



Thinking the Game

I have been to many meetings, camps, and clinics over the years, and I have often heard the term “skill development”. “Let’s focus on skill development” is a common and honorable mantra. Players are asked to repeatedly practice their skating, their puckhandling, their shooting, their passing, etc. That’s great. Those things will make them better hockey players. However, there is one skill that I believe often gets overlooked, and it may be the most important skill of all... THINKING.

The players who have the ability to “read” plays, anticipate, and think intelligently out on the ice are more valuable to a coach than the players who can skate 100 mph but are not sure where to go. Not only is it important that the individual can think for herself; she needs to be able to work well with teammates on the ice. Whether it is with or without the puck, the teams that have players who are “on the same page” in their thinking and do “the little things” will be successful.

Some might call this skill “hockey sense”. How do players acquire hockey sense? Are they born with it? Can they learn it? In my opinion, it is a combination of a person’s individual make-up as well as what she has been taught over the years that will determine how well that person understands the game and how effective she will be in various situations. So coaches need to help players learn how to THINK on the ice. We need them to be “students of the game”.

Now, I have coached females throughout my career, and I will tell you that girls and women have the tendency to take things quite literally. Those with more hockey sense understand that the answers to their questions about “what should I have done” in a particular situation depends on a lot of different variables. Where was the puck? Where were the defenders? What are your linemates doing? How much time and space did you have? Those who struggle a bit in this “thinking” area, want black and white answers, and might take a coach’s answer and apply it again later when the surrounding variables are very different. That is why it is important for her to have her head up and “read” as much information as she can as quickly as she can, so her decision at that time is appropriate for that particular situation. I believe that we, as coaches, can break down situations and help our players make these decisions. Teach them concepts that can be applied to any situation—like support, reading and reacting, communication,

triangulation, etc. The earlier they learn these concepts, the quicker they will be able to adjust to the game at its higher levels.

There are other ways that young athletes can improve in their thinking. I firmly believe that playing other youth sports has a lot of benefits. Many of the same concepts you will find in hockey are involved in other sports.

Think about it. A 2v1 in basketball or soccer is very similar to a 2v1 in hockey. What does that player with the ball or puck look for and what is going through the mind of the offensive player without the ball or puck?

Is there any communication going on? It is about making good decisions.

And making the best decisions for the TEAM is what is most important.

Let's look closer at this 2v1 example. Should the puck carrier pass or shoot the puck?

Well, it depends. What are the offensive players "reading" about the situation? What's the gap given by the defenseman?

Where is she positioned? Is she favoring the pass or the shot? Can the puck carrier draw the D to herself and then dish it off or does she have a clear path to the net?

Too often, girls feel like they need to pass the

puck in every situation because they don't want to be considered "puck hogs". They get nervous about what their teammates' reaction might be if they do not make that pass.

Well, our staff tells players that they are being selfish if they DO NOT shoot the puck—if that is the right decision for that particular play. Make the right hockey decision for your team!

Another way that young athletes can improve their hockey sense is by watching hockey. I'm talking about viewing games other than the ones in which they participate. Watching NHL, college, or high school games can really help a young player see things because that perspective is so different than the perspective she has when she is on the ice. If she really pays attention to what is happening on the ice, she will become a better student of the game.

So let's continue to stress skill development, knowing that hockey sense and THINKING THE GAME are also important skills. By developing those intellectual abilities we will be serving our players and our teams very well—for the present and for the future!

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May 2006