

STICKY BUSINESS

Ian Robertson is a Toronto, Ontario teacher and Huron Hockey School lecturer who devotes a good deal of his summer explaining how aspiring hockey players can gain psychological advantages over their opponents.

He believes a hockey stick is a player's second most valuable tool after his skates.

"I start with the stiffness of the shaft", says Robertson, who can't pass a stick without assuming a hockey stance and flexing the lumber. "The manufacturer usually provides you with a description right on the shaft itself; stiff, extra stiff, medium or incredibly flexible."

This is followed by an explanation of tendencies.

"You can shoot the puck better using a wrist shot with a whippier shaft but it's better for slapshot purposes to have a stiffer shaft," catalogues Robertson. "The puck is more difficult to control off a whippy stick but you have to be physically strong to use a stiff stick and most minor hockey players aren't."

The importance of the lie of a stick diminished with the advent of the rockered blade.

"A rockered blade produces a different lie all the time so you've got to take that into consideration. I think most kids use a six, which is the most popular lie. Yet they might benefit from using a five or even a four. Guy Carbonneau of the Dallas Stars is one of the few pros who uses a four. In theory, a low lie stick puts the shaft lower and the puck farther away from your body enabling you to generate more power on the shot. That's opposed to a high lie, a seven, which is very upright. A high lie is very close to your feet so, again in theory, you should be able to handle the puck a little bit better."

Stick length is a subject that agitates Robertson and he goes to great lengths to tell you that most players should be using a shorter stick.

"If you watch any hockey video that discusses sticks you invariably are told to cut the stick off at a player's nose if he's standing in his shoes or cut at the chin if he's in his skates. But Robertson maintains a shorter stick allows for better maneuverability and agility with the puck. "Your hands must be able to clear your body when you're shooting or passing the puck on your backhand," explains Robertson. "In most cases when you see a longer stick, the butt end gets caught in your hips and pants because you don't bring your hands right across the front of your body."

Don't pull the incredible shrinking stick play if you're contemplating going to a shorter piece of lumber. It's advised you do it gradually, giving your stick a little "haircut" each time, or it will feel so foreign in your hands that you'll never want to try it again.

Minor hockey coaches are encouraged to let their players experiment with different sticks during practice. Robertson also strongly suggests that parents include their youngsters in the stick selection process.

"Sticks are often given as birthday or Christmas presents and it's a big thrill for the kids," notes Robertson. "But I think it's important to take the youngster into the store

and experiment with the feel of as many different sticks as possible. Robertson stresses that, at least up until the age of twelve, youngsters should use junior style sticks, with their smaller blades and shafts, until they begin to mature physically.

