

# Coaches' Column:

## Coaching the Creative Hockey Player: Insights from those on the Ground

### Larry Lauer, Ph D

#### Expert Panel

**Bob McCaig**, Coach-in-Chief, Southeast District, USA Hockey

**Ryan Rezmierski**, Director of Player Personnel, USA Hockey National Team Development Program

**Scott Souter**, Associate Coach-in-Chief, Southeast District, USA Hockey

**Greg Scott**, Coach, Germantown Academy in Philadelphia, PA

**Kevin Blue**, MSU Sport Psychology Graduate Student & Former Elite Hockey Player in Toronto

What can be more exciting than seeing highly skillful competition during the playoffs when the pressure is at its greatest? Watching the San Jose-Nashville '07 playoff series was entertaining. There was a ton of talent on each squad including some very creative playmakers. The match up between centers Joe Thornton and Peter Forsberg was "must-see" viewing in and of itself! Both Thornton and Forsberg are first-rate playmakers that prefer to set up line mates than score. The creativity they display is often lost in a system-dominated league and the media's focus on a few dirty plays and coach banter.

This article is not inspired by watching the pro game, however. Instead, it comes from watching the Pee Wee A Little Caesars Championship at Munn Arena here in East Lansing, Michigan. I was struck by something that happened during the shootout to decide the championship. A young boy did a Denis Savard-*esque*, spin-o-rama penalty shot and scored to put his team up in the shootout. How creative is that! How gutsy is that! I wonder what his coaches would have said to him if he missed. Having talked to his coaches in the past I think they would have supported him hit or miss. The boy's team eventually won the shootout.

Spurred on by seeing the spin-o-rama penalty shot, I thought an article about creative hockey players would be excellent for this edition of *The Hockey Edge Newsletter*. I don't consider myself an expert on creativity, and especially on spin-o-rama's, yet I wanted to provide readers some ideas about a subject that is often talked about, but is rarely addressed in practice or in training. Therefore, I am reaching out to a group of people in the hockey world to tap into their collec-

tive knowledge.

Five members of the hockey community responded to the questions with insightful and thought-provoking answers (panel is listed on page 2). These are folks that I trust have great knowledge of the game and were also kind enough to provide information that could help the masses!

The panel was emailed with the following lead-in and asked to respond concisely to the questions.

*We all probably agree that we (coaches) would like to produce, develop, and train creative ice hockey players, not "robots" that all play and think the same way.*

*Please provide your concise and clear thoughts on the following questions:*

**1. What makes a hockey player creative? What can he or she do that less creative players cannot?**

**2. How do players become creative?**

**3. How do you coach a player to be creative?**

**What is the significance of developing creativity in hockey players?**

Following are the panel's responses to the questions. The article ends with a summary and some recommendations of what it means for you, the coach.

*What makes a hockey player creative?*

Greg Scott: The ability of a player to feel the game physically and mentally without feeling pressure to perform.

Players who develop a love for the game early on, think about the game constantly, and learn to focus on the intricacies and nuances, without feeling like the game is work, but just an organic extension of their being. That flow is translated into their creative play.

Kevin Blue: Creative players are able to recognize and exploit offensive opportunities that other players aren't (e.g. banking the puck off the side of the net, using you're feet, using decoys and misdirection etc).

Ryan Rezmierski: A combination of the ability to react to different situations on the ice as they happen and a mind that can process that information.

Bob McCaig: We need to let the participant's just play at a young age – no x's and o's. Let them be involved and less structure. If we teach them respect and build their self-esteem they WILL become creative not robots.

Scott Souter: I don't think it is easy to train players to be "creative" but we can give them the opportunity to be "emulative".

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## Coaching the Creative Hockey Player (cont.)

- The little boy in the Pee Wee A Caesar's championship "emulated" a "creative" Denis Savard "Spin O Rama" move.
- When I was a boy growing up in Canada, my brothers and I spent hours on the pond and in the driveway experimenting with the great moves we saw on TV watching Bobby Orr in the Stanley Cup, Paul Henderson in the Canada Cup, Phil Esposito in front of the net, Yvan Cournoyer on a Break Away, Gilbert Perreault on an end to end rush.
- We go out and practice this stuff over and over. We were not creating, we were emulating.
- This improved our skills and our ability to be creative.

*What can he or she do that less creative players cannot?*

BM: THINK - imagination – dream – see themselves doing something beyond what is the norm.

RR: See situations before they are available, think a few steps ahead.

GS: Play without pressure. Focus at a higher level. Concentrate without the distractions of what is taking place around them, and stay in the moment and focus on the task in front of them.

SS: Any player can make the great moves if given time and space and little pressure. The great players do it at high speed, under pressure in confined space utilizing unconscious integration of motor skills developed through repetition and skill refinement.

*How do players become creative?*

GS: Start by playing the game for the love of it and for themselves, not for someone else, i.e. parents. Work on the game outside of practice and scheduled game play. Play in the basement, the driveway, on the pond, on paper, in their mind (day dreams).

SS: Players become creative when they develop sound fundamental skills allowing them to focus their thought process on the environment versus execution of the skill. All skills need to be developed equally so that they can be executed in an integrated fashion - unconsciously and confidently (skating, puck handling, shooting, passing, puck protection, body contact). Practice and repetition makes the difference!

RR: Watching players execute plays at a higher level, and then trying those things in practice.

BM: By those of us that are involved with the players encouraging he/she not only for positive results but also negative as long as they are making some sort of effort. Celebrate mistakes as well as positive accomplishments.

KB: Developing creativity in offense requires a freedom to try things without being afraid to fail. This means that the player needs to engage in plenty of unstructured play and experimentation. Growing up, players should play shinny

and road hockey as much as possible, and watch highlights for unique plays and try them in informal settings. In Canada, much of the creativity developed by players takes place in "shinny" games- five on five hockey on outdoor rinks without equipment, where no score is kept . . . the object of the game is to score, but to do it in a creative way.

*How do you coach a player to be creative?*

BM: Identifying what the player would like to do. For example, if a player wants to try goal let them do not say you are a defenseman. We motivate players by letting them try different things that they want to do not what we want them to do- this way they will be creative. Do not stereotype them at an early age.

RR: Think outside the "box" and put restrictions on practice, meaning guiding practices with different variables, such as small area games, cross ice games, different recognition games and so on....

SS: Allow players individual time in practice to be creative and practice great moves that they have seen and want to emulate. Encourage them; do not reprimand them for trying creative things (I bet the boy in Michigan practiced the Denis Savard move over and over).

Utilize small games to allow total development of all skills in an integrated fashion in a small space, where there is little time and space to operate. Line drills provide too little time for practicing actual skills; usually do not integrate all skills, are one dimensional and far from creative.

Coaches need to adjust coaching style from autocratic and structured to a more laissez-faire and unstructured style in segments of practice to allow for creativity.

GS: Coaches can't coach a player to be creative, but they can provide an environment for a player to be creative in. Coaches can encourage players to try new skills, and let them know that making mistakes is ok.

Coaches can provide challenges both physically and mentally to players, by giving them tasks that they themselves have not thought of. At the same time coaches should keep the game simple enough so that players are free to try new things in games and practice on their own.

KB: Once per week, take five minutes in practice and introduce players to a new "creative play" (e.g. using the back of the net, batting the puck out of the air before it hits the ice on the face off, looking off the goalie on a two on one, a new type of stick handling move, a new give and go etc). Encourage the players to work on their own for a couple minutes or with a teammate.

Importantly, many coaches stifle creativity in their players by "over coaching" them. For example, attempting to run "set plays" on the power play takes creative initiative away from players in an offensive situation.

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## Coaching the Creative Hockey Player (cont.)

*What is the significance of developing creativity in hockey players?*

BM: They will not only be creative as a hockey player but in life as well. People that are creative and have “people skills” will be productive and successful in life.

GS: Players, who are allowed to be creative, develop high levels of self confidence, in not only their game and team play, but in life skills. Their ability to think through complex problems and see things in a different light at times is something that they carry with them no matter what the situation is on the ice or in life.

RR: This sport is based on changing circumstances and there are NO set plays just concepts. Hockey players must have some sort of creativity to their game, which is the difference between good and great players.

SS: Creativity requires total and integrated skill mastery. Skill builds confidence and self esteem. Self esteem provides for the development of individuals which is a good building block for teams. Skill allows players to work better in team units and function better in life – encourage creativity.

KB: Creativity is a way that players who don't have strength and size can differentiate themselves from others who are bigger and stronger. Also, creative offensive plays are intrinsically fun- that's what makes shinny so enjoyable.

### Summary and Recommendations

What an excellent response from our panel. Several themes seemed to be repeated and/or were prominent as I read the panel's responses.

#### *Read and React/Anticipate*

Hockey creativity was considered to be the ability to read and react to situations, and process this information more efficiently than other players. Thus, recognition of opportunities such as a player about to break free from a check or a developing “back-door” play is characteristic of a creative player. Ryan Rezmierski wrote that creative players “think a few steps ahead” or anticipate.

*Focused and Confident Under Pressure/Go with the Flow*  
Creative players were also considered to be capable of focusing under pressure, and have the confidence to try things others would not. As Greg Scott remarked, you have to be able to do this under pressure with great focus, and Scott Souter agreed suggesting that creativity must occur under great speed and confined space.

Coaches should not underestimate the importance of “flow.” Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has studied flow, or optimal experience, for many years. Players whose skills match the demands of a situation are capable of freeing their mind and becoming totally engaged in the moment. Once the mind is freed, players can just “read and react” and not rely on pre-

planned behaviors. While in flow, players have keen awareness of their environment and are able to perceive options as they present themselves. As Ryan Rezmierski mentioned, players are then able to process this information and make creative decisions.

#### *Imagination*

Creative hockey players also have imagination, a vision of potential options that the “average” or less creative player does not have. Bob McCaig's usage of the word “Dream” stands out to me. Dream may mean being able to actively create in your mind options that are not the “default” or normal action, yet have desired results of setting up a scoring chance. Greg Scott also mentioned “daydreaming” as a way to develop creativity. Certainly the process of dreaming of creative plays readies a hockey player to attempt these things in practice and allow them to happen in games.

#### *Emulation and Repetitive Practice*

Developing creativity does not only occur from imagination. Scott Souter and Ryan Rezmierski remarked that players “emulate” creative players and their moves, and then practice these moves over and over. Scott also asserted that a player must have a solid foundation of skills to execute creative moves. This certainly relates to the earlier suggestion that players must be confident in their skills to be creative.

#### *Unstructured Play Develops Naturally Creative Players*

Greg Scott, Kevin Blue, and Bob McCaig all pushed for young players to work on their creative hockey skills in unstructured situations with a focus on trying creative moves. Playing shinny, on the pond, or just for fun allows players to be free of the worries of making mistakes and being judged by coaches, parents, and teammates. This opportunity allows them to develop the confidence to later try this move in a game or practice. By doing this, Greg felt that players fall in love with the game and creativity becomes a part of who they are, and then naturally flows in games (when they are able to manage their emotions and nerves). This mirrors Bloom's (1985) research on talented performers (not just athletes) in the book *Developing Talent in Young People*. Bloom found that participation in a chosen endeavor began relatively inconspicuously. The focus was on having fun and building fundamentals, mostly with parents and neighborhood friends, not on winning or constant training from a professional.

#### *Coaches Must Not “Over Coach” and Create a Fear of Failure Environment*

The panel also felt that coaches need to allow players to be creative and make mistakes. As Kevin Blue suggested many coaches “over coach” and do not allow creativity to flourish. In fact, coaches should encourage players to be creative and try new skills and allow them to make mistakes as Greg Scott passionately argued. When we are reinforced for a behavior that we are modeling (such as a deke or pass be-

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## Coaching the Creative Hockey Player (cont.)

tween the legs) we are more likely to make it part of our “game”. In contrast, when coaches emphasize not making mistakes and playing conservative, players often develop a fear of making mistakes and are less likely to try something creative. Making the safe play because of the fear of losing/mistakes is being reinforced. Thinking outside the box as Ryan Rezmierski remarked is frowned upon. Players in this environment tend to play less creative and play not to lose. This is not a recipe for developing creative hockey talent! One of my mentors, Bob McCaig, has long been challenging coaches to allow young players the freedom to be creative. When he wrote “Celebrate mistakes as well as positive accomplishments” it reminds me of one of our many talks after a coaching clinic. Coaching hockey creativity is tricky, but a take home message is allowing youth to experiment, emulate, and execute without constant restrictions or evaluation/punishment. As Bob suggests, find out what youth want to try and give them the opportunity. Allow them to be themselves!

*Provide Time and Opportunity for Creativity in Practice*  
Scott, Kevin, and Greg recommend that coaches provide time for players to be creative in practice. Greg talked about challenging players and getting them out of the comfort zone by giving them new tasks, while Kevin felt teaching something new each week (e.g., looking off the goalie) would develop creativity. Scott and Ryan reminded us of the importance of small games as a way to provide a creative environment.

### *Creativity in Hockey can Transfer to Life*

Finally, several panel members asserted that learning to be creative in hockey can help outside of hockey. Whether by being able to problem solve and see creative solutions to old problems, or having the ability to adapt to changing environments and anticipate, creativity definitely is a benefit in work and social situations.

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the theme that creativity is the combination of motor skills and psychological processes, players must learn the skills and then get to a mental state where they can produce these skills under pressure, was prominent. Interestingly, the panel took the concept of creativity in different directions at times. Several panel members talked about emulating moves whereas others focused more on coaches and the development of creativity. In addition, different opinions existed on the development of creativity, whether

or not a coach can directly develop it, and just what exactly is creativity.

Thanks to the panel for their willingness to share their impressive ideas! My hope is that the panel’s wisdom provides you, the coach, with some things to think about and maybe even apply to your coaching. I believe, as I am sure the panel does, the development of hockey talent in the US will be enhanced if coaches from “Learn to Play” to juniors allow creativity by setting up a positive, development-focused environment and begin to challenge and teach players that there is more than one way to play the game.

### Coaches’ Toolbox

#### *Coaching Creativity in Hockey Recommendations*

1. Coach for creativity. Allow some free time in practice and talk about and teach creative moves.
2. Set up a practice climate that allows for creativity. Be less authoritative in your style and allow players to make mistakes. Reinforce them for the effort and talk about options – good and bad times to attempt certain plays or moves.
3. Ask questions of players, especially as it relates to options in hockey situations. “What are your options on a 2 on 1 and the defenseman is leaning towards you?”
4. Practice 2 on 1’s, 3 on 2’s, etc. Encourage players to try creative moves and reinforce these efforts.
5. Develop your players’ imagery abilities so they can envision possibilities versus thinking of only one move or play, thus becoming predictable.
6. Have players watch film of creative players and use imagery to burn the moves in their mind. Then, have your players model the moves or plays.
7. Coach the foundation of hockey skills to the point of over learning so players can then have the confidence to attempt more creative and more difficult moves or plays.
8. Teach players to manage stress and emotion so they can free themselves of distractions and worries and allow their natural game to flow.
9. Focus more on development knowing that it will lead to wins.

### HOCKEY QUOTE

*“A good hockey player plays where the puck is.  
A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be. ”*  
“The Great One” Wayne Gretzky