

Let's Get Going! Motivating Young Hockey Players

(Originally submitted as an article by Mary Siller for Hockey Player Magazine)

No matter whether you are a parent or coach, you may be noticing that your kids are getting bored; bored at home, in school, and on the rink. They may be house-bound from the weather, studying for tests, or playing the same old teams using the same old moves. What can you, as a coach, do to inject some enthusiasm into your team and prepare the players for a needed resurgence during the season?

Look around. Recognize the signs of frustration or disinterest in your players. Are the athletes not working hard, complaining, late for practice, dropping out? Does it seem like they're just going through the motions? Recognizing your players' moods is the first step towards eventually influencing them.

Getting to know you. The key to understanding your athlete's motivation is to understand each individual's needs. Martha Ewing Ph.D. and Deborah Feltz Ph.D., writing for the National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA), identify the following reasons that young athletes participate in sports:

- to have fun,
- to improve skills and learn new ones,
- for the excitement,
- to be with friends or make new ones, and
- to succeed or win.

Maximize your teams' desire to participate by getting to know the players as individuals and learning what interests them. Learn why they joined the team and address those needs:

- *Focus on skill improvement.* Measure each player's progress, and provide tangible feedback to each player so that he or she can *progress toward their maximum potential*. Let's take, for example, a new goaltenders' progress during the season. Talk one-on-one with that player; identifying his or her style, listing strengths, and providing suggestions for improvement. Make sure that you provide examples from games and practices so that the player can focus on specific types of improvement.
- *Use short, innovative/new drills that involve all of the players.* Review coaching books, videos, and professional and local games for new and challenging drills; and tailor these drills to your teams needs. In addition, introduce off-rink drills or activities that the players can practice on their own time; with friends, teammates, or family members. Don't forget to ensure some of the drills have an element of fun in them (competitive challenges generally translate well into fun drills).
- *Encourage friendships to develop on and off the rink.* Enlist the help of parents (a big coaching helper that is often overlooked) to organize in-season pizza parties or fundraisers. This will get players (and parents) into social situations that can be a catalyst toward developing those friendships.
- *Help your players keep winning in perspective.* Encourage and reward each individual's best effort. An example of this could be spending the last few minutes of practice in a competitive drill. Using a stopwatch, time the players as they skate once around the rink (with or without the puck). Throughout the season, you could recognize players that have improved their time by more than 3 - 5%. Not only does

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the coach highlight the player with the fastest time, but each player has the opportunity to be recognized for their individual improvements.

Relax and converse. As a coach, self-motivation often equals team-motivation. So take an honest, critical look at your coaching style to see how you motivate your team. Terry Orlick, *In Pursuit of Excellence*, addresses a few common coaching errors which, if recognized and dealt with, could improve team motivation. Some coaches believe the best way to motivate a team for competition is to get them "psyched-up" before the game. With young athletes, however, getting psyched-up is not usually the problem; rather, the problem for them is getting "psyched-out". Competitive stress in young athletes can originate from many sources--the athlete, teammates, coach, and parents. Try not to overload the team just before a game with criticism or demanding last-minute changes to familiar plays.

Another coaching error prevalent at all levels is the failure to give adequate positive, consistent, and supportive feedback. A crucial function of positive feedback is to motivate and foster self-confidence.

Communication is (at least) a two person

process. The coach, players, and parents are all responsible for creating an open, honest, and positive communication atmosphere.



Trophies and medals. Trophies, medals, ribbons, and awards are tangible evidence of an athlete's success. Sports banquets focus on giving out these awards at the end of each season. It is debatable whether these awards motivate individuals or equate winning only with success. D. Gould, from the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports in East Lansing, Michigan, says that extrinsic rewards are most effective when they are kept in perspective, are inexpensive, and are used to reflect improvements in personal competence. Don't forget that the intangible awards; a pat on the back after a tough game or a *way-to-go* during a solid penalty-killing role can also go a long way.

The end of the season may almost be here. Keep your team fine-tuned-mentally and physically for the play-offs, and review your coaching style to see how you effectively motivate your young hockey players.

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