

Keeping Players Confident

Considering that only six can play in that final minute, does that leave 14 on the bench in the midst of self-doubt? Not if the coach is on the ball.

New York Rangers' center Eric Lindros was saying recently that he was feeling so confident that the game seemed to be moving in slow motion. He felt as if he had plenty of time to make the right decision with the puck even though he truly only had a split second.

"Confidence is underrated in terms of its importance," said former NHL player Tom Laidlaw. "Especially that's true with younger players, but it's also true with veteran players."

Hockey players always talk about confidence as if it's some kind of magical aura that seems to come and go without warning. When a player is in a scoring slump, he often talks about his lack of confidence. When goals are flying into the net, the same player talks about overwhelming confidence.

"If you think on the ice, it takes way too long," says former NHL goaltender John Davidson, now a hockey analyst. "You can't tell yourself, oh, here comes Mike Modano he's going to shoot high. The second you start to think, he's deking and going by you. Hockey you can't think. It's all about instincts. And to me, instincts and confidence are the same thing."

Davidson believes that instincts are developed over the time, and can be greatly enhanced through the help of coaches from the youth level to the NHL.

"What we are talking about is hockey sense, about reflexes, about just knowing what to do," Davidson said. "And good coaches always find what button to push to make those players trust their instincts — to have that confidence."

How does a coach do that? Through a variety of methods, according to Davidson, including understanding a player's strengths and weaknesses to make sure he is always in a position to find success, reinforcing strong play with increased ice time or by teaching him how to be a leader.

"Every player is different and good coaches often have to work to figure out what works with each player," Davidson says.

Sometimes the methods are conspicuous, such as singling out a player for individual praise during a team meeting, while others are subtle like trying to get one player to serve as a mentor for another.

"Even the New York Rangers put Eric Lindros next to Messier and that was something that was done as soon as Lindros got here," said Davidson. "Coaches do a lot of little things that just keep adding up."

Basketball players sometimes talk about confidence, but hockey players seem to talk about it most. When players say they have lost their confidence, according to Davidson, what they are saying is that they have lost their trust in their instincts. They are filled with self-doubt about their ability to make the right play.

Even pros worry about the talent slipping away from them, evidenced by Brett Hull saying many times that he gets up every morning sincerely worried that he will never score another goal.

"I've heard people say that this game is 75 to 90 percent mental, and I believe it really is," Laidlaw said.

Often this period of self-doubt begins with just a string of bad luck. That usually prompts plays to attempt to do things differently, and they start fighting against the instincts they have relied on since they were kids.

Many NHL coaches say that the best way to resuscitate a player's confidence is to simplify his assignments. When a player is slumping as an offensive contributor, coaches often implore the player to keep it simple — concentrate on his defensive assignment or making the good first pass. What coaches have discovered is that once a player feels like he's contributing something to the team effort, he tends to relax and begins to trust his instincts. The puck starts to enter the net.

"Often a player's confidence rises and falls depending upon how the coach is treating you," Laidlaw says. "If you are protecting a lead with a minute to go, and he taps you on the shoulder and says: 'Go get it done' You feel pretty good about yourself. But if he pulls you off in that final minute, you start to doubt yourself."

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"A coach has to talk to his players," Laidlaw says. "He has to let them know he believes in them, especially young players who are nervous because they believe if they make a mistake they are going to end up on the bench. A coach can help their confidence by finding places in a game where they can play. To me, the coach's job isn't as much about X's and O's as it is managing egos and personalities."

Says Davidson in summary: "What I know about confidence is that it's harder to get back, then it is to lose it."