

Ease off the drills; let the ice do the teaching

Motto McLean is one of those guys who exemplifies Ol' time hockey. "Keep it simple," he'd say. "Coaches want to teach hockey by lecturing on the ice. Kids want to play, so combine their learning with competition."

Who's Motto? you ask.

I remember him from the days he played in the Detroit Red Wings organization for Omaha, but who can forget a name like that?

His name came up in a conversation with Frank Serratore, head coach at the Air Force Academy and former coach of the Minnesota Moose in the International Hockey League.

Frank, a native of Coleraine, Minn., has two sons in the early stages of hockey, and he is concerned that we as coaches forget our younger days.

"We lecture like professors, and the kids look at us like we're speaking Japanese," Serratore said. "My kids loved to go to the rink when they could just play.

Now, they're losing some of that passion, and I'm worried we're raising a generation of hockey players who don't know the fun of playing shinny hockey.

Coach Serratore feels that kids are being drilled to death.

"They can skate, pass and shoot," he continued. "They fly around cones beautifully, but they don't understand the game. Where are the Brotens, and Pavelichs, guys who had great rink sense? Will we ever see another Mike Antonovich?



**Jack
BLATHERWICK**

"Worse yet, I think they're losing the intangibles gained in a shinny game at the outdoor rink. They're losing that passion we saw in the rink rats of a few years ago. After all, I don't hear a lot of kids saying, 'Gee, I can't wait to get to the rink and do some drills.'"

But meanwhile back to Motto McLean. After a career in professional hockey, Motto started the youth program in Omaha. "He is Mr. Hockey in Omaha," Serratore said. "He's like the John Mariucci of hockey in that area.

Frank was working a hockey school for Motto last summer and had a bunch of very young players for two hours a day.

After a few days of these long sessions,

Frank went to Motto and said, "I think the players are getting sick of the same format, drill after drill every day. What should we do?"

Motto answered, "Frankie, the ice is the best teacher. Let the ice do the teaching."

“ Hockey is a read-and-react game. We can't stifle creativity at the youth levels just because they make a few mistakes in games. ”

"If the parents think the kids should be doing drills everyday," Motto continued, "have them talk to me. There is no better way to learn this game than to scrimmage."

Ol' time hockey, you say. There is a lot of wisdom in the way the game was learned years ago. After all, this environment gave us all the brilliant playmakers in hockey history.

And it is developing the best players today – in Europe.

Our problem in North America is that we're developing a generation of players who can do drills and execute systems as if they're nothing but an "X" or an "O". We want to teach hockey as if it were football, where everyone has a specific assignment, and there is no room for creativity.

Many of us remember our football coach yelling something like, "Don't think. I'll do the thinking for you. Just do what I tell you."

"But hockey is a read-and-react game," Serratore said. "We can't stifle their creativity at the youth levels just because they make a few mistakes in games."

In Europe, much of the game is taught by structuring some form of competition to create a learning environment where no one lectures.

Serratore relays an experience by Ken Martel, one of the coaches of the USA Hockey program in Ann Arbor, who recently visited some practices in Europe.

"If they want to teach kids to pass and receive,

they might play a little 4-on-2 game," Martel said. "The team with the advantage quickly learns to spread out, to position themselves to be receivers, and to use teammates to create plays. Skating mechanics isn't taught by a lecture from the coach. Instead, they might make up a relay race with plenty of turns.

This is what a truly good coach might do. Creating an environment for the athlete to learn is what Bud Grant calls the process. A truly good educator is happy when the student no longer needs the teacher.

Whether the format is the classroom, the football field or the hockey rink, real learning only comes from hands-on experimentation. This is especially true in a game like hockey where the options are limitless.

Creativity is the key ingredient in making any game a fun experience. After all, we could ruin an otherwise fun, table-hockey game by telling the participants exactly what to do, allowing no room for their own creativity.

"We're making the hockey rink just like the classroom for these kids," Serratore said. "There are too many rules, too much insistence that we stand in straight

lines, that we do only what the coach tells us.

"The best players in the world today are coming from Europe. Maybe we should learn from the way they develop players over there.

“ They can fly around cones, but they don't understand the game. Where are the Brotens and Pavelichs, guys who had great rink sense? ”