



REFOCUSING OUR ENERGIES AWAY FROM GAMES

Recently, as the wind howled off the Atlantic and snow roared through the city, I moved through the lobby of a rink in Boston. Happy to be out of winter's grip, I exchanged greetings with friends and shared in some small talk.

Each coach or parent with whom I conversed eagerly filled me in on the current state of their teams. "We are undefeated in our last three." "We are 0 for December." "We had a great win last Sunday." The refrain went on and on.

Each child I spoke with simply said everything was great and the year was going well. Is there a lesson to be learned here? I believe so.

As I drove away I thought, why do adults define the success of their child's season based on game results? Why are we so consumed with the results of the latest game? Are the results of youth hockey games a true indicator of success? If the season is not going well, whom do we fire: the scouting staff, the GM or the coaches? Do losses affect concession stand or replica jersey sales?

As coaches we do not want to become firefighters constantly responding to alarms set off by game results.

Despite what many people preach around youth hockey, we follow the lead of professional sports by making 'the game' the focus of the week.

This focus is adult driven, not child driven. Often, the kids don't know who they played that week or who they played the week before. They will know from the constant reminders of the adults. How did we play in 'the game' last week? Who do we play in 'the game' this week? Who scored in 'the game?' How did the goalie play in 'the game?' How have we done in our last few 'games?'

These are the common concerns around many a team.

This mentality not only puts pressure on the kids, it puts pressure on the coaches for more immediate results. The overall guiding focus of the team inevitably shifts. Training then becomes 'game training' as opposed to 'ice hockey training.'

This usually leads to more focus on system play for short-term results.

Not only do the actual physical activities then shift, but the environment also changes. A 7- to 12-year-old child is then moved into an adult, results-oriented environment. The players are then inundated by coaches

with the three 'gets' – get it out, get it in and get off.

This is not a good recipe for long-term development.

This slippery slide brings to recollection a thought shared by Finnish national coach Jukka Jolonen at an IIHF clinic in 2003, "If you want only to win the next game, it is unlikely you will win the last game."

I urge us to focus on what is vital for healthy, long-term, quality development. The young players should be encouraged to develop their skills and have fun in the process. The exercises, drills and challenges in which they are participating during practice sessions should be upbeat and positive. The environment in which they are doing this should be upbeat, safe and positive. If all of this is in place then development will occur.

This approach does not mean that all games will be won. In fact, many may not. The reality is that the results of a youth game are not a good indicator of how a team is doing in the big picture.

If you have a capable goalie, you will probably win your fair share. If you don't, you probably won't. If the flu runs through your team or there is a good rerun of Elmo on TV, you may be missing a few players. If you have a few gifted players on your team, you'll probably win a few more games. If the other team has those kids, they'll probably beat you more times than not. If you have a solid goalie and a few gifted kids, you will probably compete for a championship. This all has little to do with what is truly happening on the development front.

Matter of fact, you could have the top team in the league and your players may actually be regressing. Bad habits could be creeping into play or discipline could be running amok yet the adults around the team may be satisfied because the team is 18-2 heading into the holidays.

As coaches of youth teams we do not want to become firefighters during the season by constantly responding to alarms set off by 'game' results. Coaches and parents could spend all season running around dealing with scoreboard brushfires.

We should set a course of long term, patient, intelligent planning and stay with it. We should hold the rudder steady in calm as well as choppy seas. We should set a course to foster the best in each player regardless of the outcome of 'games.'

Certainly no one wants to lose consistently, and certainly there are many lessons to be learned from all games.

Current UMass assistant and former pro coach Red Gendron said it best: "Who cares who wins Peewee hockey games? Rather, we should be devoted to developing young players and making the game fun." ❦



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Should youth players have their names on the back of their jerseys?

- 1) Yes
- 2) No
- 3) It should be up to the parents or players to decide.
- 4) It should be up to the association to decide.

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