The sleep characteristics of a 14 year-old athlete vary little from those of an adult. Players with healthy sleep have moved past inabilities to settle themselves at night and often have much more autonomy over their sleep and younger players. As these individuals move past the sleep problems of youth (bedwetting, nightmares, etc.), they enter into a new world of sleep disturbances often faced by adults.

Insomnia can occur at any age. Often the causes of insomnia in childhood are quite different from those of a teenager. In some ways, insomnia in children often has more to do with parental expectations than their child’s sleep. As children mature, helping them cope with situational insomnia is an essential skill. Confident sleeping has far-reaching implications for how a player will feel about his sleep and address issues as they occur in the future. A coach at this level has the unique opportunity to help shape a player’s views about his own sleep. These factors directly relate to the feelings a player will have about sleep and whether or not the player considers himself to be a “good sleeper” or not. Insomnia can have many negative effects on the young athlete. Many of these cognitive and physical effects can adversely affect the individual’s play on the ice.

There are many methods for helping children sleep who suffer from insomnia. For coaches, it is important to determine if the player’s sleep issues are related to their sport or not. Paradoxical intervention has been shown to reduce performance anxiety and insomnia in young athletes. Pharmacological treatment may be appropriate for short term treatment, but better choices, especially for long-term management typically involves stimulus control, sleep restriction, relaxation strategies, and cognitive behavioral therapy.

Scheduling consistency is important. A circadian delay is a natural tendency for an adolescent to want to stay up later and awaken later. In some cases, this natural tendency can cause significant sleep disruption, especially given school schedules and weekend sleep schedules. As a coach, it is important to encourage consistency. A player who awakens at 6am on a school day but sleeps in until noon on the weekends is sending very confusing signals to the player’s brain as to when they should feel awake or feel sleep. These unusual sleep schedules often lead to excessive sleepiness during the day and difficulty falling asleep at night.

Players should be encouraged to develop routines that work for them. These routines should not only feature set wake times (very important) and sleep times, but also meal times and exercise times. Eating, activity, and light exposure are all factors in entraining our circadian rhythms optimally. Proper entrainment (the ability to train or condition the brain’s responses) can make a big difference in the way an individual performs on the ice. Imagine being asked to play in a hockey game at 2pm versus being asked to play at 2am. The performance on the ice, for most, would vary dramatically given the time of day. For individuals who struggle with their sleep, these differences can be seen on a daily basis.

Try to encourage players to develop a bedtime routine that eliminates television, computers, cellular phones, etc. prior to bed. These devices tend to wake kids up and prevent proper sleep initiation. Hard exercise/activity immediately before bed can cause insomnia for some as well. If a player is struggling with their sleep, they should avoid napping which will often only compound their problem. If snoring seems to be an issue for a player, it should be addressed with their primary care physician.

In terms of awakening, light should be prevalent as soon as the individual awakens. Light helps suppress the brain’s release of melatonin, a sleep promoting chemical. Light exposure in the morning helps to awaken individuals quickly and reinforce a strong and healthy circadian rhythm that will help the individual fall asleep quickly at night.

Coaches should begin to develop a dialogue with players that links elite performance as a hockey player with elite sleep. In order to withstand the rigors of the sport, it is essential that individuals be able to rebound from the effects hockey has on the body. Proper sleep and its replenishing effect does just that.

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