

## Mike McKay - Manager of Coach Education and Development



### Good Strategy?

As Jim Thompson clearly states in his book the Double Goal Coach<sup>1</sup> there are two purposes of youth sport. One is to win games and the second is to teach children life lessons through the sport. The key is to know which one is the most important. In too many situations adults have applied their definition of winning or competition to youth sport. Children do not see competition the same as adults. Having fun is the number one reason children play sports. Striving to win on the scoreboard ranked 11<sup>th</sup><sup>2</sup>.

Youth sport should be child centered. The most important thing is the well being and safety of the children. Parents of children in youth sport expect a coach to build self-esteem, make it fun and to teach skills to their child<sup>3</sup>. This is the youth coach's most important role. When decisions are being made about youth sport this basic premise must always be at the forefront. "Is this what is best for the child?" is the question that should always be asked. It should not be based on what is easier for adults or to allow a select group of adults to satisfy their own needs.

Why do we make rules? Rules are to regulate human relationships. If we would all follow the golden rule, "do unto other as you would have others do unto you" we would probably need fewer rules. When rules are made in sport it is to allow the competition to take place in a fair and meaningful way. If we are to teach children lessons through sport it is important that everyone involved in a competition fully understand why the rules are there. It is not for people to make an arbitrary decision that the rule does not apply to them or that it is a stupid rule therefore I will not follow it. By making decisions like this, one is showing the utmost lack of respect for the other people involved in the game. If one disagrees with a rule there are proper channels to go through in order to change them. Coaches who like to play on the edges of the rules show an equal lack of respect. What lessons are being taught to athletes when a coach spends an excessive amount of time devising strategies that take advantage of loopholes or shades of grey in a rule? Do they not know that athletes see through their attempts to justify this as great coaching strategy? Again these coaches have applied a different value to the competition than the children have.

Let's use a hockey example. Heading into the championship game Coach A, who considers himself the dean of youth hockey coaches because of the number of championships he has won over the years, realizes he must devise a strategy to stop Team B. Team B has steadily improved all year. Coach B is known as someone who prides herself on the ability to teach skills and prepare her players for the next level. She also focuses on developing the players to be well rounded people. Each player plays every position at some time during the year. She does not specialize by position at this age because she knows from coaching courses she has taken that we cannot determine a child's future size and abilities at such a young age. In the practice leading up to the championship game Coach A spent the whole hour working on his strategy. He drilled the children in all variation of his strategy. He went to bed that night confident he had discovered the secret that would bring success in the championship game. The next day is one that Coach A will never forget. His team wins the game by the incredible

score of 1 – 0 even though his team was out shot 50 – 4. In his own mind he sees himself as a coaching genius, who will shortly be elected to the hall of fame. What was this incredible strategy? Did he spend the hour to practice skills the players needed to refine or improve? Did he make each player a better person? Did he practice team building or mental training? No, he chose the biggest kid on the team and made him lie down so he completely covered the net. He spent the whole practice making players shoot the puck from all angles. No one scored. Why? Because none of the children at his level of hockey had the strength or ability to lift the puck!

His team was declared the champion, but did everyone go home happy? Remember children have different definitions of success. Parents also have different expectations. The children want to have fun. The child who was forced to lie in net was distraught. He was seen to be shaking with tears as he lay on the ice during the third period. In fact he was so embarrassed he decided not play hockey next year because of the severe scar it left on his self-esteem. Many of the other children felt so sorry for the goalie that they threw their medals away. Many left the sport. The parents of the goalie were furious. Other parents were also concerned and decided that they would not sign their children up again next season. The other team was very upset. In fact the police had to be called to prevent one furious parent from attacking Coach A during the game. Coach B, decided she would not coach next year because she was so frustrated with this type of behaviour in youth sport. At the league meeting many hours were wasted debating if this was good strategy or poor sportsmanship. The association dropped the issue when Coach A threatened with a lawsuit if the new rule passed (a tactic he used in the past). Coach A, who “won” the game, put an adult definition of winning ahead of learning life lessons. Did he really win? Did the sport of hockey win? Was hockey in that town better without Coach B? Another question we need to ask is, “Was the goalie learning how to be a good goalie?” They won the league championship and the child never let in a goal. Did the child learn the skills that will make him a hockey player at the next stage of development? Are the coaches of the next level of hockey jumping in anticipation of acquiring this great goaltender? NO, because they know at their level of play the children can lift the puck. They have acquired the skill set and strength that will allow them to defeat this strategy. One of a coach’s greatest jobs is to teach the skills of the game. The children who leave a coach’s program should have the skills necessary to play at the next level, if the child so chooses. The child should not be limited in their choices because a coach has decided to use a strategy that will limit skill development

What does this have to do with basketball?

All this has been a preamble to an age-old discussion. At what age should we allow athletes to play a zone defence? The answer to me is very simple once you have answered the simple question of which is more important; to win games or to teach life long lessons. If it is to win games then the answer is to allow zones at all age groups. There is no question that by playing a zone with younger children you will reduce the chances of the other team from scoring. The reason is the children do not have the skill set, the physical strength and fully developed cognitive abilities to attack a zone. It requires great strength and manual dexterity to shoot from a long distance. The number one score in youth basketball is the lay up. Zones prevent lay ups. Children do not have the strength and the 100,000s of repetitions to develop good

shooting ability. Also a zone means there is usually someone in the child's face upon receiving the ball close to the basket. Shooting vs. defence is a higher level skill. Second it requires strength to skip pass a basketball or to quickly reverse it from one side of the floor to the other, two important skills in attacking a zone. Catching a ball that is thrown quickly or a long distance is also a difficult skill for beginning players. Many are afraid of the ball coming at them with speed.

On the cognitive side children have a difficult time dealing with multiple stimuli. Children under the age of 12 -14 do not have the cognitive development to play continuous motion sports (hockey, basketball, soccer). This is because they must be able to process upwards of 2 to 5 pieces of information a second! The 5% who have developed this ability early get labeled athletically 'gifted'. It is just that they have had a head start on others. Too often our youth sport systems are set up for this 5% rather than the 95%. To attack a person-to-person defence a child has simple decisions. When receiving the ball should I pass, dribble or shoot. This player only has to initially read one defender, the person guarding him/her. Once he/she beats this player there is usually only one other player to read; a help defender who is in their sight. Against a zone a child must initially read up to three defenders. Another reason children have problems with zones is that their peripheral vision is not fully developed. This makes it difficult to see teammates and the other zone defenders. It is also a reason why young children have problems playing help side defence in person-to-person defence. They cannot see both player and ball. A zone solves this problem. If you play zone the other team will struggle to score.

The use of zones reminds of the use of steroids. When I was first involved in coaching and steroids came on the scene we were advised to tell the athletes that they did not work. Steroids made your body retain water and therefore look big, but you did not get stronger. The problem with this approach was that it was a lie. Steroids worked and the athletes knew it. The medical and coaching community had to come to grips with this situation. Now we emphasize that they do work, but the long term effects on the athletes is not worth the risk. The same approach happens when discussing zones. You can try to appeal to coaches on the philosophical approach, but zones do work in preventing the other team from scoring at the younger ages. If I only have one practice a week and I can win by putting my players in a zone why would I not do it. The reason is that the long term development of the players can be impaired. Coaches need to be thinking of the process of development and not the outcome of winning. I have often said that coaches who do not think development, the basic principle of coaching at this stage of a young athlete's career, should find another stage to coach. I am not saying that this person is a bad coach; I am saying he/she is in the wrong stage of coaching.

If youth sport is to be child centered, teach lessons through the sport and if we use a child's definition of competition there is no discussions. **We should not play zone defences until a child has the skill set, cognitive ability and physical maturity to do so.**

It is not easy to enforce this rule sometimes, but when has teaching children been easy. It is easy to let children watch TV all day, but is that what is best? No, it requires the adults to work together to accomplish the goal. All people involved must understand the purpose of the rule. This means players, coaches, parents, officials and league administrators. It will have to

be constantly monitored and adjusted. Careful attention must be paid to those coaches who flirt with the edges of the rule. Watch out for coaches who on the offensive side of the ball run clear outs to take advantage of the rule. These coaches need to be talked to about what is the underlying purpose of the rule.

Below is a list of associations who do not play zone with younger ages. The only organization I could find that had no restriction on zone defence was the AAU. When I contacted them about this the answer I received was that their organization was a competitive group that provided the highest level of competition in age group basketball. It is designed for teams who only want to play the best. They did admit that it was a somewhat controversial issue within the organization. Does the emphasis lie on winning the AAU Championship or the development of future players? That is one we can leave for the AAU to answer.

1. Canada Basketball's Athlete Development Model (see our website for the complete document) recommends that zones should not be used until latter stages of the Train to Train Stage of development – 15-16 years old
  2. FIBA – Basketball for Young Players – Guidelines for Coaches  
Endorsed by: European Association of Basketball Coaches  
World Association of Basketball Coaches  
Recommends zones not be Introduced zone to 15-16 year old players
  3. Basketball Australia – no zone until – 15-16 years old
  4. Israel - introduce zones at the 16 years old
  5. Baffled Parents Guide to Coaching Youth basketball – no zone defence 6-12 year old
  6. Coaching Youth Basketball – American Sport Education program – no zone (6 – 14 year olds)
  7. Rookie Coaches Basketball Guide – American Coaching Effectiveness Program (6-14 olds) – no zone
- 
1. Thompson, Jim. The Double Goal Coach (HarperCollins Publishers. Inc. 2003).
  2. Sport Parent Survey. Ministry of Government Services, Sport and Commonwealth Games Division, Government of BC. (1994)
  3. Sport Parent Survey. Ministry of Government Services, Sport and Commonwealth Games Division, Government of BC. (1994)