

Remember to Dream

Each time that we take the ice as coaches, it is a daunting responsibility that we have before us. We are asked to take our timeless and exacting game, and bring it to a level that players as young as five years old will be able to comprehend and appreciate. It is a responsibility that we carry not only for our current players, but also for the state of the game that many of us have grown to love and cherish.

The number of people associated with the game of hockey that remembers the true concept of pond hockey is dwindling. Gone are the days where the norm was a gathering of any number of kids at a neighborhood rink, or better yet a local pond. We did not focus on the lack of a scoreboard, whether the playing surface was regulation size, or whether each team consisted of five skaters and a goaltender. Often we improvised with rubber pucks, tennis balls, or if you listen to the “old timers” a snuff can wrapped in electric tape. The essential playing equipment consisted of a pair of skates and a stick. Gloves were a bonus, but in northern Minnesota they often were a pair of “choppers,” which provided far better protection against the cold. These games would go on for hours at a time, and we modified the rules of the game to fit the circumstances. We learned a sense of flexibility, even if we did not realize it at the time. If the score was lopsided, we switched teams to make our play competitive. We did not worry that the game fit a certain age requirement, some of the best learning opportunities were gained by competing with older players. Often we employed the concepts of a free-flowing “European style” before we realized that hockey was played outside of the borders of Minnesota and Canada. And finally, how many times as a pond hockey player did you emulate the State Hockey Tournament and the most recent set of heroes. While the State Hockey Tournament was played in late February or early March, the previous years matchups were replayed over and over on many ponds throughout the state, until those “legends” were replaced by the heroes of the next tournament.

As with most traditions, our sport has evolved with the pace of society in general. Our ponds have been replaced by state-of-the-art ice arenas consisting of multiple sheets of ice. Our children from the time they are mites compete in structured leagues with a pre-formulated schedule, officials, and coaching staffs that outnumber what high school and college teams used to have the luxury of. From the earliest ages we identify all-star teams and place a heavy burden on keeping up with the latest developments and cottage industries for fear that our player will be left behind. Don’t get me wrong, many of these developments have improved the opportunities for our players, and just as many of us do not yearn to return to the days before computers and cellular phones, it is impossible to roll back the developments that the sport of hockey has made. There are some great opportunities to enhance player development and an individual’s enjoyment of the sport, as long as it is taken in moderation.

We paint no sadder picture than the examples of a youth hockey player in tears because his/her team has lost a competition, or a mother/father leaning over the boards to

“encourage” our youngsters to dig a little deeper. This thought is not anti-competition, because on the pond or the outdoor rink we competed hard, we just did not live or die based on one day’s outcome. Rather we focused on trying to improve our skills and being determined to be ready to compete at the next opportunity.

As coaches we need to remember that a child’s most important work is to play. Not to be an investment for a college hockey scholarship or a professional contract or to further our egos by the success that our teams have, but to play for the simple love of playing. Learning and development, more often than not, involve mistakes and failure. We cannot be afraid to allow our children to experience these emotions as they are a natural part of the human experience. Very few of us learned to walk without crawling or learned to ride a bicycle without falling. It is a natural progression and evolution.

Today and for many days to come in the “State of Hockey” we mourn the passing of a coaching legend in Herb Brooks, but we must not forget the lessons that he leaves behind. No one associated with the game of hockey will ever forget the 1980 “Miracle on Ice.” It is one of those moments that will forever be entrenched in our memories, and most of us will never forget where we were during the course of the game with the Russians. No ice arena could ever hold the number of people that were impacted by that game, and the legend continues to get better with each passing year, as we realize that an event of that magnitude will likely never happen again.

Coach Brooks was not only a master teacher of the game of hockey, he was also a historian. He had a respect for the game of hockey and its founders that transcended what was normal or routine. He had the ability to improvise and push the outer limits of the game of hockey while fully respecting the role that those involved before him had played. Not all of his ideas were accepted, and at times they were considered to be a little over the edge. But none the less he dared to dream, and more importantly implement what he thought were improvements to the sport. One commentator in describing the events of the 1980 Olympics summed it up best by saying that “Herb Brooks allowed a group of kids with instinct, to be their own creative selves.” While the Russians stuck to the long entrenched theory of staying in their lanes, Brooks essentially instructed his team to play pond hockey, or the game of their youth. No one knows how many times this would work if the game was replayed, but on a February evening in Lake Placid, Coach Brooks and his team inspired dreams.

So the next time that you accept the responsibility of passing our game on to the next generations, try to remember the child inside of each one us. Think outside of the box and do something with a little creativity as we would on the pond, rather than just accepting the way things are normally done. And when new concepts are introduced, such as “blue pucks” or “cross-ice games,” rather than worrying about if we are varying from the traditions of our sport or “the way things have always been done,” see yourself as an innovator willing to adjust to your role in the history of hockey. Respect the past and all that it has given us, but also step up to the challenge of improving our game.

Just as we teach our children in school the history of our state and nation, we need to teach our young players the history and the faces of the great sport of hockey. We do not

replace people such as Herb Brooks, but unless we strive to continue the tradition of our coaching legends who will our youth hockey players have to emulate?

Herb Brooks summed up his own philosophy and it is one that we could all try to learn from: "You know, Willie Wonka said it best: We are the makers of dreams, the dreamers of dreams. We should be dreaming. We grew up as kids having dreams, but now we're too sophisticated as adults, as a nation. We stopped dreaming. We should always have dreams. I'm a dreamer."

So the next time you assume the responsibility of passing on our sport to the next generation, remember Herb Brooks, remember Willie Wonka and "don't be afraid to return to the pond, our field of dreams."

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