Reflecting on the Choice of Technical Scenarios While Coaching a Developing Hockey Team

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Introduction

The game of hockey is composed of a series of decisions, initiated by a deciding factor and resulting from gathered information. Consequently, each action corresponds to an *ad hoc* situational analysis enabling the player to make the right move in order to meet the needs of the moment.

The results obtained will justify the final decision. As an example, let's examine the case of a player who has control of the puck and is moving towards a corner of the ice when suddenly an opponent appears to his left. He decides to make a sharp turn to the left. Result: the opponent steals the puck away from him. And yet, his turn was technically perfect: *just like in the books*. A turn to the right would have undoubtedly been preferable. Later on in the game, he is faced with the same situation. In an attempt to benefit from his experience earlier on, he says: *This time, I will stop abruptly to the right in order to securely protect the puck*. Oh no! The opponent lifts up his stick and gets away with the puck again. Even though executing the abrupt stop and protecting the puck were near perfection, it is clear that a sharp turn would have allowed him to retain his speed and avoid the stick check. An abrupt stop farther away from the opponent may also have been adequate.

Technical execution is then desirable, but not the ultimate goal since the effectiveness of the action is measured by the results obtained. What should be our focus point: impeccable technique or the ability to make the right decision? What move should I make? On which side? Where? Should I pass or shoot? Skate quickly or slowly? Aggressively or calmly guide the puck to a partner? Should we develop *pretty players* (whose technique is beyond reproach) or *smart players* (whose sound decisions are what make them effective). Asking this question is the best way to answer it, don't you think? If you find one who is both *pretty* and *smart*, sign him immediately!!!

Scenarios / Division / Time of Year

Technical needs evolve over time. Finding his balance remains the beginner's main concern. To learn, he must confront a problematic situation: What do I do to stay upright? The more he falls, the more he will learn. If he remains on his feet, the difficulty of the scenario will be questioned. Later on, he will experiment with a variety of postures that will enable him to counteract the imbalance created by executing the various forward and backward skating movements. He will learn to stop quickly without falling with his skates parallel so he can combine a crossover start with the stop; he will learn to retain his speed when pivoting; he will strive to control the puck when turning, and so on.

The table in Annex 1 that presents the percentage of time spent teaching the basic hockey elements indicates that the time invested in developing technical skills varies. It decreases from one division to the next, as well as over the course of the season. This is not a coincidence, since a young player's technical needs evolve with age. My observations have shown that as players mature, they become more reluctant to modify their way of skating, dribbling or shooting. Their technical profile takes shape. Their individual build, morphology, weight transfer and motor coordination are all elements that help determine the quality of their technical executions. (Are there two players who are identical in terms of technique? And yet, consulting a technical manual would give us the impression that there is but a single way of doing things.) The same question is on everyone's lips: Can a player be effective in a game if his technique is less than perfect?

Two Methods of Teaching

The first type of technical teaching is **postural** in nature. The beginner needs to *feel* his body, how it is placed and the effect it produces. If he remains upright, retains the puck or hits his target, you could say that he respected at least some of the points to look for. The coach will then progressively increase the difficulty of the scenarios to allow him to improve his posture (balance) and the quality of the movement being practised. Take the example of learning sharp turns: when a player is just beginning, he doesn't have to lean to the inside because his speed is low. The more the coach increases the speed, the more the player will need to compensate by leaning his body to the inside if he wants to keep from falling and maintain his speed. He has no choice, and doesn't need to be told.

It goes without saying that the number of times a movement is repeated in the allotted time period is of great concern to the coach. If he invests ten minutes, the time must be worthwhile. The selected scenario should enable the players to repeat the movement as often as possible in the allotted time (volume). The pace (active time, ex: no line-ups) during skating exercises must be quick (but not necessarily the skating speed); the distance between two players exchanging the puck must be shortened if the movement of the sweep shot is to be developed; one puck for every two players is used; one puck per player for dribbling, shooting; etc. It all depends on the objective of the scenario.

I believe that young players improve their posture until approximately 12-14 years of age, after which time, little change is apparent without investing an appreciable amount of time in the off-season. Consequently, the pre-novice and novice divisions (5-8 years) are when the most significant changes will take place. The kids must be placed in numerous scenarios that allow them to explore and make mistakes. In the Atom Division, time in the early season could be spent perfecting certain points, but it should be completed by October. Pee-Wee coaches must limit their intervention to individual correction on a per-need basis. As of Bantam Division, postural teaching no longer exists for all intents and purposes.

But the question remains: how do you fill the time set aside for technical teaching from this point on without *being technical*?

The Three Stars: LIMITED SPACE / SPEED / OPPOSITION

Skating or dribbling alone improves execution, but is not representative of a true game context. The presence of partners or opponents forces a player to make decisions. Don’t we criticize our players for a lack of creativity? Increasing or decreasing speed or turning to the left instead of the right to avoid a collision, and keeping the puck instead of passing or shooting are only a few of the issues that young players must learn to resolve through their own decisions.

I have seen many coaches have their players accelerate at the sound of a whistle, stop at lines, skate around pylons, and make passes to players who remain still, all with hard passes at every occasion. In each of these situations, it is the coach who triggers the action; whereas in a game it is up to the opponents and partners to do so. When the coach sets up pylons, he chooses the location and side where the turn

will take place. He's the one who decides. Go for postural teaching, but in terms of creativity, *it's a whole other ballgame!* **Decisional** teaching is of the essence.

OPPOSITION

What causes a player to accelerate in a game? Is it the blow of a whistle? Of course not. It is the fact of pursuing or being pursued, of wanting to occupy a free area in front of the opponent or (worst-case scenario) to counter an opposing maneuver. How many hockey players skate headlong down the ice from beginning to end of a game without giving thought to the situation? What determines the location and side of a turn other than the presence of the opponent or a partner? Consequently, **these are the situations the players must learn to recognize**. Did Wayne Gretzky always pass the puck at 100 mph? Wasn't he the greatest passer of all time? Mario Lemieux has the reputation of being a slow skater. On the other hand, no one can catch him! He simply accelerates when dictated by the situation. When the coach expects the passes to be hard in practice, he does not necessarily take the situation into account. **Without opposition, no deciding factor is present.** In fact, the position of the opponent and the proximity of the receiver are what determine how forceful the pass will be.

LIMITED SPACE, SPEED

A hockey game takes place over a 185' area, but in actual fact only 80' are used at any one time. The occupied space is pretty small for ten players together. If I ask my players to dribble the puck moving around the ice, chances are good that they will never lose the puck. We could be led to believe at this point in time that the dribbling concepts were well taught by the coach and that the players are gaining confidence. This is not the case, however, because the scenario is overly simplistic. There is too much open space. To improve the quality of the dribble, the scenarios must be staged in a limited space with lots of movement. **Losing possession must be provoked.** At the very least, the coach could require speed to make the task more challenging. Being surrounded by partners, limited space and speed are what makes it interesting. At a given moment, he could even designate a certain number of players without the puck (the red sweaters, for example) to try to draw the puck away from them, thereby introducing opposition. When these three ingredients are brought together, we have everything we need to foster **decision making and creativity**. The players will learn to choose a technique and solve a problem in

order to keep the puck. After a few failed attempts with a turn in similar circumstances, they will come to the conclusion that they need to come up with a different technique or a turn at a different spot. **This is how they learn to become efficient.** At the same time, they will build up their **confidence** and **self-esteem**, two indispensable character traits for hockey.

The same line of thinking can be applied to learning how to shoot the puck. With younger skaters, the initial scenarios must reproduce all possible contexts without neglecting to ask them for various skating movements: the two players facing each other motionless; the carrier in motion while the target is stationary; the carrier is immobile with a moving target; both players moving in the same direction; both players moving in opposite directions. All of this is postural. Next, the passes should be carried out in a situation involving uncovering with an increasing number of partners and opponents (creativity) so that the players become able to choose the right time to make their move. This is pure decision making. Without opposition during practice, expecting a great number of successful passes during a game is unrealistic. On many occasions I have seen players execute a perfect sweep pass that was intercepted, make a pass too hard to a partner right near by, or be unable to find their available partner. These errors go well beyond the technical aspects of executing the pass. All too often we see passing exercises without opposition in Bantam or Midget practices. How do they determine the precise moment and type of pass to make?

Biceps and pectorals can be beefed up through frequent weight training. This is the effect of training. How can we then improve the quality of the decisions made by our players? What do you think?

The Game as Part of Practice

Once upon a time, on-ice coaching sessions consisted essentially of scrimmage. All coaches agree now that this is not the way to go. Then the hockey *technicians* appeared on the scene. These guys were maybe a little too technical! We have gone way overboard insisting on the technical execution of the movements. Result: we have created *pretty players*, who are very strong technically-speaking, but accordingly to many, *do not know how to play*. A happy medium must exist somewhere, right?

I feel that the game (3-on-3, 4-on-4, across the width of the ice) remains a key element of coaching sessions. Through them, a learned technique can be transferred to a game situation without delay. Furthermore, it is fun, stimulating and real. The trap is to not set objectives for the players; just play for the sake of playing. You can practise technique by playing 3-on-3 across the width of the ice. For example, you simply have to require a minimum of five sweep passes before making a shot on goal and intervene when the directive is not followed for the game to take on a different, pedagogical dimension. What need to be reproduced in practice are scenarios that imitate game situations as closely as possible. In this example, technical teaching time is being used, even if a 3-on-3 is from the tactical world. Everything depends on the goal at hand. Remember these three terms: limited space / speed /opposition. This is the key…

Conclusion

Just ask your friends if they like the show when watching a hockey game on television. Many will reply that *it's as dry as dust*! And yet, this is the fruit of 20 years of development. Isn't it about time that we stopped repeating the same mistakes, year after year? If we don't like the results, we need to change our approach, right? Let's go back to the drawing board!

Annex 1

COACH'S YEARLY PLANNING IN % OF TIME								
	Global %	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar
Atom								
Technical	50	75	70	60	50	35	30	30
Technico-Tactical	30	15	20	25	30	40	40	40
Tactical	20	10	10	15	20	25	30	30
Pee-Wee								
Technical	40	65	60	50	40	25	20	30
Technico-Tactical	35	20	25	30	35	40	45	40
Tactical	25	15	15	20	25	35	35	30
Bantam								
Technical	30	30	35	35	30	25	20	20
Technico-Tactical	40	50	45	40	40	30	35	35
Tactical	30	20	20	25	30	40	45	45
Midget								
Technical	25	30	25	25	25	20	20	20
Technico-Tactical	30	35	35	30	30	25	25	25
Tactical	45	35	40	45	45	55	55	55