



“Pre-game motivational and tactical talks by coaches are very important to reinforce the mental and physical skills needed by the players in the upcoming game to help them attain their full potential, but these pre-game talks are no substitute for during the game motivational and tactical reinforcement by the coaches on a shift-by-shift basis in the heat of the action”

COACHING LEADERSHIP – ON THE BENCH

Leadership on the bench during games is one of the most important roles of coaches and can make a difference in the outcome of the game.

Leadership in this situation does not just mean decision making as to who is on the ice when, and with whom and for how long. We, as coaches ask the players to win every shift so we need to help them accomplish that goal. The players need to feel we are shoulder-to-shoulder with them mentally through the ups and downs of the game. At the same time we need to communicate technical specifics on their play to positively and continuously help them execute the team’s game plan.

If you have a skills development coach in addition to a head coach, the skills development coach should be on the bench with easy access to the players. Ideally, he should have no door opening or shift changing responsibilities. He should focus on talking with the players individually and collectively throughout the game going up and down the bench. If the head coach primarily fills the skills development role then he of course should fulfill this role during games.

In the heat of the game, players need constant support and interaction with coaches in an excited but controlled way, just like the players need to exhibit on the ice. The players must feel the same desire, tenacity and excitement from you as a coach to win as you expect of them on the ice. Passive above the fray watching the game with the occasional suggestion or instruction while opening and closing bench doors does not get the team where it could be in a focused energized way. Rather, live the game with them vocalizing your feelings and showing them you are right there with them every step of the way helping as best you can. Be a leader.

Now as a prerequisite to doing the above effectively, the players need to respect the coaches greatly, have confidence that the coaches know the game, and have an excellent personal relationship with the coaches so the players are receptive to listening to the coaches in the heat of the game. Otherwise, they will turn off and not listen.

GIVE TIPS THROUGHOUT THE GAME

Be very positive. Praise the players for good hard play when it is deserved and suggest specific ways they could be more successful in a constructive manner. Do this during shifts and after every shift. The more positive the reinforcement the better but don’t ignore what needs to be corrected right away to help the team succeed.

Some examples.



If you see hesitancy in forechecking or careful no full speed puck carrying when there should be no hesitancy forechecking, or high speed puck carrying say so to the players on the ice in a loud enough voice so they will hear you: “DON’T HESITATE” or “SKATE” or “3 QUICK STEPS” or “UNDER HIS STICK, BODY, PUCK” . All the players on the bench will hear you too and it will remind them for when they get out there. Make them feel your controlled intensity.

If a forward is trying to carry the puck too much in his own end under heavy forechecking and is turning the puck over to the opposition or trying too high risk break out plays for the situation in stead of just dumping the puck out of our zone, call out in a loud voice “SHOOT IT OUT”. Don’t berate any player for not following the game plan when he comes off, rather ask him for an alternative that might work better or suggest the alternative if he can’t come up with one. Talk with him and his line mates about the high risk of doing what he is doing and design a play they could use that has been practiced, like an indirect pass off the boards into the neutral zone past their pinching defenceman at our blue line.

Watch the other team’s goaltender in the warm ups and during the game and give the players all your feedback on where you think his weaknesses are and where the spots are for the highest % chance of scoring. Ask for their input. Is he covering his rebounds well? Is he a butterfly goalie leaving the top shelf open? Does he come way out on the white ice all the time leaving the far side winger open for a tip in pass?

Identify the best 3 players on the other team by jersey number and give players specific coverage instructions to lessen the effectiveness of the other team as the game progresses.

Identify the weakest defencemen on the other team and suggest our players go down their side or shoot the puck in on their side and pressure them in their corners.

Watch the techniques and tendencies their centremen are using on the face offs. Identify for our centremen what techniques they could use to nullify what the opposition’s centremen are doing. Same with faceoff plays the other team may be using in our zone or elsewhere.

Identify the forechecking system(s) they are using: the 2 -1-2 same side, or the 2-1-2 cover our D to D pass or reverse breakout play, the 1-2-2 or the 3-2, and suggest what we could do to defeat what they are doing.

Same with the power play, usual formation with 2 D high or the high triangle system.

We need to help the players stay positive and confident particularly when we are losing. On the other hand when we score and get ahead we must help them stay focused on our game plan and not still be celebrating our goal after the puck is dropped. Most good teams will step up their play when they are scored on and we should not get caught in the past. So say out loud “GREAT GOAL, STAY FOCUSED” or “WATCH OUT THEY ARE GOING TO COME OUT FLYING”.



So, in many ways, help the players mentally and help them see what they cannot see out on the ice because the game is moving too fast at close quarters. The vision of the players cannot be as good as yours away from the play. You can see the whole ice, they cannot as well. Understand that many players under game pressure and excitement may simply forget some positional play and strategies and revert back to their instinctive physical abilities that often will lessen their effectiveness and that of their line mates. Other players under game pressure hesitate and think too much and slow down as they do so.

If we start to lose, encourage the players to dig down deep to even the score one goal at a time and remind them of other games when they did exactly that to help them develop an attitude that we are never out of a game until it's over. Ask specific leaders on the team to show that leadership on the ice particularly when we are losing.

As you demonstrate the above leadership skills during games, your rapport with the players will grow and grow because they will realize you fully understand their feelings and challenges on the ice as a player. You can really assist them to improve their play under intense game pressure. A very important offshoot of leading the team as described above is that it will heighten the desire of the players to succeed for themselves, their team mates, their parents and for the coaches.