

Coach Rex's Corner: Critical Years of Hockey Development - Ages 7 to 12

Editor's Note:

For an aspiring hockey player, the timeframe between the early years of 7 to 12 are extremely important for hockey development, especially if a player dreams of someday playing city quadrant hockey, junior A, collegiate, semi-pro or ultimately in the NHL.

Yes, the higher the level of play the greater are the incredible odds of reaching one's lofty goals.

This article was originally published in the Winter 2007 edition of Hockey Zones newsletter.

To mark the 20th Anniversary of Tucker Hockey I have decided to give this prior article a tune up.

With another 10 years of on ice instruction for Coach Rex in the hockey trenches which includes an additional 5,000 hours honing one's craft, here are 10 components which I feel are most significant for proper early hockey development.

There are many different schools of thought on hockey development. I trust you will enjoy the read....opinions to the editor are truly welcomed!

Positive Initiation

- Receives the Right Start - learns to skate and acquires the right taste / love for the sport of hockey as a beginner.

Proper Equipment

- It makes a difference in a player's development and performance. It's difficult for parents to keep up, even for parents, who know about proper equipment because of growth spurts and more than one child playing in the family. Equipment issues include correct fitting of skates, proper stick length, proper helmet fit and hockey pants that are not too short - equipment fitted for safety first and good performance.

A fun, positive, learning environment

- Fun for players, parents as well as coaches

- An environment that allows the development of the player's self - esteem, self confidence as well as hockey skills
- Coaches and instructors who teach good skills in a fun not too serious atmosphere
- Players want and look forward to going to the rink

Friendships and Social

- Early exposure to the game with their friends and family in a positive and enjoyable environment
- Buddies like to play with buddies especially in the early years - good camaraderie
- Being part of a team environment surrounded by good hockey people is critical

Acquires a Love for the Game

- Starts with fun and the challenges of improving which morphs into a love for the game. A player has a burning desire to go to the local rink to practice and to play and to get better each and every day. Spends extra time outside structured hockey to play, play and play some more...

Healthy Family Support

- It plays a very important part in a player's development, but many players have succeeded in a very negative environment. In fact, hockey can be an escape for some players, who live in a negative home environment. Parents should offer good, positive feedback and sincere encouragement - not too high and flattering and not too low and negative. Parents need to listen to their child's wants and needs to avoid burn-out i.e. playing too many games etc., and to offer proper guidance and support. Avoid too much pressure to play and to perform. Keep the fun in the sport! A player's success will affect his or her supporter's lives. Family members will have to make many sacrifices for an individual to go far in any competitive sport.

Good Instruction / Coaching / Mentoring

- Teach learn to skate, scrimmage and have fun

(Cont'd p.32)

Coach Rex's Corner (Cont'd from 9)

- Teach proper technique especially balanced skating
- Teach basic hockey skills / fundamentals of the game
- Teach fair play, the value of hard work and doing a player's best
- Teach how to play the game – positional play / strategies
- Foster creativity in players – to enhance development and stretch their game / potential
- Teach not only hockey skills and hockey IQ but life skills as well
- Players will require good mentors and role models – no one can go it alone.

Athleticism

- Gifted - god given natural talent
- Often inherited and often dormant
- Individual players show athletic development occurring at different stages in their life. This is why the 7 to 12 year old stage is so critical. It sets the base for later development and success.
- Plays other sports throughout the year until specializing later at the Bantam or Midget ages

Personality Traits of the Player

- Shows dedication, persistence, discipline and determination. Level headed emotions - a team player

- pays attention to coaches and other players to improve one's game. Realizes good is never good enough and that he or she needs a big commitment to be the best. Yes, many hours of practice - the 10,000 hour rule to master and excel at something is often a mentioned standard.

Luck and Fate

- It has forever played a role in sports. It is sometimes called the unseen hand. For example, when the puck hits the post or crossbar and goes out. One quarter of an inch and it would have gone in. It occurs every game. Time after time - deflections, bounces and missed pucks etc. Near misses and near goals, being in the right place and at the right time in a game and in life has defined many a hockey success / failure. Having a coach who believes in you and gives you an opportunity to excel has shaped many a hockey career.

In summary, there are so many variables which determine whether a player will be successful in the game of hockey. Many things the player can control while other things are completely out of his or her hands. The key is always enjoying and doing your very best if you wish to achieve success. When you do your best you should not have any regrets but countless fond memories from participating in the wonderful sport of hockey.