

# Chalk Talk

## Encouraging Creativity... the Essence of Better Hockey



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**As we see in most cases, amateur sports mirrors professional sports in several ways with both positive and negative effects. With the "new N.H.L." under way we see that the pre-historic days of hockey seem to be extinct and this is great for minor hockey. No more clutching and grabbing, no more trapping from the first face-off to the last buzzer. Meaningless one on one battles all over the ice for very little space is also gone. In the "old N.H.L." teams were very systematic and robotic in their attempt to win. As a result, we saw very little creativity in hockey. As a spectator and former player this style of hockey was boring to watch and to play. Creativity is the essence and foundation of hockey. I am sure when the game was envisioned it was thought to be played free flowingly at exceptional speed while manoeuvring with skill and grace through your opponent. I am also quite sure it was not envisioned to be a game where creativity and skill were inhibited with legal infractions and airtight systems. Creativity is seen in all aspects of the game but especially when a player is on offence. When a player must figure out how to beat a defender one on one or when to make a pass to a team-mate in scoring position and most importantly how to beat a goalie is when creativity is crucial. When a young player is in scoring position and must decide do I shoot or deke? If I shoot, do I go with a forehand or backhand? Which corner am I shooting for? Am I going five-hole? If I am deking, do I go to my left or right, forehand or backhand? This is when a player's creative juices are flowing. This is why we play and love hockey. For the thrill and result of being creative to beat the opponent.**

Surprisingly, the contributing

factors to the decline of creativity and the game should also be used to bring the great game of hockey back to life. These factors are the playing rules, hockey schools, parents and coaches. The playing rules are on the front line as to determining the overall style of play during a game. Before this season, the N.H.L. rules and their officials allowed a game that was filled with obstruction and impediments. The best players were not allowed to display their skill and as a result lowered the talent level to where all players became somewhat mediocre. It doesn't matter how fast you skate or how good a stick handler you are, when an opponent could just use his stick to hook onto a player as defence makes all things equal by making skill irrelevant. The old style of N.H.L. was very similar to the N.E.L., where huge men battle for inches and yards of space. This style of play and officiating trickled down to minor hockey. The "new N.H.L." and their officials are fixing this problem by allowing the skilled players to play again with creativity. The N.H.L. season is far from over so it is impossible to determine if the "new N.H.L." allows for more goals. It is possible to determine that the "new N.H.L." allows for more offensive opportunities. As a coach and fan this is what we like to see. Skills of skating, stick handling, passing and scoring make the game of hockey creative and fun. There is no creativity or thinking in the "can opener" or hooking. It will take a few seasons but the style of officiating and rules will filter down to all minor hockey which will allow for scoring opportunities and free flowing skilled hockey.

Another factor in diminishing creativity in minor hockey are some hockey schools. Don't get me wrong, there are some excellent schools with great instructors but there are also those schools that are hurting the game. There are daycares camouflaged as hockey schools during the summer.

There are camps around advertising skill development that rarely use pucks. These instructors often stress skating technique without the use of pucks. As far as I am concerned, all drills even conditioning ones should be done with a puck. If a player is taught at a young age to develop all skills together, as they mature they will have less to understand or comprehend physically and thus can concentrate on having fun while being creative. Also most hockey schools groom excellent practice players. By this I mean most schools stress individual skill rather than game situations. It is very obvious which young players attend a lot of hockey schools through their play. They are the type of player who skates fluidly, who can dangle with a puck and then let a rocket go... during warm-up. Once this player is put into a game situation they are useless and ineffective. Most of these players do not know how to apply their skill in a game situation. This is where hockey schools can be effective. If kids could be taught to apply skill in game situations creativity will then follow. Hockey is a game that is more mentally played than physically played and therefore if you or your child attends a hockey school, make sure the instructors develop all aspects of the game. It also helps to find an instructor that has accomplished something in hockey that you and your child wish to achieve. Find an instructor that has played the game and understands what it takes to get to the next level. There are instructors who will lie about their career and credentials, so parents do some background work and put your child in the best situation for them to succeed. If a player is taught how to understand and think the game of hockey, creativity and skill will blossom.

Not only in hockey but everything in life, a child's parents are enormous in moulding the child's  
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attitude and thought process towards creativity. My biggest pet peeve in minor hockey is when there is a power play and the parents/spectators continually scream, "shoot" whenever they believe it is the right time. Most of the time the player is too young and not physically developed to take or make the shot. The parents see the pros on TV make the shot so they assume that is the play their child must make; which is wrong. Let the players figure it out. It is a game they are playing and you are not. Most parents would be ineffective if someone at work was continually barking instructions at them the entire time. Give your kids some credit and space. They know what they are trying to accomplish on the ice so allow them to learn by both failure and success. Let the game educate and develop your child's thinking and understanding and as a result creativity and imagination will grow and the player will enjoy the game.

The biggest influence on either a child's abundance of creativity or lack thereof is the coach. The coach is in a difficult situation, as he has to be concerned with the individual and the entire team. A coach can sometimes hinder a player's creativity and ability with the style of team play. In minor hockey, for whatever reasons the coach has immense pressure placed upon him to win rather than develop. Therefore

coach's copy what helps teams win in the N.H.L. Unfortunately, defence and trapping are the main tools for winning so again we see this in minor hockey. Teams from House Leagues to Junior A also use these methods to bring the fastest, most creative game on earth to a standstill. Most minor hockey is like chess where you wait for an opponent's mistake and then capitalize. The kids have had the creativity stripped from their game to appease their coach's desire for two points. Most forwards, either because they are not allowed or they are not confident with their skills don't even attempt to beat a defender one on one. Also, you rarely see a defenseman rushing past centre with the puck, more often the player is instructed to dump the puck in and get back to your zone so the team is not scored upon. It is just a mindset; most competitive minor players are concerned with only being scored against and rarely think about scoring or making something happen in the offensive zone. It is funny that you see these young kids using two and three hundred dollar sticks while scoring few or no goals, but that is another topic. Coaches have to encourage and develop a new way of thinking in their players to allow for an increase in creativity. This can be put in effect through practice. Practices must involve thinking and imagination in game situations to develop a young player's creativity.

I feel that these skills are just as important to develop as any physical skill. If a coach does not develop these skills he is not helping the kids become better players.

The game of hockey when played properly is the fastest most skilled game on earth with creativity as the foundation. We, in minor hockey, must do all that we can to nurture and develop creativity as best we can. In today's world of modern extreme sports, kids of all ages are increasingly drawn to such sports as snow boarding, motor cross, and skate boarding where creativity is critical as it should be in hockey. These sports are growing worldwide daily. The athletes of these sports don't have rules, systems, coaches, or spectators/parents continually barking instructions. They have creativity and imagination and people love it. For hockey to grow internationally with more participants and viewers, creativity has to be at the forefront of the game through rules, practices, and coaching techniques and if not the greatest game in the world will continue to diminish and that would be a tragedy.

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