



Time To See The Ice

by Dan Bauer

A coach I work with most every summer uses the metaphor "see the ice" for any situation in which the obvious is being ignored. While it is at times annoying, it is also right on target for a society that all too often ignores common sense. With the recent USHL and NAHL drafts completed it became obvious to me that many within the Badger state hockey circle have failed to "see the ice" when it comes to the development of our players.

The Wisconsin Hockey Coaches Association is in the process of doing a study relative to our state products that have been fortunate enough to continue their hockey careers in college. The early research and the results of the recent junior drafts bare one consistent fact. Players who complete four years of high school have a much better rate of success than those who choose alternative routes. When the final numbers are crunched the facts will be evident even to those without hockey sense.

This may come as a surprise to some who believe that WIAA hockey is deterring the development of players. There is much debate and criticism on the twenty-game regular season. I will admit that most coaches, me included, feel a few more games would be beneficial. I can also admit that I may indeed be guilty of not "seeing the ice". Perhaps, this perceived limitation of games, is in reality the strength of our success.

Anyone who has studied the game of hockey and followed the research that is generated knows that games are the least effective way to develop skills. Skills and habits, good or bad, are refined through repetition. The quality of those repetitions can be controlled at practice. All the studies show that while time spent with the puck is severely restricted in games, it is conversely enhanced in practice.

Looking further ahead to the pinnacle of our sport, the NHL, the statistics again support the developmental approach. The influx of European players has grown from 8% in 1982 to a high of 34% in 2002. Conversely the Canadian influence has dropped in that same time period from 82% to a low of 52%. A look at the leagues top point scorers over the past five years shows a similar pattern with Europeans dominating the top ten spots annually.

The European method of teaching the game of hockey has been recognized as the state of the art approach when it comes to skill development. In their system young players won't even start playing games until they are seven years old. In Europe few youth teams will play more than 30 games while practicing more than 100 times a season. The North American way is founded on games and more games. Many youth players, some as young as ten years old, will play in excess of 100 games a year for their combined local and summer AAA teams. While the European method breeds creativity the North American process is focused on rigid systems that discourage handling the puck and promote the "dump & chase" mentality. The two systems of development are polar opposites of each other. So are the end results.

The common sense reality that has escaped us is that the current WIAA high school model and the one used in Minnesota (which very closely mirrors ours) are the only developmental programs that even come close to the European model of practice to game ratios. Most high school teams will put in between 65 and 75 practices a season, which calculates to a near 4:1 ratio. I doubt few if any youth hockey or AAA teams could come close to duplicating those numbers. You will find numerous examples of youth programs that struggle in terms of wins and loses, yet have high school programs that are very successful. The relationship between the frequencies of practices to games is not a myth. It is one of those common sense

realities that many refuse to accept. Seat belts undeniably save lives, yet many refuse to wear them. Winning the lottery is truly a "miracle" yet millions continue to buy tickets. Common sense has not always been a strong point for our society and in particular youth sports.

I have always found it perplexing that we find twenty games as unacceptable, but 60, 70, 80 is just fine. I have never understood that logic. Whatever happened to moderation? Instead of looking for ways to make hockey a 12 month a year commitment we should be pushing an agenda that gives players a designated time away from the game. Gopher head coach Don Lucia has been known to forbid his players on the ice for a set period of time following their season. It is very difficult for any of us to maintain a level of enthusiasm and passion for something that is forced on us 365 days a year. Mature, adult, NHL players that are making millions of dollars have difficulty playing at their peak for 80 plus games a year. Yet we expect an immature ten year old or a hormone crazed teenager to do just that. There is no common sense explanation for that expectation.

It is difficult to argue with the success rate of the Minnesota and Wisconsin high school programs. Both have proven to be the best available route to the next level. Four Minnesota products went in round one of the NHL draft last year; three were still playing for their high school teams. This is not to say that a select few players each year are ready to make the jump to either the National Development Team or the USHL. Jack Skille, Wisconsin's lone first rounder, used the NDT to find his road to success. While the NDT makes few if any mistakes in selecting players, the USHL can be a dangerous and fatal step for a player who is not ready to play at that level.

A Division one coach, who wished to remain anonymous, said, "players who leave (to the USHL) before they are ready often don't see enough ice time, become discouraged and consequently their development suffers".

It seems everyone is searching for the treasure map that will lead them to that elusive division one scholarship. And like a good used car salesman, the closing pitch a coach delivers in June can easily turn into a "lemon" in September. When money is to be made and jobs are dependent upon winning, mistakes will be made. A junior coach, making \$60,000 a year, is likely to be more concerned about his job security than the well-being of your son. Too often there is not time to wait for a player to develop. Their world is based on winning and results. A high school coach making fifty cents an hour operates under a completely different set of priorities.

There has been a lot of time and energy spent bemoaning the twenty-game schedule. We have plotted, planned and schemed to find ways to add games to our WIAA schedule. In doing so we have failed to see that this schedule may not be a hindrance at all, but in fact a hidden strength of our high school programs. With the advent of a Wisconsin pre-season high school league that appears to be just around the corner, there is now more reason than ever before to make high school hockey the right choice. We have added the games we have been searching for without tampering with the structure of the high school season which by the experts standards is right on the mark. The pre-season program will supplement the high school season with a reasonable mixture of practices and games, strengthening as it has done in Minnesota, an already sound developmental concept. It is a common sense solution to an extreme situation. Common sense; could this actually be the solution we have been looking for all along? Sometimes the solution is right under your nose, or in this case right before our eyes.