"Run instructional scrimmages with body checking and play stoppages for instruction, and make a significant part of the practice game-like conditions to see if the systems and tactics you have taught in disciplined drills are actually used"

COACHING LEADERSHIP – INSTRUCTIONAL SCRIMMAGES

Many times coaches are amazed to see the team not able to execute the plays in games that they have executed so well in practice drills with and without resistance pressure.

Sometimes this is because the plays in practice drills and the plays in games are close to one another but not the same in real hockey terms. Something as simple as executing the option of shooting the puck out of our zone in stead of trying a pretty breakout pass that will probably not work because of strong forechecking pressure is an example. Very necessary to shoot the puck out quite a bit and done often at the highest levels of hockey but hardly ever practiced to ensure getting the puck out and no icing. In stead many coaches just practice the tape-to-tape breakout plays and then wonder why the easy safe best play shoot out in urgent circumstances is under utilized in games and the rim the puck around the boards play fails because our winger can't take a pass easily there. These plays have not been practiced enough in drills or in game-like conditions.

Other times, some players simply don't choose the most appropriate option during games or perform the way they do in practice drills using their best abilities you know they have because you've seen them.

For example, some players don't adjust their team forecheck or their 3 on 2 or their break out play effectively or choose the most appropriate option within these practiced plays. They may also try last player stickhandling in our zone in stead of passing or playing give and go; they may pinch at the other team's blue line taking unreasonable risks; they may not use regroups; they may go in on a line on a 2 on 1 so their defenceman can cover both forwards; they may not shoot and go to the net and so on.

In short, the players can often do the drills in practice well enough but they don't choose the most appropriate option consistently under game pressure. And, some players in fact choose the least appropriate option in games even when a very simple more appropriate option is available and they know the better option. Why?

Several possible reasons come to mind including:

1. The players know the options but their minds cannot process the appropriate one fast enough

2. The puck carrier knows the appropriate option but the rest of his team mates don't, or forget, so the play breaks down

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3. Everybody on the ice knows the option but the puck carrier doesn't, or he forgets it, so the play breaks down

4. One or more players are not calm enough in games to remember the options - too tight and excited

Think about it. At practice the coach designs drills and the players learn to follow the drill design exactly only thinking about mechanically executing the drill as designed and described. How do the players then ever learn or practice to feel comfortable and to quickly choose the most appropriate option under pressure, at high speeds with perhaps heavy bodychecking going on. Remember there are many options in most circumstances.

Some players figure it out for themselves. Others do not.

So, what do many players do in stead, they revert back to the option they feel most comfortable with, not necessarily the most appropriate option, and other players playing with them may position themselves for different options. So the preferred play doesn't happen.

So how can we coaches help the players make better option choices together comfortably and calmly?

Some coaches are of the opinion that the answer is we should not teach too many options. Depending of course on the players' ages, skill levels and understanding of the game, the number of options taught and the speed at which they are taught varies. Go slower than faster. However, bad narrow minded habits form quickly at young ages and may be difficult to change later into an appreciation and comfort level of lots of options and appropriate option selection reading the keys. You even see this at the pro level with players who have great physical skills but who make more than their share of mental errors in option selection.

Taking the broader approach, first of all the players need to understand each option fully, why it is needed, why it will work and when it will work or not work. Teach them as described in other TIPs on this site using hockey boards and demonstrating the option on ice. Ask them to read TIPs like these and visualize the plays. Then they need to practice each option with no resistance in a formal drill over and over mechanically. Then they need to practice each option with stepped resistance in a formal drill over and over adjusting for the changing resistance. Coaching clinics all over teach this pyramid learning system and that's fine.

But that still is not sufficient or the same as game conditions because they are doing the same drill over and over even with full resistance but without the same up and down the ice play interruptions and distractions that happen in every game from zone to zone from second to second. So, the players TOGETHER need to be able during high speed, body contact game-like conditions to recognize **instantly and calmly** when the circumstances are such that one specific type of option should be used over another. They also need to understand their teammates' tendencies. They then need to select the appropriate option and execute it. This is particularly

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true for the puck carrier. But if his teammates don't read the same option as he does the puck carrier's selected options must change and the puck carrier or the other players may not have the time to implement another option.

Unless the players are placed in these instantaneous decision making game-like conditions over and over in practices whistled down for instruction when the appropriate option could have been used but was not, the players will have a much harder time "getting it" and calmly making better option choices all together in games.

For example, in a breakout play with the puck shot into our corner with our defenceman under heavy forechecking, our defenceman chooses the appropriate option and reverses the puck hard around the boards expecting our winger to be there. If our winger is not in position at the ½ boards to take the pass, we don't get out of our end because both of our players were not on the same option page.

Good plays work in hockey when great team anticipation occurs of what play is about to happen usually started by an event, or key, that every player on one team on the ice should recognize. For example, when there is a scramble for the puck in the neutral zone just on our side of the red line, sometimes one of our forwards wins the puck basically standing still and is facing our net. He can't carry the puck himself, too much traffic. All players on our team should be immediately thinking a neutral zone regroup may be coming and anticipate a pass going back to our open D, and then D to D with our forwards circling back, then some or all of them crossing underneath each other and going up ice trying to create an open space for a pass. If the other team's forwards are all bunched together having tried to win the puck in the neutral zone, all our players should recognize the best play will probably be back to our D to set up a clear passing lane for an across ice pass to our weak side winger almost at the boards. Players need to be placed in this situation in practice over and over to understand this and to get on the same option page as a unit, calmly but with a sense of urgency.

And then, in a similar situation, when we get the puck in the neutral zone on our side of the red line standing still, facing our net, and in stead of being bunched up the other team's forwards are on their sides and in their lanes covering our accelerating forwards. Different situation. A different option is likely to be the most appropriate even though it probably will involve the same back to our D pass. But next a D to D pass would probably be best because our forwards up ice are covered and our weak side D is not covered. There's no getting around real hockey playing experience in practice to help players make the option selection process better calmly. Everyone needs to understand the whys and the hows, not just the how as players' positions (theirs and ours) on the ice changes. Understanding the why will help players recognize quickly and together in the heat of a game when a particular option should be utilized.

Now take this concept one step further when the other team has the puck. We should be able to anticipate with a fair degree of certainty what option they will choose if we know the available

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options including the most appropriate option in the circumstances at hand for them. We can then read, anticipate and react and will have a better chance to get the puck back.

With the scarcity of practice time for most minor hockey teams, scrimmaging is looked upon by many coaches and parents as poor coaching, and it can be if it is not disciplined, filled with instruction and preceded by the pyramid stepped learning referred to above.

One thing to insist on with the players. In a controlled or instructional scrimmage, when the coaches' whistle blows, the players must stop in their tracks and not move so they will be able to understand exactly and see for themselves and believe what the best option really was as explained by the coach.

Also, give the players a goal and room for their own creativity. Players love scrimmaging and hate scrimmage interruption for instruction so tell them the more they choose the better option or create new ones that work and read and react to anticipate what's about to happen, the less whistles they will hear from the coach. Also, be reasonable, don't blow the whistle every 5 seconds, pick important priority situations to stop play for. And remember, just because you are talking, the players may not hear you properly. Arenas' acoustics are terrible, particularly when you turn your head away from a listener. Speak loudly and clearly and repeat what you say.

By the way, scrimmaging is a great conditioning tool as well. The players usually try harder competing against one another. And they have fun.

In addition to controlled scrimmages in practices, chalk talks and videos of your games are very helpful learning tools so the players can see what the better options were for themselves. The use of videos has been reviewed in another TIP in this section.

PRACTICE READING AND REACTING WITH THE MOST APPROPRIATE OPTION

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