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USA Hockey Recertification Program

Bench Management

Lesson Workbook



presented by



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Bench Management

Introduction

The leadership, decision-making process and organizational style shown by the coach in the bench management situation is a direct reflection of his/her philosophy of coaching, as well as that of the particular organization or association with which the coach is affiliated. Popular coaching lore dictates that brilliant bench strategies are the key to effecting coaching. While important, it must be recognized that bench-coaching activities should accurately reflect and compliment the actions taken in all other aspects of the coaching practice.

Bench management becomes more important at the more elite levels of play. The typical youth hockey association offers coaches differing challenges in this regard, however, a philosophy of player development must always be at the forefront in any youth sports situation. Regardless of the level of play, an organized and efficiently managed player's bench is a critical aspect of the game procedures and directly affects on-ice play as well as, ultimately, the results.

Philosophy

Obviously, the age and ability levels of the players involved dictate to a great degree the bench philosophy of the coach. If all players are to play relatively equal, then decisions are much easier, however, thorough preparation prior to game time is still important. Factors to be considered may include the seasonal plan and where this particular game fits, timing of the game (only one this week vs. three games in three days), practice evaluation (effort, attendance), recent results (including vs. this particular opponent), travel, discipline (unnecessary penalties, extended shift lengths) and specialty teams (rewarding deserving players with extra ice time). Some of these factors are dynamic and may change during the game and require active coaching decisions. As part of their game preparation, the coaching staff should go through all possible scenarios, discuss alternatives and make some preliminary decisions.

Youth Hockey Philosophy

It should be obvious to all coaches that players are not going to develop or get better by sitting on the bench. It is the coaches' responsibility to provide all players with a positive sport experience. It is important to realize that, given an opportunity and genuine encouragement, players can often surprise their coaches, teammates and themselves with their improved play. All players deserve this chance unless their actions clearly demonstrate otherwise. Another known fact is that self-esteem is very important and directly affects performance. Players should be made to feel good about themselves and their play will be reflective in a positive manner.

Bench Environment

One of the first things we will talk about is bench environment.

- If you are relaxed and enjoying the game, so will your players.
- Coach the players on the bench. Players on the ice have more important things to be focused on than you (e.g., what's going on out on the ice is a great example of positive thoughts.)
- Mistakes happen-hockey players are not given enough credit for being intelligent people. They usually know they've made a mistake before you say anything. Allow them to come back to the bench and relax, don't be waiting for them.
- A happy bench equals a place that players want to come to. Make players responsible for communicating with their teammates – communication equals understanding.
- Organize your bench – defense closest to the goaltender; fresh forwards closest to the door.

Staff

The number of non-playing personnel on the bench, who they are and what their specific roles are must be clearly understood by all involved. This of course should be firmly established in pre-season meetings. The obvious areas of concern are clutter and confusion. Factors for consideration include:

- A system for quickly dealing with equipment problems and broken sticks.
- Injured players (Who deals with them? Who goes on the ice if necessary? Emergency procedures? Who communicates to the coach about the status of injured players?)
- Support staff job descriptions (Who is responsible for what – avoids duplication, hesitation and misunderstanding)
- Who runs the bench doors? Monitors shift times? Takes stats? Communicates to players on the ice (e.g., delayed penalty situation)? Who has the license to talk to the players on the bench, officials and opponents?

Communication

The coach must clearly relay important game-related information to the players as required. The most obvious function is to inform those players that are going on the ice next. The coach must insure each player's name is called and acknowledged well in advance of the possible line change. Players must be alert and change for their position only as appropriate. Players coming off the ice should be instructed to call out their position upon arriving at the bench area. This is particularly helpful if odd numbers of players make up the defense pairings and forward lines. A situation that can become complicated if neglected is when a player comes from the penalty box to the players' bench during active play. The coach must anticipate this situation and make sure that everyone knows who is going to replace this player. Coaches must insure they do not get caught up in the heat of the action and neglect their duties here. An organized, efficient bench takes both planning and active communication and is a reflection of a team that is well-coached and alert in all on-ice situations.

Procedures and Adjustments During the Game

There are numerous factors that must be addressed by the coach in the area of bench management. Operating procedures that are relatively simple, logical and are well thought out will complete this process. Obviously, on-going, informal evaluations which may result in changes to procedures that are either not working or too confusing is important as well.

Procedures

- Player's bench gate(s): position specific (F,D) and which is which (closest to defensive zone – D, closest to attacking zone – F, switch each period); system of coming in/going out and whether to use the gate or to go over the boards.
- Recognizing when the D have the “long” change (1 or 2 periods per game) and making necessary adjustments.
- Rules when needing to change on the “fly”: dumping the puck to the bench side of the ice to prevent a quick-up breakout and attack by the opponent; all 5 skaters not changing at the same time – possibly leave one forward to maintain checking pressure or have the first forward on establish position in the far lane as opposed to chasing the puck, have the D change one at a time and establish a system of switching sides so that the change is always a short one; have a “quick-up” play for when the opponent changes on the fly – particularly if the goaltender is a good passer.
- Feedback (error correction) to individuals vs. criticism.
- How to respond when players ask questions.
- Use of a coach rink board at the bench to assist explanations.
- Dealing with unnecessary penalties (discipline), lack of effort, extended shift times (45 second shift time rule).
- Player interaction (particularly if criticizing others).

Game adjustments

- Delayed penalties (for/against, goalie to the bench – rule for which player goes on the ice).
- Signal from goalie to players on ice when opponent's penalty is close to being over.
- Pulling the goalie for an extra attacker (when, signal to the goalie to come to the bench, which player goes on the ice and tactics to take advantage of this extra player).
- Player coming out of the penalty box (signal from the bench on whether to stay on the ice or come to the players' bench, if coming to the bench does the player come right away regardless of the situation or when it's appropriate, if staying on the ice what position does the player assume – have a rule when play is in the defensive zone that the player assumes the low support forward role and communicates that to his/her teammates).
- Reactions to calls by the officials (a "bad" call, merits or arguing with the officials to make a statement or take a stand, a "good" call, emotional control – role model).
- The use of and reference to a coaching game card (quick and easy reminders for line-ups, game plan, space to make notes for between periods discussion and player/team/game evaluations, 4/4 line-up, specialty teams' line-ups, 6/5 and 5/6 face-off plays – who take the draw, other personnel, strategy).
- Technical/tactical adjustments (face-offs, possible line match-ups, particularly if home team, time-out). Note: With the new "quick" face-off rules in place at several levels of play, face-off plays and line matching is much more difficult, if not virtually impossible, and distracting to the point where its recommendation is questionable.

The bottom line for coaches at any level is to attempt to have the right players on the ice at all times. While on the bench the coach has to focus on what possibilities exist, be aware of the present situation and be ready (anticipate) for what's next – there should be as few surprises as possible. It is important that all bench personnel send a consistent message to the players and offer, for the most part, positive encouragement. The motto should be to "let the players play" – coaches cannot expect perfection from the players and must allow for the inevitable mistakes that will occur. The coaching challenge is to teach or educate through positive correction vs. negative criticism. Coaches should strive to have a positive bench with few, if any, moments of panic. Encourage a high tempo, intense, short shift type of game – players enjoy playing this style much more so than any other. Keep them on their toes through how they are utilized in game situations – as a coach don't become too predictable or get into a rut without realizing it.

Time Outs

During the game, you sometimes need to address the team. In hockey, unlike other sports, we have only one time out.

Time-out can be used for:

- Running a special play (e.g., face-off; pulled goaltender).
- To calm down or refocus the team.

Be prepared before you take your time out. Know what you're going to talk about.

- Faceoff – have it drawn up.
- Get to the point – be relaxed – it's easier to listen when you can be understood.

If the other team calls the timeout, let your players know what might be coming (e.g., pulling their goaltender, etc.)

Practice pulling the goalie – man up versus man down, so players are prepared when it happens. (Example: One minute drill – one up and one down.)

Face Offs

Face-offs are sometimes overlooked during practice. The Stanley Cup finals went as long as they did, because of the success of the Anaheim Ducks at winning face-offs in the offensive ends.

All players should know what to do when a face-off is won and when a face-off is lost.

Defensive Zone W = Breakout

Offensive Zone W = Scoring

Neutral Zone = Control

Face-offs are like a ball possession in football (e.g., 60% = W's in USHL)

Prepare to succeed:

- Practice in small games – mini face-off tournament.
- In games: coach/goalie on bench/parent Keep track of face-off wins and losses. Give reward to player with most wins or to player that improves week-to-week.

Special Teams

At the youth level, development and enjoyment are the two goals for every time you're on the ice. My philosophy with special teams play is that all players should have a chance to participate in both the power play and penalty kill.

Power Play: One or two basic types

- Keep it simple enough so all players understand it. Practice it, so players are prepared.
- Discuss prior to the game which power play you will use during the game. If you decide to change it, do it in between periods so there is no confusion.

Penalty Kill: Use one type of penalty kill.

- Teach players where to be, and then philosophy – aggressive vs. passive – don't worry about mistakes.
- Focus on effort and discipline, not systems. Have fun and try things.

Coach the players on the bench:

- Power Play – who is up next?
- Penalty Kill – who is the player in the box? If it's a "D" and you have two "D" on the ice, let them know the next forward has the defense from the box.

Between Periods

There isn't much time from the end of one period to the beginning of the next. If you have a break between periods:

- If you need to change things (e.g., power play, penalty kill, face-offs) choose one or two things to change, not more.
- End talk with both team and individual points of success. Single out different individuals and make sure everyone does something good.
- Leave the locker room with short-term goals (e.g., first five minutes; power play; penalty kill).

Allow the players to be together, one of hockey's greatest treasures is time spent in the locker room. Teammates and each other – not always the coach. Always let the players know when they are to report to the ice. (e.g., five minutes; three minutes; one minute countdown).

Summary

As you can tell, the majority of the work to game adjustments and locker room harmony starts at practice. These skills need to be practiced just like skating or shooting. We all learn and execute best when we are in a relaxed and enjoyable environment. The more relaxed and in control you are of your emotions, the better your team will respond.

Coach players on the bench:

- Communicate in a calm and upbeat manner. Yes, it is okay to laugh and enjoy the competition your team is involved in, it is a game.
- Enjoy watching players react to all situations before the game, during the game and after the game. (e.g., goals, big hits, wins and losses).
- Focus on helping, not dictating what the game of hockey is all about.
- As a coach, be willing to do the work to help prepare players for success during games. This is called PRACTICE. Remember games are for the kids!



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