



Laying Down The Foundation

When I retired from the NHL 4 years ago and started coaching my son's team, I thought it would be easy. Teach them to skate, handle a puck, pass and shoot. I played at the highest level, how hard could it be? Extremely Hard!!! If you want to be good, there's hours of preparation that goes into becoming a coach.

In my four years of coaching so far, I firmly believe that the most important coaches in youth hockey today are at the mite levels, ages 4-8. Mite coaches are laying down the skill development foundation that players will draw from throughout their playing careers. Hockey is a unique sport; you have to learn a skill before you can participate. In soccer, football, baseball and basketball, if you can run, you can play. Hockey is different. If you can't skate, you can't play. The first skill that must be perfected is skating and coaches must hold players accountable to develop proper technique early on. We will spend more hours trying to correct bad habits later down the road than if we would have spent the time early on making them do it correctly. The speed of skating maneuvers will come over time, but they have to be technically sound.

Let's break down skating. It's all about balance. Players have to be able to balance 100% on one skate while moving in order to become an effective skater. We get balance from bending our knees. Players start by gliding in a straight-line, blue line to blue line for example, on one skate with their glide knee bent, head and chest up. When doing this, players are using the flat part of the blade, which is the easiest. This can be done both forward and backward.

The next progression is to move to the inside edge around a cone on a single skate. Anytime there is a change in direction, players must follow the blade of their stick, simulating controlling a puck. This is difficult for most players to get used to because their body momentum changes from one direction to another, thus taking them out of balance. If their glide knee is not bent, players will struggle. Once the balance is attained with the inside edge, progress to doing the same maneuver, but using only the outside edge.

The outside edge is the most difficult to master, but this is the starting point to introducing the forward and backwards crossover or cross-under. This is done riding an outside edge, forward or backwards around a cone and driving the glide skate under the body. When a player begins to properly execute his/her skating techniques, the next step of puck handling can be addressed.

If you look at the elite levels, all players are good skaters. What separates the best of the best is their ability to handle the puck and that is why North Americans have strived to

tap into the training methods of the Europeans. Their style is based on puck possession and the only way to achieve this is by having strong stick handling abilities.

Last season, I was hired by the Wayzata Hockey Association to teach their fourth year mites - skill development. They were on the ice weekly with me for forty-five minutes. I had five stations focusing on five things---skating, stick handling, passing, shooting and lastly, a combination of all the skills. The stick handling station frustrated me every week because I couldn't keep their attention for more than a couple of minutes, which resulted in no noticeable improvement. It got me to thinking about what I did growing up as a kid. I remembered lining pucks in a straight line, roughly 12 inches apart and would try to maneuver a puck or golf ball in and out of the openings from start to finish. The only problem was, that I spent more time realigning the pucks than actually stick handling. I was never known for having very good hands. That realignment problem sparked an idea of connecting the pucks together with a continuous arm. In the beginning I tested this idea on the kids and it seemed to make a huge difference in keeping their interest. This new training aide turned into the development of a new product I call SweetHands StickHandling. At 'skills' the kids actually looked forward to working with SweetHands. We always start by showing proper hand positions on the stick. We inform them that the top hand is the engine in stick handling and the fuel for the engine is from the wrist roll of the top hand. You'd be surprised at how many kids and coaches at every level couldn't tell you the proper hand position of the top controlling hand. It's our mission to provide quality and effective teaching aides to both coaches and players. We have sold to 38 states and 2 provinces in Canada so far. Please visit our website at www.sweethockeyproducts.com. I had to give myself a plug, didn't I?

We are teachers of skills. Systems can be taught in a short period of time if the player has the ability to execute it. Make every practice focus around improving their skating. You can still handle a puck, pass and shoot, but focus on the foundation of hockey – skating – and reinforce this at all times. Making players accountable early in their careers, gives them the opportunity to reach their full potential as a hockey player. Be organized, creative, enthusiastic and a good communicator. Think outside the box and make every player feel special. Have a great season. All the Best!

Lance Pitlick