

Sports Psychology: Keeping It Simple

“Ninety percent of the game is half-mental.”

That uncut gem of wisdom was first issued on a diamond by noted sports philosopher Yogi Berra but it transcends baseball to apply equally to hockey rink. How athletes perform from the shoulders up is now more important than ever and Dr. Wayne Halliwell believes no player is too young and no coach is too old to benefit from basic principles of sports psychology.

Halliwell, a University of Montreal professor, is the team psychologist for the NHL’s Canadiens and a man who considers himself to be a sports (mind) stretch rather than a sports shrink.

“Sports psych applies at almost any age,” says the former European Pro who attended Vermont’s Middlebury College on a hockey scholarship and earned his doctorate at Florida State University. Here are three basic areas coaches should be thinking about.

Visualization

“Let’s say you’re trying to explain a concept to a seven- or eight-year old boy. You’re trying to get him to follow his shot to the net and stop in front of the net to maximize scoring opportunities. You don’t have to use the words ‘visualization’ or ‘imagery’, which are the clinical terms. But you might say, ‘run this through your mind’. Young kids have such vivid imaginations so this idea can be used at almost any age to help them learn the tactical part of hockey. Ask them to go home and actually close their eyes and think about what it’s like to headman the puck. Maybe you’re trying to introduce a simple 1-2-2 forechecking system. Again, what does that look like to them in their minds?”

Perhaps your players could make a habit of five minutes worth of ‘team visualization’ in the dressing room after practice to review a drill or concept. Ask them to spend another five minutes doing the same before bedtime.

Fun and Focus

This all falls under the domain of concentration.

“A coach must keep his players’ attention and he does that first and foremost by making practice fun,” says Halliwell. “Remember, the younger the age grouping the shorter the attention span so you have to work in shorter components in terms of length and difficulty of drills and new information introduced.”

The coach must make sure his practices are well organized with a variety of interesting drills that keep the kids buzzing with intensity. Career coaches spend up to an hour a day planning each practice. Youth coaches should reserve 20 to 30 minutes well in advance of each hour of ice to prepare their practice.

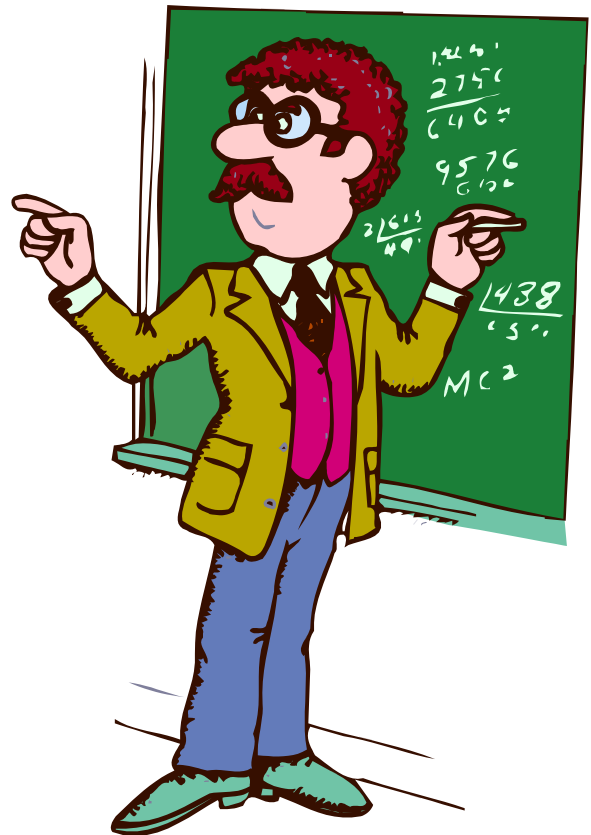
Halliwell offers this example of how a coach can start applying the most basic parts of mental training to a group of young athletes.

“The word ‘ready’ can be substituted for ‘focused,’ ” explains Halliwell, who knows the general state of mayhem that can often engulf a youth hockey dressing room before a game. “Tell your players that you want them ready as a team prior to a game. You can have a rule where there’s a 10 or 15 minute quiet period before going on the ice. It’s a time for players to start thinking about how they’re going to play, what they’re going to take onto the ice from practice and, at the coach’s suggestion, what they should be picturing in their minds.”

You want your players ready before the game and during the game.

“That means being ready when you’re sitting on the bench and your shift comes up,” adds Halliwell.

Kids understand the meaning of ready and, if they are, it also means they’re focused and concentrating.



Process Goals — not Product Goals

This means placing the emphasis on improvement, individually as players and as a team.

“The product is what you’re striving for, such as winning games. Getting into the playoffs and winning championships and tournaments,” states Halliwell.

“Process goals” are all the little things that must be successfully completed to achieve the championship product.

“Accentuate the importance of the team getting better instead of having all the emphasis on winning and losing. But that also means you must have a way of measuring that they are getting better.”

Halliwell says this takes time, planning and likely some parental assistance.

“Start charting the number of passes they make in a game, or the number of scoring chances, or even some of the subtler things such as solid defensive plays, headmanning the puck, staying on side, getting between your man and puck while backchecking.”

The coach, with cooperation from the players, can set goals prior to a game. You can predetermine how many passes you want to complete, the number of face-offs you want to win and the number of scoring chances you want to get.

“Try to find as many of those process goals as you can so the kids feel good about themselves. They need to be having fun and they need to feel that they’re improving.”