

Assistant coaches key to team success at all levels

Editor's Note: Walt Kyle is an assistant coach for the New York Rangers and has worked previously as a minor league head coach in the Edmonton Oilers' organization and as an assistant coach for the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim. He is a former Northern Michigan University player and has ties to USA Hockey, serving in various coaching roles. Kyle is widely regarded as someone who will someday be a head coach in the National Hockey League. Chalk Talk recently asked Kyle to discuss the importance of assistant coaches at all levels.

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One maxim that should be embraced at all levels of hockey is that a good assistant coach can be as valuable as a 30-goal scorer.

That's because he may be the person who brings the 30-goal scorer out of a slump, or he may be the person who adjusts the positioning of a defenseman so that he no longer gets consistently beat on outside rushes. A good assistant coach can make a difference in wins and losses.

"I think assistant coaches at the youth level are absolutely critical," Kyle says. "If you are going through a practice and doing a skating drill or a skill drill, and some young kid is struggling with a fundamental or a concept you can't hold the whole group back because of that one kid. But when you have an assistant coach he can go over and work on those one or two kids. If you don't have assistant coaches, maybe they don't ever grasp that concept and it will cost you down the road."

Kyle said even at the NHL level, assistant coaches spend time on skill development. After practice, while a head coach might be dealing with the media, an assistant will still be on the ice working on one-timers with specific players or trying to improve the fitness level of players who haven't been in the lineup, or working with a defenseman on improving his ability to tie up a player along the boards. The best assistants are those who like the teaching aspect of coaching, those who like to deal one-on-one with the players.

While the head coach sometimes has to be more direct, even blunt, about a player's performance because he is dividing up ice time, the assistant coach can follow-up by putting a positive spin on the situation. At the youth level that can be very important because self esteem issues are important.

"The head coach may come in and tell a player he isn't playing well and won't play as much because of that," Kyle said. "The assistant coach can then come in

and say, 'Hey, you haven't been playing well, but we are going to get you going. We will spend some time on this and that and we are going to get you going.'"

The assistant usually gets to give the message of encouragement. He can say, "You will get better. This is going to work and then you are going to get more ice time."

Essentially, the assistant and head coach often will play the "good cop-bad cop" game with players, much like TV detectives would do to squeeze a confession out of a suspect. In the coaching world, the "good cop-bad cop" method is used to assure that the player gets the message and yet still feels as if he has an ally who will help him work through any difficult time.

"The assistant coach can rarely be the bad cop," Kyle says. "There are times you certainly have to enforce discipline. But you have to take a different approach than the head coach.

Another reason why Kyle believes in having multiple assistants at the youth level is crucial is to maximize your efficiency in your limited practice time.

"When you have assistants you have extra hands and eyes out there," Kyle said. "One of the most efficient ways to maximize your ice time is splitting the ice up and running stations. At one end you can be working crossovers with one coach and in the middle section they are working on passing. The other end you are working on shooting."

What other advice does Kyle have for assistant coaches? "Support your coach," he says. "That's what coaches look for in assistants – guys who will support their program. Players need to know that everyone is on board with what the head coach is trying to accomplish."

"Also, that's how you are going to get jobs. Coaches look for those they know will support them."