



Benefits Beyond Hockey

Why would a hockey coach help players with their mental game? Many coaches confide that they don't know a whole lot about sport psychology, and don't have the time to learn or to help the players develop mental abilities. Others choose to make practice so challenging that they believe it must build character and mental toughness.

The reasons to develop the mental abilities of your players are plentiful. Doing so is relatively easy, it fits well into what you're already coaching, and it is highly rewarding.

You build life skills – focus in the face of potential distractions, composure under pressure, enduring confidence, emotional control, strong leadership, and helping players learn more about being their best at anything they do. This is often what we call maturity and character. Years later, when players see you at a game, or give you a call and tell you how valuable those life skills are, (and they will!) you'll know you made a difference.

But you want to develop hockey players and win games. Mental abilities will get you there much quicker and easier than without. Some of the key reasons to get started and do a great job of developing mental abilities are:

1. The mind is the computer that runs everything. The right mindset allows the body to function at its best. Even slight glitches like improper goals, worry, distractions, fear, and doubt produce a noticeable reduction in performance, which can accumulate over time to significantly tank a talented player's career. All that ice time, hard work, and great coaching are processed through the computer.
2. The body is more consistent, and it is the mind that contributes more to our inconsistency. When players need to dig deep and push themselves beyond where they've ever been, it begins in the mind.
3. Everything is created twice. All we do is first created in the mind, then the body does it. This is how more efficient learning occurs, and it is what coaches aim to accomplish through drills, scouting, and coaching strategy. By rehearsing a performance correctly in the mind, it is more likely to be done right.
4. Being "in the zone", where things go exceptionally well, is a combination of physical and mental preparation. While it is difficult to create "the zone", the right mental ability is necessary to play near that level consistently.

5. Players and teams attempt to push their opponents “over the edge”. They do things to get you upset, lose your composure, become frustrated, and more in order to distract you from your A game. Perennial power University of North Dakota men’s hockey team has used this strategy very effectively. Whether you choose to do this or not, mental ability helps your players hold up when your opponents try it.

6. If you been around hockey any length of time, you’ve seen players and coaches with strong experience and exceptional talent who sabotage their game. Anger, worry, frustration, low confidence, choking under pressure, and being distracted, along with a host of other disruptions they choose to let in their heads drop their performances to lower levels.

7. The difference between making it and not often comes down to mental strength. Back in the day, Bobby Clarke was drafted second round behind a bigger, stronger first round pick who could shoot and skate better than Clarke. But Clarke made it and he didn’t. His mental preparation kept him working on the ice longer, gave him the heart to give and take the extra hits, and to bear down when he had to. Where it showed the most was bouncing back. When he lost possession of the puck, he turned on extra adrenalin, kept his head up, and came right back to check the man.

Chances are you already know how to develop some of the mental abilities that take performances to the next level. Start there. Building mental ability is an area that has not received much coaching. That means there is a lot of room to grow, and rapid advancements will take place. Those who get on the leading edge will have a distinct advantage. The lives of your players on and off the ice will show this.

In upcoming newsletters you will find more specific information on helping your players with pre-game preparation, building confidence, strengthening leadership, effective goal setting, and perfect practice.

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