



*“Players love game stats from the basic team win-loss record to individual goals and assists, individual plus/minus, and goals for and against averages – focus on the team stats as the most important, but also recognize individual achievements”*

## **COACHING LEADERSHIP – TEAM AND INDIVIDUAL STATS**

Players are motivated by and like stats and usually have a lot of fun with them.

Team and individual statistics can also be very helpful to coaches in helping to motivate improvement, helping to select players for various positions, helping to decide who plays with whom on forward, defence and specialty units, and helping to identify team and individual strengths and areas for improvement.

When players first start playing recreational or competitive hockey at a very young age they are very aware of who is scoring and who is not even when no one is keeping score. The reason is obvious – that’s the game - putting the puck in the net, and players notice that people cheer when it happens. Sure, hockey for almost all players is just recreational and fun and all the elements of “real winning” in minor hockey referred to earlier in this site are very important, but look at the look on the kids’ faces when they score – it’s priceless!

From almost day one, players receive reinforcement from their parents, coaches and teammates every time they score. They come home and say: “We won and I got 2 goals today” or “I got 1 goal and 3 assists today”. The response from whoever is listening is normally very positive. Most parents also ask “Did you have fun?” and “How did the team do?” to deflect away from just self-interest.

Coaches tend to buy into this and congratulate players for the team win after a game and their goals and assists while the players who are great defensive players and goalies sometimes tend to get second fiddle. The better coaches find ways to reinforce good plays that have nothing to do with just the offensive part of the game.

Professional and high level amateur hockey reinforces these “who got the most goals” values too as the top goal scorers and point getters often get to be the first round draft choices, receive the largest contracts, are named one of the three stars, are the featured TV interview and so on.

As players start playing better hockey on competitive teams where they have to try out to make the team, what they have learned at a very young age as they have come along stays with them. The individualistic attitude remains fairly dominant in many, especially the elite players.

So the better minor hockey coaches don’t focus only on individual goals and assists, but also find team statistical and other goals to talk with the players about.

What are some of these team stats you could focus on? Some that I have found useful besides just winning or losing as a team are: team per game goals against average; individual, forward



line and 5 player unit plus/minuses; the number of odd player rushes against us (more of their players than our players coming across our blue line); and team shots for and against us. You can make these like a game within a game and refer to them often as you are teaching new skills, systems and tactics.

You can reward outstanding performance, for example by starting the game with the 5 player unit that has the highest plus/minus.

If you want to emphasize defence first, offence second as this site suggests, keep a running total of defensive minded stats as well as individual goals and assists, and communicate them to the players, say monthly. They will help motivate players to achieve team goals and adjust their play to the team's systems.

I particularly like the plus/minus stat because it motivates most players to balance their offensive and defensive play and risk taking when a player has or doesn't have the puck, especially in the defensive end. Take a winger for example when we don't have the puck yet in our own end but he anticipates we're about to get it, does he leave his check and break into an opening for a pass or wait until we have control of the puck for sure? And at their blue line, does our defenceman take high risks in keeping the puck in creating inevitable 2 on 1's? Coaches can utilize the plus/minus stat to encourage better risk taking in the team's interest.

Coaches and team managers of minor hockey teams have a lot to do so get another parent who comes to all the games to keep the stats for the team during a game. An added bonus is he/she will feel involved with the team a little.

Don't over emphasize the importance of stats, however, as we all know stats can sometimes not tell the real story, especially in light of the following:

- Plus/minuses may vary depending on who plays with whom on a forward line, the five player unit, and particularly who the defensive pairings are
- Plus/minuses may vary depending on who penalty kills and who plays on the power play – some teams don't count these but there is no harm in doing so as long as this fact is taken into account when coaches look at these stats
- Players changing on the fly when the other team is entering our zone can lead to a goal against us when the players just coming on the ice had no real chance to stop them from scoring
- Our goalie lets in a very soft goal on a bad bounce on a shot he saw all the way
- If different players are in the lineup against different teams, with some opposition teams less talented than others, this can distort these stats



- Minor hockey referees are notorious for getting the goals and assists wrong on the game sheet so check with the players and other coaches on the accuracy of the game sheet and change it to make it accurate

So, be sure to communicate to the players that you know that certain stats may be misleading if looked at too precisely and why that is the case. Let them know that normally the positive and negative distortions probably even out over a season and that as a coach you are only using them as one guide and are looking at wide margins of results. Explain you are not looking at the stats simplistically or on a micro basis, for example, Jim has a plus 2 and Ian a plus 4 so Ian is better than Jim.

I have found that part of good after game feedback is to go around the room with the players and get the accurate plus/minuses. It gets the players thinking about the goals scored and the goals scored against us at the same time when their play is fresh in their minds. You can then emphasize the strengths, identify the areas for improvement, and suggest ways to improve.

Other stats like shots on their goal and against us are good too to show the relative ratio of play in their end or ours, and our opportunities to score as well as theirs.

Also, how many odd player rushes did we have against us is a very good stat to keep in games. None is a great result and is quite achievable when the kids get a little older. You'll be surprised how many games you will win when there are no or just 1 or 2 odd player rushes against your team in a game.

Whether, when, or what stats you use with your team depends a lot on the level and age you are coaching. I would not suggest it for house league for example or young ages say under 10 years old normally. But for select hockey and up where the players are over 10 years old where there are tryouts to make the team and the hockey is supposed to be reasonably competitive, try it.

Again a word of caution. Don't micro analyze the stats. Look for the wide gaps among players. Let the players have fun with them and use them as an objective guide to challenge your subjective impressions about players. I've had situations, for example, where a defenceman seemed very average to me but the stats said he'd hardly ever been on for goals against us and said his plus in the plus/minus stats lead the team. It has worked the other way too.

Some parents may think this brings too much analysis and professionalism to minor hockey but the kids love it and they can learn some life lessons from it, particularly that when you are playing on a team, the team comes first, and individual accomplishments come second.

And of course another useful life lesson for the players concerns the value of, and the limitations of some statistics.