



Quality Instruction

Editor's Note: During the hockey year, there are many hockey schools and programs, which teach, power skating and hockey skills development. However, the quality of the instruction varies greatly depending on which program is chosen.

In the Winter 2005 issue of Hockey Zones, Coach Rex's corner discussed the art and science of coaching. This past article can be found on our Web-site www.tuckerhockey.com. It identified 33 qualities, which are required to pursue coaching excellence. For this edition of Coach Rex's corner, the emphasis is on hockey instruction. Hockey instruction is the art and science of teaching hockey skills – technical and tactical. It is a “specialized component” within the coaching profession.

Tucker Hockey has identified 16 components to ensure Quality hockey instruction.

Preparation

Being prepared prior to going on the ice ensures a professional looking program. The instructor is relaxed and confident because he or she is knowledgeable of the curriculum, the drill selection, teaching points, proper demonstrations/explanations practice set-up and can visualize how things will operate on the ice. Being properly prepared ensures the practice session runs smoothly and most of all the players benefit.

Appearance

Wearing a good tracksuit reflects a professional image. In addition, when on the ice all Tucker Hockey instructors wear hockey helmets. We believe helmets should be mandatory for all on – ice instructors across Canada. Safety first!

Convey Objectives and Theme of Program

At the start of the program, convey to participants the curriculum, and what they should expect to get out of the program. In the past I have experienced kids showing up for a power skating program expecting to do shooting drills! Know what the program is about first before signing up, otherwise it may lead to disappointment.

Positive Energy/Enthusiasm

A positive attitude is contagious. It's important to create a positive learning environment. It's important to show you love being on the ice and teaching hockey skills. Players feed off

your positive/upbeat energy. I often tell participants that I am on the ice over 500 times per year – I love being on the ice. It is where I like to hang out!

Volume and Tone of Voice

Too often I have witnessed instructors continuously shouting at players. After a while it gets stale, and players tune out the instructors. It's important to give players positive reinforcement and encouragement without intimidating them (especially younger kids) and negatively affecting their self esteem. Too much shouting at players and not talking to them creates a very negative learning environment. We want to be heard but not to be annoying.

Read and Adjust to Audience

The skill level of the players will affect your curriculum. An instructor needs to provide drills which stretch the players, but does not frustrate them due to lack of success. Neither should the practice bore them due to the drill being too easy or not challenging enough. It's an art. It's important to teach hockey skills and correct errors but equally important to keep players moving – to give them enough quality repetitions of the drills especially, if there are 20 or more players on the ice.

If an instructor is trying to teach tactical skills and the core of the group do not have sufficient technical skills, the drills will be executed poorly and both instructors and players will be frustrated with the results or lack of results. Age will also play a part. If the players are really young, such as tyke or novice, it is important to incorporate a good mix of fun drills/games with skill development. If players are AA/AAA calibre, it's important to teach skill development but also to challenge the players and push them with advanced drills designed with a high intensity component.

No matter what the age or skill level, sometimes players are tired or have low energy levels, so an instructor may have to tone down the practice session.

On-Ice Demonstrations

A picture is worth a thousand words. When an instructor properly demonstrates a drill, such as a skating skill, a player sees first hand the right way to do the skill and can then duplicate what has been shown. For teaching technical skills especially skating skills, on-ice demonstrations are the best and most effective way to provide instruction.

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“You are what you are when no one is looking”

-Anonymous

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Convey Proper Teaching Points

When demonstrating a drill, it's important to identify the key teaching points but not overload the players with too much information. Cover the essential teaching points, build on and expand on depending on the abilities of the players.

Provides Positive Feedback and Correction of Errors

Players like to receive praise and positive reinforcement. It's important to give players good encouragement and correct their mistakes. When a player performs the drill or skill incorrectly, the instructor must let the players know what they did wrong, demonstrate properly and get the players to perform again. Doing the skill correctly and repeat, repeat, repeat will ensure a player improves on performance.

Progression of Drills

The curriculum needs to be presented with a "building block" approach. Start with drills, which provide confidence and then advance to drills, which challenge and stretch the players. For power skating drills, players can do the drills without pucks and later progress with pucks.

Time Management

Ice time is very valuable so it's very important to use it wisely. To keep the players active and not spend too much time talking to players. There must be a good balance between too many and not enough repetitions. Players need to perform the skill enough times to gain improvement but not too many times where players get bored / tired of the repetitions. Keep the practice session high tempo with a good variety of drills so as to challenge and keep players interested.

Utilizes On-ice Assistants

The head instructor requires a good supporting cast. Assistant instructors

need to be familiar with the curriculum, selection of drills and teaching points prior to stepping on the ice. Assistants can contribute in the areas of setting up the drills, placing pylons in the correct places, moving pucks around, demonstrating skills, assisting weaker players with words of encouragement, correcting errors and leading sub-groups on the ice. The assistants help the head instructor ensure things run smoothly.

Often parents are concerned with the ratio of players to instructors on the ice. An excellent ratio is eight to one. It's important to keep in mind; it's not the total number of instructors on the ice but how involved each instructor is on the ice. I have seen programs that are far more effective with three instructors vs. six or seven instructors. Having six or seven instructors on the ice may look good on the surface but if they are not active and involved – day dreaming or shooting pucks around – it really doesn't enhance the quality of the program.

Displays instruction innovation/novel ideas

It's important to continuously tweak the on-ice program to make it better each time out. Receiving feedback from parents and players and incorporating new teaching approaches. For example, when teaching knee bend within my power skating program, I have utilized several unique drills such as the gorilla drill and the soccer ball drill.

Mentions Player's Names and Engages Group in Short Talks

Players like to hear their name especially when they are doing a drill well. Having players place their name on their helmets personalizes the learning environment. As well, short talks with the group throughout the ice sessions keeps the players engaged and creates a good positive learning environment. Players need to feel

welcomed and fitting in small talks at the start and at the end of a session creates a good atmosphere.

Seeks Input from Participants/Parents

It is important to foster feedback from players and parents so as to ensure an ongoing successful program. Players/parents should be encouraged to fill out post program feedback forms. An instructor may have a set program, but the skill level or other factors may affect the delivery of the program.

Often within a select age level the skill level varies. It's important to tailor the program to the middle skill level of the group. Challenge the top players but not frustrate the lower end players and conversely challenge the low-end players but not bore the top end players.

Besides the science of teaching the skills, there's also the art of instruction because it's like Forrest Gump's Box of Chocolates "You never know what you're going to get." Each age group can be so different from one another.

Makes Adjustments For a "Better Next Time Session"

Every on ice session is a learning process. Often instructors have good intentions about doing a certain curriculum on the ice but after conducting the first few drills realize they may have to tone things down due to the lack of skill level or raise the bar because of the higher skill level of the group. As an instructor, it's a continuous learning experience. Coaches and instructors expect players to hone their skills and to get better. As well, I feel good instructors are always looking for better drills, new teaching points and ideas to hone their craft as well.

Hockey and life are continuous learning no matter our age or background. Keep the fun in the learning too!

"A professional is someone who can do his/her best work when he/she doesn't feel like it"

-Allistair Cooke