

# Purposeful Coaching: Development Over Production

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One critical component to being purposeful in our coaching is making sure that we create a strategic and tactical environment in which our players' long-term development is given higher priority than perhaps safer, simpler, or more productive alternatives. In teaching the proper ways to think about or process the game of hockey, many of the pathways that give us the best chance of winning in the moment don't necessarily align with what is best for development in the long run - often with time horizons extending well beyond what we'd prefer. Sure, we can hope that most of what we instruct and implement bears fruit for us, at least by the end of the season. However, we truly need to focus on the broader picture and accept the fact that much of what we do for our players is for down the road, even if that often creates some headaches for us in the present.

Regardless of age or level, kids come to us - often simply because of inherently misaligned instincts - with flawed perspectives on how to read and react. Some of those issues are obvious, some much more subtle. Either way, it's our job to create new channels in their thinking and their processing. And that can be quite frustrating at times, to both coaches and players alike. Often, it seems like the status quo is more desirable because it just feels better and perhaps even yields superior results. Change can be discomfoting. And the right change, the most important change, can sometimes be downright painful.

Following are three examples for which I think maintaining and implementing the above perspective is especially important:

**Horizontal Hockey:** The broad notion of *horizontal hockey* includes several ancillary concepts, but the general idea is that hockey is meant to be played laterally, not simply straight up-and-down the ice. We do a HUGE disservice to development, starting even at the youngest of Mites, any time we utter the words "stay on your side" (an exception being the DZ in some contexts) or other similar commands meant to portray the ice as being comprised of vertical, up-and-down lanes. One tactic for showing the appropriate mindset, especially for those away from the puck, is to use examples of football receiving routes. Illustrate on a whiteboard how if all eligible receivers simply go straight up the field, how

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ineffective that is. Describe how that applies just as much to hockey - and how important it is for players to look to move cross-ice and even back or towards the puck carrier. Explain why this is so critical in the NZ especially, but how it also applies to the OZ and even somewhat within the DZ (e.g. breakouts or lateral coverages). Utilize drills that isolate certain sections of the ice, and then present and reinforce the logic and timing for how lanes should be filled. Hit this over and over and over again until you start to see it becoming somewhat instinctual. Then hit it again and again and again – because if you don’t, they will revert to their vertical nature. This process will be messy, and it will likely cost you productivity early in the season at least. But it’s something that must be done in any earnest attempt at true development.

**Puck Possession:** One other cringe-worthy statement we often hear is, “It’s early in the season; let’s just keep it simple, and dump-n-chase for now.” I can somewhat see the logic from a productivity (i.e. winning early) perspective, but not at all from a development one. The best teams at the end of seasons, hands-down, are puck possession teams, and that identity needs to be built from day one - even as it produces unavoidable growing pains. And one key point in all of this is that puck possession does not mean reckless possession; it means smart possession up until the point where it becomes most prudent to move the puck. Perhaps that movement takes the form of a pass or a shot. Perhaps it’s a little chip into an open or safer area of ice. And perhaps it is indeed a dump-n-chase from the NZ. The issue at hand isn’t what one must prescriptively do with the puck in certain areas of the ice or in specific situations. It’s instead how to make smart plays so that we can most effectively gain a competitive advantage in overall possession. Recklessly forcing a play at the offensive blue line simply in the name of *puck possession* doesn’t create value; it only opens us up to a likely turnover in a space that gives our opponents a quick advantage in their possession and positional game. So yes, there are times where dumping the puck makes total sense; however, we want players who are able to make that decision on their own, based on their maturing read-and-react capabilities, not on a coach’s blanket mandate for “keeping it simple.” Instilling hockey sense in our players is never simple. They must learn through their mistakes. And it’s our job as coaches to put them in and help them through situations where they are forced to read the ice, to assess the situation, and to build a repertoire (of skills, techniques, and confidence) that allows them to frequently make that impressive *hockey play*, but to also see, sense, and understand when it’s appropriate to do something else with the puck. It’s not a dichotomy of playmaking versus keeping it simple or safe; it’s creating in our players an ability for them to constantly bounce back and forth along that spectrum. The only way to create that hockey sense is to instill an overall mindset of puck possession, but within a framework that guides and reinforces the virtues of smart reads and accountable decisioning.

**Goalies Aggressive to the Puck:** Compared to the first two examples, this final item may seem a bit out of left field, but it’s another one where I know that, as coaches, we are generally missing out on critical development opportunities by not teaching and reinforcing proper perspective. Think about the

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last time you saw a college or pro goalie who wasn't good at playing the puck away from the net. Of course, some seem relatively more comfortable and defter than others, yet all are fully capable of quickly busting into the high slot to handle and distribute the puck - or at scampering from their post to stop a ring and then either handing it off or moving it themselves based on their up-ice reads. One simply cannot become a good goalie without becoming highly proficient at this. However, for goalies to develop these required skating and stick skills, as well as the ice awareness necessary to effectively utilize them, we as coaches need to be encouraging this aggressiveness at the earliest of ages. And through that process, we need to expect that we are going to see errors and mistakes and, most likely, even a goal or two into abandoned nets because of it. One of the worst things we can do to our tenders is make them unnecessarily nervous about leaving the crease. Thus, years ago, I started a habit of telling my goalies early in our seasons, "I will never get on you for going out aggressively and making an honest mistake with the puck. But trust me, I will chew your butt if you just stay passively in the crease and don't try." Unfortunately, I think most goalies in youth hockey feel the opposite pressure. That hurts our teams and especially hampers the development of this critical and often under-appreciated attribute of good goaltending.

Hopefully, the above examples have provided decent insight into some of the ways that we as coaches can set proper perspectives and push key objectives within certain areas of the game – areas where the primary and foundational goal must be the development of smart and skilled hockey players, even if that development, at times, takes our overall team productivity back a step or two. As coaches, we often get to experience the fruit that our patience and perseverance produces – and sometimes we don't. Yet regardless of how that timeline unfolds, we can trust that what we are purposefully teaching and emphasizing today becomes what is best for our players somewhere down the road.

-Jonathan

*Jonathan Lindahl has been a member of the Wayzata Youth Hockey Association since 2001 when his oldest of four started in the program. He is a USA Hockey Level 5 and MSHSL certified coach, and over 16 seasons head-coached 21 WYHA teams across all boys' age-levels, from Mites to Junior Gold, as well as girls' 10U-A and 12U-A. He has coached in eight state tournaments and six state championship games. In a 24-month stretch ending in March 2016, his three Jr. Gold A teams played a total of 14 overtime periods across three state championship games versus Edina - culminating just a week later in an overtime victory versus the Hornets in the title game of the 20-team USA Hockey National High School Tournament in suburban Washington D.C. Jonathan was a long-time member of WYHA's Player Development Committee and was the 2015 recipient of the Robert S. McNamara Award for "longstanding, unselfish contribution to the Wayzata Youth Hockey Association." He has a passion for writing about coaching philosophies, strategies, and tactics.*