

Teaching versus Drilling

In the world of professional hockey we pre-scout our competition in an effort to be prepared. I do the same thing in the hockey school world as well.

Throughout 24 years of operating hockey schools I have personally observed competitors programs and the glaring issue is the absence of the camp's expert.

I was recently in attendance at a camp with a national presence and noticed yet again the absence of the camp's expert. I asked a parent if this bothered her and she replied, "No, because she was informed the staff was trained to teach his system and as long as they teach his system, I am ok with it."

I asked if I could watch the camp with her and she agreed. The first drill required her son to shoot a puck along the boards to a child waiting behind the net. Her son skated along the boards to meet another player who was told to collect the shoot-in. Her son was told to "Battle" the player behind the net who had now stopped the puck. The player's were told to "Battle" for the puck and try to take the puck from behind the net and score.

The woman's son was quite small and the other player was much bigger. As her son approached the larger player, I just knew what was going to happen. Physics took over and her son was knocked to the ice by the bigger player and the bigger player stepped out from behind the net and scored an easy goal. The group had 10 kids in it with one coach (even though the camp advertised a 5:1 ratio). The other eight player's did the drill and the original two player's switched position's and got to do the drill one more time before it was time to move onto the next drill. The woman's son got knocked down again and the bigger player scored another easy goal.

This scenario was repeated at every station and her son spent most of the next 50 minutes being knocked down repeatedly. Not once was he corrected and taught how to handle the situation he was facing. Regardless of his size if the staff had corrected his tactics he would have had more success in executing the drill. After the session I asked her what her son actually learned from the experience except how to get up off the ice? She had no answer.

I spoke with some of the coaches after the session and asked them their names and credentials (this is the same process I went through when I used to send my son to hockey schools). The camp website promoted the staff as current professionals, etc. Only one guy had any "Pro" experience and that was in the CHL (Central Hockey League). Seeing I coached in that league, I was not surprised that these coaches did not understand the learning process and how important it is to break things down into more digestible pieces.

Let me share with you why the "Battle drills" were such a disaster. In the NHL we draft 18 year old players and bring them to a development camp 2 weeks after the draft. We put them through "Battle drills" as well and every- single one of them executes the drills incorrectly and we know why. They spend most of their youth playing 80-100 games a year; most of these kids face "Battle" situations about 5 percent of the game. I know this because I have actually placed a stopwatch on players and tabulated

how much time is actually spent in “Battle” situations. Try it yourself, last year I placed a clock on an NHL defenseman and he was in actual 1 on 1 battles for 2 minutes out of a game where he played 15 minutes. So because very little time is actually spent in one on one battles, at the youth level especially, because the puck is in transition 80% of the time (it’s constantly moving from one team to the next or the best player is carrying it all the time) and kids are not being “Taught” the fundamentals of “Battling”, therefore they are unable to execute in practice or games.

Once we have proven to them that they lack the skills necessary to compete in our league, we teach them the fundamentals and break every step down into small parts until they execute correctly, then we move onto the next drill. This is the process with NHL draft picks yet at this camp the kids are not being taught they are simply being placed in situations where failure is prominent and there is no correction. I am sure their parents thought they saw improvement but it was not lasting as they were never “taught”, they were just drilled and there was no long-term retention.

In closing I would like to express these two points...

- 1) It is important that the “expert” be in attendance regardless of the staff’s qualifications. This would ensure that the investment that parents are making into their player’s development is a valuable investment.
- 2) My intention is to express the importance of proper execution and the value of constant correction of fundamental skills and their relationship to long-term retention of these skills. Basically – a player should not just be “put through” a drill and then moved onto the next lesson the player should be taught the drill properly and be required to execute the drill effectively before moving onto the next lesson. Quite often the next lesson is a continuation of the previous lesson.

Thank you,

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