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Youth Hockey Success Is a 3-Piece Puzzle: Part III



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The foundation of any youth, adolescent, and adult hockey experience is fun and the passion to play. Scientific research articles over the past 25 years and beyond have clearly showed that the athlete that is enjoying the practices, competitions, successes, and struggles of youth sport rarely discontinues participation in a sport. This leads to the second way in which a youth hockey environment ought to measure its success, persistence. The athlete that embraces both winning and losing seasons alike and enjoys both the doing the “dirty work” of defense and lighting the lamp on the other end of the ice is a genuine success. Youth hockey communities that raise players that eventually become coaches are truly successful. Fun and persistence are both excellent measures of success. As the season closes, it is important to add another element that ought not be neglected... performance.

Performance

It can be seen as politically incorrect to say that athletic “performance” should be a marker of a successful youth sport season. This idea only carries weight when one misuses or misconstrues the concept of performance. Having a clear definition of “performance” is critical. Performance in players should not be confused with wins and losses, goals scored, or saves made. These are all measures of the outcome of a game, but do little to most accurately address how a player skated, passed, and played defense. These things must be assessed by watching closely to in-game behaviors. Performance is an athlete’s execution of age-appropriate skills, trying new skills, developing as a teammate, and persisting in the face of challenge. This is an essential differentiation for parents and coaches to embrace. Players that give effort, execute one or two basic skills during game time, and work well with others on the ice ultimately succeed at the outcomes of a game. The best measures of performance are fully under an athlete’s control, wins/losses, points, and ice time are all dependent on others. Viewing the outcomes as performance measures in essence “puts the cart in front of the horse,” not encouraging players and coaches to focus on execution from the drop of the puck to the games final buzzer.

During each season it is valuable for an athlete to have one technical skill (e.g. appropriate grip on the stick), one physical skill (e.g. good stride when skating), and one mental skill (e.g. refocusing during a game) to focus on developing over the course of the season. Periodically throughout the season the player should remember to check progress towards these objectives. Measuring success can simply be noting what percentage of the time the skill is being successfully executed. With good coaching, patience, and a commitment to learning, this percentage ought to increase over the course of the season. At the conclusion of a season, the player that is encouraged to look back on the new skills that were learned and the many successes on the ice becomes most confident, harbors positive memories, and enthusiastically looks forward to seasons to come.

Measuring success of the learning of basic technical, physical, and mental skills is clearly important for performance, in addition it is also closely linked to one’s commitment to sport. Regularly in youth sport research it has been found that the top two reasons kids like to participate in sport is to have fun and learn

new things. This sounds easy, but teaching a child proper technique, emotional management, and leadership skills is too often neglected. The young hockey player that fails to learn efficient skating and develop stick skills will look outside of the rink to satiate his curiosity. Skill development keeps kids excited and allows players to grow in a timely manner.

Fun, persistence, and performance are all complementary objectives of youth sport. Fun is at the foundation of timely player development and creates an environment where families flourish at the rink. Fun alone is not enough however, coaches and parents must remember that hockey has the potential to be a life-long experience and that new skills ought to be taught in a timely manner. These ideas are more bold than they appear: it is not too hard to bring a smile to a kid's face and getting energy and enthusiasm at the beginning of a season is relatively easy. The challenge is to have the patience, artfulness, and thoughtfulness throughout the season to create a most successful youth hockey experience filled with high **performance**, enthusiastic **persistence**, and **fun**.

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