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### Focus on the Basics

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Year in and year out the game of hockey continues to produce great players. As we admire our favorite NHL players from around the world, we are amazed at the speed and execution the game is played. It seems that such a complex game is performed with such ease. This tactical approach and the "how-to" reaches into our coaching imagination. These systems that are used from the breakouts to the power play, play in the defensive zone to the penalty killing approach, are all skills necessary for a successful

team. Yet within these you see the basic fundamentals of passing, puck control and skating. For the many coaches in youth hockey, focusing on the basics can achieve the results that will benefit your hockey players the most.

As we seek to improve our players, and their individual and team performance in practice and games, we look for that “ideal” drill execution. The pace is at game speed, passes are tape to tape, the flow up and down the ice moves with little or no interruption. Emphasis on skill development is critical in order to achieve a desired execution in practice and games. The Ontario Minor Hockey Association lists guideline recommendations for player skill development. This ranges from the Novice Program (Technical Skills 75%, Individual Tactics 15%, and Team Tactics 10%) to the Midget Program (Technical 35%, Individual Tactics 20%, Team Tactics 20%, Team Play 15%, and Strategy 10%).

Recently I had the privilege of watching the Atlanta Thrashers and Buffalo Sabres practice on an off-day prior to their game in Atlanta. When observing the Thrashers practice I noticed was a lot of work on the basics. Skating, passing, puck handling and puck control. As I moved over to watching the Buffalo Sabres practice, the similar basics were being covered. I had a chance to have a brief discussion with Bob Hartley, Head Coach of the Atlanta Thrashers. When mentioning my observations on his teams practice, Bob indicated that the basics are very important and he added to “respect the basics”. I found this very intriguing.

What I observed in a portion of the practice was 5 v. 1 (Coach in the Middle) with goalie in nets on one-half of the ice. They were working the umbrella formation, with quick passing, with about 5-6 passes before a shot on net. Shots were being set-up from the point, the side boards in the face-off circle, for the one-timers, to the post positions down low. Each emphasized a left-to-right, or right-to-left puck movement to get goalie moving side to side. In the neutral zone there were several players skating around gloves on the ground circling or in a figure 8 motion passing back-n-forth. These were just a couple of the things going on.

As I continued to watch on the other sheet of ice, the Buffalo Sabres worked through their practice session, and I noticed a similar approach. Basic drills, that was at a high tempo pace with fluid movement, game speed skating, passing and impeccable execution. I followed back up with Bob Hartley as we watched the Sabre practice, mentioning how interesting his comment was on “respecting the basics”. He added to this indicating that drills should be “useful and make sense to game situations.”

For coaches in youth hockey, it is important to continue to understand the roles we play for the players we are developing. Although there is noticeable differences from NHL players to a youth hockey player in all aspects of the game, it does not change the need to understand the role we play. The emphasis on the basics of skill development needs to be an important part of our practices. When you observe what the worlds greatest players spend their time on in practices, you gain an appreciation for how the basics are the cornerstone for the complexity of the game.