

Creative Play Creates Creative Players

By Lyle Phair

A few issues back I wrote an article on Developing Development, apparently a topic of great interest as I received numerous e-mails on the subject, literally from all over the country.

Obviously it is an issue that has the potential to spark some interesting debate. My point was that the focus of youth hockey, or any youth sport for that matter, should not be on developing players to be professionals. That is a role that is better left to junior and college coaches (who are professionals themselves) at a time when players have matured to the point where they can actually be considered as having the potential to play at a higher level.

At the youth level of any sport, the emphasis should be on the experience for the kids participating. Not the adults. The kids. The focus of the adults should be on creating a fun, safe, competitive environment where every kid has the opportunity to enjoy the experience.

In the article, I referenced University of Alaska-Fairbanks head coach Guy Gadowsky's outstanding article in *American Hockey Magazine* on *Good Hockey Habits* as the blueprint for what youth hockey coaches should be teaching their players. In short, that coaches should be emphasizing solid, individual skills, and more importantly, habits or behaviors, that the players can use no matter what type of game they are in, or what type of system or structure they play.

In other words, teach them the skills and habits that will allow them the flexibility and freedom to grow and improve, not systems that restrict them from doing so. The majority of those who responded agreed with me, but many wondered how to go about accomplishing it. How do you coach that way?

To me, it is pretty simple. Coaches need to take a step back and let the kids figure it out on their own. Which for many adults, coaches and parents included, is not an easy thing to do. But really, coaching is much more than teaching and directing. It is about providing the players the opportunity to learn.

We have all seen great players make great plays, and heard someone exclaim, "You can't teach that!" To a certain degree they are right. But they weren't born with it. You can teach the skills and instill the habits that allow a player to make an outstanding play. But you can't teach that player to make that play. That is something the player has to figure out.

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So how do you provide the players the opportunity to learn? You let them play. You let them make mistakes. But that is easier said than done in today's world.

After Russia beat Canada to win the gold medal in the World Junior Championships in early January, Don Cherry went on one of his infamous tirades on Hockey Night in Canada about how the game was lost. Canada had let the lead slip away in the third period. Once Russia got ahead they began protecting the lead late in the game by simply throwing the puck off of the glass and out of their own zone, something that Canada had not done earlier in the game.

Cherry's point was that was the difference in the hockey game and alluded to the fact that the Canadian Hockey Association's emphasis on "more skill" was the root of the problem. I'm not sure the message that he sent to any youth hockey coaches and parents among the viewers was what they really needed to hear.

It's just not that simple. What Cherry failed to point out was that the players in this game were the most highly skilled in their age group in the world. For the most part, they all have excellent hockey habits, and the skating and puck skills that allow them compete and make the decisions they need to make to play at that level.

What he also didn't say was that the Russians did not throw the puck off the boards all game long. It was a decision that they made late in the game to protect the lead. But each time they did it, they also had the option to carry the puck out over the blue line, or pass the puck to a teammate across the ice, up the ice, behind the net, wherever, if they thought that was a better play. The point is it was their choice. They had to make the decision. And they were able to make that decision because of skills and habits they had learned as kids.

Things like skating agility and speed to beat an opponent to the puck in their own zone, having a quick look before getting to the puck to see who is open for a pass or if there is room to carry the puck. Much more than just banging it off of the boards.

Yet those are the messages that often get relayed to kids by their coaches and their parents. If it works at the higher levels, it will work for us. But that is not the case. They are two completely different animals and they should never be confused.

That being said, it is important to note that the Red Wings can be used to illustrate the concept of creativity. Do you think that Red Wings, in particular the lesser known, non-

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superstar players, would be as creative as they are, and as entertaining to watch if they weren't allowed the freedom to play that way? Put any of those players on a team that plays a restrictive, highly structured, system and they would become just like any of the other robots on that team.

That's not to say that players shouldn't be learning a basic system of play. That is important. But for youth hockey, that system should really be nothing more than basic positioning. Nothing more than a general area where each player on the ice should be, depending on where the puck is and who has possession of it.

From there, for the kids playing the game, it is all about making the right choices. For the coaches, it is more about suggesting what those choices might be, rather than demanding what they should be.