



Fun and...Games?

by Dan Bauer

What's wrong with this picture? Sunday morning, at the local rink, watching a bantam hockey game. About five minutes into the game—a goal is scored. No celebration; not even a stick in the air, not a high five, no victory huddle, nothing. Just five players skating right back to center ice for the next face-off. A few minutes later a second goal is scored with the identical result.

The last time I checked, scoring goals was one of the main objectives of a hockey game. This is a feat that is the culmination of all six players on the ice coming together, doing their job and achieving their goal. Is that not traditionally a time when we celebrate our success? I have seen it in college hockey, even in the NHL where they make millions of dollars. More and more routinely I don't see it in youth hockey games. That is a shame and a subliminal memorandum regarding the glut of weekend games we are force-feeding our youth.

If you are allowing your teams to score without celebration—think again. You are missing a great opportunity to build camaraderie and reward teamwork. I never thought we would have to teach players how to celebrate a goal. Scoring a goal is both the metaphorical and literal object of the game. There is no need to cross the line of sportsmanship and humility, but a celebration, including all the players on the ice, is most definitely required.

Is this no-celebration policy some new spin-off from the self-esteem police to prevent our opponents from hurt feelings? Maybe it is because we are doing a poor job of selling the team concept and players would rather mimic the selfish antics of NFL and NBA players who constantly seek attention for themselves. Heaven forbid that this is a product of playing your fifth game of the weekend and one game just seems to melt into the next. It couldn't be weariness with a system that rolls a redundant number of games past us like an assembly line conveyor belt. We have been told that if kids were asked, they would rather play games than anything else. CSI would be hard pressed to find evidence to support that at many youth games.

There isn't anything I can think of, that takes over an hour, that I would have enough energy and emotion to do as well as I could do, five times in a normal weekend. Yet we continue to ask our players to do this weekend after weekend. When a kid doesn't get excited about scoring a goal it is a clear sign of either boredom or selfishness. Neither of which is good for the team or the player.

That brings me to my next point. There is reason why kids are recommended to come with a set of adults. It is because they don't know what is best for them. They know that donuts taste better than oatmeal and that pizza and chips are better than liver and green beans. They will choose video games over homework and watching television ahead of doing the dishes. They would never make their bed or change their clothes if we didn't make them. Bathing might be a weekly event if left up to them. They come with adults, because without them, they wouldn't survive. It is our duty to make decisions for them based on our elevated knowledge and experience. So the premise that we play games because that is what kids want shouldn't be reason to continue the onslaught.

There was a time when games were the reward and practices were demanding, meaningful and frequent. It was that Protestant work ethic that our country was founded upon. Somewhere between Alex Delvecchio and Alexander Ovechkin we lost that basic principle. Games should be the reward for a productive week of practice. They should be valued—enjoyed—celebrated, not a monotonous series of uninspired contests.

What's right with this picture? Friday afternoon over Christmas break, at the rink, watching kids participate in a small games clinic. Eight kids, from squirts to high school age playing a cross-ice game with mini nets and no goalies. A goal is scored and a wild celebration of hollering, stick raising and high-fives ensues. Before their celebration is complete the opposing team is already attacking in quest of the equalizer; that is transition hockey! It is also pond hockey in its finest moment.

Back to reality. After traveling five plus hours in a car on Sunday to play two games I came home and sent my twins to the neighbors backyard rink. It was a Norman Rockwell experience with a fire to warm them and no coaches to cool their enthusiasm for the game. The two hours they spent on that outdoor rink is 90 minutes more than they played all day. It is another picture perfect snapshot of the game in its finest form. Small games of one against two, on the same small rink, a free for all complete with play-by-play, plenty of "dangling" and a competitive spirit as fresh as the cool night air. In spite of popular belief, great players still grow up on the outdoor rink. And if you are scratching your head why we don't have more skilled players, look no further than your television set, computer and the structured framework of our youth programs.

There is hope, like the area association that doesn't play any Sunday games, but has four hours of open ice after church instead. Some associations are actually cutting back games, taking entire weekends off (get me my nitro pills, please!) and scheduling more and more open ice for players. I can remember not that long ago when youth associations were debating whether they should be playing on Sunday morning at all. Hockey or God? We should be embarrassed at our answer to that question. Instead of eight-o'clock mass I find myself looking at a 7:00am Sunday game 90 miles away. My Dad would never have allowed that, church was not negotiable. And by the way who doesn't want to get up at 5:00am on a Sunday morning?

The more small games I play, and the more backyard rinks I see the more convinced I am of their value. The more youth practices I watch, with long waiting lines, too many cones and drills that minimally challenge only their physical skills, the more I believe in small games. The glazed over looks I see in the eyes of youth players marching through cones like robots tells me that we need to change the way we practice. The excitement I see in the faces of the kids who attend my small games clinics tells me this is something they enjoy.

Once again the evidence to support the small games/cross-ice philosophy is staggering. Successful coaches from all levels have endorsed it and use it regularly in their own practice scheme. The experts continue to tell us we play too many games, but the scheduling madness continues. Don Lucia, Mike Eaves and George Gwozdecky (who incidentally have won five of the last six NCAA championships) support both the cross-ice concept and the reduction of games, but we choose to listen to Joe the local butcher from the youth board that tells us different.

It doesn't even take an adult to see that Five NCAA titles should trump five hours at a USA hockey clinic. It is official folks, we play too many games. I don't care how many youth presidents try to tell me different. Actions, or in this case a lack of actions, speak louder than words. And a silent celebration is a crystal-clear statement not even Joe the butcher can ignore.

If you are an association that is moving away from more games and finding ways to increase pond hockey time for your kids, please drop me an e-mail.

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