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PRESENTS THE COACHING SERIES...

“A PANE IN THE GLASS”

Life With Junior Athletes

by Bill Tschirhart

Just as successful college coaches sometimes find it more than difficult to translate that success to the professional ranks (or vice versa) the same can be true for curling when a successful coach of adult teams takes on his/her first junior team. It's a different challenge!

Coaching junior-aged athletes has some unique features (that's putting it mildly) not the least of which is the fact that you are not coaching four or five athletes, you have a large group of stakeholders as well. Don't ignore them. They're part of the deal and they're called parents! You best be aware of that and acquire the coaching skill set commensurate with that larger "team".

Some coaches have made a career out of working with junior-aged athletes. If this is your first foray into that world, seek them out and talk to them, at length. It's time well-spent. I did and what I learned from them is the basis of this article.

I'm not one of them by the way. I have worked and continue to work with many junior teams and their coaches but my own hands-on coaching experience with them, in the trenches so to speak, is limited. My own children, Susan and Mark did not have to "listen to Dad" in their formative curling years very much. While I was trekking around the country helping other juniors, thankfully they had excellent coaching at home. To those coaches, thank you from a grateful parent. And, oh yes, I stayed out of their way. When I was able to watch them play, I was just an interested spectator. When their coaches asked for advice, I gave it but they had to ask. I trusted them!

The key to success is COMMUNICATION, early communication. Most of the trouble occurs when there is a misconception regarding the roles the athletes, coach and parents play, a lack of complete understanding of the roles or a failure to identify them in the first place.

Modern parents are no different from parents of previous generations in their desire for their offspring to succeed. There is however, one exception to parents of the twenty-first century. They are more involved in the process. *They want to take a role, and if one is not clearly defined, understood and agreed to, they will create one for themselves that can be counterproductive to*

both the coach and the athletes.

To avoid pitfalls, start early. In your team building sessions during the off season, get the parents involved so that they begin to understand your philosophy and values as well as those of the athletes. When this happens, it will be clear to the parents that you will conduct yourself according to your values and implicit in that process is the message that you expect the parents to honour those values in the way they relate to their child and to you the coach.

At the onset of the season, a meeting with the parents will more clearly define and establish the roles each is expected to play. The focus of that meeting will be the values agreed to by the team and the coach. You may have to be very definite regarding the way you expect the parents to support your programme of development with the athletes. Join with other teams and coaches in your league to set up a meeting at which time a third party can state the expectations of parents. In this way, the coach can then build on the guidelines set forward in the meeting and customize them for the team and the parents involved.

A prudent decision may be to actively involve your parents in the process such as the recording of competitive data, booking accommodation, confirming bonspiel entries etc. Many "problems" occur when parents who wish to be involved have nothing to do, and as a result gradually assume the role of critic.

Some coaches have players, parents and themselves sign "contracts of intent". The contracts can cover a wide range of situations from practice expectations to behaviour guidelines. A personal note of caution; if you choose this route, do so with care. You may "paint yourself into an uncomfortable corner" as unforeseen events occur which don't quite fit the terms of the contracts.

As the season progresses, plan sessions with the team and parents at which time evaluation of the season to that point can be addressed. The feedback can be of great value. The flow of communication will certainly have an intrinsic value.

As previously stated, parents are your stakeholders in the operation. Discover what the stakes are. Work diligently to have the parents see you as a partner. Make sure that they understand the stake that you have in the process.

Carefully characterize the involvement that you will have with their children as a journey. Substitute winning with "performance". Emphasize the rewards of the journey and not the final destination.

As the season progresses, be aware that the team may "expand" as your successes lead to others. People who were not stakeholders at the start of the season may be on your bandwagon as it proceeds to higher and higher levels. If that occurs, it may be necessary to bring them into the fellowship of understanding that you have with the original stakeholders. More than one team has been led to the brink of disaster at provincial or national events because they failed to do this.

Try to avoid surprises. Young people in particular will strive to meet expectations that are clearly defined at the beginning of a process. Difficulties occur when the unexpected happens and rules and regulations are made up "as you go". Young people don't respond well to that and neither will the parents.

Junior women's teams and junior men's team generally have their own differences. They, like their adult counterparts, are not the same and should not be coached the same. Here are some of the differences that have been relayed to me or that I have witnessed. Remember, what you read below applies to junior-aged athletes but those adults reading this will do a lot of head nodding I suspect.

- *Women are more likely to prefer lighter weight shots and therefore as coach, one of your challenges will be to help them utilize all the power sources available (see, "You Have the Power" in this series). Men on the other hand, tend to salivate when they are afforded the opportunity for a big weight runback, double or triple takeout. They may need some extra work developing the softer finesse weight shots.*
- *Women tend to take fewer strategic risks, preferring a more controlled game strategy and tactics while men have a tendency to see the reward and ignore the risks, with disastrous results from time to time. Both need your assistance in the risk/reward syndrome.*
- *From a nutritional perspective, women will be more willingly to explore and assimilate the necessity for good sport and general nutrition. They will buy into that. Men, not so much!*
- *In the pre-game phase of preparation, women are more likely to study, adopt and follow a self-regulating pre-game stretching programme. Men will need coach-centered monitoring in that area.*
- *Women are more open to try new approaches in all phases of the game. Men are more content with the status quo and will need the coach or other experts to show them that there might be better ways.*
- *In the area of brushing, women absolutely require excellent technique since they don't have the muscular strength to overcome poor technique. Men, with greater muscular strength really benefit from good technique.*
- *In adverse situations, women tend to keep things bottled up inside. Tears flow more easily. Women need to learn to vent their frustrations in such a way as to not harm the dynamics of the team. Men will handle the same negative situations very differently. They will not hesitate to speak their mind but that openness has to be channeled to avoid the same negative consequences that silence can produce.*
- *Women are more openly supportive with their teammates. Men, again, not so much.*

Frequently, the coach of the junior team is a parent of one or more of the team members. Sometimes it's due to necessity, there's no else to coach the team. If that's the case please read "A Pane in the Glass # 40 – Coaching Certification: Why Bother?". Suffice to say you need to

have a heart-to-heart talk with your offspring/athletes as to how each of you will relate to one another in the sport environment. Then, you need to take special care when you have your coach/parent meeting. The most obvious pitfall is player positions. If it's your son/daughter who plays "skip", make sure everyone is comfortable with that and realizes why it's your son/daughter who assumes that role. Don't "whistle by the graveyard". Educate your parents to the point that they see that no one position is more important than any other and you need to remember that too.

Make no mistake being parent/coach is tricky business. Tread carefully and did I suggest that you get certified? Every athlete deserves a certified coach. Remain current! Your certification is your best defense against unwarranted criticism.

The title of this article implies that there are special skills and coaching tactics when the team is of junior age. That's true to the extent outlined in the article but, I clearly recall a coaching friend who coached a junior aged team, with significant team dynamics issues and a senior aged team with exactly the same challenges. This coach wisely realized that age was not a factor and successfully handled the personal relationship issues of both teams using the same coaching modalities. I was at arm's length to witness a skilled coach in action. So, sometimes age doesn't make any difference at all! A team is a team! Wow, I guess there is no coaching formula that's "plug and play". You're right! ***Coaching is as much art as it is science!***

Before closing, to you parents out there reading this article remember that the person who works with your children was very likely asked by yourself or one of the parents on your child's team to assume that very demanding role. The coach is a volunteer. He/she deserves your positive support at every step of the way. If you have questions or concerns, you owe it to the coach to go to him/her directly. Never criticize or even raise concerns about the coach in front of your son/daughter! That's just not fair! Work with the coach. Offer your support and remember that it's a journey, not a destination!

Enjoy working with your junior athletes and remember a colleague who has travelled the road ahead of you is only an email away. I'll see you soon behind a pane in the glass.