



Teaching Life Lessons Through Hockey

Participation in hockey has so many opportunities for young people to learn life lessons and to grow through the process. As players move through the system from young youth, to high school, to midgets/juniors and some beyond the lessons get tougher each year as the competition for playing time and even roster spots intensifies. Coaches and parents have a wonderful opportunity to help their players navigate through these issues. Coaches in particular have the opportunity to decide which life lessons kids experience and how they are delivered. In some cases it is very easy for a coach to hide behind the “You will have a tough boss some day so you might as well get used to it now” instead of doing things the right way with honesty and respect.

A well run program never has to fall back on the “these are just life lessons you are now learning” explanation to young skaters. Good coaches are honest and fair in their treatment of all players on their team. In the youth ranks especially it is really critical to move players through the system in such a fashion that all kids have an opportunity to play and develop in all sorts of game and practice situations. Short benches to win games is one of the worst sin a youth coach can commit. The unspoken message to all of the players is simply wrong. The life lessons from short benches are: Winning takes precedence over all other values and goals of the program; the players who sit are not worthy of participation and are not full members of the team; only a few kids matter on the team. The same goes for power play and penalty kill “special teams” in youth hockey. All players should get an opportunity to play in these situations throughout the year.

What about the message that many coaches are so fond of saying that everybody needs to be committed to the team? This is another wall for coaches to hide behind. What does this mean exactly? What is the message that a high school/midget player receives when he or she hears this and sits on the bench watching the same 8 or 9 players rotate to the ice during games? The message is that you are somewhat valuable for practice but not in games. The coach wonders why some players lose their enthusiasm for the game and the team. Effort at practice drops because the reward of game time is not there for those players. The coach may openly question the commitment of these players not realizing that it is his/her own actions that has squeezed the life out of them. The life lessons here are; winning is the only objective for the boss/coach; management does not walk the talk; actions speak louder than words. In other words the unwitting coach is subjecting the players to a situation that in the “real world” results in poor moral, low productivity and lack of respect for management. Yes these are life lessons but not ones that parents want their kids to learn as teenagers. The “real world” will provide enough lessons when the time is right.

What “life Lessons” should youth and high school players be learning through their participation in hockey? As I said above, coaches really have a choice about the experience that the players have on any team. In youth hockey the players are all within a 2 year age range but in high school players range from 14 to 18 years old. Since so few will advance beyond high school hockey the underlying objective for any coach at all of these levels is that all of the players have a meaningful experience and get better. This is best accomplished in an environment where players are valued, their input solicited and ideas considered. A positive framework along with accountability is essential for this to occur. Players need to be accountable for effort, allowed to make mistakes, and have an opportunity to learn individual skills as well as team skills. The development process is different for every player and coaches need to take a realistic view of where each player is in the development process and coach them each accordingly.

Life lessons are an important part of youth, midget and high school hockey. Coaches and parents alike should strive to insure that the players are learning the right lessons that will make them stronger and better individuals. All players will experience adversity and disappointment at some point in their playing days and how it is handled and how the coaches and parents deal with it is critical to the long term impact on each player. Coaches have a choice in this process; choose well.

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