officials. They are being asked to step up and call everything they see. The hockey community also needs to step up and be supportive and to control their emotions. Otherwise we are undermining the effort to improve the game and only become part of the problem. Let's all be part of the solution and accelerate hockey's evolution into the most skillful, physical, fast and fair sport in the world.

Larry Lauer, Ph.D. is the director of coaching education and development at the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. He is a former hockey director at Flyers Skate Zone, Pennsauken, NJ. Larry also heads Championship Performance Consulting which provides mental training for athletes and produces The Hockey Edge Newsletter. For more information on this month's topic and mental toughness training, please email Larry at lauerl@msu.edu.

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Goaltenders: our practices must be more goaltender effective. Once a goaltender is warm, I believe shooting from the same pre-determined lane numerous times in a row is boring and ineffective. Further, I believe goaltenders need to be coached on skating, puck handling, technique and angles during practice. Once warm-up has occurred, I think an effective practice for goaltenders must have a variety of shots coming from all angles. *Small Games* can and will put goaltenders into game-like situations.

It is up to every ACE Coordinator and every coach to understand the purpose and mission of effective practices. The challenge is to **“walk the walk”**.

“What you see is what you coached”

Al Bloomer, National Coach in Chief, Director Coaches Section