

Video brings coach's message into focus

NHL coach-of-the-year Marc Crawford pushed the fast forward button on Paul Fixter's life when he hired him to be the video coach of the Colorado Avalanche.

The affable "Fixy", who also served as an assistant coach under Crawford with the Cornwall Royals, now makes a living scrutinizing, analyzing and breaking down NHL game tape. He believes the application of videotape as a hockey teaching tool differs little from the youth to professional levels. Its primary function is to serve as reinforcement for what is being taught on the ice.

"It's a big thrill, especially for young kids, to see themselves on video and it's amazing how they respond to what they see," says the 31-year-old Fixter, who, as a youngster in Kitchener, Ontario played on the same team as New Jersey Devils captain Scott Stevens.

"We have a saying at Huron Hockey School that 'The monitor doesn't lie.' It seems a coach or parent can tell a kid a hundred times to do this or do that. But if a kid sees it once on video the response invariably is, 'Oh yeah!' When they see it, the impact is much greater than just using verbal communication."

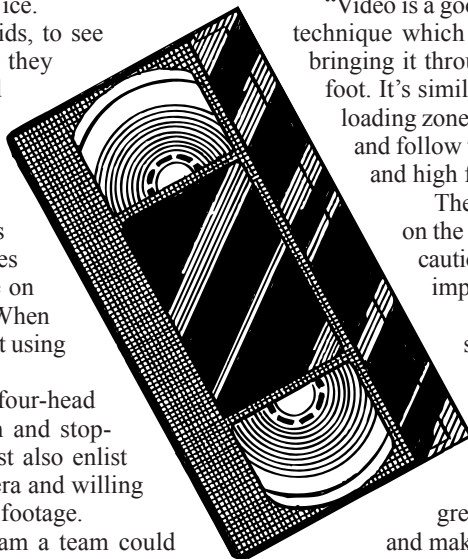
Fixter knows it's imperative to own a four-head VCR for picture clarity during slow-motion and stop-action reviewing. Youth hockey coaches must also enlist the help of a parent who's handy with a camera and willing to make a commitment to obtain the required footage.

Here is Fixter's plan for a video program a team could follow for the season.

"You could build a video component into a once-a-month pizza party or team get-together," recommends Fixter. "Stress that element of fun because the last thing you want to do is make this seem like their seventh school subject."

It would be a progressive taping system staggered to highlight different components of hockey throughout the season.

"For example, in the first month you might want to look at individual skills. Here are three reminders of things we have to do to become better shooters or better passers. The next month you would start with some examples of improvement in those areas and emphasize aspects of defensive zone coverage. The third month could touch upon breakouts from your own zone followed by some offensive zone tactics in month four. You could save special teams play for month five and conclude with a season review that serves as a playoff primer in the final video session."



The coach must set the parameters after determining what areas his team needs to improve, but the possibilities are limitless.

Fixter offers these two ideas geared to younger players.

"Most really young kids don't possess the physical strength to raise the puck when shooting or passing. But they all try to hoist it and you end up seeing some horrible mechanics. They're all arms and upper body while shooting or trying long passes when they should be using the lower body.

"Video is a good teaching tool to show them the proper passing technique which starts with taking the puck off the back foot, bringing it through the middle zone and releasing off the front foot. It's similar to shooting the puck where we talk about the loading zone at the back skate. Trigger zone off the front foot, and follow through with a low follow through for a low shot and high follow through for a high shot."

The coach and parent doing the videotaping must be on the same page gathering and editing material. Fixter cautions coaches to take into account the psychological impact they're having on their players.

"One of our rules, even at the pro level, is to show three or four positive clips of reinforcement for every negative piece of criticism. Videotaping is a valuable tool but it's not the be all and end all. Keep your actual teaching segment at the monthly video party short. Maybe 15 or 20 minutes, and make sure you have plenty of great plays, goals, and saves to pump everybody up and make them feel good about themselves."

Fixter could probably buy his own NHL franchise if he had a dollar for every Huron Hockey School pupil he's critiqued on video over the years. He knows now the basic tenet is just as effective with NHL stars in the winter as it is with kids in the summer.

"I put together a video of the visitor shots for every game. One of the things Colorado goalie coach Jacques Cloutier reminded Stephane Fiset while reviewing one tape was, when you know there's a man in position trying to tip a shot, get out about a foot farther than you normally would be to lessen the angle and the area the puck can be deflected to."

It was more reminder than revelation to Fiset, who could be heard remarking, "Oh, yeah!", in the Avalanche video room that day.

It's a response Paul Fixter has heard thousands and thousands of times before.