



“On minor hockey teams where there are try outs, give as many players a chance to participate and compete for regular playing positions on a team as is reasonable and manageable during the season for their age group to maximize the true potential and further development of individual players and the team - help them unleash their physical and mental talent”

COACHING LEADERSHIP – DEVELOPMENT / TAXI SQUADS

17 Players (9 forwards, 6 defence and 2 goalies)

Many minor hockey organizations that have players try out to make the team, require teams to carry only 17 players (9 forwards and 6 defence and 2 goalies). Many coaches have difficulty who makes the cut decisions to make because the talent levels of the players are sometimes very close. Normally cuts are made and the 17 player roster is set.

Some organizations are trying to find ways to allow more players to participate, develop and have fun. Good for them. It’s what minor hockey is all about.

3 Player Development or Taxi Squads

Some organizations require teams to have Development or Taxi Squads of up to 3 players in addition to the 17 regular players. These “development” players are not regular game playing players but they attend all practices so their skills are further developed in the hope that in future years they will make the regular team. Or they may just want to learn more about hockey. In the meantime they are able to have the enjoyment and benefits of playing hockey within their age group and with friends, usually at significantly less cost because they don’t play in many games. They can get called up to play in case of illness, injury, suspension or a regular player not being able to play for other reasons.

One problem with Development Squads is these players do not feel like part of the team as much as the “regular” players do no matter how hard coaches try to make it so. But if the alternative is to not make the team, some players will decide to take second best rather than not be part of the team at all – it’s their choice.

20 Player Earn Your Position Rosters

Development squads are particularly useful in the younger years, say up to the ages of 13 or 14. After that I would suggest a variation of this model if your organization wants the highest level of manageable player participation on teams. This alternate model is a 20 player roster with the coaching staff deciding who will dress for any game based on a comparative physical and mental hockey skills assessment of players, their dedication to the team, and the coach’s overall assessment of the ability of players to help the team succeed. Although it’s the coach who makes the decision, in reality the players do by the quality of their play and their dedication to improvement.



Of course, in order for the coaching staff to fairly decide who can contribute to the team the most all players must play in game situations over the season and thus under the 20 player earn your position model, the so-called weaker players on the team will play more than they would have probably under the Development Plan model. So the players who can help the team more will play more and vice versa.

So a 20 player roster is one further way to emphasize the paramount importance of the team, the team, the team. That is, the group of players that will help the team the most will play. It's more inclusive and kinder to the players.

If the 20 player option is chosen it is important to get the buy-in from the parents and players at the outset. The first parents – players – coaches meeting of the season is ideal for this discussion and decision. Some parents may feel it is fairer and easier to pick the team at the beginning of the season and stick with a clear delineation between the development squad and the regularly playing team during the year. Everyone knows where they stand, a decision is made and there are no ambiguities or potential conflicts. Some parents may feel that for the weaker players not to know from week to week whether they will play in a game or not, puts too much stress on these players or they may feel this model puts too much power or control in the hands of the coach. These opinions are as valid to them as others who disagree with them. Let the majority of players decide for the team and then obtain the parents' buy-in. Unanimous agreement is desirable but not always possible.

Think of some of the life lessons and the team success drivers that are nurtured by the 20 player earn your position roster approach:

- The team comes first
- You have to earn your way on to the team and continue to do so during the season for the benefit of the team – you can't just make the team and then show up when it suits you or not perform up to your capability – take responsibility – motivational tool and is very life like
- Some players play significantly differently in meaningful game situations against tougher teams than at try-outs or in exhibition games – coaching initial selection judgment may be improved – better for the team in the long run and demonstrates fairness
- You have more than one chance to play regularly on the team if you improve to the extent that you can help the team more than another player – players sometimes develop and grow physically and mentally in leaps and bounds at 14,15 or 16 years old – encourages dedicated learning and shows fairness
- You can't miss practices and games without good reason and expect to play regularly – encourages discipline and is fair to the whole team



- Creates healthy internal competition on a team at the right level - motivational tool and is very life like
- You can't just not learn and not follow the team's systems and tactics, play selfishly or regularly get many foolish penalties and expect to play regularly – encourages discipline and is fair to the whole team and is very life like
- Honest feedback on why a player is not a regular will be encouraged by this approach and communication will be requested by players or parents as to what can be done to improve a player's skill level if the player wants so the player will become a regular - encourages dedication, learning and a keep trying attitude with immediate rewards for achievement
- Allows players who have previously played for the team who are injured in or before tryouts to rehabilitate and compete for a regular playing position on the team during the season – is fair and may be better for the team in the longer term

So why is it different as the players get older? Well, simply, younger players are more willing to accept the idea and the label that they are “developing” or on the “taxi” squad than older players are. Maturing adolescent players don't like that label and are de-motivated by it. Many are becoming or have become young adults at 15 and 16 and want to be treated as adults and not like children. As well, older players are better able to understand fairness and the reasoning behind the coach's decision to play one player over another based on one player being more highly skilled and dedicated than another.

If you coach a team that year-to-year doesn't ever seem to reach its true potential based on its apparent overall team talent level, and you are looking for new ways other than just new tactics/systems/leadership ideas and words to motivate the players to help them break through the barriers that are holding them back, try the 20 player earn your position model approach. As the players learn to really understand the relationship between learning new tactics/systems, work ethic and consistent performance/dedication on the one hand, and earning and retaining a position as a regular on a team on the other, you should begin gradually to see the performance of certain individuals improve, especially those who only try as hard as they have to to stay on the team and don't listen very well. When everyone on the team really buys into this reality, the entire team's performance should improve as intensity grows to an appropriate level. The team should be able then to play to its full potential and the players will thus have more fun. And more importantly, the players may apply this life lesson to other aspects of their lives – you usually only get out what you put in.

Some say that some or all of the life lessons outlined here for 15 and 16 year olds and beyond that can be learned and reinforced through playing hockey are only for higher levels of hockey. What could be further from the truth? Most parents would like these same life lessons they teach to be reinforced by their coaches to assist in the players' personal growth.

Besides the coaching staff's subjective assessment of players' physical and mental skills and their dedication to the team and its systems and tactics, it is useful for the team to keep individual



plus/minus, goals against averages and goals and assists statistics to aid in the decision making of who plays and who doesn't. Re-emphasize to the players and parents that statistics are only one of many indicators deciding who plays and who doesn't. Also, keep track of who misses games, practices and off ice sessions and why.

A few words of caution, coaches.

First, if one or more players consistently don't play in regular season games they should receive some kind of annual fee refund.

Second, the 20 player roster, despite its flexible value to the team will cause you more headaches than the set 17 player roster because you will need to explain to 3 players and perhaps their parents before every game who will play and who will not and why. That's not easy because you know the players will be disappointed. Be very sensitive to their needs and whatever you do don't abuse your position. The positive side of these discussions with players is that this will lead to a "work on this or that" discussion either within the team practices or through an outside skills program (e.g. power skating or shooting). Your relationship with these players will improve as they gain more confidence in you. The negative side for some coaches may be that these discussions are hard to have and take time to prepare for properly. But don't we tell the players sometimes "no pain, no gain"? It applies to us as coaches too!

20 Player Full, Partial or Flexible Rotational Roster Models

It should be said right up front that one of the big draw backs of any of these rotational models is that it makes it very difficult to attain forward line, defence pairing or 5 player unit continuity and team systems and tactics learning when players on units are changing week to week.

A variation of the above 20 player roster model is a 20 player full fixed rotational model where all of the players play in an equal number of games during the season with 17 dressing per game. Many of the most talented players won't like this because they will play in less games and the team will probably lose games the team could have won had the most talented players been playing. While seeming very fair on the surface, it is potentially very divisive when the losing starts.

Another option is the 20 player partial fixed rotational model with 17 dressing per game where 7 or 8 players who are the less talented players play in an equal number of games while the more talented players play in as many games as they can. This latter model may be useful when the organization wants to be inclusive by having a 20 player roster and inclusive with the 7 or 8 less talented players but still remain somewhat competitive. But remember, a full or partial fixed rotational model will send the signal to those players in rotation that the rotation is the rotation whether they play well or badly, try hard or not, are disciplined or not, learn the team systems or not, and that is not best for the team as a whole I have found, if the team really wants to maximize its performance, and most teams do. This too may appear fair on the surface but is potentially divisive by creating 2 classes of players on the team.



Yet another option to increase the performance of the team over the other rotational options is the flexible partial rotational model with 17 dressing per game where the coach has the leeway to rotate the 7 or 8 players in games according to his judgment with the objective that these 7 players will all play in the same or very close to the same number of games when the season is over, while the more talented players who can help the team the most play in as many games as they can. This is less divisive than the partial fixed rotational model but still divisive.

Every organization will have to consider the pros and cons of 17 player units, development or taxi squads and 20 player rosters and decide what model they are the most comfortable with. They all have pluses and minuses depending on your point of view. The experience, quality and the degree of trust the players, parents and organization have in the coach to do what is best for the team while being sensitive to these pluses and minuses and to the individuals involved, is a very important factor.

Experimentation with different models is very useful. Give different models a chance to succeed. The same model doesn't necessarily fit all age groups or teams. It's probably a good idea to revisit all the elements of "real winning" for the players outlined earlier on this site as you go through your decision making process.

I favour the 20 player roster earn your position model for the current team of 16 year olds I'm coaching but on other teams it was different. There are no absolutes. Organizations should give their coaches the flexibility to adapt the best system to their team for the benefit of the team and individual players.