



# ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

## NOVEMBER

### Coaching Lecture

On May 20, John Cunniff lectured at a coaches clinic organized by the Coaching Program for the members of the USA Hockey/Massachusetts Satellite Program.

John is a former head coach of the New Jersey Devils. He is currently head coach of the Devils farm team and a previous assistant coach with the Boston Bruins. John started many of the training programs utilized by Massachusetts Hockey. He also has coached with several U.S. -National Teams, which include the US Olympic and World Teams.

*The discussion, though topical, did not follow any preconceived path. Quotation marks are not used, but most of (his words are John is either direct quotes or paraphrased. Below are excerpts from his presentation along with notes by Bob Richardson of the Dallas Stars and the International Hockey Academy:*

John began his talk referring to how Russians performed their drills many years ago when he spent time, there, observing their youth practices. He said that they tried to execute their movements during the skill drills at the highest possible pace. The game does not change. Years ago people were saying that certain player's were too small. They said that Bobby Orr and Wayne Gretzky were too small! When I played and I was preparing to tryout in the NHL back in the 60's, I lifted weights. Old players said that I was crazy. I was not going to convince them otherwise, but with patience things change. John was referring to the hope that youth teams would emphasize skill development more as time goes on. What you try now may bear fruit later on. Unfortunately, you have to sell the parents on how to train properly, because they do not want to sit and watch a practice or an off ice session.

**In answer to a question raised from the audience; How much time should be spent on skill work?**

Do a lot was his answer. Speaking of a Russian youth coach named Vitaly, John went on saying that, Vitaly would demonstrate a skill such as jumping over a stick then the kids would go do it for 2 min. or so. Then Vitaly would call them back and maybe he would have them jump over a stick while controlling a puck. John went on then maybe they would do passing variations for a few minutes, such as passing spinning around and receiving the pass. Then do it with a pivot. Then

they might do 2 on 2 keep away for 5 minutes with one puck in a tight area. Then they might scrimmage for 5 minutes, come back and work a timing drill, then scrimmage again for 5 minutes.

Note: So these youth practices were often activity oriented for players 12 or under. Never wanting to bore the young players. Systems were not practiced. Games against opponents from other towns or organizations were and are few.

### **Speaking of pro-players:**

During the Canada Cup (John was an assistant several, times) when he spoke with the pros they were attentive. With the U.S. National Team he could do drills with 5 or 6 passes. Then when he went back to coach at Hartford (Whalers) his pros could not make 5 or 6 passes in a drill so he had to cut it down to start. Just as with young players, especially if they have mostly played games as opposed to the Russian youth players, you will not be able to make more than a few passes in any one drill. One pro team that John had guys complained about the passing drills. The reason was that some could not crossover and pass at the same time, so they complained. They had to slow down and glide; they screwed the drill up then complained. Eventually the players elevated their skills and then asked for more drills like them!

### **What about skating?**

To skate you have to have balance fundamentally. Some of the best drills, have been proposed by Jack Blatherwick, where you have to go fast when you pass and shoot in a skill drill, to get out of your individual comfort zone. At first you cannot hit the net, so players get frustrated and they do not want to do them. Eventually they can hit the net. Now they do not have to slow down to shoot. These thoughts are in reference to kids who can skate not necessarily for beginners. Once you are past Beginner you need to work on speed of execution. Why bother with technique past a certain point in time. Speed is more important. You are not going to change a skaters technique, beside many great players have their own technique. Things such as proper lower body lifting can give a player a lower center of gravity and therefore more knee bend. Agility skating and skating in tight areas is crucial to development.

Note: Jack Blatherwick through scientific study writes that stride rate is more important than stride length in the sport of hockey.

### **Coaching yourself:**

As with all other knowledgeable coaches such as Anatoly Tarasov, the father of Russian hockey, John believes that you have to coach yourself, work your hand to eye coordination. Do things on your own, start juggling. I got a book John said. First start with one ball, then use two and then three. Remember that when you drop a ball it is a sign of improvement.

### **Specificity of skill:**

Coaches need to set up an environment where the players are not afraid to make mistakes. This is how you learn. For example be sure that the subtleties of a maneuver are encouraged. You want player to try to receive passes on their forehand when possible and not lazily accept a pass on the backhand or when controlling or handling the puck, know the difference between open ice stickhandling and tight area puck control. The difference is that in open ice often you just push the puck ahead, unlike a time where you may be confronted by defenders where you may be moving the puck side to side or back to front.

### **Great players:**

Find a way to win. They find a way to get it done, to win their personal battles. You have to make mistakes. This makes you a better player. It allows you to figure out what does and does not work. Team wise; John Wooden the great UCLA basketball coach said that, " The team that makes the most mistakes wins", meaning that they do not fear failure. It does not matter where you come from. Look at John LeClair, every NHL team would want him, he came from a small town in upstate Vermont. He did not play much hockey when he was younger. He liked to fish. He gained confidence over the years as he gained strength.

### **Use of other sports:**

Basketball is a good sport for hockey players to play. It is also a good tool to teach things such as 2 on 1's, or transitions. Any sport that you can play that gets you away from hockey will help you to become a better player.

### **You cannot do enough tight area work/activities.**

### **Tip of the Month:**

From the booklet "Edgar Edger's Complete Guide to Hockey Equipment & Maintenance:

The risk and occurrence of injuries can be drastically reduced by wearing an athletic mouthguard ... Mouthguards not only significantly reduce the incidence and severity of injuries to the teeth and mouth, but **they also act as a shock absorber against more serious injuries like concussions and jaw fractures."**

Be forewarned, the more times that one incurs a concussion, the more likely that he will have to give up the sport. The incidence of this type of injury is on the increase because of the recklessness and uncontrolled speed at which some play the game. When some lack respect for their opponents, that's when serious injuries are more likely to occur.

### **PROTECT YOURSELF!**

**Wear a good mouthguard...inside your mouth, not outside.**

**Quote of the Month:**

From Sports Illustrated May 10, 1999; The Ring Leader: The greatest team player of all time, Bill Russell by Frank DeFord:

Russell speaking of his disappointment in the way basketball is being played now, "The coaches dumb players down now", he says, clearly irritated. " They are stifling innovation. They're not letting them play outside the system. All the kids in this generation-they really don't have a clue."

Russell on success, " Remember each of us has a finite amount of energy, and things you do well don't require as much. Things you don't do well take more concentration. And if you're fatigued by that, then the things you do best are going to be affected."

**Drill of the Month:**

Try to devote some time each month to the skill of protecting the puck, as opposed to exposing it to the defender. As a player gets older, the chances of controlling the puck in a defenders checking range will lessen because of the increase in competition. The great stickhandlers of all time use the subtlety of protecting the puck. Watch Lemieux or Gretzky or now Kariya. They are some of the greats.