"Deciding which players have the physical and mental skills to play which position to help the team the most is a key coaching decision that is an art not a science… identify the 'gamers' "

COACHING LEADERSHIP – RIGHT PLAYER, RIGHT POSITION

If teams all had players with exceptional and equal physical and mental skills, position selection would be easy, but this never happens.

I believe, and my playing and coaching experience has overwhelmingly proven the old saying, you build championship teams from the net out. There is no substitute for a great goaltender. He can make up for many mistakes. Then defence first, offence second, not defence and offence together unless your players are very, very skilled, both physically and mentally compared with the opposition.

So in selecting right player – right position, make sure you get your available players who possess the best physical and mental skills into the following positions in this order:

1. Goalie
2. Defencemen
3. Centres
4. Wingers

Some players are simply more of an asset to the team than other players because they possess higher physical and mental skills and have more important position responsibilities. A defenceman is a good example because he is the last player between their players and our goalie. A centre is another good example as his responsibilities literally are all over the ice. A winger has very important but more limited responsibilities.

Usually in amateur hockey, there are a group of players who try out for a team. The best all around players with the physical skills make it and others don't. In house league, players may be simply assigned to a team with the objective of balancing the talent among the teams fairly.

Players who shoot right usually start playing on the right side at an early age, those who shoot left on the left. The bigger slower players usually have gravitated to defence over the years. Players who are faster, are good with the puck and can score have usually played forward, so they play forward and left wingers play left wing, right wingers play right and players who are very good skaters usually play centre.

Mental, including tactical skills are ignored almost entirely in the early years and sometimes much later as well.

Usually the range of difference in physical and mental talent among the players on a team is quite broad and judgments have to be made to maximize the potential of the team.

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Throw out the past positioning of these players at the outset of each season, consider the following and other key physical and mental factors or criteria in deciding who you are going to play where and then give these players a chance to get used to their new position and responsibilities to see how effective they are.

These factors assume the tactics and systems in hockeyplayerdeveloper.com have been accepted.

Defenceman

Physical Skills

- can skate backward, forward and side-to-side with ease and is above average in this skill
- can pick up the puck in our corner in high gear with ease
- has quick feet and three good quick steps to get to the puck
- is fairly tall for his age with good reach unless he has exceptional skills (usually skating) in other areas to make up for being smaller
- is strong on the puck and likes to play physical in front of our net and elsewhere lifting their player's stick off the ice and competing for ice position
- has a fairly strong and accurate wrist, snap and slap shot so he can shoot the puck out from deep in our end and from the point on net in their end
- is aggressive, can win the puck in the corners almost all the time one-on-one
- has basic puck handling skills but doesn't need exceptional skills in this area to be effective but it always is nice to have
- has basic passing skills but doesn't need exceptional skills in this area to be effective but it always is nice to have
- is a gamer

Mental Skills

- defensive minded first and offensive second but can join the rush – likes playing it safe and doesn't like taking unreasonable risks – passes the puck or shoots it out rather than carrying it in our end
- won't pinch at their blue line unless 100% sure our team or neither team will end up with the puck
- won't lunge in the neutral zone or in our zone unless 100% sure our team or neither team will end up with the puck
- has no fear of contact and likes playing inside the opposition
- can read the play in front and around him and find the open player to pass to quickly and calmly – uses D to D passes a lot
- has presence and doesn't usually panic - will think and act effectively under pressure
- is a gamer

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Centre

Physical Skills

- one of the three fastest skaters on the team
- one of the three best passers on the team, tape to tape, soft or hard
- one of the three best puck handlers on the team – soft hands
- is tall with reach, unless really exceptional in other areas
- is tenacious and strong
- likes to and is an effective back checker, fore checker and body checker
- wins most face offs and can neutralize the other centre on the draw in our end
- will normally be the first player back on the back check
- is fairly strong on the puck and physical in front of our net and in our corners
- will play effectively down low in our own end and be fast enough to get back into the offensive play when we get possession
- has better than average stamina
- can execute 3 on 2's and 2 on 1's
- is a gamer

Mental Skills

- is both offensively and defensively minded and are balanced between the two
- would just as soon make a nice passing play to score than to score himself
- can read and anticipate the play in front, behind and around him and find the open player to pass to either forward or back
- is creative with the puck
- is disciplined and plays good positional hockey
- is a very hard worker
- is a gamer

Winger

Physical Skills

- can snap the puck at a spot quickly and accurately – has scoring touch - above average and an accurate wrist, snap and slap shot
- is large, tall and strong for his age so they can win the puck in the corners, be strong along the boards and take the puck into the crease to score if the opportunity arises or screen the goalie in front of their net
- loves to fore check, body check, take the man first and pressure the opposition into making a bad pass
- can skate fast enough to beat their defencemen wide at their blue line

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- can take a pass at the hash marks on the boards in our end, control it, chip it to the centre, pass it to the winger cutting across or knock it by the defenceman at our blue line
- can handle the puck well enough to execute 3 on 2's and 2 on 1's
- is a gamer

Mental Skills

- is the most offensive minded of the players and loves to score
- tends to shoot rather than pass all things being equal
- will play disciplined positional defensive hockey in our end taking the passing lanes away from their defenceman
- will cover up for pinching or lunging defencemen who get beat at their blue line or in the neutral zone
- plays wide and on their side of the ice except when rotating with another player
- loves to drive for the rebound
- is creative, especially around the net – senses the holes
- can read the play in front, behind and around him and finds the open player to pass to either forward or back
- is a gamer

You will have noticed that all of the above criteria have "is a gamer" underneath both physical and mental skills. Some players' better-than-average physical and mental skills only really become apparent in game situations for some reason. They somehow stand out in games, especially important games, but are average in practices or when our team is ahead by 4. Championship teams have more than their share of "gamers". Identifying these players and sticking with them is very important.

Once you have decided on players' positions at least to try, you are ready to decide who will play with whom and why.

If after deciding who will play with whom you find that you have defensive or offensive weaknesses in actual games, that is, you can't score enough or you get scored on too much, or certain units are that way, you may have to reassess your right player - right position assignments, or change your line balances (if you want balance) or change the systems for the units.

Remember, the overriding consideration is what is best for the team and then for individual players.

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