

The Art of Bench Management

(Originally submitted as an article by Greg Siller for Roller Hockey Magazine)

The referee signals both goaltenders to make sure they are ready. He gets a nod from the scorekeeper and then from the other referee, and finally drops the puck to start the game. As a coach, even though *you* won't be playing with the rest of your team, you have a vital role in your own game; the game of bench management.

Bench management is the process of carrying out your game plan by utilizing your players in the most effective way possible. The most effective way possible will mean different things to different coaches; even those participating in the same league or tournament.

Is there one right way to manage your bench? Absolutely not. Managing your bench is a mixture of art, science, and personal flair--with the need to employ several strategic, tactical, and motivational tools to achieve your teams' desired goal.

There are two major levels of bench management, depending on whether you are coaching an instructional/recreational team or a travel/tournament/pro team. The instructional team is one with the emphasis on player instruction and development; where winning is a part of the overall program goal but not the number one priority. Teaching players how to play the game and giving each of them the opportunity to play is the underlying principle. Most grassroots teams fall into this category.

Bench management for a travel/tournament or professional team differs in many ways from the instructional team. A travel/tournament team is put together to compete at the highest levels of play possible; with winning being the priority. Coaches utilize specific players in specific roles to win their games, similar to a chess match, with the final objective being check-mate!

To run a good bench, you have got to be skilled in two key areas; player management and game management.

Player Management

This component of bench management should be the similar whether you are coaching an instructional or traveling team. Your role here is to get the most out of each player, each and every shift, for the entire game. To do this, there are five areas that you need to focus on.

- ***Communicating*** with your players before and after each shift is an essential role for both the coach and assistant. By *talking it up*, you will keep your players thinking about their play. Also, if a player gets frustrated, you need to get that player back on track mentally. If you want your players to play an intelligent game, you need to communicate your plan to them and get feedback from them to ensure that they understand your message.
- ***Utilizing player leaders***. A coach cannot do everything for a team. You have to rely on key team players to help keep your team on track. Leaders (captains, assistant captains or other leaders) need to provide your team with a vocal and positively influential presence, both on the playing surface and on the bench.
- ***Developing and utilizing a players' confidence*** requires you to give your players opportunities to grow. That may mean putting them into situations such as a power play or

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penalty kill role if you believe they are ready; and sometimes even if you *may* believe they are not. You will never know what a player is capable of doing if you do not give them the chance to learn, develop, and get hockey experience.

- ***Motivating and challenging*** your player's gets your team focused and will encourage them to play at a higher level. Also, by getting your players to play at or beyond their potential, it will make your job that much easier (and that much harder on your opponents).
- ***Learning something from each shift***. Every player (and coach) should be encouraged to learn something about their opponents during each shift. This is most beneficial when you have not played a particular team before. By noting a team's strengths and weaknesses, you have acquired the ammunition for a plan to defeat that team.

Game Management

This component deals with how you (and your assistant coaches) execute your game plan and handle special situations that may occur during your game. Game management is performed by each and every coach. However a distinction occurs depending on whether you are coaching an instructional or traveling team. For the five areas below, instructional coaches generally focus on the first two; with some emphasis on the last three, depending on their individual motivations. Traveling coaches, on the other hand, emphasize the last three areas as their edge for success.

- ***Coach's/assistant coach's roles***. If you are running your team with two (or more) coaches, you must define the roles for each person on the bench. Who organizes the lines? Who makes sure that the proper players get on and off the playing surface at specific times? Who gives the players feedback after their shift? These (and many other) items all need to be addressed before your game so that confusion over responsibilities during the game does not cause you to lose an opportunity, or worse, give up one.
- ***Organizing your lines*** is an essential ingredient for your team's success. By properly matching up your player units and lines, with the opponents, you can gain several advantages during each shift, period, and throughout the game. These advantages will lead to opportunities to put the puck in the net.
- ***Adaptability and flexibility*** are important because hockey is such a dynamic game. If your original game plan called for getting the puck to your hot center because of his wicked wrist shot, but you found that he was getting double coverage, change your plan and get the puck to one of the other players to shoot. You still get the shot on net, and since two of your opponents are tied up with one of your players, that leaves your team with a player advantage. You should always be on the lookout to create opportunities by being flexible and adapting to each new situation.
- ***Using stats*** during your game, will give you additional insight into your players, lines, and opponents. Above and beyond the normal goals and assists, you can record shots by player and from which areas on the playing surface they came from. This helps you determine which players are putting the puck on net and where your scoring chances are coming from. Another

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stat that can be helpful is +/- . This can give you a clue to who is hot and who is not. One other stat that I find essential is noting how the goaltender handles shots from different locations. Does the goaltender go down on most shots? Is he weak on the stick or glove side? This information will help you to plan your final period or two.

- *Special situations* occur during each game that requires the coach to assess the risks and rewards of a particular action. Examples of special situations include pulling the goaltender, deciding how aggressive to perform during special teams play, monitoring your teams/opponents momentum and adjusting your strategy from an aggressive style to a less aggressive one (or vice versa), and using your time-out. These types of situations provide you with the opportunity to change the course of the game as well as the momentum within it. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. But what is important is that you recognize when to take advantage of these special situations and put your best plan into action.

No matter what type of team you coach, bench management plays an important part in your teams' overall success. By improving your ability to manage your players and the game, you will have given your team two key opportunities for success.

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