



*If We Do What We Have Always Done...  
We Will Get What We Have Always Gotten.*

What is the USA Hockey style of play? Do we have a style of play? Often when we think of Canadian hockey, we think of a tough, physical, powerful and an effective style of play. Europeans are great skaters with outstanding puck handling skills. The Soviets are well-conditioned athletes; their game is one of puck control, flow and finesse. The Czechs are similar to the Soviets; they are very good defensively and have a history of great goaltending. USA Hockey's Lou Vairo states, "It is getting harder to differentiate the various national styles because they have copied from each other". I think we can safely say that USA Hockey, at the international level, is a hybrid. We also recognize different styles of play between the eastern and the western parts of the country. We have studied the various hockey federations and coaches have adopted what they think will work for them. In our youth programs, coaches are currently free to adopt whatever philosophy they want. On the one hand we encourage coaches to be creative and visionary; but on the other hand do we really want our youth level programs to be game and outcome driven? We also recognize the possibility that the conceptual, technical and tactical philosophies of player development may or may not be currently in sync with the expectations of many of our customers. Perhaps the diverse approach of our youth programs is acceptable and the "skill development" proponents are trying to manage the un-manageable.

Relative to skill and technical development, has U.S. hockey become a game of labels? Labels currently have no national standard of definition. "Recreational", "house", "competitive", "select", "elite" are categories often used to describe programs as well as players. We also use Tier I, Tier II, AAA, AA, A, B, etc. Even the most experienced coaches have difficulty determining what these labels mean. They mean different things to different organizations depending where in the country they are located. How confusing can this be for parents, coaches and the players? Clearly most programs in our federation have individual players that may fit into each of these categories. The problem comes when, for *competitive fairness or balance*, we need to classify teams or programs in their entirety. Just because a program is recreational, does that mean that it cannot be competitive? It is a competitive game at all levels. People a lot smarter than me have tried to come up with a national definition of Tier II Youth Hockey. The definition currently varies from district to district. We have 11 districts, 34 affiliates and 2400 associations within the USA Hockey family. For clarity, consistency and competitive fairness, shouldn't we attempt to have standards of classification from one district / affiliate to another?

Currently, I think too many USA Hockey youth programs are predominately game driven. The practice-to-game ratio is often 2-1 or less. We have 10-and-under teams traveling great distances and playing 60-70 game schedules. We teach a structured game with emphasis on systems and short term outcomes and not on long term skills and concepts. Practices are predominately too controlled and structured. The ice is not fully utilized because we do not have multiple teams practicing together. We emphasize defensive hockey at very young



ages and do not encourage offensive skills and creativity as much as we should. The *point of emphasis* is the key. Are we coaching to win or are we coaching to teach? Admittedly these statements are generalized. We recognize that there are coaches and

associations within our federation that encourage skill development, puck possession, creativity and concepts. However, based on my travels and discussions with other Coaches in Chief, these coaches/associations are currently in the minority. Kids enjoy and have fun doing things they are good at. Should our mission be to help players become as good as they can be? Players develop at different rates and ages. For these reasons, I believe that development of skills (not game outcomes) should be the priority at all levels of youth hockey. Don Lucia, Head Coach at the University of Minnesota, noted in a speech to a Minnesota Hockey gathering that his team spends more time on skill development and small games than most youth programs. I can think of several examples where players have not made the jump into select or elite programs until they were well into their teens. Further statistics indicate that less than 15% of our membership will end up playing in Tier I or Tier II Juniors, NCAA or the NHL. Many studies have shown that the number one reason kids drop out of this great game is because they are not having any fun.

If we could establish a style of play that coaches and administrators would accept, what would it be? Is USA Hockey membership so diverse that having a national philosophy of play is unreasonable? When kids enter into USA Hockey should they be schooled under a national philosophy of development? As they move from one level or age classification to another there would be some level of consistency. When the USA Hockey Board of Directors reviews and votes on rule changes and policies that impact the game, they would have a policy of national development on which to base their decision.

USA Hockey's Youth Council and the Player Development Committee have had discussions regarding the preparation of Model Program templates. Perhaps the way we are currently developing players is as good as it gets. On the other hand could we or should we do a better job emphasizing skill development, creativity and offense? What role should the leadership of USA Hockey play in developing a national style of play or philosophy of player development? I believe if we de-emphasize games and winning at the youth level and emphasize skill development, players would have more fun. Drop out rates would decrease and the game would grow. Perhaps if travel was reduced and we put multiple teams on practice ice a side benefit would be that cost per player would go down and the game would be more affordable. Cost for our participants is clearly an issue.

I do not have the answers. I do think we need meaningful discussion about the **USA Hockey Way** emphasizing: **Unselfish – Speed – Athleticism- Heart**. Should we emphasize a *puck possession game* when developing youth players? Paraphrasing a recent presentation by Tim Taylor, former Head Coach at Yale University, stated "To be an effective puck possession team, **ALL** players must improve puckhandling, passing and receiving skills". Many of USA Hockey's recent decisions revolve around the emphasis on and development of skills: Standard of Play – Points of Emphasis, Blue Puck, Direct Off-sides, 8 & under Cross Ice Program, Small Games Handbook w/DVD and USA Hockey Skills & Drills Video. The Coaching Education Program continues to emphasize skill development at each level of a coach's certification. We are trying to do the right thing for our players, coaches and the growth of the game. We need to continue the dialog and the effort.

*"The enjoyment and development of skills will outlast the wins"* – Bob O'Connor, USA Hockey  
Director Emeritus, former National Coach in Chief

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*"What you see is what you coached"*