

## **Is Youth Hockey Doing the Right Things?**

**By Wally Shaver, Let's Play Hockey Newspaper**

Wouldn't it be great if we could get back to the good ole days of hockey and relive those moments of "old time hockey."?

But what is old time hockey? I know young people who think it was the high scoring era of the 1980's when Wayne Gretzky was piling up 150 and 200-point seasons like it was nothing.

Others go back to the goon squads of the 1970's when the Filthydelphia Flyers and Big Bad Bruins were beating up everyone in sight. Older folks will harken back to the old 6-team NHL era when virtually every game had to played like it was your last because there was a waiting list seven deep at every position.

Old time hockey has an entirely different definition when applied to youth hockey these days.

As Minnesota Gophers head coach Don Lucia said, "there is far too much parental involvement in the game today - and that's true of all sports. Too many parents are living their kid's dreams - they push their kids too much. It's like a horse race to get their kid to the next level." Boy isn't that the truth.

Remember in the olden days when kids would go down to the outdoor rink and join in a pick-up game and just skate for hours on end.

Big kids, little kids and everyone in between. Some call it pond hockey. Some call it shinny. To those of us who played it this way, we just called it hockey.

"Everything is so organized and programmed these days that the kids don't have an opportunity to just be kids," said the coach of the defending national college hockey champs. "It used to be the kids would do it themselves. They'd go down to the rink and play by themselves or get a pick-up game organized. They didn't have video games, DVD's or computers - or a coach telling them what to do. They played to occupy time."

"It will never go back - that's the reality of hockey today," Lucia continued. "What has happened is, we aren't producing elite players in Minnesota. We don't see the Broten's coming along anymore. We're not producing enough Jeff Taffe's and Jordan Leopold's - the real skilled players. We produce good players but not many elite ones and I don't really know why."

Any parent over 35 can make some easy assumptions. Sure, today's youth have many more options for their time - mostly of the high tech variety: videos, Internet, electronic games. There are a greater variety of activities available - usually organized by goody-goody parents who think their kid has to have everything. And that lead to a bigger and broader problem.

"There are too many people that are running hockey that think they know what's best for the kids when they don't. There isn't a lot of continuity. You have parents who want to

coach their kids or sit on a board who make the decisions then when their kids move on, they drop out and a new philosophy takes over," said Lucia.

At some point, there has to be self-analysis. There must be a better way. Why do college and pro coaches harp on the same thing: we have a lack of good skilled players. It's a problem endemic in the U.S. and Canada.

Why does it seem all the high skill players in the NHL these days come from Europe. Look at the leading scorers in the NHL - a disproportionate number of them are Europeans compared to the numbers of Europeans in the league.

Ask any NHL scout where the top ranked draft-eligible players in the world are coming from - Europe. Why is that?

The European approach to the game is different than here in North America. Earlier this year I wrote a story on Thomas Vanek - the talented 18-year old freshman player for the Gophers. He's from Graz, Austria and the first European to ever skate for the Golden Gophers. You know what his dad does for a living? He's a career, full-time hockey coach. at the youth hockey level.

As Lucia said, "the best coaches in Europe are at the youth level. It allows for continuity year to year and you get a good coach year to year. They know what's best. They're into development, not politics or coaching just because their kid is on the team. People here get way to caught up in wins. But who cares? Winning and losing only matter at the end of the year. The emphasis should be on, 'are the kids getting better? And, how is their skill development progressing.' That's how hockey should be measured."

This year's edition of the Gophers is a prime example. No, they aren't as deep with skill players like last years' group who won the national title.

Losing players like Jordan Leopold, Johnny Pohl, Adam Hauser, Jeff Taffe and Nick Angel left the team with gaping holes in experience, talent and leadership. This years' Gophers are still a very good team and one of the better squads in college hockey.

After savoring the title last year for a couple of weeks, the Gophers got back to work.

"We knew we were going to be a much different team. Our emphasis from the start has been to steadily improve and experiment during the season with the goal of making the NCAA playoffs. Then we'll see what happens," said Lucia. That's where the winning and losing really counts. That's what the Gophers are preparing for.

As Lucia continued, "hockey is not rocket science. Its not all X's and O's and positioning and systems. The team with the skills are usually going to win. So why not put the emphasis on skill development instead of playing all these games. In Europe, there is much more emphasis on skill development and practice time.

There's not a lot of team stuff until the peewee level. They don't worry about getting 50 or 60 games in with a bunch of tournaments."

Don Lucia has some outstanding points for hockey coaches, administrators and youth coordinators to ponder:

\* "Why do mites play full ice hockey? Why not play small ice hockey and learn stick skills? Players can always learn position."

\* "We can do a better job of ice utilization. I cringe when I see a team with 14 skaters out there using a full sheet of ice. Most of it is wasted. Practice time can be far more productive."

\* "Why not have 3 or 4 teams on the ice, especially at the mite and squirt level. Play cross-ice games where the kids are in a smaller space and will learn skating and stick skills. Play shinny hockey - there would be a lot more development."

\* "Associations should have minimum skating requirements for kids trying out for teams. Kids should be lumped together based on ability, not age - especially at the mite and squirt levels. Put them out there where they can touch the puck and be out with kids of their own ability."

\* "Why is there so much emphasis on travel teams? Young kids at the squirt level don't need to travel. In-house is a much better deal."

\* "You have to put a puck on a kids stick. They'll get more reps and feel more comfortable with the puck. Why not play shinny games in a smaller space?"

I think anyone with a good understanding of the game realizes this. I'd like to know then, why do we have so many bozos doing the opposite? Why do we have so many parents who think they know it all continuing to do the wrong thing? I don't know. I guess it's the just the way it is.

In a nutshell, youth hockey should reduce games, add practice time and work on skill development - particularly at the mite and squirt levels. Coaches in youth hockey who think they know it all should get a clue and become better informed - the problem is, the one's who need it the most, don't get it.

As Lucia summed up the over-organization and over-parenting of youth hockey, "that's part of the reality of hockey today. It'll never go back. I'd advise parents to save the money on travel hockey, put the money in the bank and save it for their kids' college tuition instead of trying to play for a scholarship."

I think we all need to remember what we as adults did as kids. We went down to the local outdoor rink and played shinny. It was a time when kids were kids - not programmed robots who needed adults to tell us what to do every two minutes. Old time hockey.

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