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Checking for All the Right Reasons

by Dianne Powell

Is ice hockey a safe sport or has it gotten a bum rap? Are incidences of violence increasing or blown out of proportion by the media?

When it comes to sports, everybody has an opinion: coaches, parents, players, fans. But one thing everybody agrees on is that coaches play a significant role. Huge is how Jay Wescott, chair of the Ice Skating Institute's Hockey Section, describes the role of coaches. "I give a tremendous amount of credit to coaches because it's not an easy job," says Wescott.

Wescott began playing hockey at age four or five and played through high school and in college on a full scholarship. He also played one year as a semi-pro, has 10 years experience as a coach, and is General Manager of East Bay Iceland, Inc. "When you are a role model (as coaches must be), you have to be a lot more aware of your actions and the influence they have on people," says Wescott.

"A coach has to sit down with players and parents at the beginning of the season and spell out a code of conduct and make sure everybody understands," says Gerry Hart, ISI Board 2nd Vice President, owner of The Rinx in Hauppauge, NY, a 15-year NHL veteran and a youth hockey coach for 20 years. "The parent's role is to be supportive, to provide encouragement and to make sure, number one, that the child is having fun. I think parents who are paying a lot of money for their kids to participate should have some input into the quality of coaches and how the league and team is being managed. When it comes down to the game and the locker room, the coach's role is to take over, and the parent's role is to stand back and be supportive."

"A coach is an educator, and the same type behavior should be expected of a coach as we do of teachers," says Lee Roy, chair of the Schools, Colleges and Universities Section of the Ice Skating Institute. Roy began playing hockey at age seven, is a member of the Hockey Hall of Fame at the University of Vermont and founded the Portland Youth Hockey Association. Roy started coaching when he was a sophomore in college and has coached mites to college-age players. He's the manager of the Travis Roy Arena in Yarmouth, ME.

As educators, hockey coaches are responsible for teaching players the difference between checking as part of the game vs. checking to injure or intimidate opponents. "I don't believe you can distinguish between taking the man and playing the body and checking," says Hart. "Where you draw a very definitive line is on the issue of hitting from behind. Any time a player's back is turned to you or you're approaching a player from the blind side, that's where you draw the line. It's a matter of educating and proper coaching. There are many drills that can be implemented in practice that will teach the proper techniques of playing the body. Playing the man is a very important part of the game of hockey."

"Whether it's basketball or football or hockey, the concept defensively is to place your body between the body of the opposing player who's approaching your goal," says Hart. "If you don't do that, you're not playing the game effectively. It comes down to coaching."

Roy, Wescott and Hart all agree that it's important to start teaching proper checking early. "I think they should be learning it when they start to play hockey," says Roy. "They learn it when they're young, and if taught correctly, they practice it all the way through. You've got to be able to demonstrate to those you coach what is acceptable and what isn't."

"Kids should be taught how to play the body almost immediately," says Wescott. "You need to tell the kids that they can put their body between the puck and the other person, how to ride a kid off, not checking, but maneuvering their body so they can get the puck and keep it away from the opposing player. If they've mastered skating and some of the fundamentals, then how to position the body should start fairly early."

"We have a responsibility to teach the kids how to play the game properly," adds Wescott. "There's a time to check and a time not to check. There's a time to use the stick and a time not to use the stick. People have to teach responsibility and accountability. Coaches and officials really play a huge part in teaching kids the respect of the game."

"Our society has to stand up for the fact that we can't tolerate violent or immoral conduct from players, coaches or parents," says Hart.

To reinforce the no checking from behind rule, Roy urges: "Make the penalties very stiff, make sure referees don't tolerate it, and get coaches to make their players aware of the dangers of checking from behind. Enforce the rules and regulations so kids won't even attempt it."

Hart agrees, "We all have a responsibility to set high standards of conduct," and kids have to be held responsible for their actions, adds Wescott.

"If the kids are taught how and when to body check, it's very simple for a coach to detect an attempt to try to hurt vs. an attempt to try to separate the person from the puck," says Wescott. "There's a time for checking and a time when you shouldn't be playing the body at all. If you see a kid using his head or going into the boards after a player, you need to correct them immediately. Sometimes the person trying to give the check can get hurt a lot worse than the kid receiving the check. You need to work hard on continuing to improve how checking and using the body happens in the game."

Roy says kids need to be taught not only how to give a check but also how to take a check. "A lot of kids don't know how to take a check; if they did they would be less susceptible to injury. They would be less afraid of getting checked if they knew how to take a check."

"They need to be taught how to use their body without throwing elbows, without leaving their feet, without trying to do bodily harm. Players need to know the proper techniques, how to use their bodies, how to bend their knees, how to use their weight, what to do with their sticks, how to keep their heads up, not hitting with their heads but using their shoulders or hips to make the actual contact," says Roy.

Is Ice Hockey a High-Risk Sport?

"The equipment today is better than it has ever been, and officials have done a better job of controlling some of the more uncontrolled and violent incidents that have occurred in the past. I think it's a very safe sport and a very desirable sport that teaches a lot of positive things," says Hart. Roy also cites modern equipment with making the sport safer.

"The key to the game of hockey becoming a better, safer one is educating the coaches. Teaching coaches how to coach is the key to having better youth hockey programs," says Roy. "Teach them proper use of the equipment, proper respect for their opponents, and to appreciate the game of hockey."

"There are great organizations, certainly the National Alliance for Youth Sports and ISI and USA Hockey are all organizations that encourage continuing education, awareness of proper teaching methods and psychology in the handling of student athletes," says Hart.

Wescott adds, "It's a great game and a great sport, and the majority of the time people are doing a

very good job of keeping the kids within the realm of what the sport is about."

Roy says that from ice hockey kids learn team work, self worth, self respect, and respect for the people they're competing against as well as coaches and officials. Wescott urges that the focus should be on "the fun of it, the skill of it, and the enjoyment of it."

Kids need to learn to win graciously and lose graciously says Roy. "I expect children and young adults to learn that they're not always going to win and to deal with it, and when you do win, win in a way that shows respect for your competitors, as well as your team and coaches."

The Ice Skating Institute's Recreational Hockey Program is for all ages and ability levels. It emphasizes hockey as a healthy sport and focuses on good sportsmanship and a positive learning environment during practices and games. ISI's in-house recreational hockey games are geared for participation, fun and equal ice time for all involved. ISI provides ice hockey for children to enjoy and for adults to use as a recreation and fitness program.

For more information on ISI's Recreational Hockey Program or to register players, contact ISI Membership Dept., 972-735-8800.