

Minor Hockey Dad & the Big Picture

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While on a speaking date in Hamilton I was button-holed by one



of the early arrivers, a 30-ish guy in a suit and tie, who admitted to being a hockey Dad for three boys, all playing on "travelling" teams.

"They're chips-off-the-old-block," he explained, allowing a hearty chuckle in appreciation for his good fortune. "14, 13, and 11, all forwards but I have the middle guy slotted for defense. He's that 'see-the-play-developing' kind of keeper player."

It's not like this hasn't happened before. There are people who need know if you will agree with their biased evaluation without the benefit of you having any unbiased eye-witness evidence to the contrary.

As I prepared to roll out my time-tested replies, he didn't wait and barreled directly into covering their stats, counting them off on his fingers and leading off with "considerable interest from a well-connected friend of a Flames scout." Then came goals, assists, points, personal awards, personal bests, personal traits and before he could swing into personal hygiene, I felt the need to interrupt.

"Are they coachable" I asked? He took on what passed for a puzzled look.

"Well, I spend as much time with them as I can," he answered defensively.

"On the basics. You know how it goes with kids, right?"

"Sure, but I was referring to the team coach."

"Oh, him. Sometimes we don't see eye-to-eye, and his power play really sucks. But those offensive numbers are pretty good, eh?" With that revealing statement, I got on with the remainder of my checklist.

"OK, say I put the questions this way. Is he the best skater on his team, if not, is working on it? Can he carry the puck with his head up? If not, why not? Can he pass forehand and backhand with accuracy, can he make all the shots, high, low, and hit spots? Does he switch well in transition with or without the puck, does he drive the net with or without the puck, does he understand his defensive responsibilities, does he take direction, or does he sulk when things don't go his way, is he a team player, and does he approach each shift with a "clean sheet" attitude? And, if not, why not?"

After stuffing my counted-off fingers into pockets I explained what real scouts, not friends of friends, or those who are "real knowledgeable" look at when grading youngsters.

It always seems to come as a shock, disbelief in most cases, that goals, assists and points are not benchmarks, merely signs of ability. What scouts actually look for at all levels, is "upside."

Temperament, determination, grit, tenacity, courage, creativity and decision-making under pressure, toughness both mental and physical, the ability and desire to absorb coaching and direction are keys to catching the eye of evaluators. With those traits a young player bears watching. And it takes time.

There's an old sports adage I subscribe to without reservation. "It's unnecessary to endlessly practice what you do best. You should practice what you don't do best."

Stats and a booming slapshot are only indicators, because if that's all you bring to the dance you can kiss goodbye to your chances of suiting up with Sidney Crosby anytime down the line.

There's a line I wrote in a column back in the mid-90's which had to do with speaking to hockey Dad's like my friend above. "Show me the School."

Meaning, if your budding superstar doesn't have the qualities and characteristics listed above, or isn't addressing them every chance he gets, the best bet for your youngster is getting an education.

Only seven hundred twenty plus young men can suit up in the NHL in any single season. The odds on being one of those rare players are prohibitive. And hockey, like any sport, is a game with a limited shelf life, while having an education is forever.

Every hockey parent should bet on education as the safest wager they can make.

If not, ask yourself why not?