

Tryouts – A Coach’s Perspective

There are many ebbs and flows in a hockey season. Whether it's winning against a team that is ahead of you or losing to a lesser opponent; the emotions of a season for a coach and players can be a rollercoaster. These highs and lows of emotion all come with team sports and are a natural adrenaline rush that is very hard to match anywhere. This is one of the reasons why volunteer coaches want to give back and enjoy being there. There is one occasion during the year that the lows far outweigh the highs... after many discussions with coaches and having been through the process many times, it is almost unanimous that the tryout process is by far the worst time of the year for a coach.

A hockey team is together for almost 8 months of a year... starts in August/September and ends in March/April. For most teams you are on the ice 4-5 times a week, and when you do the math, it is a lot of hours that you spend with other families within that team. I can honestly say that 95% of the time when I have been at the rink with kids of various ages, I have enjoyed the experience. For me, the development process of watching kids continuously improve throughout the year is very satisfying. To watch a kid struggle at the beginning of a year with a skill or tactic, and to see how through repetition, structure and teachable moments they finally get it; is a reason I keep wanting to come back to the rink...

The chemistry in a dressing room becomes a very special feeling and successful teams will create bonds that you can only understand when you have been through all these experiences with each other. Win or lose, the comradery in the dressing rooms and on the ice creates bonds and relationships that are life-long...I often run into teammates from over 20 years ago and after a short period of time, it will feel like we still have a connection and interact like we played our last game with each other just yesterday.

As seasons pass, relationships and bonds form between coaches, kids and parents. Families interconnect in many scenarios and in various social settings. Games, practices, tournaments, team emails, team dinners, playdates, sleepovers, carpooling, social fundraising events and the unplanned get together at someone's house that lasts far too long into the night; these are all regular occurrences for a hockey family. When you spend most of your days with each other; relationships continue to blossom; you are with each other so much that it is inevitable to create strong relationships with one another.

Then the season ends...and soon after it is time to pick your team again. There are a limited number of spots on every team. On many occasions you will find upwards of 60-70 kids at the first tryout. There are kids that are pushing to make it through to the next level as well as a whole bunch of kids that would love a spot on your team and are will do whatever it takes to get there!

To be completely honest, the first tryouts are not the most difficult cuts to make even though they are usually the largest in number. A coach will typically try to get the numbers down to a more manageable amount (around 30-35) by the second tryout. The reason that these cuts are not as difficult is because a lot of these kids are not ready to make the jump to the next level and are coming out for a skate to see where they fit in. The other reason is that the emotional attachment and amount of previous interactions with most of these kids and parents has been limited.

I have heard on many occasions from parents about a coach not doing his job and due diligence when evaluating the players – well here's a well-known secret in the coaching hockey circle – it is impossible for evaluators and coaches to adequately assess that many kids in one tryout without making some mistakes. Some kids may get cut on the first tryout that deserved to make it through to one or two more tryouts. And some kids will make it through one or two that probably shouldn't have. This is not a perfect science and is a subjective process.

Next set of cuts is to get to scrimmage numbers. A coach wants to see how player's skill and technical abilities are during initial skating and drills. This gives them a first impression of what type of player they are. The scrimmage and compete drills then give them the ability to view hockey IQ or hockey sense, vision, playmaking ability, compete, work ethic and team play.

The very hardest cuts; and when it becomes the most difficult and stressful is the last 4-5 cuts. As kids push for a spot on the team, this means they will be taking the position of someone else and it may be someone who has been on the team for a few years; that has established bonds and friendships with the kids on the team... could be the coach's son's best friend... could be a major sponsor.... could be the kid of a league executive... could be and usually is a kid with fantastic, supportive parents...

As the bonds of friendship develop through the years these last cuts can be overwhelmingly stressful for a coach. There have been situations and stories that I have heard where friendships have been ruined because of someone's

kid being cut from a team. Sleepless nights, anxiety filled days and thoughts of anger being spewed are way too regular... a recurring nightmare for a coach is replayed year after year in the spring; I have even heard of great hockey guys that do not want to coach for this exact reason.

As a coach you wish you could make room for more kids on your team however this just isn't possible and you often have to make tough decisions.... With every good story of the kid who makes it, there is the bad story of the kids who doesn't. Believe it or not, there is not a single coach out there that wants to create tension, animosity or hatred between any person, parents and players....this comes with the territory at this time of year of having to make these choices....and frankly it stinks.

We are supposed to be letting our kids play a game that is fun! They are supposed to enjoy coming to the rink each and every day and want to be around the team and boys wherever and whichever level that may be. There will always be another team that will accept each and every player and parents with open arms. This will be their new hockey family for that year. We as parents and coaches have to be aware of the culture we create for our kids and be supportive especially at this difficult time of year.

Keep in mind - that most coaches are volunteers... hockey is a game.... kids are supposed to have fun... parents are supposed to enjoy the experience as well as the kids....tryouts are just as hard of a time for the people picking the teams as it is for the "bubble kid's" parents and children.

Enjoy the relationships, memories and long lasting friendships that are created through hockey! Before you know it your child will have grown up and it will be all over!

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