

How Important is Coaching?

A recent e-mail message from a friend reads as follows. “ Kelly stared her fast pitch season with very little self confidence. She is the catcher on the team and things were not going right for her in the beginning. The team has a new coach this year and he kept encouraging her and pointing out the things she was doing well. At mid-season she started hitting and making some nice plays. Her team took second in the division. Kelly was selected to the all-star team and played in the state tourney at Lewistown. Their team took third place. The second to the last game Kelly was awarded the game ball and at the conclusion of the final game she was awarded MVP. So does the coach make a difference...?”

Of course, in the professional and college levels coaching makes a difference. We all know that it does. There are many coaching legends from Vince Lombardi, to John Wooden to our own Herb Brooks. Scotty Bowman and Bob Johnson carved wide swaths across the coaching world giving endless hours of their time and energy to teaching others the art of coaching. Their records as coaches speak for themselves.

But what about the youth coach? How important is that person to the young players? In today’s world of year around hockey with more games than practices, maybe the winter season youth coach becomes even more important. The in-season youth coach is responsible for most of the individual skill development activities and team skill development. The off-season coaches are recruiters for the most part and little actual development occurs due to infrequent practices. Many of kids now have as many as eight coaches in the course of a season if you count all the AAA and off-season teams kids play on. It is no wonder the kids are sometimes confused about what to do.

Good coaching is the glue that holds teams together. Good coaching will help the youth players develop their skills, play hard, and have fun regardless of the win loss record of the team. Good coaching teaches character, responsibility, accountability, discipline, teamwork, and respect. Good coaches create an environment that encourages players to develop and grow to their potential at that point in their lives. Good coaches are teachers first and coaches second.

Coaches are now required to attend mandatory Coaching Education Programs (CEP) before they can get behind the bench. This is an excellent program by design but the implementation does have its problems. Because CEP is now mandatory, many coaches will take three levels of coaching courses in three days. Although they can now coach, have we done the right thing for the kids or the coaches?

We require our referees to take extensive on and off ice training. We test them each year and evaluate their performance throughout the year. Advancement is dependant on demonstrating their ability to perform. They have a tough job to do but not as tough as a coach. But we really give coaches very little training other than a couple of days of classroom sessions and no testing and no evaluations. Referees that perform well are rewarded with high profile assignments, regional camps, and the opportunity for advancement. Youth coaches are not offered the same opportunity.

If youth coaches are so important to a player’s development, why do we do so little for them? Our local hockey associations have a hard time filling all the spots for coaches and often end up with parents who coach because nobody else is available. Then the new coach heads to a couple clinics and is now behind the bench. Would you accept a math or science teacher in your child’s school with only 16 hours of training? I would guess not. But you accept it in athletics.

Maybe it is time to acknowledge the youth coaches for the tremendous contribution they give to the game. Perhaps Minnesota Hockey needs to develop an off-season program to continue their development and help make them better coaches. Perhaps our local associations need to consider ways to support and encourage more training for their coaches. Maybe the youth coaches of Minnesota should form an association and develop an education program that addresses their needs. Maybe we just need to rethink this entire situation and approach it from a different point of view.

It is reported by leading medical experts that for many youngsters today their coaches have the best opportunity of all the adults they come in contact with to have a meaningful impact on their lives. That places a tremendous amount of responsibility on the shoulders of youth coaches.

The answer to my question in the beginning of the article is, “yes, coaching does make a difference!”

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