



ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

MARCH

Fun

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If you have had the opportunity to see any of the 1996 World Cup, there were several interviews between periods and in the newspaper where USA team members spoke of their experience. It seemed like every player interviewed credited coach Ron Wilson (as well as assistants Paul Holmgren and South Boston's John Cunniff) with making the setting fun. The players cited this as one of the main reasons for the success of the US team. Wilson clearly knows one of the major tenants of coaching in the 90's and achieving human potentiality is, that fun is self-motivational.

Is the enjoyment of the activity, as translated by players, having fun an overriding aim of youth coaches? Players who are having fun will win more battles, pay the price and sacrifice more than players who are hamstrung by coaches who want tactical control of the game. Players who learn to read and react at a young age will advance further in the sport and have a better chance to reach their individual potential than players who are over-coached.

Why?

Hockey is a reactionary game at its core, because of its transitional nature. This ability to adapt, to succeed and to fail are an essential components to individual growth in the sport. It is the base point of an individuals feel for the game. The window of opportunity for their development is thought to be prior to the age of 15 or so. If a player has been allowed to develop this ability he will have hockey sense. If he only waits to think about how the coach wants him to play or fears failure as judged by the coach, his hockey sense will be diminished. This will limit his development as well as productivity.

Player's who are having fun will do more of the things necessary to win without the need of false extrinsic motivation, because their motivation is intrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is more legitimate currency than extrinsic.

In his book Punished by Rewards, Alfie Kohn writes "...more and more researchers have come to recognize that we are beings who possess natural curiosity about ourselves and our environment, who search for and overcome challenges, who try to master skills and attain competence, and who seek to reach new levels..." **this is what inherent motivation is, it should be fostered, not extinguished.**

If a player is not having fun, then he will exhibit a lack of effort that coaches then feel the need to intervene on. So they may formulate a strategy to motivate the player externally and it may work for a while, but as Kohn writes "...reinforcements do not alter the attitudes and emotional commitments that underlie our behaviors". In one of the most relevant passages in his book he writes ". Anytime we are encouraged to

focus on how well we are doing at something (as opposed to concentrating on the process of actually doing it), it is likely that we will like the activity and keep doing it when given a choice". Simply put those that enjoy the activity will play closer to their potential because they are internally motivated to do so. Successful people enjoy the process. They do not fixate on the outcome (product).

This does not mean that a coach let's his players do whatever they feel like doing or provide no direction. For one of the tenants of being a coach is to make demands of your players, demands that sometimes they do not want to meet.

The connotation of the word demand conjures up images of ruthlessness or harshness, however it is not the case. Players may want to take shifts that are too long, they may not want to play defense or they want to horse around too much. These situations are pretty much universally agreed upon as detrimental to the individual and to the team, therefore the coach has to set and maintain guidelines, sometimes to the consternation of the players.

The setting up of a positive atmosphere that encourages players to reach their potential has been the aim of many successful coaches. One of the most read authors in the realm of the pursuit of athletic potential is Dr. James Loehr. In his book Mentally Tough he describes what is needed for peak performance: " performing in the proper emotional climate means that you will summon those skills and exercise them to the best of your ability. Your positive attitude about those skills and your confidence in your own abilities-'I know how to do this'- help bring about the desired emotional climate. **One characteristic of peak performance is the knowledge that you will never run out of options.**

Knowing you can do it means that your confidence to try another way if your first response hasn't worked. By experimenting, you develop a repertoire of options. It takes confidence to experiment, *but the process builds more confidence because you learn more about your own abilities*".

If young players are not allowed to make plays, that they see it hinders their ability to progress. The best players can react to the situation based on "having been there before". They can draw on their experience; they're past successes and failures. The best players *Find a Way to Win*, they do not fear failure. They do not just dump the puck in all the time or dump it out.

Doing the Trap or imposing systems with ten year olds does nothing to enhance fun, confidence or read and react skills therefore these players regress. When a player has developed these abilities along if the necessary skills then at 14 years of age or so they have the basics then they progress to more tactical team play, however they will be ready for it.

Playing under a rigid system is limiting because it only let's players respond to one set of conditions or minimal conditions. The game has many, many varied situations. They must be dealt with in an unquantified (unevaluative) way, to enhance the players' ability to adapt to them, to overcome them.

It is not physical ability we are talking about here, but mental, mental toughness as defined by Dr. Loehr in his recent book The New Toughness Training for Sports. Loehr says... "Your mind, body, and emotions will become more flexible, responsive, resilient and stronger- the real meaning of tough..." **Players are at the peak of performance when they are " confident, relaxed, energized with positive emotion, challenged, focused and alert, automatic and instinctive, ready for fun and enjoyment"**. Contrast this with players who may lack in confidence because

they do not have the necessary skills, who may be nervous because of adult pressure, who are bored by being forced to play some useless system, who are unable to focus because they have been demotivated and lack hunger, who are rigid and lack instinct because they are encouraged to play lowest common denominator hockey, who are not having fun.

At the heart of education is the hope that through the process the students will be better equipped to solve problems. This can and should be done by allowing the game to teach itself through practice, games, street hockey, pond hockey, by watching and emulating pro and college players. Anything related to the game that can be used by an individual in a game situation to win that particular battle.

Educators know that many children under the age of 11 or so have difficulty understanding concepts. Systems are conceptual. No matter how good a teacher you are your players just may not get what you are trying to accomplish with your system. Do not force it or overdo it. You may not get a return on your investment.

Unfortunately the high school or bantam coach has to deal with under motivated, low skilled players who are frustrated by their previous experience. There is no reason for this to happen. Let's make fun, confidence building and enjoyment of the process the aim of youth hockey.

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Tip of the Month:

From the newspaper article: All-hockey theme showed no quit, but news was soft, by Chris Cobb of the Canadian National Post 2/21/2000

John Gardiner, head of the Greater Toronto Hockey Association is quoted:

"The problem isn't in controlling the kids, the problem is controlling the parents.

Some kids have to carry the burden of their parents on their shoulders.

"Parents have to stop pushing kids too far, too fast."

It could be added unless they want to increase the chances that their offspring regresses, then they should go on pushing, then they almost surely will fall short of any potential that they may have had.

QUOTE of the MONTH:

From the newspaper article, A rough road for Brooks by Dick Chubey of the Edmonton Sun. 3/3/2000

Brooks says, It's ice out there, it's fast. If you have the puck, you try to do something with it. You try to get a balanced attack, not just sit on our heels all day."

This from, Brooks joins chorus for crackdown by Bruce Garrioch of the Ottawa Sun. 2/29/2000

Speaking of the constant use of illegal tactics against Jagr, Brooks says,

" This guy is hooked, held and slashed on every shift. You want to have your best players controlling the game. To me, it's like I'm watching the Calgary Stampede out there every night. It's out of control."

Earlier in the article Brooks likened it to calf-roping!