



Give the whole game back
By Pete Carlson – NSC Hockey Development

For the last few years I have been reading article after article regarding the development of hockey players. It seems USA Hockey has a philosophy of how it should be done, and then it goes to the State philosophy, next the association philosophy, and finally the coach's philosophy. The strange part is every one of these groups has a different philosophy of what is right for our young hockey players.

Our governing body of hockey says we need to register more kids and keep kids playing. It has been said that hockey is for everyone and we should not be losing kids as they get older. These thoughts range from: the game costs too much, the coach didn't keep it fun, winning was too important, not enough skills taught, too many skills taught, not enough games, too many games, or the refereeing is terrible. I think we need to look deeper regarding why we are losing kids.

I believe we are losing kids because of our always changing philosophy. The words "never" and "always" are being said by too many of our hockey leaders. I hear people say, "Never skate with one hand on your stick, never use your backhand." I hear people say, "Always play the strong side wing, always shoot low, always take the body." These are quotes from some of our top leaders and coaches in the field of hockey.

I can't believe I hear our hockey leaders saying we should never play 5 v 5 at mite level, we should only play in-house, we should only practice, we should never play full ice with mites, we should never travel further than 10 minutes from home, we should only play cross-ice, we should never keep score. Why are all of these so bad? Does anyone realize that the list above is fun for kids, fun for families, and can also help kids stay in hockey?

It seems the balance is out of hockey. It is this way because we go from one extreme to another just because someone thinks we need to change everything up.

Some of our leaders have convinced us to only practice and play the game in small areas. I agree that cross-ice games are great. But these same people wonder why our youth can't play the game as they get older. Because the game is more than just one small area, the game is 17,000 square feet or 20,000 square feet of area. The message from our leaders is now moving us to think there is only one way to practice, in small areas. WHY? Basic skills do need to be practiced over and over to become better. These skills need to be taught with structure and unstructured drills and activities. But why do full ice games have to leave the curriculum? "Never" play a full ice game. Are you kidding?

Full ice games are part of development and it is fun. Listen to the kids. They want to play the game.

Full ice hockey also teaches the game. Our leaders saying we need to get back to the old days and practice like we did when we went outside. Well, you all need to think real hard of what you did when you got to the outdoor rink. I bet you never threw out cones. You never worked on edges, and you never had a practice plan. You also didn't take time to use rink dividers. You did make teams and play a game. When I think back, the game was usually full ice. The game was sometimes 3 vs. 3 or 10 vs. 10. We also didn't have a score board, but we all knew what the score was, and we all knew what the series score was at the end of the day. We remembered yesterday's score and made new teams based on it. Heck, my kid keeps score in every knee hockey game we play, and I think that is great. I have taught more lessons regarding winning and losing over knee hockey games. Why do our leaders now say we should never keep score at the lower levels? Never is a strong word folks.

I am tired of hearing the score is only for the coaches and parents. Our leaders say coaches are trying to become the next NHL or D-1 coach and that is the reason they want to keep score. That is not true at all. Go ask a coach if he or she wants to coach at that level and 99% will say, "No way". Playing games without the score board teaches many positive things. But why take out the positives of what the score board can teach. Let's play games both ways.

Have we forgotten that keeping score is more than to show people how many pucks went in the net? It is to teach sportsmanship, pride, honor, and team work. It is to give each child a chance to reflect how he or she has done. It is a time for a coach or parent to explain the importance of winning is not everything, but competing is. It is a chance to see our children happy and disappointed and see how they react. It is our time as coaches and parents to mold our children and build character. If you think we should wait and build these traits later in life, you are wrong. They need to be taught now. Our young kids are smart and willing to listen and learn what ever WE give them. Give them the whole game.

Some hockey leaders say we should not have referees on the ice. Again, balance is important here. I would love to see us play some games without referees. Yes, it would keep the game going if we just pulled the puck out after a goal and played. Play fair and be a good sport when you go offside, give the puck to the other team and play. That is all true. But that philosophy only moves us away from learning the whole game of hockey. Skaters need to learn the rules and respect the rules. They need to be called for a penalty and sit in the box. I agree they are not learning how to carry the puck or learning how to control their edges when sitting in the penalty box, but they are learning self control and discipline. They are learning there are rules to the game and they need to be followed. The referee is controlling the game and we need to respect his or her judgment during the game. If we wait to teach this, it will be too late.

I feel our leaders talk out of both sides of their mouth, which in this case is good. But then the message gets lost by embracing only one philosophy. One day they say we need to give every child the opportunity to play hockey and stay in it as long as they so choose. The next day they say we need to develop every player into great hockey players by eliminating games. Not everyone is going to be a great hockey player, so why are those philosophies changing our way we offer the game? Some kids just want go to the rink and play hockey with no pressure of doing skills right or wrong. They just want to play the game. I would guess this is the majority of our population of skaters.

Do you really want to give the game back to the kids? Than let's do it. Let's give the whole game back to the kids. Let's give them full ice games, small area games, power skating drills, stick handling drills, passing drills, shooting drills. Let's give them flow drills, breakout drills, neutral ice drills, offensive drills, defensive drills, goalie drills. Let's teach them 1 vs. 1 to 5 vs. 5 and everything in-between. Let's give them games of structure with score boards and referees. Let's give them a game with no structure, no referees, and no scoreboards. Let's give them the ice and see what they can do with it.

Other states look at Minnesota players in awe. They wonder how we can produce so many good players. Look around, our youth hockey is great. Minnesota High School Hockey continues to give opportunity and promise to our players for the next level. Regarding the next level, the WCHA, MIAC, and CHA, men's and women's programs are loaded with Minnesota boys' and girls'. Most Minnesota men's and women's college teams are top ranked teams in the country every year. Junior teams around the country have more Minnesota players on them than any other state. How can our leaders say we are wrong in our development?

If you step back and don't look too close, we are so close to perfect. The problem is we have a few leaders that grip one philosophy and won't accept other philosophies. We need to merge all philosophies of hockey together. They all have a place in the game of hockey. If we all work on this, you will see we are not far from giving hockey back to the kids.

The great sport of hockey is more than moving kids from level to level. It is giving every child an opportunity to play at their level. It is giving every child that wants to play hockey a chance. It is giving the whole game back.