

Overcoaching, undercoaching: finding a balance

There is, no doubt, a perfect balance of coaching that is appropriate for each team. There also is no doubt that each team's need for coaching varies. Each is a unique blend of players with different levels of talent and, more importantly, different levels of understanding of the game and all of its pieces.

Before I get further into this subject, I want to define what I mean by the term "coaching" in this context.

As I have discussed over the past 13 years in this column, coaches are involved in literally scores of duties that range from organization, systems selection and skill teaching to psychological analysis and discipline enforcement.

The "coaching" that I want to delve into now has to do primarily with teaching of the game itself.

I do realize that it is difficult to separate this aspect of coaching from many of the other aspects, but I believe it is a critical aspect.

There are certain *givens*, including good organization, well-planned practices, objectivity, enough study to truly understand the game well, and other basics.

Once these givens are in place, then coaches need to decide how they are going to approach teaching their teams *how to play the game*. They need to decide, over the season or even more than one season, what they are going to do in practice that accomplishes several things:

1. Provide enjoyment and an appropriate amount of fun. Fun is very important at young



ages, enjoyment becomes more important as players mature.

2. Develops players' skills so they can perform adequately in various game situations. Most skills are skate or hand related. Some are also more overall body related, but still involving skates and/or hands. Examples of these would be things like shot blocking and puck protection.

3. Develops players' understanding of the game and its various pieces so they can make intelligent decisions in various game situations.

So practice then involve as much fun and enjoyment that develop skate and stick skills as well as game situation understanding. That seems to be a neat recap that sounds pretty easy.

However, if we were to travel around and watch 10 or 12 teams (of various youth levels) practice and play for a month each, we would see practices that are very different in drills, teaching, fun and enjoyment.

Some coaches believe that each practice should end with 10 or 15 minutes of severe conditioning skating, for example – while others

(including me) believe that properly operated practices in themselves provide good conditioning.

Some coaches spend considerable time each practice on special teams, while others dwell little on power plays and penalty kills.

Some coaches drill forechecks or coverage diligently so players know exactly what their specific duties are while other coaches want players to react in all circumstances due to *understanding*.

I want to make a case for coaches to be very careful not to *overcoach* their teams, especially at the squirt, pee-wee and bantam levels.

By *overcoaching*, I mean spending too much time on detailed systems, power play, rote drills. Low-intensity, skate-then-shoot drills are of little value, for example.

As outlined in recent past columns this season, I believe that young players have a much weaker naturally acquired grasp of the game than ever before.

I don't want to dwell too long on the reasons for this shortcoming, except to reiterate that many hundreds of hours of outdoor shinny taught me and earlier generations of players most of what we knew about the game, as well as the skate and stick skills that we had.

Because few youth players today spend those hundreds of hours, their coaches have the tough task of teaching all aspects of the game, as well as all skills, over very limited numbers of practice hours.

I would like to see youth coaches increase their practice ice as much as possible and truly become teachers, tutors, and counselors on the

ice for their players.

Some systems are necessary, of course, and there is still discipline and many of the other tasks. However, fun and enjoyable isolated shinny-like drills for substantial portions of practices where players could be tutored to learn the game more naturally is the preferable direction.

This is what I call *undercoaching*.

I believe that *overcoaching* creates more role players with less creativity and less flexibility.

A more naturally taught player will also learn to appreciate and love the game more.

There are definitely more details to be worked out to fine tune a process such as the one I have described.

There are some coaches who believe that playing more games (and thus less practices) is the answer. I don't believe this is the right direction because player involvement in (one hour) games is so limited.

Players also are under much more pressure in games and can't comfortably experiment and be creative.

I moved more and more to the shinny drill practice process with my own team this year and saw positive results as the season progressed.

Hopefully, some of you will try it next year and report results that I can share with other coaches in my column.

Many of these shinny drills were outlined in my columns several weeks ago. You may be interested in revisiting those columns. 