

Purposeful Coaching: Coaching to the Bench, Not from the Bench

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Last month, I delved into an early-season key point of emphasis for each of the four player positions. This time around, I'm going to touch on one aspect specific to coaches. At first blush, it probably will seem very basic. However, if we all commit to doing a sincere self-evaluation of how we interact and instruct while on the bench, I think we'll realize that there's, at a minimum, room for improvement for all of us - and for many of us, an opportunity for significant adjustment.

How do you behave on the bench?... And by behavior, I don't mean the degree of appropriateness with players or refs. Instead, how do you actually go about utilizing your bench voice - what you say, when you say it, and to whom you say it? In effect, how do you coach and teach during the action?

Are we trying to coach "from" the bench? Yelling instruction to players on the ice during play isn't effective for a couple of reasons. First, players in the action are likely hearing just a portion, if anything, of what we are saying. Second, and most importantly, it becomes increasingly detrimental to the ultimate goal of getting our players to read and react according to their own ice awareness and instincts. We give them instruction constantly during practices, in the locker room, and on the bench. Then when they're on the ice, it's their time to perform - not ours. If we continue to instruct during those key moments in which they are accountable for executing what we've taught, how can we expect them to pay attention to, much less digest, anything we provide anywhere?

Sure, it's good to be vocal during games, often even loud and animated; however, the key take-away in all of this is, **YOUR AUDIENCE NEEDS TO BE THE PLAYERS ON THE BENCH, NOT THOSE ON THE ICE.** When yelling things like "We gotta get that deep!" or "Slice the circle!" or "Watch the backside post!", you're letting the players on the bench know what you're seeing and thinking - providing commentary to what you're expecting of those on the ice. This keeps those on the bench engaged as active "students" while you're continuing the process of teaching - often referencing, reinforcing, even introducing various concepts and themes as you see them playing-out in front of you.

This may sound corny, but think of it as if you are in a video room with your team, and the action on the ice is the game film you're all watching on the screen in front of you. You're standing behind your players, watching and interpreting as things unfold. You don't/can't stop the action or rewind it. You can only analyze and instruct in real time, as things happen. When you see a specific scenario that you've been talking about or working on in practice, you keenly point it out. When someone reverts to a bad habit that's been a common point of emphasis for the week, you intently express displeasure. And when there's a subtle play made that shows that all those drills you've been doing for a given situation have started to pay-off, you emphatically celebrate with quick verbal praise.

Of course, as this is all happening, you're making mental (or even pen-to-paper) note of what portion(s) to share specifically with each player, or line, or D pair when they get back to the bench. Not everything needs to be regurgitated to those who weren't there at the time to hear it, but some things do. Those few seconds after players are back at the bench are the best opportunities to quickly share your relevant snippets of thought. And then it's back to the action in front of you and the instruction to your captive audience.

The coaching never stops. But best keep it behind the boards.

Have a great November!

-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.