

State of the Game

The Passion of Puck

Although this season is somewhat abnormal in that there is no hockey at the NHL level, we can rest assured that at the youth level things are very much normal, at least in the parental stupidity department.

In any given rink on any given night there is typically some sort of wacko behavior by some poor child's parent, but none that have been as newsworthy as a couple of instances that have occurred in Toronto this season.

First it was a mother who felt the need to lift her shirt in front of a group of parents and children at her child's hockey game, and you know it is newsworthy when it makes Jay Leno's monologue. Ultimately, she was banned for the season.

Most recently it was a father who received a five-year suspension from hockey arenas after he attacked and choked the coach of his nine-year-old son's hockey team. The reason? The player had missed a practice and the coach had sat him out for a few shifts at the beginning of the game.

While it goes without saying that the behavior of the parent was inappropriate, and justifiably punished, what about the decision-making of the coach? Is it really necessary to bench a player for missing a practice?

I am sure that there are those who think that the coach's punishment for the player was just fine. And actually, in some respects, I could make a very valid argument that it was justified. Controlling ice time is really the ultimate "power" that a coach has over his or her players, at any level of play. Discipline is a very important part of hockey and like any large group, a team needs to have some sort of structure in place and some rules to follow so that everyone knows what is expected of them.

That is one of the great things about hockey, and any team sport for that matter. Individuals learn how to co-exist with their teammates and what it takes to work together in games and practices all season long to try to achieve some common goals. Really, there is no better place where kids can be in an environment that enables them to learn some of life's lessons that will be invaluable to them as they grow into adulthood.

But I think I could make a pretty strong argument in the opposite direction as well. Every player pays the same amount of money, and to be fair, every player should get the same amount of playing time when they are there. If they choose not to attend, for whatever reason, then that is their prerogative. But when they are there, they should be getting their money's worth.

There are plenty of other questions and issues that arise in this scenario. Is it fair to the players who attend all of the practices and work their hardest, that the players who don't, get to play just as much as they do?

Would the coach treat every player the same? Would he bench the best player on the team the same amount of time as he would bench the weakest player on the team? And if so, would that still hold true in an "important game", or just in the games that were most convenient to do it in?

And finally, is it really fair to the child to be punished for something that, in most instances, was beyond his or her control? After all, not many nine-year olds make their own schedule or have the ability to provide transportation for themselves to their sporting events.

At the end of the day, I really think the whole situation is just another example of how we adults tend to take a kid's sport and impose our will and our rules upon it, so that we end up treating them like adults and not the kids that they are.

If this happened to be a midget or bantam game I could buy into the coach's line of thinking a little better. But for squirts, I think it is taking it more than a little too far. Obviously, that still does not make his father's actions acceptable.

But that is really not what I think is probably the most important issue here. If I were the coach, my first thought would not be to punish a player for missing a practice. It would be to try to figure out why the player was missing practice in the first place. And the first place I would look was in the mirror to make sure that I was

doing everything that I should be to make coming to the rink and playing the game such a great experience that not one player on the team would ever want to miss out on it.

A few years ago I coached a soccer team of 10-year olds, which unfortunately was placed in a division that was more than just a little too much for them. In ten games we were out-scored 45-0 and it was cause for great celebration if and when we got the ball over mid-field in a game. Eventually the players came to dread the games, not just because they were out-matched, but also because of how seriously some of the parents took things. My hope was that they didn't begin to despise the sport itself. But for every practice all season long we had all but one player on the team in attendance.

While it would have been very easy for them to give up and not come to practice, they came to them all, and they enjoyed being there. Incidentally the one player who did not come to practice on a regular basis was the same player who two years earlier when dribbling the ball down the sideline in a game, stopped and turned to her mother who had been running down the sideline beside her and yelled "SHUT UP!" much to the amazement of everyone in attendance. Needless to say there were some other issues there.

The point is that no matter how bad the situation was, they all still wanted to play and practice because they loved playing the sport. I was the same way with sports when I was a kid. Nothing could keep me away. And to me, that passion for playing is the most important thing that we should be nurturing in our kids as they participate in sports.

As adults, coaches and parents, we can be involved and get excited to the point of being overzealous or be supportive to the point of being pushy as much as we want. But at the end of the day, how badly they want to play is really up to them.

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