

Successful Season

What is your definition of a successful hockey season?

The minor hockey regular season once again is coming to a close and March playoffs are just around the corner. In a few weeks, when you reflect back on this year's hockey season, what will constitute a successful season for you? Winning Provincials? Winning the City championship? Winning the Divisional title? Winning Minor Hockey Week? I trust your season will be remembered for more than just your team's win and loss column.

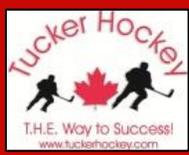
For individuals working in the NHL ranks, a successful season is making the playoffs and ultimately winning the Stanley Cup. Basically winning is everything! The stakes are so very high. Often if you don't win you will lose your job!

When looking at the minor hockey world the attitudes, priorities and focus should be different...much different indeed! Winning is not everything. Everyone aspires to be a winner... no-one likes to lose... but I truly feel there are so many things which equate to a successful season than just winning. Why? The minor hockey system develops not only hockey players but young people as well. Since only a small percentage of players will go on to make a living in the sport, it is important to keep the proper perspective on the season and its end results. Hockey is the greatest sport on earth and every child should enjoy the experience of lacing up the skates and participating in a team sport. The recent Canadian Hockey Association T.V. commercials regarding "Relax it's only a Game!" philosophy directed towards overbearing parents...who place too much pressure on their kids... are priceless! The video clips on the golf course, in the supermarket and the traffic ticket scenes are very amusing to watch indeed. They convey a very important message to parents...let your child play the game...have fun and develop their hockey skills ...and let the chips fall where they may!

The main emphasize should be on hockey skill development and having fun! Too many minor hockey coaches are trying to teach team tactics, positional play and systems to their players and are "tunneled into winning" when the emphasize should be on teaching skill development i.e. skating, passing, puck control and shooting etc...the fundamentals of the game.

Success can be measured in many, many ways...here's a little "food for thought" ... Maybe it's the tyke player who learned to skate from one end of the ice to the other without falling down...maybe it's the novice player who can finally raise his / her wrist shot off the ice...maybe it's the atom player who learned to skate backwards this season... maybe it's the peewee player who has learned to take and give a check properly and safely.... maybe it's the bantam player who switched from playing forward to defense and now enjoys the game better from his / her new position on the blue line...maybe it's the parent who introduced their child to hockey and their kid has fallen in love with the sport. "Eh, mom / dad I want to go to the rink!" Maybe it's the rookie assistant coach who was a little nervous about helping out the team but came out of his / her shell and truly enjoys helping the kids...maybe it's the head coach who molded the team into a very competitive unit when at the start of the season going 0 for 5 things didn't look too promising...maybe it's the grandparent who decided to "free up some time", to see his / her grandchild play this season; saw the first game....got hooked... and didn't miss a game all season! Maybe it's the younger sister who wondered what all the fuss was all about with her older hockey playing brother...signed up for girls hockey and loves it...maybe it's the "first time" parent volunteer i.e. score keeper, time keeper, fund raiser who now loves the game atmosphere and the social environment around the hockey rink...maybe it's the first time volunteer minor hockey administrator who has a better appreciation of the thankless time and energy volunteer administrators, coaches and parents put into our game. Maybe you can think of a few more. I know you can add to the list! When looking back at the hockey season, many things will come to mind... on and off the ice... while no season will be perfect...there should be more good memories / thoughts than bad about your participation in the greatest sport on earth.

Reflecting on my own minor hockey experiences, my last season behind the bench was in 1995. Even though my team made tremendous progress from the previous year, we fell short of making the playoffs by 3 points. At the end of the season, I won the "Coach of the Year" award in the Calgary Junior Hockey League but this award was not the most satisfying or most memorable part of my season. Two events stand out. The first event happened in the middle part of the season schedule when our team won a game without a goalie! My number one goalie i.e. Kyle had to work and I couldn't recruit another goalie from my Midget "AAA" or Midget "AA" affiliate list. So my back-up goalie i.e. Scottie was the lone goalie on my game sheet. At 6:45 pm...no Scottie... where's Scottie? I went to a pay phone and called Scottie. Scottie thought the game started at 9 pm...it was a 7 pm start instead! We did not have a goalie for the start of the game! What do we do? I decided to start the game without a goalie and wait until Scottie arrived...better late than never. I developed a game plan to play "keep away" when we had the puck and play "pressure on the puck" when the opposition had the puck. We created an "I" formation with two forwards in the neutral zone...they were instructed not to skate past the center line unless we had the puck... had three players lined up across our blue line and one player guard our net zone. We managed to escape after the first period down only two to one! When Scottie arrived for the start of the second period, we went on to win the game 6 to 3. It was quite a thrilling and exciting game...what a joyous atmosphere in the dressing room after the game...we could have easily folded our tent and given up... but we pulled it together as a team! Fond memories indeed!



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Off the ice my best memory related to a phone call I received during the off-season, from one of my players Troy. Troy had called to see if I would be coaching the team for the upcoming season. With a very heavy heart, I had to tell him no... because of uncertainty with my work situation I could not commit to coaching the team. Troy was the last player I placed on my roster during the previous season. He would often get down on himself because he was not scoring but I told him I didn't care if he scored all season as long as he worked hard, and played good two way hockey! He only scored one goal all season... Troy was a player who had difficulty with his school work throughout the season and would often call me to ask if he could skip practice to study for an exam...I would say no problem just give me your "A" game next time we play! When Troy learned that I would not be coaching he said to me: "Rex, last season was the most enjoyable year I have ever had in my 12 years of playing hockey, I learned so much and had so much fun!" Thanks again for everything!...Those words from an 18 year old hockey player were much more gratifying to me than winning the "Coach of the Year" award. It reinforced that I had a very positive influence on a young athlete's growth and development and his teammates over the course of the hockey season.

So the minor hockey season is coming to a close for another year. When you look back at the season whether a player, coach, parent or administrator I trust you will have many fond memories of participating in the greatest sport on earth... because the game consists of more than just winning. Winning is not everything..."relax it's just a game"... but it's the greatest game on earth... enjoy it!

Yours in Hockey,
Coach Rex