

The Skinny on Skill

Where have all the scorers gone?

Watch the game at any level and it is clear to see that scoring is down. Has goaltending improved that much? Is defensive play that much better? Is more hooking, holding and interference allowed, resulting in less goals? Are the offensive skills of the players weaker than in the past? Are there less “pure goal scorers” being born?

All of the above are partly true, except for the last one. Not knowing that much about genetics, I would be hesitant to say that goal scorers are born that way.

Possibly the biggest reason would be the “improvement” in coaching over the last 20 years. And the description “improvement” is used very loosely. Has coaching improved at all levels of the game since the US Olympic gold medal twenty years ago? Absolutely. No question about it. But how it has improved is the question.

Over time, anything, well almost anything, will naturally improve, just from repetition. The improvement in coaching has been fueled by the desire to win. Coaches will do anything, well almost anything, if it improves the chances of their team winning. And one of the easiest things to coach is a system, especially a defensive system.

It doesn't necessarily take quality, skilled players to be successful if you can implement a defensive system. Your players don't have to be great skaters, they don't have to be great with the puck, have great vision, nor creativity. All they need to do is work hard within the system. And if they can score 2 or 3 goals while playing smothering defense during the course of the game, it usually is enough to win. Or at least enough to be successful, and to get your team to buy into the system. How else could the Florida Panthers get to the Stanley Cup finals in their infancy? It

certainly wasn't on skill.

So it works. Or does it?

Is it what is best for the players? As a coach are you doing everything that you can to develop your players? Or are you sacrificing player development for winning percentage? That is the question that all coaches need to ask themselves.

At the professional level, the highly skilled players (and certainly the ones at the top of the scoring charts) are predominantly European. Is their system of player development that much better than the North American system? Apparently. If you gauge it on the end result, becoming one of the elite players in the best league in the world.

But is that how it should be gauged? Purely on what system is best for developing skills and sending players to the pros?

Kids play hockey for a number of different reasons – fun, the physical activity, the thrill of competition, the enjoyment of participating in a team sport, and on and on. Many of them play with a dream of someday playing professionally, like the players they idolize. Most will not play past high school. But some will. Some will play

junior, college and even professional. How do we know which ones will and which ones won't?

We don't. And we can't. So how do we decide our coaching philosophy? Do we coach to win? Do we coach to develop skill? Do we try to enhance creativity with the puck? Do we allow players to make mistakes, even if it costs us a win, but makes him a better player in the long run? Does any of it matter, as long as the players are having fun?

You're the coach. You get to decide.

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