

The hockey season is now officially underway with the Thanksgiving tournaments all completed and in the record books. New team rankings will be forthcoming and the debates will ensue. The race for the state tournaments in March has begun and all the participants are on the track. Now the teams will settle in with their practice and district game routines. The real season is just beginning and the coaches now have to really dig in and do their job.

But what is their job?

This is a question that will elicit a wide range of responses. Some will say that the coaches are there to teach the players the Xs and Os to help them win. Others will say that they are there to provide discipline and force the players to work hard because it is good for them. Most responses are centered on providing direction to the teams. I would suggest that there is a whole other area of responsibility that is rarely discussed and that is the idea that coaches need to continually learn about the game and about coaching.

Effective coaching requires the following elements in order to provide a quality learning experience for your players:

- 1) A deep understanding of the basic skills that are required to play the game and how to teach those skills. A youth coach must be able to teach skating, puck handling, passing, shooting and body contact skills.
- 2) A realistic understanding of the skill levels of your players and a plan for improving those skills.
- 3) A respect for the players and an expectation that not only will the players learn from you but you will also learn from them.
- 4) Patience. Lots of it. The skills required to play this game are not easy to learn and take time. Many youth players cannot do what their coaches want because they are not yet physically capable. New skills and ideas take time for players to assimilate. Praise the effort as they work towards the desired results.
- 5) Be a sponge. Learn as much about the game as you possibly can and be open to new ideas from any source.
- 6) Always question what you are doing and see if there is better way. Get to know experienced coaches and ask questions. See how they do it and ask them why?
- 7) Get to know your players and learn what makes them tick. Try to determine the best way to communicate with them and the best way to motivate them.
- 8) Be persistent in your teaching with the understanding that revelation can occur at any moment.
- 9) Do not be afraid to be wrong. Making mistakes is how you will learn to be a better coach. Encourage your players to make mistakes as they will also learn from their mishaps.
- 10) Provide an atmosphere that encourages players to have fun and learn.

So where do we start? All youth hockey coaches have completed the required levels of the Coaching Education Program. Rather than an end to the education process it should be the beginning. Each district in Minnesota Hockey has numerous experienced and high quality coaches. Each District has a Coach in Chief and an ACE Coordinator to help all of the coaches. District 3 is even running a series of mini-clinics to help the coaches improve their coaching skills.

Minnesota Hockey has two new free skating video tapes available to help youth coaches teach basic skating techniques (Contact Minnesota Hockey for more info). There are also numerous resources available to you on the Minnesota Hockey web site in the Coaches Resource Center.

If you are interested in being a better coach or have a hockey problem you want to discuss with someone call the head coach from your district and ask for help. They are all willing to help you out.

When March rolls around and the snow is giving way to the warm spring breeze think back to your team in October and November. Remember the smiles and the whoops of excitement for goals scored and games won. But more important look at the progress your players have made and your team has made. You were part of that journey and you did your job. Have a great season.

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