

Earning the respect of your players

When it comes to the obstacle course players encounter trying to jump from juniors to collegiate level, former NHL defenseman Rick Zombo knows the terrain like a polar bear on the tundra.

As coach of the St. Louis Sting of the North American Hockey League, Zombo is guiding teens whose aspirations lie at the collegiate level. He speaks from experience.

As a freshman, he helped the University of North Dakota win the NCAA National Championship and was captain of the Fighting Sioux as a junior.

However, his college background is only part of what made Zombo a success story.

As a former eighth-round draft pick of the Detroit Red Wings, Zombo had to overcome major obstacles to reach the NHL.

“There was nobody pulling for me. Every year that I went to camp they had a ticket to Adirondack (AHL) waiting for me,” says Zombo. “It wasn’t until Jacques Demers called me up in my third season that I got my chance.”

His coaching philosophy is one that was shaped by the hard work that he had to put in to succeed at hockey’s highest level. His willingness to take the time to analyze and listen also helped distinguish Zombo from those less successful.

Zombo emphasizes that being a successful Junior A coach is far more than having a winning record. He wants every player that comes out of the Sting program to have high self-esteem, integrity and a positive future.

“It’s true that this level of hockey is a stepping stone to college, but it is also an opportunity for me to help shape my players into better people by the time they leave,” says Zombo. “That is the most rewarding and important part of the position, and a responsibility I take very seriously.”

Zombo demonstrated the strength of his belief in that philosophy after inheriting the Sting in mid-November of the 1997-98 season.

His arrival came as a surprise to his players. Although the team he was taking over had only one win in its previous 15 games, Zombo decided that he would completely forego working on X’s and O’s.

Instead, he spent the next two months talking to them about family values such as discipline, responsibility and respect.

“These are some of the things that can get lost in the shuffle when young men (ages 16-20) leave home to play Junior A hockey, particularly if they are away from their parents for the first time,” says Zombo, a graduate of Junior A himself. “I felt that these values had to be reexamined and engrained before our organization could be successful on the ice.

“Those two months were very stressful because the transformation I was trying to make in the players takes consistent reinforcement and a lot of time,” he added.

At times, Zombo worried that his owners, parents and players would lose patience since he felt everyone wanted immediate

results.

However, he was convinced that his approach, although a longer proposition, was the necessary path to follow.

“The players had to learn to respect themselves, and then their teammates before I could begin to earn their respect as a coach,” says Zombo. (It didn’t hurt that he guided the Sting to a 6-2 record in his first eight games behind the bench.)

While he and members of his team went through this process, Zombo began to earn his players’ trust.

“The players didn’t give me any immediate trust or respect based on my background. To be honest, they could have cared less that I played a dozen years in the NHL,” says Zombo. “What was important to them was that I made an effort to understand each player and didn’t try to take their individuality away.

“I let each player be himself. I also made sure that every player, no matter what his role, was made to feel that he would be instrumental in the team’s success.”

This approach created a bond between Zombo and his players that has been the key to the Sting’s turnaround.

“I tried to establish a dialogue with my guys; I asked them for their opinions and tried to take their needs into consideration. They now realize I’m flexible and will treat them like adults,” says Zombo.

Another part of Zombo’s plan was to take some of the pressure off the players,

which is intense at the junior level, by concentrating on individual skill development.

“It was amazing how much better we played when I told them that the wins would come if they just showcased the lessons they learned during practice,” says Zombo. “In fact, the players were so relaxed they used the game of ‘Rock-Paper-Scissors’ to choose who would be in the shootout to decide a game against Danville.

“As a result, we won in a pressure-packed situation.”

Zombo also found that once the players realized that he had their welfare and development foremost on his mind it allowed him to perform the most important part of his job.

“I was able to lead them,” he says. “Once they knew that I wanted to make them better people and better players, and wasn’t looking for any personal gain, they thrived on being challenged.”

Sting general manager Steve Pona knows that the word is quickly spreading about the Sting’s growing hockey presence and professional business operations.

“Parents and players realize that the Sting’s ‘cycle of success,’ which focuses on improving the individual player, which makes the team stronger, which builds the Sting program, is the optimum formula for success at the Junior A level,” Pona says.

He adds, “Rick is the only coach to implement this organizational philosophy, which is designed to positively influence the personal growth and professional development of our players for many years after they leave our program.

“The players had to learn to respect themselves, and then their teammates before I could begin to earn their respect as a coach.”
