



# LEADERSHIP

*Motivating Your Players*



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## OBJECTIVES

- To understand motivational techniques
- To understand the meaning of success
- To learn how to deal with stress

### HOW TO HELP MOTIVATE YOUR PLAYERS

Athletes are most highly motivated when they obtain what they seek from their participation in sport. Therefore, motivational techniques should be selected that are based upon the reasons athletes have for joining the team (provided that their motives are healthy for the individual and the team). The following strategies may help you improve your players' motivation.

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#### *Know your athletes... Why are they participating?*

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Young athletes differ in their personalities, needs, and objectives for playing hockey. You must, therefore, get to know your athletes as individuals in order to determine why they participate. One way to accomplish this is through a team meeting at the start of the season. Ask your players why they are participating and what their personal objectives are for the season. Continue this dialogue before, during and after practices, special events or whenever you have a chance to talk one-on-one with your players.

#### **Help Athletes Improve Their Skills and Learn New Skills**

Skill improvement is one reason for joining a hockey team. Therefore, practice sessions should focus on skill development, with regular opportunities for players to measure their progress. In addition, you can help athletes set performance goals that are appropriate for them. For example, when young players are first learning to pass, tell them that if they can pass the puck so that a teammate can receive it without moving his or her stick, they have been successful. More advanced players should be encouraged to pass without altering their speed

or direction so that their teammate can receive the puck and continue a developing play without hesitations. As players improve, they can increase the number of times they pass successfully. In this way, your players can measure their improvement in performance more objectively than by considering only the game outcome.

#### **Practices and Games Should Be Enjoyable**

As indicated by various studies, young athletes want to have fun. This means they want to play, not sit on the bench or stand in long lines waiting for their turns at a drill. One of the best ways to ensure that practices are enjoyable is to use short, snappy drills that involve a large number of players. You can also keep your players' interest by incorporating new drills. Your players may even be able to invent useful drills of their own.

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#### *Having a chance to display their skills during a contest is an excellent motivator.*

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In games, too, all players can be involved, even if they're sitting on the bench. Team members can be watching the individuals who are playing similar positions in order to learn from their good techniques or their mistakes. They can also watch for strategies used by the other team. Most importantly, however, they should all have a chance to play in every game. Knowing they will have a chance to display their skills during the course of the contest is a primary source of motivation prior to and after the experience. Players who sit on the bench, unable to test their skills in a game, are not having fun.

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#### *Allow players to be with their friends and make new friends.*

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Many athletes view their hockey participation as a chance to be with their friends while doing something they enjoy. Allowing them to have fun with their friends does not mean your practices have to be disrupted. You can encourage opportunities for them to develop their friendships by initiating social activities, such as a mid-season pizza party, that would take place outside of practice. This will require more time on your part, but you will also get to know your players better and may find these activities very rewarding.

### **Help Players Understand the Meaning of Success**

Children learn at an early age to equate winning with success and losing with failure. If athletes win a game, they feel good or worthy. If they lose, they feel incompetent or unworthy. This attitude toward winning can be very discouraging to players, unless they are always winning (an impossibility for at least 50% of the participants). One of your most important roles, therefore, is to help your players keep winning in perspective. One way to accomplish this is to help your players understand that winning a game is not always under their control. For example, after losing a game, you may tell your team, “We ran the offense well today, but their goalie played very well, so we didn’t get as many goals as we expected.”

Your players also need to know that, although striving to win is an important objective in hockey, being successful in hockey also means making personal improvements and striving to do one’s best. This attitude can be developed by:

- encouraging maximum effort during practices and games
- rewarding that effort
- helping your players set important but realistic goals that they can attain and thus be successful

In helping your players understand the meaning of success, it is important not to punish them when they fail, particularly if they gave a maximum effort.

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***Your coaching approach is the most important factor that influences player motivation.***

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### **Use the Positive Approach to Coaching**

Probably the most important factor that influences your players’ motivation is the approach you take in coaching. There are many different styles or approaches used by coaches, but most fall into two categories: the negative approach and the positive approach. The negative approach is the most visible model of coaching because it is prominent (like bad news in the newspaper) through the media, in professional, college and even high school sports. This approach is one in which the coach focuses on performance errors and uses fear, intimidation, and/or anger to motivate players. The negative approach doesn’t work very well with young athletes. Constant criticism, sarcasm, and yelling often frustrates young athletes, deteriorates their self-confidence, and decreases their motivation because they are just developing their skills and have fragile self-concepts.

The positive approach, in contrast, is one in which the coach focuses on the correct aspects of performance and uses plenty of encouragement and praise for the tasks that players perform correctly. When skill errors occur, a coach who uses the positive approach corrects mistakes with constructive criticism. A positive, supportive approach is essential when coaching young athletes if high levels of motivation are to be maintained.

Key principles for implementing a positive approach to coaching are listed and explained in the following paragraphs.

### **Be Liberal with Rewards and Encouragement**

The most effective way to influence positive behavior and increase motivation is through the frequent use of encouraging statements and rewards. The single most important difference between coaches whom young athletes respect most and those they respect least is the frequency with which coaches reward them for desirable behaviors. The most important rewards you can give are free. They include a pat on the back, a smile, clapping, verbal praise or a friendly nod. The more a coach uses encouraging statements and rewards, the more motivated the players will be.

### **Give Rewards and Encouragement Sincerely**

For rewards to be beneficial, they must be given sincerely. This does not mean that you shouldn’t give players positive feedback about their performance

when they make mistakes. You can point out their errors and, at the same time, praise them for the plays they performed well. It is important to be positive, but also realistic.

### **Reward Effort and Correct Technique, Not Just Results**

It is easy to praise a player who just scored a goal, but it is less natural to praise a player who tried hard but missed the shot. Sometimes, too, we forget to reward correct technique when it does not result in positive outcomes. It is important, however, to reward players' efforts and the use of correct technique if you want this behavior to continue.

### **Have Realistic Expectations**

Base your rewards and encouragement on realistic expectations. Encouraging your 8U, 10U and 12U players to strive to elite-level standards will probably make them feel as though they have failed when they can't reach the goals they think you've set for them. It is much easier for you to give honest rewards when you have realistic expectations about your players' abilities.

## **HELP PLAYERS SET GOALS**

Young athletes learn from parents and coaches that success is equated with winning and failure is equated with losing. Adopting this view of success and failure confuses the players. Let's take, for example, the cases of Charlie and Paul, members of the winning and losing teams, respectively. Charlie played three minutes in the final period, spending two of those minutes in the penalty box. Because he was a member of the winning team, however, his performance is perceived as a part of the success. On the other hand, although Paul masterfully used the skill he had been practicing and scored his first goal of the season, he is forced to conclude that he is a failure because he was on the losing team. As adults, we recognize the inaccuracy of these perceptions, but our actions at the end of a contest may tell our players that a winning score is what really matters.

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*Equating success or failure with winning or losing results in mixed messages to the athlete.*

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Athletes need a way to compare current and past performances to determine whether they are successful. This can be accomplished through goal setting. By using an individualized goal-setting strategy, each athlete can regain control over his or her own success or failure. In addition to removing the mixed messages, remind the players that there are some factors that can determine the outcome of a game that are out of a player's control. For example, the person your athlete is defending may be playing the best game of his or her career. Although your athlete is playing very well, there is just no stopping the opposing player. Or, injury or illness of one player may force another player to play an unfamiliar position. Or, the ice may be much faster or slower than your players are used to playing on and all of their passes are slightly off the mark. These examples highlight the need to establish personal improvement goals consistent with the objective of winning, but not entirely dependent on its achievement, to maintain player motivation. Several guidelines for goal setting that can markedly help performance are listed and explained in the following paragraphs.

### **Success Should Be Possible for Everyone**

When implementing a goal-setting program, each athlete must experience some success; in other words, each player should perform at a level that demands a best effort for the existing conditions. Help each athlete realize that effort equals success by focusing rewards on such efforts.

### **Practice Goals Should Be More Challenging and Goals During Competition More Realistic**

When you set up drills to work on passing or shooting, help your players set goals for practice that will challenge them to exceed a previous effort. For example, when practicing slap shots, you may ask your best shooter to make seven out of 10 shots in practice, while another player may be challenged with four out of 10. You cannot expect the same level of performance in a game because neither you nor the player control all the factors. Therefore, you may set two or three out of 10 shots in a game as a realistic goal for your best players and one out of 10 shots for your other players. With this approach, motivation at practice is increased and players have a realistic chance of experiencing self-worth in a game.

### Goals Should Be Flexible

If goal-setting is to be effective, goals must be evaluated frequently and adjusted depending on the athlete's success ratio. If an athlete is achieving the set goal, increase the goal to provide for greater challenge and motivation. If the goal is too difficult and the athlete is feeling frustration or failure, the goal should be lowered rather than having the athlete continue to experience failure.

### DEALING WITH COMPETITIVE STRESS

Some coaches believe the best way to motivate a team for competition is to get them "psyched-up" before the game. With young athletes, however, getting "psyched-up" is not usually the problem; rather, the problem for them is getting "psyched-out."

Competitive stress in young players can originate from many sources: the player, teammates, the coach, and/or the parents. When hockey players are asked what might cause them to worry, the five most frequent answers given are: improving their performances, participating in championship games, falling for a "sucker move," performing up to their levels of ability and what their coaches would think or say. Thus, young hockey players are most likely to be worried about performance failure. This worry about failure may increase players' anxieties, which, in turn, may cause poor performance and eventually decrease motivation.

A good way to help your players avoid the effects of competitive stress is to reduce their fear of failure. This can be achieved by encouraging them to enjoy the game and do their best. When your players lose or make a mistake, don't express displeasure; rather correct their mistakes in a positive way by using the following steps:

1. Start with a compliment. Find some aspect of the performance that was correct.
2. Then tell the player what was wrong and how to correct it.

3. End with another positive statement such as, "Keep working at it. You'll get it."

This approach allows players to keep practicing their skills without the fear of making a mistake. The following guidelines may be helpful in preventing competitive stress:

1. Don't set unrealistic goals.
2. Use the positive approach when correcting mistakes.
3. Eliminate the type of "pep talks" that communicate overemphasis on the game and the outcome.

### SUMMARY

Children play hockey because they want to have fun, be with friends, improve their skills and be successful. Children who drop out of hockey typically do so because one or more of their goals was not met. You can maximize your players' desire to participate and help prevent them from dropping out by getting to know them as individuals. Learn why they are participating, focus on skill development in practice sessions and make sure the practices are enjoyable. Allow time for friendships to develop by creating a cordial environment both on and off the ice. Help players understand the meaning of success and have them set realistic goals.

Using a positive approach to coaching is the most effective way to improve players' performances. Positive coaching will also make playing and coaching more enjoyable. Be sure to reward effort and correct techniques in addition to the results that meet your expectations.

Having realistic expectations of players' performances will provide more opportunities to give rewards. However, when players make mistakes, use the positive approach to correcting errors. The positive approach involves using a compliment, correcting the error and then finishing with another positive statement. Using a positive approach and helping players reach their goals are effective ways to motivate your players toward maximum performance.