



Help Your Kids through Tryouts

The onset of fall is also the beginning of tryouts for youth teams all across Minnesota. Tryouts are a time of high anxiety on the part of players, parents, administrators and coaches. Nobody involved particularly likes the process but we need to go through it in order to form teams and begin the season. In spite of the stress and anxiety that tryouts generate, this is a great time for parents to help their kids face some of the realities in life and also learn to understand some of the myths that surround tryouts.

It is important to understand that kids take all of their cues about their well being and relative abilities from their parents. During tryouts for a hockey team or any other activity, how parents react to the process will have a major impact on how the kids react prior to, during and after the tryouts. Parents that are anxious and show signs of stress and general nervousness will cause the same emotions in their children. As we all know from our own lives, when we feel anxiety and stress we do not perform at our best. Players that are tense and uneasy do not play well.

Another common reaction by parents is "it is all politics" as they attempt to explain why their child did not make the desired team. If their child attends a private school then they will blame that for not making the top local association team. Maybe the blame is that the other kid's parents are board members and therefore it was not a fair tryout. The excuses are endless.

Unfortunately some parents feel compelled to share these excuses with their children who then believe these statements as fact. If all of the kids whose parents who scream foul made the A team, the roster would have 30-40 players on it. That is a lot of politics!

Maybe politics or some other force from outer space influenced the team selections but chances are that they did not. Coaches want to select the best players for their team and they have a very short time to evaluate the kids. The last three or four players on any team usually are the hardest decisions for coaches and where they spend as much as fifty percent of their time. I know that kids have been left off of teams because of the "baggage" they come with. Parents are sometimes the baggage. Your actions and behaviors can be a liability to your kids. Some coaches would rather not deal with a known trouble maker parent because the kids usually have the same attitudes.

Generally speaking coaches do a great job selecting the teams. They are all volunteers and coach for the love of the game. They do make mistakes but normally they come from a belief that a particular player will do well once the season starts and sometimes it just does not work out that way.

There is also a natural order of skills and abilities in every closed group of athletes. What I mean by that is typically in any association the A teams are made up each year from a group of 22-25 players. The top 5-7 players are consistently on the A team each year due to their athleticism and early development and the rest of the kids move in and out as their growth rates vary and skills develop at different times. Occasionally a player from outside the group develops later and enters as a second year Pee wee or Bantam. We know for sure that many A pee wees are surpassed in later years by B players when the kids go to high school. The hard facts are that some kids are always going to be better athletes and players than others. It is not politics or any other influence, it is life.

Parents are typically the worst judge of their child's abilities in youth athletics. It is very difficult as a parent to separate from the role of a parent and objectively evaluate your child. All parents want their kids to be successful and want to be able to boast about their children's accomplishments. When it comes to youth sports however, all of the conversations and excuses that come from parents only serve to disillusion their children about the process and lessen their enthusiasm for the game. All parents mean well but many actually sabotage their own kids.

The Positive Coaching Alliance (www.positivecoach.org) describes the fundamental objective of youth sports as "Building Character and Self Esteem Through Sports". This applies to coaches but even more so to parents of kids who play sports. The tryout periods for youth hockey teams are a great time for parents to help their kids by reducing their stress and anxiety. You can do this by eliminating all negative conversations about the process, evaluators and the final outcome. If you were honest with yourself you know the outcome is correct and if in fact your child is a bubble player, it likely does not matter in the long run. More important is using these events as teachable moments and opportunities in our roles as parents. How you handle these situations will leave lasting impressions on your children.

Dealing with disappointment is an important lesson that young people need to learn. By placing the blame somewhere else only delays the inevitable learning for children. As parents it is important to help kids process their disappointments and move on. By taking a neutral stance on the outcome of the evaluation process you are sending good messages to your children. You are communicating that you support them on whatever team they play on and you are proud of them. Ranting, raving and otherwise placing blame where it likely does not belong only harms your children's development.

Youth sports should be fun for the players and parents, not a high stress competitive culture where everybody actually thinks the outcomes matter. Over 98 percent of the kids playing hockey in Minnesota will never play college or professional hockey. Eighty to ninety percent of boys depending on which community you live in will not even play high school hockey due to the large number of boys in youth hockey and small number of spots for high school teams.

So why get all worked up about tryouts? Stay calm, cool and collected. Let the coaches do their job selecting the teams and then have a wonderful winter playing the great game of hockey.

See you around the rink...

Hal Tearse

Coach in Chief

Minnesota Hockey