



Positive Play

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Tom Rudrud has a refreshing approach to coaching hockey. Sure, he wants his players to work hard – but more than that, he wants them to love the game of hockey.

Rudrud, head coach of the Junior A Danville Wings of the North American Hockey League, says his coaching philosophy stems from his early playing days. Rudrud's father was his coach when he played youth hockey and it was his father who instilled in him the key ingredient to coaching success.

"He told me to always stay positive," recalled Rudrud.

"I want my players to work hard and be successful, but at the same time, I want them to enjoy the game," Rudrud added. "Keeping things upbeat helps."

Rudrud may put a positive spin on things, but he's not a 100-percen cheerleader.

"I try to stay positive with my players and be encouraging, but if I need to address criticism I do," he said. "But I try to do it constructively and in a positive way."

Rudrud feels it's very important for junior hockey to nurture players in the "best way possible," even when delivering criticism to a particular player.

When Joe Byrd, a high school senior who is a winger for Danville, was struggling early on during the 1997-98 season, Rudrud didn't bench him. He gave him more playing time.

"Joe has all the talent in the world but he lacked confidence," Rudrud said. "He has great skill and size (6-foot-3, 198 pounds), however, he didn't have confidence with the puck. "But instead of getting down on him, I encouraged him to keep working hard and I gave him more ice time."

Rudrud's encouragement paid off as Byrd later scored four goals in a weekend series.

Rudrud works on fostering a positive environment early on. In fact, he doesn't even wait for players to crack the lineup. Yep, before Rudrud drafts players, he encourages them and their families to visit Danville.

"We are a very family-oriented town that stresses strong family values," Rudrud said. "It's important to get that point across (to potential players) and see how they respond."

When drafting players, Rudrud looks for players that have attained a high skill level and are fundamentally sound. Rudrud purposely keeps his roster to the minimum so everyone has an opportunity to contribute and feel like they are a vital part of the team. "I think it's important," he said.

Aside from his father, Rudrud said the men he has coached with have influenced his coaching philosophy. Rudrud learned a great deal from coach Larry Pedrie when he was an assistant under him at the University of Illinois-Chicago. "He (Pedrie) used to say, 'The best form of defense was a strong offense,'" Rudrud said.

Rudrud also grew under coach John Perpich at Ferris State. "He stressed the importance of size and strength and how instrumental it can be to your team's success," Rudrud recalled.

Rudrud enjoys coaching Danville and feels very fortunate that he has "an excellent group of young men who are playing for the right reasons."

"I am very proud of my players' work ethic and the fact that they are working hard to attain their goal of playing college hockey," said Rudrud, adding, "It's a lot of fun working with guys who are willing to make the necessary sacrifices. I enjoy seeing their excitement as they're having success. And I'm satisfied working with guys that have the hunger, desire and gleam in their eye to push themselves to the next level.

"As they (the younger players) get more comfortable with this level of hockey and adjust to our up-tempo system, our offensive production will only increase."

Rudrud is especially pleased with the leadership of his veteran players. "These guys are doing an excellent job pushing the young guys in the right direction. Their leadership even helps the coaching staff in practice, by demanding hard work from the younger players," said Rudrud.