

Coaching in the NHL

This week another good man and good coach lost his job in the National Hockey League. Greg Gilbert was the second hockey coach to lose his job this season following Darryl Sutter's departure from San Jose. The bottom line... if you don't win... you don't keep your job! The stakes are so very high at the NHL level on and off the ice. The National Hockey League is a multi - million dollar business. The league is so competitive on the ice that if a team slumps into a 10 game losing streak... the playoff picture becomes very bleak indeed! Off the ice millions of dollars ride on the success or failure of the hockey product on the ice.

The Calgary Flames have not made the playoffs since the 1995 – 1996 season under the stewardship of Pierre Page. Greg Gilbert, Don Hay, Brian Sutter and Pierre Page, during his second season, unsuccessfully attempted to guide the Flames into the playoffs... 6 plus years maybe 7 long years? Time will tell... of non-playoff hockey in the City of Calgary. Why? Calgary hockey fans and supporters have their own views on this subject matter. Inadequate coaching, poor management decisions, small market restrictions, lack of team chemistry, lack of talent on the ice or just plain bad luck... many come to one's mind!

I strongly believe the problem has not been inadequate coaching. It reminds me of the squeeze the orange exercise... where one tries to obtain as much juice as possible from the orange. I personally feel several years ago Brian Sutter squeezed as much juice out of the Flames' orange as humanly possible... but Brian still could not generate a winner!

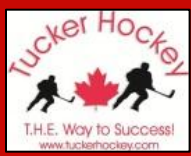
Why would a person want to coach in the NHL? Maybe, to gain the rare opportunity to coach at the highest level of the hockey profession, to have the unique experience of coaching many elite and gifted athletes, to cherish the challenge and opportunity to ultimately test one's coaching talents and abilities, to earn a very comfortable living within the game one loves, and / or to gain hockey fame? However, coaching at the NHL level involves a down side of: living in a fish bowl, subjecting one's self to a world of criticism and second guessing from television, radio, the press and the public at large. "Every one's an expert", taking the game home with you every day, subjecting one's self to many sleepless nights trying to figure out ways to win, and sacrificing time away from the wife and children? After the post firing press conference Greg Gilbert showed class and poise when discussing his departure from the Flames. He seemed relieved that he would no longer be taking home with him the game and as well he could get to know his wife and children again! He projected a sense of peace knowing he did everything he possibly could do to create a winner in Calgary.

The coaching profession is an art and a science. It's not rocket science but it definitely involves more than opening the rink gate. Many people who watch the game on television think they know the game. Many ex- players who have played at a high level feel they can coach. Many instructors / coaches who can diagram a drill i.e. the x's and o's feel they know the game but there are so many components to being a successful coach including at times a little luck! Besides knowing the technical, tactical and team system part of the game, a successful coach is a strong leader, teacher, organizer and innovator. Roger Neilson, who has coached 1,000 games in the NHL, has showcased his innovative skills over the years. Cultivating ways to win throughout the season with the cards one is dealt often requires a great deal of "coaching savvy"! Coaching requires supreme communication, knowing one's personnel, their strengths and weaknesses, knowing one's own strengths and weaknesses, and the ability to "push the right buttons" throughout the course of the season.

Recently I attended a coaching clinic held by Canadian Hockey at the Saddledome. Both Tom Renney, V.P. of Player Development for the New York Rangers and Mike Polino, Assistant Coach for the Canadian Men's team at the Salt Lake City Olympics gave interesting and informative views on the art and science of coaching. Mike Polino reflected on the motivational tools i.e. videos etc. the Team Canada coaching staff employed to inspire Canada to win Olympic Gold. Mike expressed the view "he was honored to be called a coach... to touch the lives of young people... emphasizing keeping the fun in the game... making people feel special who are working around him". Tom Renney reflected on his coaching background with the Kamloops Blazers, Canadian Men's National team and the Vancouver Canucks. Tom expressed the view "it's important to be yourself, demonstrate your values, don't kid yourself (know your strengths and weaknesses, smart people change and adjust their thinking), be a leader (people accept the challenge when it is their challenge), surround yourself with the best people and the intangibles (... have a dream....a vision....a plan)

Food for Thought:

At the minor hockey system, I strongly believe the game is about developing hockey skills, developing not only young hockey players but developing young people, enjoying the game and the people within the game, and instilling the will to win in hockey, and ultimately in life However, winning is the destination not the journey. The journey is more important than the destination. To the contrary, in the National Hockey League the stakes are high... so very high... the bottom line is winning is everything!! It can cost a person his job; Greg Gilbert is a prime example. One has to win or they are given their walking papers! Harry Neale, former NHL



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Coach and HNIC analyst often expressed the following views: “As a coach you are hired to be fired. When you can’t win in your own building and you can’t win in the visitors building... you’re running out of places to win!”

Yours in Hockey,
Coach Rex