

PREPARATION FOR SHORT TERM EVENTS

As a coach, the ability to rally your team for important events such as tournaments, play-offs and provincial championships, can be an important skill. These short-term events create much excitement for players and parents as well as stress when things don't go well. In these environments, people tend to become frustrated easily and taking steps to minimize distractions will only enhance your chances for success.

The importance of the short-term event can be measured in several ways depending on the progress of your team at the point in the season in which the event occurs. Whether your team is enjoying success or not at the time, the short-term event offers definite advantages to the team as a whole.

Advantages for the successful team include:

- competing against new opponents and challenging your players to compete at a higher level;
- creating a short term focus much like play-offs and enabling you to rehearse for the intensity of the championship run;

Advantages for the unsuccessful team include:

- placing your players in a new environment where they can achieve the success that has not been realized to date during the season;
- creating an environment where players can generate confidence and renew their enthusiasm for the remainder of the season;

Other advantages offered are:

- The ability to build chemistry in your group by offering team building activities taking advantage of the fact that the players are together for a short period of time in one location;
- The opportunity for the team to experiment with new strategies and increase individual confidence in the players by playing them in new situations;
- Develop strong game preparation habits in your players by instituting a daily plan that optimizes their ideal performance state; and
- A great chance to conduct some fun activities with the players and parents enabling the entire group to enjoy the team environment.

As coach, you play a key role in how your team may benefit from these advantages and planning for the event will assist you and your staff in bringing success to what can be a highlight of the season.

The Environment

We all agree that we all, including our players, perform at our best when we are in a comfortable environment that we are familiar with and feel relaxed in. With many short-term events, the competition is held away from the home arena and in unfamiliar surroundings.

Team members will be exposed to increased travel, strange accommodations and varying meal choices in addition to playing in an unfamiliar facility. Because of these changes to the player's' daily routine, they will require some time to become acclimatized to their new surroundings and any changes to their typical daily schedule. If this adjustment takes too long, your

team may be eliminated from possible success before you reach your true potential. For this reason, helping your players gain an appreciation for the many changes that they will experience, in advance, will help you gain success earlier in the event.

Travel

When playing at your home facility or within your own league on a frequent basis, players adapt easily to the travel requirements including things like where the facilities are and when to leave to arrive on time. Being aware of the travel requirements helps the player to relax and remain unaffected by the travel and can better focus on the game.

When traveling to an event, this all changes and, as the coach, you must consider how you will organize the travel to minimize the stress that may be created by showing up late, not being able to find the rink, or not being certain who will drive the player.

Creating a travel plan that includes the time of departure to the arena, the arrival time, and takes into consideration things such as the traffic at the time of the day as well as inclement weather, this stress can be reduced.

Meals

With all of the activity that takes place in a short-term event, the players tend to become distracted and place far less emphasis on what and when they eat than they normally would. To avoid the negative impact caused by players eating the wrong foods too close to the game or not eating enough, including a meal plan in the overall plan will help them stay on track and get the proper nutrition.

By carefully considering when to eat meals as well as what nutrition players should eat during that important time immediately following a game, the coach can schedule meals for the players to ensure they obtain the necessary nutrition and limit any negative impact upon their level of energy and play.

Another benefit to planning team meals is that by bringing the players together, the coach can use the players' time efficiently by going over pertinent information while waiting for the meal to be served.

Finally, determine what types of food will be available in advance. Call the restaurant that you plan to use and ask them what they offer. In some cases, they may be quite willing to prepare a special meal that fits with your nutritional goals for the players. If the available meal choices vary from what the players would normally eat at home, ask your parents to help acclimatize the players to these different choices by offering the same choices at home prior to the event.

Remember, it will be important that your players eat properly as they will expend a lot of energy within a very short period of time. Don't take their nutrition for granted.

Accommodations

Just as nutrition is critical to your team's success, so is proper rest. Whether the event allows your players to stay at home or in a hotel on the road, you should consider the impact that playing in a short-term event will have on the amount of time your players will have to get that important rest.

When staying at home, the players' busy schedule will vary from the approach before a typical league game where they typically don't have to cope with the increased pace. In addition to the compacted schedule, the players will be traveling with their parents who may have their own schedules and this may create a very busy time. The travel between games and

activities will consume the players' time as well. It will be important to enlist the support of the parents to enforce curfews and sleep times as well as ensuring players get those quiet times between activities so that your players get the necessary rest

On the road, the same concerns exist but can be minimized with a properly planned schedule. Institute curfews, establish times for players to turn out the lights for the night, and institute room checks. If parents want to socialize, ask them to do so in a room where no players are sleeping so that they don't interfere with the players' rest. Seek their support in keeping the noise down after the players are asleep for the night or during those afternoon naps.

Other things to consider with accommodations on the road are the number of players to a room, supervision of those players, which players will room together, and segregating players who may be ill.

Ice Facilities

If you and your players are not familiar with the arena and facilities in which event will be held, this can be a distraction and may create a few surprises that may throw your players off their preparation for the games. Nothing is worse than arriving at a new arena to play an important game then to find poor dressing room facilities, no skate sharpening, small benches, as well as the on-ice concerns such as ice size, distance from benches to own net, and other factors such as little room behind the net. All of these will require adjustments by your players.

To reduce the impact of these factors, coaches should make every effort to contact the facility to determine its physical characteristics. Another effective method is to obtain pictures of the facility as it enables the player to gain a visual perspective of what they will be faced with. If at all possible, holding a practice or short skate at the facility before the actual event commences goes a long way to helping the players become acclimatized to the new environment.

Equipment

Many coaches have arrived at the visitor's arena only to find that one of their players has forget a piece of equipment that cannot be easily replaced or have had a player break a skate blade or other piece of important equipment during a game. Any time this happens, it can be a distraction to the team not to speak of the impact it has on the player.

Prior to the event, have the players and parents develop an equipment checklist that they can use to ensure they have all their equipment as well as to ensure it is all in good working order. Making sure that each player has enough sticks, has checked their skates blades and rivets, and other equipment for defects is critical. Ensure that all stitching on equipment is in good shape and make certain they don't overlook neck protectors and other critical equipment.

As is the case, with any team on the road, your players will need a place to dry their equipment between games. If a drying room is not available at the arena, using the hotel rooms in which they will sleep may not be a good idea. Check with the hotel to determine if they can provide an area to dry the equipment and ensure you have a plan in place to handle this requirement.

To help overcome any equipment problems that the team may encounter, creating a back-up kit that includes items such as helmets screws and pieces, extra, replacement skate blades, neck protectors, an extra helmet, extra padding, and a sewing kit for repairing torn equipment makes sense and may help you overcome those minor problems that always arise.

Emergency Action Plan

Just as it is for any other game, developing your Emergency Action Plan for the short-term event is important. If competing in a different locality, knowing things like instructions to the hospital and emergency contacts numbers is critical. As coach, it is advisable that you also plan for how you will cope with minor injuries that may occur during the event and determine what onsite medical support will be available.

Goals for the players and team

While teams entering short-term events all strive to be win the tourney or play-off, it is also important to set individual and team goals for your players. For individual goals, meet with your players and ask each to provide you with a few personal goals that they would like to accomplish during the event. Player goals could include areas such as improved individual plus/minus ratings, shortening shifts, improved defensive or offensive play, and improved preparation for games or improved discipline.

Team goals are also important and will help your players gain a sense of accomplishment should they not win the event. Some team goals could include a specific number of shots on net per period or per game, face-off success, decreased goals against, increased number of take aways, less turnovers, or any other statistic that will help the players focus on the key areas that will help the team be successful as well as to derive some personal satisfaction from their own performance. Remember that whatever goals you establish, they must be measurable. Enlist the help of a key parent or your team manager to help you track this information and let your players know how they are doing as the event evolves. They will want to know how they are doing.

Staff Responsibilities

In a short-term event, if you fail to assign roles to your assistants and team manager, you will realize very quickly that you cannot do it all alone, but it may be too late.

Develop clear job descriptions for your staff to ensure they are involved in a meaningful way and are contributing to your overall team success at the event. Develop tasks that relate directly to those requirements that have been identified in your plan and ensure that staff are assigned to look after those requirements. When delegating roles, look at the strengths and weaknesses of your staff and provide roles that utilize their strong points.

Define the roles for the parent group and ask your team manager to coordinate these activities. This might include driving injured players to the hospital or other activities associated with the event. Determine if the tournament provides team hosts and ask your team manager to meet with them to solicit their help as well.

Ensure that you discuss roles to those individuals who are not necessarily on your staff but do, in one way or another, impact upon your team. Individuals such as bus drivers, etc., all play a part in your plan.

Work with your team training staff or the tournament medical staff to ensure that you have a system through which injuries to your players are reported in an accurate and timely manner. You will want to know the extent of the injury as well as the expected return to play. Issues such as who will treat the player when injured on-ice as well as in the dressing room need to be discussed. Who will be responsible to contact emergency assistance or ambulances should the need arise are all critical to making your plan work for you.

Typically your team manager will cater to the administrative needs of the team. As such, it is important that careful consideration is given to ensuring that those administrative activities do not detract from your team's performance.

Daily itineraries should be developed and all requirements should be confirmed prior to your arrival at the event. To plan a meal for a specific time only to find out that you needed reservations to the restaurant will not only delay your other plans but will significantly impact the general mood of your team. The management team can assist with the arrangements and help to ensure that all aspects are covered.

Other roles that the team manager can play at a short-term event are:

- Attending any delegation or tournament meetings
- Administering the emergency protocol in conjunction with your medical/training staff
- Communicating the rules and expectations to your parent group
- Assisting with organizing requirements for team meetings including any training aids or equipment
- Coordinating the collection of the contact data for the team, emergency agencies, the tournament, equipment repair shops, and if necessary, arranging for calling cards

Another area that can provide your team with a distinct advantage is that of scouting. Understanding how your opponents' play can be a huge tactical and psychological advantage to your team. Determine who on the coaching staff is best suited to perform this function. To do this, you will need to know the schedule/draw as well as any practice schedule. Perhaps you may know someone in that locality that is qualified and willing to act as an advance scout for you.

If the rules do not prevent you from doing so, the use of video is an excellent way to bring your scouting package back to your team. Ask a parent with to video games that your staff cannot attend due to scheduled commitments. Ensure that this person understands what you are looking for. In some tournaments, the local TV station will be videoing all games. Determine if you can access those videos for your scouting purposes.

Another area that most coaches fail to recognize as important in scouting is to scout the referees. What kind of game do they call/ Are they calling everything close or do they let the teams play hard? By answering these questions, you can better prepare your team to compete. Attend games early in the event before your team plays to get a sense of what the officials are looking for. Ask to talk with the event Referee-in-chief and seek his advice on how best to prepare your players. By failing to do this, your normal style of play may not succeed and you may jeopardize your chances of success if you get off to a bad start in that crucial first game.

Daily schedule

Once you have all the information you require about the event, develop a schedule for each day of the event and circulate it to your players, parent group and team staff. Having a schedule eliminates uncertainty and will reduce the numbers of questions that players and parents might pose if they don't know where they are expected next and when. A schedule also offers a huge benefit in that you are deciding when best to hold certain activities in advance with careful consideration, not in the heat of the moment in a busy event.

Build sufficient time for rest and allow for down time to relax. Know if your players are preparing for key schoolwork as they may need study time to prepare even though you are in an event. Find out if they are required to write an exam or test when they return home. Not addressing this need may leave your player feel stressed out and out of focus. Setting aside time for study can out the player at ease.

When entering a short-term event, there are several considerations that your staff must understand and consider. What is the length of the event? What are the expectations on the players as the event rolls on and their energy level start to weaken? Are you trying to do too much? Remember that the tempo will be high and the energy utilized will increase due to the corresponding stress in your players and staff.

When holding meetings the adage 'less is more' stands true. Pre-game meetings must be short (5-7 minutes). Use handouts to augment your discussion points. When talking to players limit the number of points to three or four. It is also important to understand when it is important to get away from the rink and the game. Plan for some down time and allow the players to have a chance to interact with others as well as to relax.

With the short-term event, the team that can successfully cope with the adversity that will undoubtedly arise, will have an advantage of the team that loses focus and tires as the event moves along!