



Controlling the Bench

In watching some of the masterminds of the game behind the bench, you would think they were taking a stroll in the park rather than directing a hockey game. But as a coach you know the endless list of items that go through your mind during the course of a game. How you prepare for and how you handle these situations has a significant effect on you, your team and the outcome of the game.

Running the bench is a very, very important aspect of the game. Sometimes coaches take it for granted and really don't realize its importance. But sometimes it can be the difference between winning and losing a game. Most successful coaches have a good sense of its importance and make the right decisions at the right time. Matching lines, changing line combinations, utilizing "hot" players, and benching players are all things that a coaching staff has under its control during a game.

Maine Black Bear head coach Shawn Walsh is a master at handling his players and controlling the game through good bench management. He should be, having learned from the master, the NCAA's all-time coaching wins leader Ron Mason, who has lead his teams to over 800 career victories from behind the bench.

"I think that Scotty Bowman has proven that you can win games with it. It's not as important as a hot goalie. But it's a percentage game, it might give you a better chance of success" says Walsh when talking about controlling the bench.

Walsh prefers to handle his team's defensemen during the games, and lets his assistants make the changes with the forward lines.

"It's easier to do that and that way I can read the ice better. I keep in tune with my forwards, but I like to handle the defense because it is low maintenance".

The Black Bear mentor suggests that coaches name their lines for ease in giving direction on the bench. Using the center's name, or assigning a color to each line allows coaches to give brief descriptions of who is up next such as "Green up" or "Peterson's line next".

Several elements are involved in decisions on who plays when, who plays more and who plays less for Maine.

"I like double-shifting lines that are hot" says Walsh. The other factor is the amount of whistles. Sometimes if there are a lot of whistles, I will pull a line off after only 20-25 seconds. But I will put them right back on next. My reason is that I want to get another line on the ice so that they're not sitting on the bench too long. You want to be mindful of the amount of time guys are sitting on their butts"

Team statisticians let Walsh know the shift times of each of his lines and players at the end of each period. However, he usually already has a good feel for who has been on the ice too long.

"You can usually tell if they are floating in areas like re-taking their ice. They typically don't float on the forecheck or on a scoring chance. But they might loaf when they are re-grouping. If you see that, then their shift times are too long."

Walsh finds that teaching on the bench during games is very beneficial to his team, but cautions in using it too much.

"Once or twice a period at a maximum. Use a coaching board as it takes your teaching from an auditory level to the visual level"

Most of Walsh's attention during a game is directed at watching how the other team is forechecking, their neutral zone defense, and tendencies on breakouts and face-offs.

These are things that you can recognize in the first few shifts and make the necessary adjustments if they are needed.

His other major concern is recognizing how changing conditions require him to make adjustments with his team.

"You might need to make adjustments at the ten minute mark to take into account the ice conditions" says Walsh. "The ice can be a factor and player fatigue can be an issue. So at some point during the period, you might want to change your forecheck or your neutral zone play.

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