



## Team Captains

Each year at this time youth hockey teams are forming and each team picks a couple players to serve as Captains of the team and maybe one or more players to serve as assistant captains. Several years ago I began to examine this practice to determine what was really happening.

There were two situations that forced me to rethink this tradition. The first situation occurred while I was watching my A Bantam team as they participated in a day long outdoor team building program. Many of the activities are designed to challenge the players individuality and force them to work together to complete the tasks. At the end of the day it was apparent that the players that had been selected to be Captains were not necessarily the best choices. The second situation occurred at the conclusion of our A Bantam season. During the year end team banquet two Captains were announced for the next season with a third Captain to be named in the fall. The next day I learned that one boy who had expected to be named went home in tears and much to my surprise, one boy who was named was also in tears as he was planning on changing schools but had not told anybody.

After these occurrences I decided to reexamine what exactly do captains do? How does one become a captain? Is it necessary to have captains? What if we do not have captains?

What do Captains do? Good questions indeed. In youth hockey the only functions I can ascertain is accepting the team trophy after a tournament. With a no tolerance stance by officials players/captains do not serve any communication roles between the bench and officials. There are a couple unusual situations regarding penalty expirations that actually come down to Captain's choice but in 35 years of coaching and 20 years of playing, I have never come across them. So maybe we do not need captains.

The process of selecting captains is not well understood. The Minnesota Wild appoints a new captain each month based on performance and leadership qualities. Youth teams use a variety of methods including having the players vote, the coaches select or some mixture of both. I know some coaches that ask their players to stand up in front of the team and tell the players why they want to be the captain and then the coaches select.

The real issue for youth teams is why should there be captains? Since they do not have any functions per se they are merely honorary positions. I believe the selection process can create problems on teams. In many cases the best players are chosen as Captains but if you look at college and pro teams the Captains are generally not the super star players. That would indicate that there is much more to this than being popular and having skills.

Players not selected may feel slighted and players selected may feel superior in some way to their teammates. Of course these feelings are also felt by the parents of the players and could potentially cause some negative feelings by players and parents. The potential ill will may not be worth the effort and it may actually hurt the team.

A year ago a reader emailed me to inquire about literature regarding the roles and responsibilities of team captains. Although there is plenty of information about power plays, break outs, off ice training and the like, very little exists about Captains.

I finally found a great book by Jeff Janssen, M.S. entitled *"The Team Captain's Leadership Manual; The complete Guide to Developing Team Leaders Whom Coaches Respect and Teammates Trust."* The book is a 10-week program for both athletes and Coaches. This book is very interesting and informative. The main thrust is that leaders come in many types and styles and that most leaders need to be developed. This takes time and effort on the part of the players and coaches.

Having worked through the book with my high school captains last year I found that the process really does take time and as a coach you have to be committed to investing the time and effort to develop your leaders.

I have also come to the conclusion that in youth hockey there is no real benefit derived from having captains until the Bantam/U14 levels. As a pee

wee coach for two years we chose not to have captains. I think everybody except the player who was the perennial choice felt it was a good decision.

How should Captains be selected? I do not think there is any perfect method especially at the youth level. I have tried many different methods including team vote; team and coaches' vote, coaches select and no captains. In the past couple years with the high school team I coach we use a system that involves a team meeting to discuss what qualities are desirable in Captains, and what the duties and responsibilities might be required. These are always interesting discussions. Each year we end up with a different process and outcome. The final decision rest with the coaches, however, the players have considerable input into the decision. This coming year we will use two Assistant Captains for the season and select a new Captain each month based on merit.

Youth hockey need not mirror the pros or college teams. With an emphasis on skill development, fun, respect and sportsmanship it really does not make any sense to put a couple kids on a pedestal. Since there are no duties for a captain and young players are not particularly receptive to peer leadership, maybe no captains is the best course to take.

If you are interested in getting the Leadership Manual contact Jeff Janssen at [www.jeffjanssen.com](http://www.jeffjanssen.com) or call 1-800-721-TEAM.

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