



SHANE BOWLER

Playoff Preparation



PHOTO: JIM COLAR

With the regular season in minor hockey coming to a conclusion, as a coach, you are either preparing for the playoffs or starting to prepare for next season. Seeing how more teams make the playoffs than don't, most coaches at this time of year are preparing for a playoff run. Coaches taking their team into the playoffs must prepare for the "second season" if they hope for success and winning results.

For a coach to be successful and have their team prepared for the playoffs, they should have taken notes and kept detailed records throughout the season. At this time of year, your team has played everyone in the league a few times and as a good coach one would know: who the top players are on every team, every team's goals, each team's style of play, and also power-play and

penalty-killing tendencies for each team.

Also at this time of year the league standings are mostly set so you can design a specific game plan for each team you will most likely play. It is very important when designing a game plan for the playoffs that you are realistic in your goals for your team. If you are in the playoffs then of course there is a chance to win, but as a coach be realistic. If your team just snuck into the playoffs as a seventh or eighth seed and are playing one of the top teams who have lost only a handful of games all season, your goal of winning the series might not be attainable or realistic.

Set goals that can be accomplished. For example, if you have not beaten a team all season, don't set a goal of trying to win the series but try to win period by period. Set goals that can be accomplished and

then built upon to develop team success. Remember, as a coach you are always trying to build moral and character no matter the score or situation and this can come in many ways other than in the final score.

After your opponent is determined and after an understanding of your opponent is made, it is now time to start preparing your own team and fine tuning your systems in all areas of the game aimed at helping you succeed. As we are aware, during the playoffs, in most sports the slogan "Defense wins Championships" is often used. Solid team defense will give any team a chance to win. This is a great place to start preparing your team for a playoff run. It is crucial that every player on the team is certain of both the team systems and individual responsibilities. Playing solid defense is more a mental skill rather than a physical skill. With the

length of minor hockey games being short, weaker teams with solid defense can keep their team in most games, and possibly steal a few wins.

Another area of the game that determines most outcomes is "special-teams". In the playoffs, especially in the later rounds, teams are more evenly matched and scoring chances are limited. Every opportunity for a goal has to be taken advantage of or defended ferociously depending upon whether the team is on the power-play or penalty kill. Again by this time of the year, the power-play should be very sharp and controlled. Your opponents should know this and have a penalty kill system developed to defend against your breakout, offensive zone entry and offensive set-ups within the attacking zone.

It is important that you teach a new power-play set-up with a new breakout and zone entry to have your team prepared. The team may not need to rely upon the new system but if needed it could be the difference in winning a game.

Just like the power-play, the team penalty kill can win a game or two during the playoffs. Have a couple of new penalty-kill systems prepared to throw a few different defensive schemes at your opponents. Change things up to throw a wrinkle into the game and give your team an advantage while your opponent must now adapt to your system. When coaching, you want to instill in your penalty killers that they must get their bodies in shooting lanes with sticks in the passing lanes while working their hardest. Although the best penalty-kill scheme is to have team discipline and not take penalties.

With the playoffs being more intense and every goal magnified, puck possession is crucial to winning games. Puck possession comes in various forms such as dump-ins, take-aways, or physically separating a player from the puck, but, the best way to attain puck possession is through face-off alignments and drags.

Again, it is important that every player on the team is fully aware of their alignments and responsibilities for every face-off circle in every zone. Each player should not only know their own assignments, but also those of their line mates. At this time of year, a missed assignment in defensive coverage can result in a goal against very quickly.

Face-off alignments are most important at all times of the game but especially in the last minutes of periods and games. These are crucial moments in the game and the players must all know and commit to what the coach has planned for the situation. In the last minutes a coach must have several plans

for every possible situation relating to the numbers of players on the ice. There could be a goalie pulled, your team could be on the power-play or penalty-kill, or there may be several penalties. Whatever the situation, you should have a face-off alignment and an attacking or defending scheme whether the team is up or down a goal and in which zone the face-off is taking place. Face-offs

which players will be staying and which players will be released. These coaches also should be scouting playoff teams to help establish what needs to be done to become a playoff team. But most importantly, non-playoff coaches must develop a program to entice and keep the type of player they need to help get the team into the playoffs next season.



happen so quickly that the teams best prepared on all draw situations have a great advantage against less prepared opponents.

The above issues should all be concerns for coaches going into the playoffs while planning for a championship.

For those coaches not going into the playoffs, they should still be working as hard as those coaches in the playoffs. At this time of year, coaches who aren't moving ahead to the playoffs have to start preparing and building a better and more productive team for next season. Non-playoff coaches should start making personnel decisions as far as

This time of year is very exciting while teams get ready for playoffs or looking ahead to next season. It is your duty to fully prepare your team for a playoff run and give them every opportunity to win. For non-playoff coaches it is also your duty to do all you can to help get your team in the playoffs next season.

Shane Bowler is a former head coach in the OPHL and is president of the Hockey Institute in Toronto. He was formerly an All American hockey player and assistant coach at the University of Alabama in the mid 90's.