

Tips on how to be a “good” youth coach

Every hockey coach eventually is forced to ponder the meaning of his existence. What is the meaning of coaching? For what purpose was I put on this bench? What have I accomplished in life as a coach?

Often, this happens to veteran coaches when they suddenly realize the years have blurred and the coach wonders what happened to all that time. “I’m not young anymore,” he laments as his son prepares to make major life decisions like where to go to college or who to take to the homecoming dance. Many evenings and weekends in a cold ice arena can make one wonder, “Was it all worth it?”

If that question isn’t easy to answer, Coach may try to compensate. A shiny new pair of Bauer Supreme Composites? Maybe ask the best looking mom on the team to be team manager? Road trips to tournaments in exotic locales like Traverse City, Toronto, or Mississauga?

Mid-coaching crises aren’t preordained. There are steps you can take now to ensure that, half way through your first season as a coach or your 10th, you won’t wonder, “What the heck am I doing behind this bench?”

There’s a good reason you’re behind the bench. It should override all the other common reasons coaches initially get involved: your son or daughter is on the team; no one else was willing to be coach; the first coach quit to become a poet; you wanted to “give something back” to the hockey system that once benefitted you as a youth player; you like the thrill of victory; you’re in search of your lost youth.

The reasons are almost endless. But at the heart of them all should be a guiding light (not the red goal light) that keeps you focussed on your role as a youth coach. Whether your team is winning or losing, whether your child is the star or not, you should be coaching FOR THE KIDS. And that’s not just paying lip service about being “in it for the kids”. That’s remembering in the heat of battle, when the refs seem against you, the clock is winding down, and the pee wee championship of the Kalamazoo Optimist Hockey Association Earlybird Tournament is on the line, that

hockey is supposed to be fun, a learning and growth experience for the youngsters. The kids just want to play and have fun. Pure and simple.

So here’s five sure-fire tips gleaned from USA Hockey’s Coaching Education program curriculum for helping you keep your focus during a long season when the pucks aren’t bouncing your way, your hair is turning gray, and all you can think to say is, “WHY?!”

1. Declare your personal coaching philosophy

You should begin to formulate your philosophy the moment you decide to coach. It will be the basis on which you make decisions that affect the team and individual



players. When, almost inevitably, parents question your decisions, your personal philosophy will be the firm ground on which you will stand. You will be less likely to stray from your course and drift aimlessly through the season, led this way and that by a host of “special interest” parents. Write down your personal coaching philosophy and keep it where you will see it regularly to remind you why you’re coaching. A clear, concise philosophy goes a long way towards a successful season.

Here’s part of a sample personal philosophy: “For me, good coaching requires a balance of the following basic

principles: development, organization, motivation, discipline, communication, and professionalism. To me, winning is more than just winning the big game. It includes applying the above principles in developing each player which, in turn, forms the necessary chemistry for a winning team...” The coach then elaborates more on each of his principles.

2. Define “successful season”

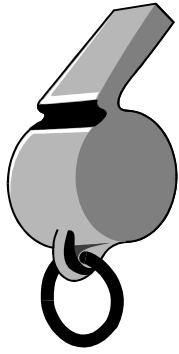
If winning the state championship is your only criteria for success, here’s a tip: get out of coaching right now. Competition, naturally, is what sports are all about. Everyone wants to win. But putting pressure on the players and yourself to always “win-win-win” can take the fun out of playing. Remember, the kids just want to play. So, for starters, make it clear to them that as long as they try their hardest, they’re winners. Then, establish realistic goals that will serve as beacons that will keep your team headed in a positive direction throughout the season. That should be your general goal.

You should also set short- and long-term goals. A short-term goal might be to “win over 50% of our face-offs in the next game” or properly execute a certain team passing drill in the next practice. A general long-term goal might be to be simply “to improve individual and team skills”; a specific long-term goal might to make the league playoffs. Whatever your goals, define them and refine along the way if necessary. Just have them.

3. Develop the whole person

The odds of making a living playing hockey are about as good as Scotty Bowman taking his players out for a victory party at Pizza Hut. Statistics show that most kids don’t even make it to midget hockey, let alone the pros (they drop out for a variety of reasons such as part-time jobs, girlfriends, other sports, etc.). Your players aren’t going to use their passing, shooting, and skating skills to make it in this world.

Rather, when the *real* tryouts begin, they will draw upon the life skills they hopefully learned and honed playing an organized team



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sport -- effective communication, teamwork, self-discipline, respect for others, positive thinking, good sportsmanship, etc. -- to get a job and raise a family.

USA Hockey refers to this as the *humanistic* aspect of coaching. In essence, it is about being a caring coach who sees the team members as people first and hockey players second. A humanistic coach shows interest in all his athletes, encourages good conduct, guards the health and safety of his players, puts the emotional and physical well-being of his players before the desire to win games, and in general is concerned with the total development of the person. One common way coaches show they care is to require their players to show them their report cards, for example.

The coach, therefore, has to be a positive role model at all times. Kids, especially at the mite and squirt level, see their coach as all-knowing, maybe even perfect. They watch Coach's every move, they hear his every word, and they follow his example. So set a good example. Next time you're tempted to holler at the ref, keep in mind the example you set for your players.

4. Be an effective communicator and listener

Volumes have been written about how to be an effective communicator, a good listener, and a competent manager. Tap these resources and become a student of the game and a student of human relations skills. Good sources for information are the public library, bookstores, USA Hockey, and your local association. Regardless of your won-loss record, as a coach, the ability to communicate effectively with your players and parents can be the difference between an enjoyable season and a six-month-long nightmare.

Some techniques of effective communication are: 1) be enthusiastic; 2) be positive; 3) praise in public, criticize in private; 4) be demanding but considerate;

5) treat all players as individuals; 6) give equal time to all players; 7) be patient; 8) be consistent and fair in dealing with players.

As most parents realize, being a good listener and knowing how to handle different situations is a learned skill. How do you offer constructive criticism without hurting feelings? How do you verbally reprimand a child? How do you handle insubordination? How do you deal with a child's temper tantrum? Not easy questions to answer, so take time to find solutions.

5. Have fun

If you're not, then why bother playing or coaching? It's that simple.

Winning, of course, should be one of your goals. The team plays to win. But winning shouldn't be the No. 1 priority. It's not easy for youth coaches in any sport to accept this. In the work world, measurable statistics like profit margin, sales, and quotas determine how well you're doing your job. In sports, your first inclination is to look at the won-loss record.

Some of the best coaches never win a championship. Along the way, however, they teach kids about intangibles such as self-discipline, teamwork, and the value of hard work. Each coach has to decide exactly what he wants the team to accomplish, but those goals should include those that promote teamwork, individual growth, and success on and off the ice.

Besides, stressing winning all the time can become a drag for kids, especially if they don't win that often. Younger kids, in particular, are just thrilled to death to be playing. It's fun. Coaches and parents should not take that away from them.

So Coach, the next time you wonder, "WHY?!" remember, you're in it for the kids.