



## Bench Management

### **Introduction**

The leadership, decision making process and organizational style shown by the coach in the bench management situation is a direct reflection of his/her philosophy of coaching as well as that of the particular organization or association with which the coach is affiliated. Popular coaching lore dictates that brilliant bench strategies such as those employed by the legendary Scotty Bowman is the key to effecting coaching. While important, it must be recognized that bench coaching activities should accurately reflect and compliment the actions taken in all other aspects of the coaching practice.

Bench management necessarily becomes more important at the more elite levels of play. The typical minor hockey association offers coaches differing challenges in this regard, however, a philosophy of player development must always be at the forefront in any minor hockey situation.

Regardless of the level of play, an organized and efficiently managed player's bench is a critical aspect of the game procedures and directly effects on-ice play as well as, ultimately, results.

### **Philosophy**

Obviously the age and ability levels of the players involved dictate to a great degree the bench philosophy of the coach. If all players are to play relatively equal, then decisions are much easier, however, thorough preparation prior to game time is still important. Factors to be considered may include the seasonal plan and where this particular game fits, timing of the game (only one this week vs. three games in three days), practice evaluation (effort, attendance), recent results (including vs. this particular opponent), travel, discipline (unnecessary penalties, extended shift lengths) and specialty teams (rewarding deserving players with extra ice time). Some of these factors are dynamic and may change during the game and require active coaching decisions. As part of their game preparation, the coaching staff should go through all possible scenarios, discuss alternatives and make some preliminary decisions.

### **Bench Personnel**

The number of non-playing personnel on the bench, who they are and what their specific roles are must be clearly understood by all involved. This of course should be firmly established in pre-season staff meetings. The obvious areas of concern are clutter and confusion. Factors for consideration include:

- a system for quickly dealing with equipment problems and broken sticks
- Injured players (who deals with them? who goes on the ice if necessary? Emergency procedures? who communicates to the coach about the status of injured players?)
- Support staff job descriptions (who is responsible for what – avoids duplication, hesitation and misunderstanding)
- Who runs the bench doors? Monitors shift times? Takes stats? Communicates to players on the ice (ie. delayed penalty situation)? Has license to talk to the players on the bench, to officials and opponents?



## **Player Communication**

The coach must clearly relay important game-related information to the players as required. The most obvious function is to inform, as preparation, those players that are going on to the ice next. The coach must insure each player's name is called and acknowledged well in advance of the possible line change. Players must be alert and change for their position only as appropriate. Players coming off the ice may be instructed to call out their position upon arriving at the bench area to assist this process. This is particularly helpful if odd numbers of players make up the defense pairings and forward lines. A situation that can become complicated if neglected is when a player comes from the penalty box to the players' bench during active play. The coach must anticipate this situation and make sure that everyone knows who is going to replace this player. Coaches must insure they do not get caught up in the heat of the action and neglect their duties here. An organized, efficient bench takes both planning and active communication and is a reflection of a team that is well-coached and alert in all on-ice situations. A goal worth considering is a maximum number of too many players on the ice penalties in a season.

## **Procedures and Adjustments during the Game**

There are numerous factors that must be addressed by the coach in the area of bench management. Operating procedures that are relatively simple, logical and are well-thought out will complete this process. Obviously on-going, informal evaluations which may result in changes to procedures that are either not working or too confusing is important as well.

These factors include:

- player's bench gate(s): position specific (F,D) and which is which (closest to defensive zone – D, closest to attacking zone – F, switch each period); system of coming in/going out and whether to use the gate or go over the boards
- recognizing when the D have the “long” change (1 or 2 periods per game) and making necessary adjustments
- rules when needing to change on the “fly”: dumping the puck to the bench side of the ice to prevent a quick-up breakout and attack by the opponent; all 5 skaters not changing at the same time – possibly leave 1 forward to maintain checking pressure or have the 1<sup>st</sup> forward establish position in the far lane as opposed to chasing the puck, have the D change 1 at a time and establish a system of switching sides so that the change is always a short one; have a “quick-up” play for when the opponent changes on the fly – particularly if the goaltender is a good passer.
  - Feedback (error correction) to individuals vs. criticism
  - How to respond when players ask questions
  - Use of a coach rink board at the bench to assist explanations
  - Dealing with unnecessary penalties (discipline), lack of effort, extended shift times (45 second shift time rule)
  - Player interaction (particularly if criticizing others)

Restricting players' ice time is the most effective “hammer” that the coach has at his/her disposal but it must be used wisely and as a last alternative after all others have been exhausted.



Game adjustments are also numerous and include:

- delayed penalties (for/against, goalie to the bench – rule for which player goes on the ice)
- signal from goalie to players on ice when opponent's penalty is close to being over
- pulling the goalie for an extra attacker (when, signal to the goalie to come to the bench, which player goes on the ice and tactics to take advantage of this extra player)
- player coming out of the penalty box (signal from bench on whether to stay on the ice or come to the players' bench, if coming to the bench does the player come right away regardless of the situation or when it's appropriate, if staying on the ice what position does the player assume – have a rule when play is in the defensive zone that the player assumes the low support forward role and communicates that to his/her teammates)
- reactions to calls by the officials (a "bad" call, merits of arguing with the officials to make a statement or take a stand, a "good" call, emotional control – role model)
- the use of and reference to a coaching game card (quick and easy reminders for line-ups, game plan, space to make notes for between periods discussion and player/team/game evaluations, 4/4 line-up, specialty teams' line-ups, 6/5 and 5/6 face-off plays – who takes the draw, other personnel, strategy)
- Technical/tactical adjustments (face-offs, possible line match-ups- particularly if home team, time-out). Note: with the new "quick" face-off rules in place at several levels of play, face-off plays and line matching is much more difficult, if not virtually impossible, and distracting to the point where its recommendation is questionable.

The bottom line for coaches at any level is to attempt to have the right players on the ice at all times. While on the bench the coach has to focus on what possibilities exist, be aware of the present situation and be ready (anticipate) for what's next – there should as few surprises as possible. It is important that all bench personnel send a consistent message to the players and offer, for the most part, positive encouragement. The motto should be to "let the players play" – coaches cannot expect perfection from the players and must allow for the inevitable mistakes that will occur. The coaching challenge is to teach or educate through positive correction vs. negative criticism. Coaches should strive to have a positive bench with few, if any, moments of panic. Encourage a high tempo, intense, short shift type of game – players enjoy playing this style much more so than any other. Keep them on their toes through how they are utilized in game situations – as a coach don't become too predictable or get into a rut without realizing it.

### **Hockey Alberta Philosophy (WIN-WIN)**

It should be obvious to all coaches that players are not going to develop or get better by sitting on the bench. It is the coaches' responsibility to provide all players with a positive sport experience. It is important to realize that, given an opportunity and genuine encouragement, players can often surprise their coaches, teammates and selves with their improved play. All players deserve this chance unless their actions clearly demonstrate otherwise. Another known fact is that self-esteem is very important and directly affects performance. Players should be made to feel good about themselves and their play will be reflective in a positive manner