Back to the Basics

Today the talk in hockey from the NHL all the way down into youth hockey programs is the lack of individual skills. More specifically the lack of passing, stick handling and shooting skills. This was the central theme at last years USA Hockey National Coaching Symposium and a constant topic around most of the rinks in Minnesota. Many of the people who have been involved with hockey for a long time like Don Lucia and Willard Ikola will remind listeners of the "good old days" when kids spent eight hours a day on the local outdoor rink on winter weekends. This is where they learned to stickhandle and puck protection skills. The skills were not learned playing games or going to structured practices but rather by just being "rink rats". The problem seems to be well defined. In today's fast paced world and indoor rinks (not to mention el nino and lack of outdoor ice), the old way is not a good solution. Many people are looking for answers but feel the solution to the problem is difficult. I disagree. The solution is fairly straightforward, but will take some work.

During the course of the past thirty years the game of hockey has changed in a great many ways. The Russians taught us about conditioning, regrouping, and puck control. The size of the players has steadily increased and then they heard about the weight rooms. Jack Blatherwick designed training methods based on science and Herb Brooks captured the Gold Medal by defeating the Russians. Technology has also done its part, with lighter and stronger materials that enable the players to be better protected. The advent of the mandatory facemask is still a sore topic with many, but it is here to stay. These changes are all a result of a need or problem that needed to be solved.

In order to solve problems of climbing expense and extensive travel some programs have decided that the kids play to many games, and in fact many associations are trying to eliminate squirt travel teams. Some are advocating the same for peewee levels. Game to practice ratios is constantly discussed with more emphasis on practice. Skill development programs, similar to the program at the Wayzata Youth Hockey Association, have done a great job of focusing on and improving individual skills. But the fact remains; skill levels seem to be an on going area of concern. Even with the explosive growth of off-season play (AAA Leagues, Showcase, Elite programs, etc.) skills are not improving. I would suggest that the answer and solution to the problem is actually fairly simple.

We all know what the problem is *from our point of view*. But lets think about it from the point of view of a 13-year-old player. In thinking back to my days on the pond playing with my friends for hours on end, I remember many of the positive aspects that others refer to. What I do not remember, however, is butt ending, spearing, boarding, charging, holding, hooking or interference away from the puck. We did not feel a need to deliver two-handed blows with our sticks to the forearms of our opponents, or as some teams are coached, to any unprotected area of the body. Our youngsters today are giving and taking a beating every time they play. This is the problem in a nutshell. Why would a 13-year-old player want to stickhandle through traffic when he is constantly beaten with sticks? If not beaten, hooked from behind until another opponent can run him over. Even being in the general area of the puck is reason enough for an opponent to take him out. This is what is going on. No wonder they do not want to handle the puck.

Coaches and referees alike are looking for the solutions to the problem. The District referee representatives say it is up to state organization to do something about it.

Coaches say it is up to the officials on ice. The truth is that the solution can be found every day when a coach or official looks into the mirror. Are you a leader or a follower? Are you leading by example, or just going with the flow?

It is time to reinstate the rulebook as it is written. No more free passes for a butt end or high stick because nobody got hurt. No more interference away from the puck because it did not affect a scoring chance. The rulebook does not allow a butt ending call to be reduced to slashing, but it happens. Every time we compromise the rules and principals of the game, we compromise ourselves and shortchange the kids. If we take shortcuts so will they.

It is imperative that the adults in the game behave like adults. The officials and coaches in each district need to find common ground where they can work together rather than in an adversarial relationship. This is not up to Minnesota Hockey, Michigan Hockey or USA Hockey. It is the responsibility of each association and each district to be guardians of the game and protect it and the kids from those who would use it to further their own gains.

If you want to have better skilled players, turn the battlefield into a play field. Teach your players to play the game with skill, and support the officials when they penalize your players for rule violations. The kids will have more fun and their skills will improve.

During the off-season District 3 will begin the process of forging a partnership between coaches and officials. We will address many of the problems that both groups face and find a middle ground where we can all work together. I encourage all districts to do the same during this off-season. The end result will be more fun for everybody involved, and better skilled players.

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Since 1971, Hal Tearse has been involved with coaching hockey and soccer. He has coached in the USHL, Division 3 College, and all levels of youth hockey from Junior B down through peewee B. He has also coached at the Olympic Sports Festival and traveled with the Soviet Junior National Team. He currently coaches the Bantam A team in Wayzata, MN. , serves as the CEP Director for District 3, and is the STP Coordinator for Minnesota Hockey.