



ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

JANUARY

Quote of the Month:

From the Canadian National Post January 5, 2000,, not Perspiration, is hockey's future by Cam Cole.

Tom Renney vice-president of Canadian Hockey says:

"We have to allow players to use their creative mind to play the game and not stifle that and not penalize a player for being more imaginative."

We have subverted those possibilities so completely in our obsession with size courage and points in the minor hockey standings that we've forgotten how to play shinny over time, and it's going to take time to relearn.

Article of the Month:

By Bob Richardson
Director International Hockey Academy
Scout Dallas Stars
(article written 1992)

There are many ways that players can develop for the sport of hockey. One of the optimal ways for players to improve is by playing shinny hockey. However, in today's world of adult organized leagues and practices, one of the best methods for young players to develop overall hockey playing ability is to experience the pure joy of the sport, devoid of adult miss-direction, judgment and criticism. One of the fundamentals of the sport is decision-making. The ability to make productive choices; when to pass, when to shoot etc. We often confuse learning with skill improvement. No one's skill is improved by coaches' locker room chalk talks. Very little tactical learning takes place in these sessions, in part because the coaches do not limit themselves to 1 or 2 topics and address them concisely. Little in the way of developing a better feel for the game or enhancement of decision-making takes place, in comparison with the experience gained from playing in a free flowing non-adult-led game. Learning has little or no influence on reflexes. Yet, youth coaches routinely gather their player's 1/2-hour to an hour before league games to lecture them on subjects such as team play. There is little productive in this course, particularly if the coach is not well versed in the subject and cannot make his point succinctly. The great players, the best players have the ability to react in a game that is transitional in nature.

When youth players are pushed to do too much too soon, they can feel frustrated or stressed, which will lead to feelings of failure. Learning by lecturing might lead a player to be somewhat more proficient at a particular tactic, but at what cost? In the short term the player may show "improvement", but in the long term we want them to be problem solvers and eager, hungry players. We may be stifling that inclination by forcing them to play according to an ill-conceived adult plan. Coaches should spend more time building self-esteem in the locker room before games and less time on systems. They should spend more time earning their players respect.

The game has to be given back to the players for it's long term good. **Harry Howell, Hall of Fame** defenseman with the **New York Rangers** and now a scout with the **Edmonton Oilers**, said when commenting on such young **Soviet** stars (young then) as **Sergei Federov** and **Pavel Bure**, " When the **Russians** are young players, they are allowed to play shinny-that is handle the puck a lot and skate. Our players are **overcoached** when they are young. I watched the **Canadian** players and all I hear the coach yelling is '*shoot it, pass it, get rid of it*.'" As a result we don't have the *puckhandlers* the **Europeans** do.

NOTE: Remember this was said 8+ years ago. The disparity in physical skills and read and react skills is more pronounced now than it was then and the end is nowhere in site.

A player must develop the skills, a feel for the game and most importantly a **passion** for the game in their formative years, before they are **14 or 15 years of age**.

Bobby Orr and **Don Cherry** spoke about the miss-direction of youth hockey on **Cherry's Grapevine TV Show**. **Orr** explained how he developed, by playing on ponds as a youngster. **Orr** said, "**that's the way we learned our skills...without adults, just drop the puck and go.**" **Cherry** agreed with **Orr** saying that he too is bothered by over-involvement by adults in youth hockey. **Cherry** said, "**you know what bothers me... when I go to the rink and I hear the coach saying pass it, pass it, you know and the kid takes 2 steps and passes it. I mean if you (ORR) had done that you would never have made it to the NHL.**"

In their conversation **Orr** reiterates that he learned the game by playing, no adult scheduled league games, but on the pond, having fun. He says, " in many cases kids would be better off than waiting for adults to organize it." **Orr** goes on to say, "**I don't know if I could play today, I keep hearing about all these systems. We learned the fundamental skills shooting, passing, handling the puck, skating...these systems are unbelievable!**"

There it is from one of the best players ever to play the game, saying that it should be fun. That too much adult involvement is taking the joy and creativity out of the game. He does not know if he would enjoy playing under these circumstances. Who would?

Some time ago I had a parent call me. The parent was concerned that their son did not seem to be playing as well as the parent thought that he could play. They asked if I would watch a game and tell them what I thought. It took only one shift to see the problem. The parent was absolutely right. The **young player was playing without passion, without the hunger** that he had previously exhibited.

His skills seemed diminished. How could this happen. Systems!

The coach had a system where the center did not get on loose pucks, a system where the center was reduced to a virtual on ice bystander. It is inconceivable that youth coaches entrusted with the development of our young players can basically render those players useless.

Young players need to pursue the puck. They need to have their desire expressed on the ice otherwise a fundamental motivator, hunger, can be extinguished. Sadly, this boy has another coach now and he has a similar "system". In a game which should be full of action, where being involved has its individual and team rewards, where exuberance is lacking, he is reduced at times to an on ice spectator.

Many youth coaches feel that discipline in behavior and game play is one of their prime responsibilities. They mistakenly feel that discipline is something that is imposed on players not something that is instilled in them. In terms of behavior, this approach is used by coaches who cannot gain young player's respect, so they use their power to create false respect and false discipline.

In terms of game play this "discipline" is encouraged through systems that the coach imposes on his players. The coach cannot get gratification from the expression of individual creativity. So, he restricts movement as much as possible on the ice, in the hope that limiting the choices of the players will lead to less mistakes. This is **called fear of failure**. It is instilled in many young athletes by over-involved youth coaches. It limits their growth as well as their potential. Soccer is facing many of the same problems brought on by many uneducated youth coaches. In an article written by **Roy Rees**, the **U.S. National Under 17 Team Coach** (1/10/91 issue of *Soccer New England*), **Mr. Rees** defines the goal or aim of a youth coach as "...the drawing out of individual skills." He goes on to write, "**If a coach imposes rigid discipline on his players he can hardly expect them to play with joy and abandon. A coach who restricts the creativity and inventiveness of his players is doomed to produce journeymen soccer players on mundane boring teams.**" Mr. Rees could easily have been writing about youth hockey.

The soccer star **Pele**, who was to his sport what **Orr** was to hockey in the 70's wrote an article in ***Sports Illustrated* (3/25/91)**. Here are a few observations that also could easily have been written about hockey:

" Many coaches fearful of losing their high-paying jobs no longer play to win, they play not to lose. That subtle shift in attitude has had far-reaching effects at all levels of the sport, from the *mechanized way* kids learn the game to the questionable defensive tactics pros use to frustrate their rivals."

"To create a goal is a complex task that requires dozens of split second decisions and the imagination to anticipate three, four, five moves ahead. Most of today's players, who are products of the over-emphasis on defense (or systems in hockey) aren't afforded the opportunity to master these

skills."

" What has been lost in the process is the very heart and soul of the game."

There are many fine coaches, many well-intentioned coaches in youth hockey. Hopefully, there are also many open-minded coaches. Open-minded enough to make improvements in the way that they go about the task of coaching. Let the players initiate their own plays during practices and games, let them talk and have fun in the locker room before games. Let them play and develop without so many over-bearing systems. Coaches can develop their skills, foster hunger and passion for the game, encourage them to be creative. Take a step back. Let them play shinny hockey. Allow them to have fun. You will be surprised at how much better they will become when they become the owners of the game. **Adam Crowe, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff**, speaking after **Desert Storm** said, "**The key factors of our success were initiative and imagination more so than planning.**"

In the January 5, 2000 Edmonton Journal again Orr speaks out:

"We're putting chains on our backs. They can't all be like **Wayne**, but let's not hold them back.

" We learned our skills on outdoor rinks and parking lots. That's how we learned to skate and how to handle the puck. There has to be structure, but if a kid has skating ability, let him go."

Tip of the Month:

Speaking of playing hockey a youngster:

" When the season was over, sometimes he'd (Wayne's dad) hid my skates. He wanted me to play other sports, to just be a regular kid having a great summer. Hockey was the focal point, but it was what I did in the winter."

The facts are undeniable, the best players are self-motivated, the best players are hungry and they can be so because they did NOT skate 12 months a year, as some many miss-informed kids do today. Research just about any of today's top performers and you will find the same thing. They took time off and they were athletes.