

What's the compass for the great map of USA Hockey resources? How do inexperienced coaches navigate all this information?

The way you look at playing directly affects the way you look at preparing people to play effectively.

Coaches who actively apply simple principles help players learn to actively apply simple principles.

Here's what matters:

Know your "Why"—what do you want the people you work with to gain from your time together?

Transition vs. possession--Train for decision-making

Make ourselves unnecessary—hockey is a player's game

- **Engagement vs. memorization**--actively applying simple principles vs. retrieving info from the database
- **Undercoach**—usefulness, not accuracy, should determine what you say
- **Value of Little Things**—you don't have to teach every little thing—if you teach players the value of little things, they'll seek them out
- **Profit from failure**—we grow wiser from our mistakes
- **Wait Time**—engage, don't fear dead air
- **Triage**—the incredible value of prioritizing your work

Skill acquisition—learn how to learn

- **Big Three Skill Sets**—
 - **Skating**--Indicator: backward chase
 - **Puckhandling**--Indicator: figure 8's, Czech drill
 - **Decision-making**--Indicator: 2-2 cross-ice, score on either net
- **Discreet skills**--skating and puck skills—where else do they get a chance at these?
- **Skill proofs**—find the indicators of mastery

Station practices are valuable

- **Repetitions/isolation**—break down the skill to develop good technique
- **Progressions/integration**—combine skills to develop athletic fluency
- **Competitions/application**—apply skills for fun and immediate feedback

Let the game teach the game

Know your “Why”—What do you want the people you work with to gain from your time together? Hockey is a game of failure, and at some point, you will certainly ask yourself why you’re coaching.

It helps to have an answer.

Every coach’s answer may differ, but most include the following to some extent:

We want players to:

Learn how to learn skills

- to watch and learn

- to listen

Be part of something greater than self

Learn the value of habits

- to own and profit from mistakes

- to be resilient

- to harness emotions

Learn what it takes to excel

Learn to work effectively with others

Learn to compete

Learn the value of delayed gratification

Learn the value of preparation

Learn to be proactive

Learn decision-making

Learn to stay involved, whether support or lead

These goals will not be achieved without fun and effort.

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Transition vs. Possession--Hockey is a transition game, which makes it very different from most sports. In possession sports (football, basketball, baseball, and to some extent soccer and lacrosse), one team has clearly-established possession of the ball. There may be turnovers, but there is enough time and order to script plays. The plays the coach draws up—the X's and O's—are a big part of the game, and a large part of each player's responsibility is to execute the planned play.

The vast majority of American coaching tradition—the way we tend to see coaches—comes from possession sports.

Hockey is a transition game—*islands of order in a sea of chaos*—and players have to constantly assess the situation and make decisions. While face-offs and special teams may offer situations that can be scripted, most of the game is reading and reacting. To help players be successful, coaches must help them learn how to read and react effectively.

This difference radically changes our role as coaches. In other sports, coaches spend more time directing players: placing them and assigning them specific tasks to be executed according to script. In hockey, coaches spend more time preparing players: helping them learn the mental skills to read and react effectively and teaching the physical skills that allow players to follow through with their own decisions.

In our efforts to instill order, we hockey coaches have often sacrificed player initiative for the sake of an illusion of order. How often have you seen a Bantam player take a shot and skate past the rebound? In the goal crease amoeba of Mite hockey, a kid will whack at the puck until it's in the net or gets knocked somewhere else. By the time a player has learned to skate and handle a puck, we've drilled the common sense they started with right out of them. Players coached by wolves wouldn't skate past their rebounds, but after we've worked with them for years at considerable expense of time and effort, they do. The corner is where the line was in the drill. How many plays begin with a whistle? How does a player begin play in a real game? Either a faceoff—quick reaction to where the puck goes—or off the bench—changing on the fly by jumping into a situation. How many drills end with a shot, then get in line? How often in a game does play continue (and often accelerate) after a shot? Do our practices reflect those realities? Are we preparing people for those situations?

We're coaches, not traffic cops, and we're more effective when we teach the skills of a player's game. If we look for ways to start drills with players reacting to something that happens on the ice, if we incorporate shots into the middle rather than the end of a drill, if we finish drills with a sprint to the net or the bench, we more accurately create the game situations players will face and we better prepare them to play effectively. Look for those opportunities to make practice replicate the game and you'll find them everywhere.

A useful analogy of the difference between Possession sports and Transition sports is Infantry vs. Special Forces. In football, where there's time and space to set up and array forces, players receive their orders from the coach, arrange themselves accordingly, and execute their assignments, then six seconds later as the dust clears, they reassemble for the next briefing. The emphasis is on following orders and executing the battle plan.

In hockey, players are more like a commando squadron parachuting in behind enemy lines—a mission objective for the group to accomplish, usually at high speed with no time to consult with headquarters. The necessary skills here are the ability to work together, recognize the situation, make good decisions, and find a way to achieve the objective.

[A Few Good Principles](http://compass.principles.com/compass/document/0020/3186/a_few_good_principles_1.pdf) (http://compass.principles.com/compass/document/0020/3186/a_few_good_principles_1.pdf) is a business article from *Forbes* ASAP that illustrates the difference between the two situations and how Marines prepare people to be successful in transition.

An aside: The similarities between sports and the military—squads, drill, attacks, defense, victory, campaigns—have always been with us. George Carlin has some interesting things to say about our sports, and how they influence and are influenced by the way we look at the world. He focuses on baseball and football (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amKnci0huc0>), but that give-and-take of influence certainly applies to hockey.

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Make ourselves unnecessary—As coaches, we're trying to help our players develop the skills and knowledge to play the game without our involvement. Throughout history, every generation has worked to prepare the next generation to function without dependence. This work requires a long-term view that values preparation more than convenience. Increasingly parents are raising their children in time starved environments where long-term value is compromised by short-term needs, often building in dependence. An illustrative scenario: a couple is heading out for a much-needed adventure with their young child. Both parents work full-time, so some quality time in a time-starved situation is highly valued. Their six-year-old child has an untied shoe. Both parents would agree that in the long-term scheme of things, the child should learn to tie the shoe. However, since the schedule is tight, it's simpler for one of the parents to tie it.

Not a big deal, but the principle of choosing short-term convenience over long-term value can eventually undermine a child's development. Think for a moment how often that kind of choice is faced every day and which choice is more often made. The young people we work with will someday be the ones competing in a global economy, funding our pensions, changing our Depends®. Or not. Coaching, like parenting, is not about convenience; it's about long-term development and fostering self-sufficiency. Look for ways to encourage self-sufficiency in your players and you'll find them.

There may be times when you have to choose between being a player's friend now or being their friend ten years from now. Will you compromise long-term value for short-term convenience or will you do what needs to be done now and later both be able to look back with satisfaction?

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Engagement vs. Memorization—try to think of the name of your 2nd grade teacher. My guess is that you took a moment, looked upward or off to the side, and ignored your surroundings for a moment or two while you searched your memory banks for the name. Now think about a kid trying to figure out where to go in the midst of a hockey game. Will he be in the moment and taking in information if he's trying to remember where on the whiteboard his coach told him to go? If she's going to be involved in the play, she shouldn't be tuning it out so that she can remember something, she should be actively applying a few simple principles to the situation. It's keepaway.

If we don't have the puck, we want to get it. If we have the puck, we want to keep it and score. Take away time and space on defense, create time and space on offense.

If that part of the mission is clear, kids will figure out how to apply it to whatever situation arises. Unless we coaches have cluttered their minds with a lot of diagrams and X's and O's that they're supposed to remember.

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Undercoach—usefulness, not accuracy, should determine what you say. Test for usefulness—is this the most important thing the player should hear right now? Is this something that’s going to make a significant difference? Just because you’re right doesn’t mean you have to say it—if it’s not a moment when the player can use what you say, don’t say it. Unless you want players to get in the habit of tuning you out, work on saying less and making it valuable.

Value of Little Things—You don’t have to teach every little thing—if you teach the value of little things, players will seek them out. Use drills that emphasize the value of good habits and attention to detail. An example: the Czech drill and the habit of passing and moving—have players in line watch the knees of players as they pass: the best time to get open is right after you’ve passed the puck—do the passers pass and move or pass and stand up?

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Profit from failure—Hockey is a game of mistakes—every change of possession is a failure in some way—and players who learn to own and profit from their mistakes will continue to improve. Tremendous amounts of energy can be dissipated in denying mistakes, assigning blame elsewhere, or allowing them to dampen enthusiasm. Asking questions about a play is often more productive than supplying answers—answers are the player’s job. The most important shift is always the next one—help players learn to take what they can from the past and be ready for what’s ahead.

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Wait Time—don't fear dead air. Wait time is the period between asking a question and supplying a hint or answer. Studies in math classrooms in the 80's found that the average wait time for girls was shorter than for boys. What conclusion can we draw from this situation?

If I were practicing effective wait time, I'd give you plenty of time to think about this question. Feel free to pause and consider it.

What the studies concluded was that teachers, whether consciously or unconsciously, didn't expect girls to be able to answer without help. When teachers consciously lengthened wait time for girls, they found that their performance improved.

One great way to find out what your players know is to ask them questions. However, if you get in the habit of immediately supplying the answer, players will get in the habit of passively waiting for the answer to be supplied.

If those moments of silence put pressure on you, look for ways to turn the tables. If the expectation is that the players fill it, they'll look for answers.

Most of us have grown up with network radio and television, where dead air means loss of audience. Our hunter/gatherer nature, equipped with a remote, allows us to search elsewhere for diversion. These days, the word "silence" is often accompanied by the word "awkward."

As coach, you don't have to be the source of all knowledge; you don't have to be the source of entertainment. If you want to engage your players' thinking by asking them a question, be willing to give them time to engage. If you establish the expectation that they actively participate, they will. We're working to grow people who actively produce, not passively consume.

If you want to know what your players understand, ask them, then be brave and wise enough to wait for a response.

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Triage—every player can improve every facet of his game; no player can improve them all at the same time. Our work as coaches is to pick out the one or two things to work on right now that will make further development possible. Whether planning a practice, a season, or what you'll say between periods, finding the priorities is essential to progress.

Important vs. Urgent, (Covey)

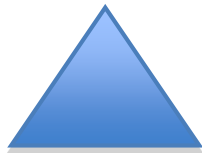
I. Important and Urgent—must do now	II. Important but Not Urgent—planning, long-range preparation
III. Not Important but Urgent—deadline, but not meaningful	IV. Not Important and Not Urgent—time wasters

As coaches and as an organization, we'll benefit most by spending as much time as possible in sector II.

Pyramids for priorities and organization—most important is lowest. Build from the bottom up—show players what matters most.

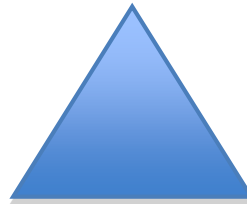
Player development (Constantine, et al.)

- 5. Best
- 4. Play as a Team
- 3. Play Smart
- 2. Play Hard
- 1. Build Good Habits



Player resources/evaluation

- 7. Game
- 6. Strategy
- 5. Systems
- 4. Tactics
- 3. Skills
- 2. Body
- 1. Mind



Building a strong foundation requires knowing what's important.

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Skill Acquisition—One of the greatest long-term values of playing hockey is learning how to learn: observing a skill, breaking it down to its simple pieces, imitating and perfecting the simple pieces, putting them together, and applying them in the game. People who learn how to do this are immeasurably better prepared to find a way to succeed in their lives.

Do the right things.
Do them right.
Do them quickly.

But early in the process, **Slow it Down.**

As players are learning complex skills—skating stride, puckhandling, shooting—that involve many smaller components, taking it slowly can really help put them together. For instance, a shot integrates many forces, among them: transfer of weight toward target, extension of bottom arm flexing and sweeping the stick, pull of top arm providing accuracy and fulcrum of the leverage, roll of puck from heel to toe of stick, snap rotation of the shaft as puck reaches the toe, and follow-through of toe of stick toward the target. Practicing without a puck at very slow motion allows a player to learn how all these forces come together and develop a sense of timing that can be accelerated once it's integrated. Do the right things—work on each of these forces. Do them right—practice putting them together slowly with perfect form. Then, do them quickly—once the pieces are in place, work on explosive quickness in release.

Whether attaining knowledge or skills, the boxes below offer a valuable way to think about the process.

Four boxes of skill acquisition for building habits of technique—Awareness & Ability (Skulsted)

3. Conscious Competence—I've practiced and can do it if I think about it	2. Conscious Incompetence--I see the skill and have tried it and know I can't do it
4. Unconscious Competence—I can do it well without having to think about it	1. Unconscious Incompetence--what skill did I just see?

The goal is to work toward #4

Four boxes of knowledge— Awareness & Knowledge (Gladwell)

1. We're aware that we know.	2. We're aware that we don't know.
3. We aren't aware that we know.	4. We aren't aware that we don't know.

Effective organizations tend to stay in the top two, tap into 3rd, and address 4th, which a lot of us coaches, players, and parents often overlook

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Big Three Skill Sets—Playing hockey requires three basic skill sets:

- getting around the rink
- taking care of the puck
- making good decisions

When most kids start hockey, they already have the decision-making (keepaway) but need work on the other two skill sets. By the time we've drilled those in, we've drilled creativity and common sense out—a mite in the amoeba vs. a bantam missing a rebound in his hurry to get to the line—we can change the specific behavior in this case, but the principle still applies: we tend to drill out their smarts so that we can control the situation--with whistles and traffic cops, we create robots and consumers rather than problem-solvers and citizens.

What do the kids we work with most need from us?

- They need to learn to handle frustration and learn how to learn and work with others, but everybody needs that
- Of the three skill sets, which ones do they need the most? And which one do we spend the most time on?

How many Keepaway or Tag coaches have you met?

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Discreet Skills--Skating and puck skills are the two skill sets that most players don't have many opportunities to develop away from the rink. How often do we generate power laterally, as in skating, rather than back-and-front, as in running? How often do we use an implement to control a disc? Lateral running and eye-hand coordination occur elsewhere, but skating and puck skills aren't developed in many other activities, so we have to emphasize them at hockey practice.

Encouraging rollerblading and street hockey can give players a better opportunity to develop skate and puck skills away from the rink, but these are the skills to focus on during practice. Find ways to work on them while incorporating decision-making.

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Skill Proofs—Look for the indicators of mastery. Anyone who can skate well backward, turning, pivoting, and stopping effectively at high speed, can skate well forward, so being a great backward skater indicates mastery of skating. Players who can control the puck at the limits of their reach, cup it, and turn with it, have the ability to protect the puck by keeping their bodies between the puck and their opponents. If you find the proofs of various skills and teach to them, you'll accelerate player development.

- Skating--Proof: backward chase
- Puckhandling--Proof: figure 8's, Czech drill
- Decision-making--Proof: 2-2 cross-ice, score on either net

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Station Practices Are Valuable--

Value of stations for developing coaches—

- Ownership and involvement—coaches don't just lean on their sticks
- Specific skill—a focus for player and coach on one piece of the puzzle
- 6 shots at teaching it
- Lead coach who can work with each assistant for one of the stations (if two lead coaches, they can each spend a session with each coach, giving the coaches more/earlier feedback about points of emphasis and also working with players themselves)
- See the value of repetition—break complex down to simple, then groove good technique via muscle memory
- See value of progressions—building a game skill on a puck skill on a skating skill (so skating gets worked on throughout)
- See the value of assimilation—combine simple skills into more complex ones
- See the value of competition—skills with application, involving the Big Three skill sets
- See the value of giving up a little control—kids are still engaged in learning even if we don't have lines and one authority, even if things look chaotic, even if they're having fun

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Repetitions/isolation—by breaking a skill down to its parts, we help players develop muscle memory of good technique. Daniel Coyle's book [The Talent Code](#) is a wealth of information about how myelin helps reinforce skills.

The more we develop sound skills in young players, the less re-teaching or un-teaching we have to do later.

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Progressions/integration—playing hockey requires not only having good skills but also being able to put skills together to deal with whatever arises in the game. Building a game situation onto a puck skill onto a skating skill gives players a chance to not only improve each technique but also to develop the ability to use them in combination.

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Competitions/application—players don't come to the rink to perfect technique. They want to have fun and see how they stack up. Competition allows them to apply their skills and get immediate feedback from the game. They can see what works and what doesn't, and they can make adjustments accordingly. And they have a blast in the process.

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Let the game teach the game: From tag to full-ice 5-5, competition is essential at each level in every practice, with every skill—some time to improve technique, then some time to apply it in competition—competition provides instant feedback, develops decision-making skills, and brings players back to the rink eager for more. While it's important to let players figure out the game without a backseat driver constantly issuing commands, it's also valuable that they develop the habit of learning from their play. Asking questions after a shift or referring to a specific situation and looking for more effective options can help them visualize what they did and build the habit of productive self-reflection. Small-area games are more valuable when players have learned how to and process what they've done. The game can better teach the game if we help players learn how to learn from it.

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