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



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A rink and practice filled with laughter and enthusiasm is a critical measure of a successful youth hockey program...it is however not the sole way we should measure the excellence of a skater or a team. Enjoying a shot, embracing a game, and having fun over the course of this season are good. Even better is enthusiasm for skating, passing, shooting, defending, and competing that lasts a lifetime. Developing teams and players that can optimistically persist regardless of the situation are truly

successful.

Persistence

One shift, one game, or one season does not make an athletic career. A great youth hockey environment is one that develops players with unwavering effort and optimism regardless of the scoreboard or team's record. Did you know that Tom Brady's high school football career began with him as a back up quarterback on a winless team? It is also important to remember that he spent a significant amount of time as a back up quarterback at Michigan and with the Patriots. Clearly, an unwavering passion leads to tremendous achievements.

Science tells us that it takes about 10 years to become truly excellent at any endeavor. Yes, some athletes might be blessed with physical gifts that allow them to gain technical skills rapidly. It takes significantly more time to develop the mental and tactical understandings necessary to fully express one's potential. With this in mind young players should be nurtured to have enthusiasm and commitment throughout the many successes and challenges of hockey. It is the athlete that perseveres that is most likely to achieve the greatest successes...and develop the most skills during the youth hockey experience that will pay dividends on and off of the ice.

Sport science has shown that athletes who achieve world-class successes in their youth rarely repeat such performances as an adult. Clearly a "rush to victory" is not always the best indicator of athletic excellence. Wins and losses can be quite lopsided during the early years of youth hockey competition. With this in mind, the outcome of a game matters far less than the how one competes from the drop of the puck to the final shift of a game. The longer a player plays, the more it is necessary for him to be excited about competing against evenly matched opponents. While winning is great for the ego and losing is not quite as fun, a player must be willing to risk either happening during a close game and battle hard from start to finish. It is this attitude that leads to the competitive toughness necessary for success.

Some good questions an adult might ask to help nurture this attitude are, "How did you play?" and "What did you learn today?" Both put the focus on player's development rather than the outcome of the game. There are skills, attitudes, and efforts that players can work successfully on each day regardless of the situation and the ice-time provided. Another important question that gives a good sense of a player's passionate, commitment to play is, "Did you have fun?" Practice can be exhausting, games can be challenging, but the passionate player returns to the ice each day ready to play.

When adults sit back and attempt to predict the future potential of a young player, it might not be wise to look at goals scored, defensive skills, or ability to stop shots, but rather persistent effort and enthusiasm in all zones of the ice and during all situations of the season. The best teams, the best programs, and the best rinks reward and encourage players to embrace challenges and enjoy each day on the ice. Ultimately, the goal is to raise young people that will not only grow as players, but also have the passion to coach and give back to hockey as adults. It is this attitude that will both grow the game and allow players to reach their ultimate potential on the ice.

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