

# Chalk Talk

## The Hockey Off-Season: Maybe it Shouldn't Include Hockey



SHANE  
BOWLER

As the 2005-2006 hockey season comes to a close, the "off-season" will soon be upon us. Over the last decade or so the activities of the off-season have changed dramatically. In the past, the off-season was just that. A player would take time off from hockey from the end of play-offs until try-outs the next season. In minor hockey today, because of various influences, there is very little or no off-season at all. In my opinion, (by the way, an opinion which is also shared by numerous hockey authorities) little or no off-season does not help today's young players and in fact may hurt a player's long term development. The off-season is a crucial time in a young player's overall development and I will suggest to players a few things that should be done during the summer to allow for development and success.

During the off-season, a player's activities should relate to the level of hockey being played and the age of the player. There are several concerns both parents and players should consider during the summer and they fall under physical, mental, and social categories.

The first suggestion as to what to do when the season ends is to take a break.

The hockey season can be long and demanding, so when you are done take a couple months away from the ice to rejuvenate your body. This is the time to allow for your body to recover from any nagging injuries. We endure long cold winters in Canada. Compound that with bone chilling arenas; so it is good to take a break and stay out of the cold rinks to re-energize one's body.

After a break from the game, it is important to get back to exercising and getting ready for the upcoming season. What I would suggest is that a player should work on and improve areas that matter in today's hockey. As a coach at various levels, the two most recommended areas would be skating and shooting. One could develop these skills without going to the rink every day. For skating, the most important factor



is foot speed. This could be improved through such training as running up hills, through obstacle courses, wind sprints, and ply metrics while being on the ice occasionally. As far as improving your shot, that is rather simple. Set up a shooting range wherever space is available and take 200-300 shots a day with emphasis on all shots especially the backhand.

It is also important to play other sports in the summer other than hockey. There are several sports such as lacrosse, baseball, soccer, and cricket that young players could use as cross training to develop such skills as hand-eye co-ordination, foot speed, strength and cardio endurance.

Another physical consideration to be concerned with is equipment. Kids grow so quickly it is important that their equipment fits properly for both safety and performance. This is the time to make sure rapidly developing bodies have not outgrown existing equipment and that in cases where they have those pieces should be replaced to ensure maximum protection. Clearing equipment should be done on an ongoing basis, but now that you have time your equipment should be properly sanitized from all infectious bacteria to protect yourself and your team-mates.

The off-season is also a great time to prepare yourself mentally for the new season and your future. Hockey is both mentally demanding and regimented so taking time off allows your mind to relax and clear without being overloaded and eventually burnt out. The off-season and summer vacation coincides so the young player gets a chance to get away from

the structure of both hockey and school and allows the player their own thoughts and ideas for a few months. Depending on the age of the player, the off-season is a great time to think about and research your future. Take the time to study and inform yourself on what options you have as a player. Educate yourself on the different leagues and coaches that may be available to you in the coming years. If you are a younger player, read a book about your favourite player or team and this will keep your mind sharp and improve yourself as a player in the future.

The most important part of the off-season comes in the social aspects of the young player's life. The summer allows for kids to participate in other sports or activities and make new friends while maturing as a person. Hockey in the winter is very time consuming by taking up anywhere from 2 - 6 nights a week. The summer allows family time and relationships to revolve around other activities, which are great for a family to grow. Most importantly summer and off-seasons allow kids to be kids. Kids need time to act their age and enjoy all aspects that come with this all too brief time of life.

Minor hockey has become very time consuming and demanding both physically and mentally. In my opinion, it is not necessary to be on the ice every day all year round to achieve your goals. In many cases too much hockey can lead to the opposite. A player playing year round might peak midway through the season and performance will suffer from fatigue or worse, he or she might simply "burn out" and loose complete interest in the game. It is important for a child to be well rounded and explore different sports and activities. I believe that the time away from the rink will not hurt the player's development, but rather enhance development as a player and a person.

So prepare for the off-season and have a great summer.

Shane Bowler is president of the Hockey Institute in Toronto and currently the head coach of the Wexford Raiders Jr. A team of the O.P.J.H.L. He was formerly an All American hockey player and assistant coach at the University of Alabama in the mid 90's.