

By Mitch Korn

While the Stanley Cup Finals may have just ended, it's almost time to start thinking about that new season. Coaches everywhere are faced with a common dilemma: how to choose a goalie when they themselves know very little about goaltending.

Many coaches fall into the trap of believing that "bigger" is better than "smaller," and that "flashy" is best of all. But in the long run, that's usually not the case.

In order to help those confused coaches, I've tried to outline some key things to look for within three broad categories. By no means is this all-inclusive, it's merely a guideline to point coaches, goalies and parents in the right direction. It is up to the coach to develop drills that accurately test and evaluate a goaltender.

Physical skills

**Stance is important.** A goalie must have fundamental arm and leg positioning, along with the ability to remain in the stance position throughout all of his/her moves.

**Skating is critical.** Goaltenders must be wonderful skaters—not only forward skaters, but backward and lateral skaters, too. They must be able to skate and stop like a goalie, not a forward. In addition, solid balance and agility on skates is important for movement, recovery and positioning. Pay close attention to this one!

**Athleticism.** Even without the checking associated with other positions, goaltending is a demanding physical position. Being a good athlete just makes everything so much easier for a goalie.

**Save Execution.** Goalies must possess the basic saving skills. Certainly, age level will determine the advanced level of these skills. But skate saves, 1/2-butterflies, two-pad slides, use of the blocker and catch glove, and stick saves must be executed in an efficient, crisp and clean manner. Beware of the goalie that consistently "overreacts."

**The Goalie's Size.** Many coaches feel that big is better than small. Not true! Tall goalies have pluses and minuses, as do small goalies. In most cases, size is really not an issue. Remember, Tom Barrasso is 6'3", 210 and Curtis Joseph is only 5'10", 185.

**The Goalie's Speed.** Also known as "movement time." Again, coaches generally feel the faster the better. That's usually true, but it's also only part of the total package. While speed is a good guide to athleticism, conditioning, muscle tone and flexibility, it should be considered only as one part of the goalie's skills. I've coached goalies who were very fast, but not very good!

**Conditioning.** The goalie is the only player who plays the entire game. Therefore, he/she should be well-conditioned and in reasonable shape. An overweight goalie's deficiencies manifest themselves with other physical weaknesses in the areas outlined above.

**Little Things.** Look for things like the ability to break up centering passes, stopping pucks dumped in, freezing the puck, moving the puck, rebound control, etc.

Overall, when considering physical skills, the goalie should be able to do everything with one leg that he/she can do with the other. Everything that can be done from a stationary position should also be able to be done moving both forward and backward.

### Mental skills

No goalie can make it big without quality physical skills, yet just having quality physical skills is no guarantee of success. Mental skills are equally important.

**Angles & Positioning.** While "getting there" is a physical skill, knowing "where to go" is a mental one. The goaltender should challenge shooters, avoid hanging back on the goal line, and limit goals surrendered from bad angles. The better the goaltender's positioning, the more "blocking" rather than saving is done. A well-positioned goaltender, therefore, will not look as flashy as a scrambling one, but will be much more consistent.

**Proper Save Selection.** The ability to "read and react" to a situation, anticipate, and have "hockey/goalie sense" directly affects the goalie's ability to make the correct save choice. For example, if a player is parked in front of the net and tips the puck, a 1/2-butterfly move is much better than a skate save attempt. Often, however, the same shot from the same spot might be played differently based on where the other nine players are positioned on the ice. In other words, a change in situation can dictate changes in the way a goalie must be positioned and the save selection required.

**Reaction Time.** This is the speed at which a goaltender can mentally recognize a given situation and decide what physical skill to execute. Once a decision is made, the goalie's physical speed comes into play. Together, they add up to the "response time" of the goalie.

**Mental Toughness.** The ability to maintain concentration and intensity, and to "shake off" being scored upon are skills to be admired. Be wary of goalies who use excuses, blame others, or who pull themselves from the net.

Overall, mental skills cannot be measured by rapid-fire drills or showdowns, but rather by drills that simulate game situations.

### Emotional Skills

**Self-confidence.** It's a must. Confidence is important for all players, but many goalies are downright cocky...and that's not so bad! That cockiness may be an important part of the goalie's emotional make-up. The coach must then consider that "part," and decide if he can work with the

goalie, as well as how the team will react to it. Remember: the goaltender, while a different animal, must still be part of the team.

**Work Habits & Heart.** Put simply: you practice as you play, you play as you practice. A goalie should have excellent work habits, setting a work-ethic example for the rest of the team. It is easy for a goalie to loaf during many parts of practice. If he or she does, you should wonder just how badly that person wants to be a better goalie.

**Coachability.** The goalie must be open to new ideas and constructive criticism. This is often a problem if the coach is not perceived as a credible source by the goalie.

There's much that goes into being a successful goaltender. A judgment should not be made based on one scrimmage, 10 breakaways, or a series of rapid-fire shots. Choosing a team's goaltenders is a big decision that affects everyone on the squad. So work these tips into your evaluation process, and good luck! Because after everything's been analyzed, we all still need some luck.