



# ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

## FEBRUARY

### Stifling Creativity

Article of the Month:  
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Stifling Creativity Inhibits Development  
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In an effort to justify their existence coaches feel that they are not "coaching" unless they are doing something, anything that might "look" like they are actually "coaching". They feel that there is weakness in inaction.

The television camera rarely dwells on the coach who is not animated. Youth coaches get the message that they have to at least "act" the part. In doing so many well-intentioned, misinformed youth coaches are disabling the development of the youth players under their management.

When a pro team does not win or does not play well the coaches usually cite tactics as the reason for substandard performance. It was refreshing last year (1990), when the Bruins started slowly, that Mike Millbury said his team needed to work on their skills and by doing so they would regain any lost confidence. In youth hockey, Millbury's answer should almost always be the solution. Make your players better. This is the youth coaches job.

The current environment in youth hockey venerates false validations of success, winning games, as opposed to maximizing or developing individual abilities. Because of this creativity is discouraged and a dumbed down brand of hockey is played.

In his book *Creativity*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes of what creativity entails and how it can be stifled:

" Each of us is born with two contradictory sets of instructions: a conservative tendency, made up of instincts for self-preservation, self-aggrandizement, and saving energy, and an expansive tendency made up of instincts for exploring, for novelty and risk-the curiosity that leads to creativity belongs to this set. We need both of these programs. But whereas the first tendency requires little encouragement or support from outside to motivate behavior, the second can wilt if not cultivated. If too few opportunities for curiosity are available, if too many obstacles are placed in the way of risk and exploration, the motivation to engage in creative behavior is easily extinguished."

Csikszentmihalyi also writes, " It is easier to enhance creativity by changing conditions in the environment than by trying to make people think more creatively." A good coach sets up an environment that either rewards creativity or suppresses it. Bobby Orr in a Boston Globe article by Kevin Paul Dupont (1/23/2000) is quoted as saying, "Let 'em play...if an offensive player is able to create, we have to let 'em do it-at every level. Let 'em go. Let 'em play." Players should be allowed to develop at their own pace. They should not be forced to understand or learn all of the major components of the sport yesterday, because learning can inhibit creativity. If you inhibit creativity in youngsters, if you do not allow them to develop an intuitive feel for the game, they will be functionally disabled in a sport that is reactionary in nature. The execution of any particular previously acquired skill is inhibited by conscious thought. Hockey is a game where elite players have passion, hunger, desire and an intuitive feel for the game and its varied situations. On a January 2000 telecast of a Detroit v. Toronto game the commentator said, " Pat Quinn and Scotty Bowman are successful coaches in part because they get players who can think their way through a situation."

We should be endeavoring to enhance these desirable traits not inhibiting them. This occurs through allowing players to make decisions during the action of practice or games.

If Bowman and Quinn are right. Isn't it interesting how many European players that these coaches depend on? Is there something that the Europeans are doing to produce players who make good decisions within the framework of a game and maybe North Americans are not doing?

Along with Yzerman, a player who possesses an abundance of hockey sense, Shanahan and Chelios (all of these N. Americans players are over 30 years of age)! the players who Bowman relies heavily on are Lidstrom, Larionov, and Federov. For Quinn 9 of his top 14 scorers are Europeans. The players he seems to play the most are Sundin, Hoglund and Kaberle.

In Europe, if a youth coach is working on tactics he is either reprimanded or fired. The Europeans know that the window of opportunity to develop creativity, and enhance the attendant intuitive feel for the game closes a little with each passing year.

In an article on human behavior from the Boston Globe (3/4/91), Alison Bass writes, "...a series of experts have suggested that...detailed analysis can actually be detrimental to good decision making [creativity in sports]...". Bass goes on to write, "...intuition, the product of an unconscious thought process within the brain, draws, upon each persons vast reservoir of experience..." In youth hockey terms, for the development of a well-rounded player, unless they are given the chance to initiate their own plays, to have no fear of failure as judged by adults, their intuitive process, their feel for the game may never be developed. John Wooden the basketball coach for UCLA whose teams won 10 NCAA championships in 12 years believes that, "the team that makes the Most mistakes wins." Why? Because they do not fear failure, so they try to beat their opponent instead of trying not to lose to them.

Many youth coaches spend an inordinate amount of time either pointing out "mistakes" in the misplaced belief that this will help their players, when in reality it usually leads them to make more mistakes. Or, youth coaches try to control a game that has some inherent uncontrollability. This frustrates them because they feel that the game and its successes are a reflection of themselves.

So youth coaches work on breakouts and forechecks and skating techniques and skating without pucks etc. Bass says, " if we stopped to think about what we are doing every time we moved a muscle or blinked an eye, we would never accomplish anything...a growing number of researchers in fact believe intuition formed the very core of human intelligence."

When you limit players options and discourage them from finding a way to win the battle they feel for the game will be diminished. Jack Parker the longtime head coach for BU tried to make every play for his team during the play! As an assistant at BU I told Coach Parker that this was one of the reasons that we were unsuccessful (this was about 1985). To his credit Jack agreed and stopped this behavior one he had displayed for about 15 years at the time as a coach.

Jack Blatherwick, former strength and conditioning coach for US Olympic Teams and the University of Minnesota writes in the February 1990 issue of Minnesota Hockey Magazine, Negativity Can Stop Creativity:

"...one of the biggest problems in mastering a skill is to over-intellectualize it. Whether it is walking, running, skating, shooting or swinging a golf club, any skill requires natural coordination. The neuromuscular system is ultimately inhibited by conscious thought...We (hockey coaches) seem to need control of the game, probably to a greater extent than is in the best interests of our players. If we over-coach, the natural, reflexive skills will be inhibited. Furthermore, by removing spontaneity and creativity in our team systems, we limit the future growth of individuals and the ability of our team to react."

In addition to Blatherwick's considerable expertise in the sport, he also has a doctorate in exercise physiology. Youth coaches need to follow the advice of people like Bobby Orr, Csikszentmihalyi and Blatherwick and in turning the sport back to the kids. They need to spend less time on systems and technique. They need to spend less time playing league games with standings. In fact Canada is moving to cutting the number of league games.

Herb Brooks current coach of the Penguins and former coach of the 1980 US Olympic gold-medallists says, " competition without preparation [high speed skill training, tight area work, games/drills that encourage decision making and unstructured games) is not development."

This article was first written in the early 1990's by Bob Richardson and rewritten in February 2000.

Tip of the Month:

Don Cherry on Hockey Night in Canada January, 2000:

On letting kids develop through making plays, through trial and error, unjudged by adult coaches.

" I want to implore you coaches, don't rush the kids. Now I know what you're saying, ' he only improves with the opposition', but I say NO, and I'll tell you why. The kid will not try his little tricks...that's what I call deking. When he goes to high he will not try..."

In order to make a play young players need to experience success and failure over time. They need to try things. They need to handle the puck. They need to develop a higher panic point with the puck, otherwise they will be doomed to just getting rid of it, coughing it up, rather than making a play. Isn't this what coaches in high school or college or the NHL are looking for someone who can make a play? Unfortunately young players are rewarded for coughing it up or passing to covered players! Well, at least they are not puck hogs.

Cherry on "playing up":

" I would keep them in bantam as long as possible, I would keep them in pee-wee as long as I could all the way down. Don't push the kids! Let them play in their division.. They don't improve with the opposition. They get hurt (developmentally)!

Why is this? Because they end up playing what's called survival hockey. That is for much of the game they cannot make plays or try anything they just play a lowest common denominator game, get it out, get it in, get rid of it etc. There is no way of calculating how many players have been harmed by this, but be assured that all who have coached at the higher levels have seen it happen too many times. Its just that you are never going to here or see evidence of this potential unrealized.

Quote of the Month:

Bobby Orr from the Boston Globe January 23, 2000. Orr's Creative Suggestion: Loosen it Up by Kevin Paul Dupont

" Some players are so afraid of making a mistake they won't try anything. Hey you're going to make mistakes. But let 'em try. The player will eventually be more confident with the puck."Maybe it sounds silly to say an NHL player isn't confident with the puck, but you see some of them, they handle it like a hot potato. It's shoot it in, shoot it out. I'd like to see them attempt to do more."