



## Coaching to Develop Players

Hockey is a game of high speed problem solving and the players who have developed the best skills usually are the best problem solvers and dominate. Coaches can have a great impact on their player's ability to solve problems like 1 on 1 or 2 on 1, but to do so a coach needs to understand the basic idea of teaching players to solve problems. As you plan your season and practices remember you are coaching individual players rather than a team. Each player has slightly different needs and by addressing those needs the team will improve.

In North America we are very anxious to teach even our youngest players all about off sides, breakouts and fore checks. These positional drills all too often make up the bulk of the practices. This is deemed necessary to prepare for the up coming games which parents and coaches feel need to be won. Unfortunately this short sighted approach robs the players of the opportunity to develop the necessary skills required to play at a high level in their later years.

I would like to suggest that there is a higher level of coaching that should be practiced. Since the game is about problem solving, the coaching staff should focus on helping the players find solutions to specific situations. You might also refer to this as learning to react to common reoccurring situations. Either way, a new approach to coaching youth players is needed. So let's take this to the next step and assume that in order for individual players to be able to solve problems they need resources. Those resources include skating power, speed, fitness, and puck handling skills. The players also need to be able to use these resources in tight areas from behind the net or in the corners where there is lots of traffic.

Understanding that player's need resources, coaches may proceed with exercises and training that will help their players strengthen their resources. At the elite levels of the game it is recognized by most coaches that "puck handling and skating are the key to player success". In order to improve the skating and puck handling of the players the coach needs to spend a considerable amount of time working on these skill sets.

Fundamental skating comes first with the younger players and as the players get older more advanced skating with pucks that incorporates lots of lateral movement, spins, cut backs and escape moves are all part of the development process. Practices need to be customized to meet the needs of the individual players. Even individual drills or exercises may need to be modified for each player on the ice.

The objective is to achieve skill mastery at which point the players have the freedom to create. The ability to be creative is determined by the level of skill mastery each player possesses. How often have we heard coaches talk about being creative and yet they do not provide the necessary resources to the players so they can play in a creative environment?

Skill mastery is achieved by using creative individual skating and puck handling drills that simulate game like situations. These drills will allow players to develop coordination of their arms and legs as each part works together. With on going attention to these concepts, drills and exercises the players will develop instinctive moves because they have done them thousands of times and developed the muscle memory required to execute them instinctively. This allows them to free up their mind to be creative.

To start on this process I suggest that youth coaches spend the first month of the season working on fundamental skating and puck handling skills. As the season progresses reduce emphasis a bit depending on age level. In order to take your players to new levels design drills that force your players to move laterally four to five feet and then accelerate to the next problem that needs solving. Hockey nets positioned in small areas make great problems that need to be solved.

Minnesota Hockey provides skills videos on [www.minnesotahockey.org](http://www.minnesotahockey.org) that you can download onto your computer that demonstrate how to teach skating, puck handling skills and checking. USA Hockey offers a skills DVD available at [www.usahockey.org](http://www.usahockey.org) and you can go to [www.flexxcoach.com](http://www.flexxcoach.com) to organize and design your practices.

Remember, play offs do not start until February. The teams that are the best prepared and possess the best skills will advance. If you want to put your team into the best position at play off time, spend most of season working on skill mastery concepts and encouraging your players to use their imagination as they play the game.

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