



## Keeping Up With The Times

The game of ice hockey is still fundamentally the same as it has been for the past 50 years, but many aspects around the game have changed and none more than the players that show up at the rink every day. The players of today are very different in many ways from even 15 years ago and coaches need to keep improving their skills in order to remain effective with their teams and players. Having a clear understanding of these changes will help coaches perform better. The areas of change that bear review include: communicating with the Millennial Generation; Understanding the broader picture of sports in our society today; And understanding training and development opportunities available to athletes.

Coaches need to be great communicators in order successfully transfer knowledge and information to their players. The problem is that the Millennial Generation (born 1982 through 2002) has grown up in a world very different than previous generations and they have very different expectations than prior generations. This Millennial Generation has always had cell phones, computers and the internet in their lives. They are closely connected to each other by technology. Their parents are very involved in all aspects of their lives, thus the term "Helicopter Parents". To be an effective coach one must understand this generation of players. The old way of "My way or the Highway" simply does not cut it any longer.

The characteristics of the Millennial Generation have been described by the experts as follows: protected, confident, realistic, multi-taskers, stimulus junkies, team oriented, "Always Connected", identify with parental values, seek leadership and favor lots of frequent feedback.

These traits present many challenges to coaches. The players want to be heard and have more say over what they do. You as a coach need to decide "How tough is to Tough" With these kids you need to walk a fine line or you will lose them. Another characteristic of this generation is that they are very confident but also very fragile. They will often talk big but play small or not play hard at all. These characteristics are very different from previous generations that did not have access to the technology and communication systems that we have today. Try some new approaches and spend some time observing how these kids communicate and learn.

As a coach you might want to follow some of the following suggestions.

Improve your understanding of your players as individuals.

Take the time to get to know them and appreciate them

Connect with your players' one on one several times a week.

Understand what their goals are. They might be different than yours.

Help each player establish personal expectations and goals

Include players in establishing team standards and expectations  
Be patient and positive with youth players but do not hover over them

It is also important to understand the broader picture of the hockey scene and the overall expectations and goals of players in hockey and elsewhere. Players today have many choices about where to play, where to train and a whole host of other sports and activities available to them. Always remember that because they are so connected, nothing happens in a vacuum any more. Your reputation as a coach, that you worked hard to establish, can be lost in a single moment with a misstep on your part or worse yet if you have failed to keep up with the players skills, expectations and current methods of coaching. As hockey expands all across the country even Minnesota youth players have many options available to them as young as 12 years old.

Training and development opportunities are abundant and as a coach you need to be current on what is age appropriate for your players. It is also imperative that you understand that players will self select the training programs that they feel best suit them. This is especially true in the off season. Compelling players to attend your program is likely not the best idea. If you provide dynamic and current training they will attend. If you do not they will seek it elsewhere. Much of this is parent driven until the players are mid teens and then the individual players will select programs for their own development. Again, having a strong understanding of what motivates each player will be critical in coaching and advising them.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this piece, the game is played the same as always but the participants have defiantly changed. Coaches also need to change. One of the required and important areas of effective coaching is competency. Make sure you are able to teach skating, puck handling, passing and body checking. Make sure you understand how to effectively communicate with players in an age appropriate manner. This is your homework for the summer. Read and research. Think about these issues and reflect on what you did this last season that you could improve on. There is quite a bit of information on the internet and books that can help. I will discuss these in other articles.

In order to improve coaches must be inquisitive about their players and what they want and need. Coaches do not need to abandon all of the old ways but merely update and present the information in a different fashion and in different ways. Failure to adapt to change could lead to tensions in your program and a less desirable outcome.

Hal Tearse  
Minnesota Hockey Coach in Chief  
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