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HEADLINE: Coaches need to concentrate on the importance of the game

BYLINE: BY MIKE MULRYAN

So the NHL owners rejected Jim Balsillie's offer to buy the Pittsburgh Penguins. And like I told you in an earlier column, you can be assured the main reason was Batman's and American owners' fear that Balsillie might move the team to a (gasp!) Canadian city. Only the NHL would void an offer that was basically double what the franchise is worth. And in a corner somewhere Mario wonders if he's ever going to get his money. What a joke. Please Santa, get some real hockey people running the game.

Okay, it's pretty clear I've backed coaches in this column a bazillion times. But more than once as of late, I've heard a coach tell someone it's all about winning and they coach to win. Every coach should instill a keen desire to win in his players, but not a win at all cost mentality.

Think about this. Your novice team starts off the season thumping the opposition and beginning the year on an extended winning streak.

Is it coaching, or is it the fact the club is talent-rich and winning on that basis only? Or are the top end kids playing all the time while the lesser lights ride the pine? So that team continues to dominate all year, bases on their talent advantage. Are they better individual players than they were in September?

Meanwhile another team stars 0 and 12 then goes .500 plus (PCT) the balance of the year. Any chance coaching had a hand in that? Has this team been exposed to better coaching over the long run than the powerhouse team? I would think so.

At the younger levels, teach and have fun. Develop all your players. Having been at the midget AAA level longer than anyone, I've seen thousands of kids who excelled at minor hockey levels on raw talent, but because of a lack of coaching, or a lack of effort to learn on their own part, fall flat at bantam or midget.

At the same time I've watched as a bunch of kids who didn't play on the elite teams

or championship teams, but played for coaches who taught the game, end up drafted or go on to U.S. scholarships.

Ask any NHL coach where good coaching is imperative. They'll tell you the minor hockey level is the most important. At that level, for a coach to want to win at all costs, and not develop ALL his players is a disservice to all kids. Remember coaches, parents, and kids: less than one per cent of all kids currently playing hockey will ever be a pro. What are we doing for the other 99 per cent?

A ton of coaches and parents have asked me to put in print a little bit of statistics I've thrown their way at clinics, so here goes. The following is an excerpt from an article by Jim Parceus a few years ago:

"On an average year in Ontario each birth year playing has approximately 24,000 kids playing. A sample of 1975 birth dates for minor hockey players revealed the following. Out of approximately 24,000 1975 birth dates that had played minor hockey, 262 were selected in the 1991 Ontario Hockey League draft. Out of those 262 kids, only 94 played at least one game in the OHL.

"Out of those 94, only 63 finished their age eligibility in the OHL. Now, I must tell you that most NHL and OHL scouts will tell you that the 1975 birth date group was one of the best crop of players overall ever in Ontario, and the player depth was considered exceptional.

"Of those 24,000 kids, only 14 received full NCAA Division 1 scholarships, and another 22 accepted Division 2 or 3 deals. Of the 63 players who finished their OHL careers, 38 were drafted by NHL teams. Of those 38, only 23 signed pro contracts.

"Of those 23, only 18 appeared in one NHL game. Of those 18, only nine became regulars (including Todd Bertuzzi). So in a year, generally accepted as an exceptional year for Ontario kids, (1975 births), 18 of 24,000 made it to the NHL, 23,982 didn't."

Is minor hockey for 18 or so kids, or approximately 23,982? Hopefully it's for both.

Number one, it's a game. A select few will become pros, while most play the game for the sport, fun, education, discipline, competition, and life skills. (By the way, 18 of 24,000 account for 0.075 per cent.)

The vast majority of coaches in minor hockey are good coaches who teach the kids the game and instill a desire to win. But they temper the winning part in favour of development. . . .