

Try-Out Time

It's that time of year. Tryout time is a time of anxiety for players, parents and coaches alike. There is a lot of debate over what is the most effective means to offer player evaluations and team selections. I would like to dedicate this article towards this discussion. My main objective in discussing this topic is to offer some insight into how best to run a try-out selection process and to define what coaches should be looking for in evaluating players when making selections and placing these players at the appropriate level of play.

What should coaches be looking for in a player in order to properly place them at an appropriate level? The answers to this question will help to decide on a try-out format that will reveal the important playing characteristics necessary to be successful in hockey. I believe that there are three important categories that coaches should assess when evaluating players and their respective ability levels; competitiveness, intellect, and skill. A player's competitive edge is paramount to success in hockey. Hockey is, by nature, a confrontational game. Passion to play and willingness to compete should be assessed whether the game is being played with or without checking. Ben Smith, the US women's Olympic coach always says that, "hockey is as much a game of will as it is a game of skill." A player's competitive instincts are essential to success in hockey. There are countless examples of competitive edge that are displayed in a hockey game. A player's desire in a one on one confrontation is one example. A player's second effort to win a loose puck battle is yet another. Every shift of every game provides evidence of competitiveness in the players who are participating in the game. Passion to play should not be discounted when assessing a player's ability level and where that player might fit in the team selection process.

The second category that should be considered is the player's intellectual capacity for the game. How well does the player "think" the game? This is an important factor in assessing various ability levels. How does a coach effectively assess a player's intellect? Not unlike a player's competitive edge, every shift provides evidence of a player's capacity to think the game. Does the player make the right decisions with the puck? Does he know when to pass and when to shoot? Does the player have awareness without the puck? Does he offer proper puck support to his linemate? The answers to these questions can be found during the course of a game. Only in game scenarios do these intellectual skills reveal themselves. They are essential skills to a player's success in the game. What some players lack in physical skills, they can make up for with their ability to think the game. This intellectual capacity for the game is every bit as important as a player's ability to skate or stickhandle. I often hear comments at the rink suggesting that if a player skates well and has decent physical skills then he can be "taught" how to think the game. Why can't a player improve upon his physical skills if he has displayed a capacity to think the game?

The last category that should be assessed in the evaluation process is the player's physical skill level. How well does the player skate, stickhandle, pass & receive, shoot, etc... This is the most obvious category that coaches should assess. These fundamental skills

are essential to success in hockey, and important to the evaluation process for proper placement of players. How does a coach most effectively assess the physical skill levels of the various players? How much weight is given to these physical skills with respect to the previous categories discussed in this article? Once again, a player's physical skills will become evident in a game scenario. A game scenario will provide an opportunity to effectively assess these three categories at the same time. If a try-out consists of fundamental skill drills, then it will be difficult to assess a player's competitive edge or intellectual capacity for the sport. For this reason, I believe that the majority of a try-out should consist of game play. Coaches can be creative with how the game play is executed. Cross-Ice games or half-ice games will provide the same opportunity for evaluation. The important factor to consider is allowing a proper work:rest ratio for the players. Coaches should allow for sufficient rest so playing time is quality play. Coaches should also try to ensure sufficient reps to allow for thorough evaluation. I would recommend three line teams regardless of the types of games that are chosen to play.

It has been my experience that youth coaches often times look to evaluate the physical skills of the sport and have a tendency to overlook the competitiveness associated with hockey and the intellectual skills required to have success. It is important that players at the youth levels be placed at the appropriate skill level so they will be challenged by the competition but not overwhelmed. Proper placement of players will help to ensure a positive experience and fuel the passion for continued participation. I hope this discussion will help those contemplating an evaluation process in the weeks ahead. Good Luck!