

# HOCKEY IS LIFE



PLAYERS AND PARENTS COMPLETE  
GUIDE TO LIFE IN HOCKEY

**SAMPLE ONLY**  
**NOT FOR PRINT**

# HOCKEY IS LIFE

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**Published by Hockey is Life Corp.**

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ISBN 978-0-9734694

1. Hockey – Training - Life

First Printing

Printed in

**Hockey is Life Corp.**

Box 758, McBride, BC,

Canada V0J 2E0

For more information or to order books email [info@hockeyislife.net](mailto:info@hockeyislife.net)

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**THERE ARE  
MANY EXCEL-  
LENT HOCKEY  
BOOKS ABOUT  
TRAINING,  
HOCKEY HE-  
ROES, COACH-  
ES, LIFE STO-  
RIES AND MORE**

## MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

**They can be tremendously interesting.  
But, players and parents need more,  
much more.**

Often, these books are about them, not about you – where you are headed, your life in hockey. This is the first definitive book to help players and parents through life in hockey.

The idea for a book began partly from the desire to remain in the life of hockey, and partly from illusive thoughts, thoughts that often appeared when relatives and friends, who were now skating down the same hockey path with their own sons and daughters, asked me hockey questions and advice. And then it hit me like a slapshot – these are the same questions all of us parents were asking 20 years ago! Should I buy used or new skates? How much is it really going to cost to play hockey? Do I really have a chance at playing pro? Why doesn't my kid ever get a chance on the power play? Is summer hockey camp worth it? Are hockey academies worth it? It's so competitive, how can I get an edge? What supplements and when? Is dryland training really that important? How important is it that I get drafted in the CHL draft? Exactly what is a hockey agent, and should I sign with one?

And on and on and on. So many questions, so many situations, so many costs and sacrifices, so many decisions.

What we believe to be the most practical hockey book for players and parents had not yet been written. Until now. This is the most complete, most informative book ever written to help players and parents.

This book is a guide for everyone's life in hockey. But it could not exist without the amazing journey that was

Dylan's life in hockey. The journey is the birth, the spirit, the soul, of this book. As a hockey manager, dad, and writer, I am just the vehicle, the tool, that helped create the product. I'm the hockey dad of a kid from small town Canada who would eventually play pro hockey in the ECHL, Europe, and Russia/Asia.

Dylan touched almost every rung on the hockey ladder on his climb to the professional ranks – so many ups and downs and turnarounds that it is enough to make anyone's head spin. He was a typical hockey kid, the hero and the goat, buried then revived, stories like cuts etched in ice. That's why his story is so emblematic for families all across the continent – because we weren't any different than most of those families out there heading down snowy roads early in the morning and late at night, trying to have fun and see how far this adventure can go.

It is not a personal story but everyone's inside story: what life is like in the trenches as a hockey player and a hockey parent. It has answers to questions, advice for those who want it, and detailed information on how to improve your game. It is a guide to ease the bumpy journey and some help for the constant decisions. This book covers it all. It is my sincere wish that you like the book!



**PLEASE, LEND  
ME YOUR EYES  
AND READ  
CAREFULLY.**

# WHY HOCKEY IS LIFE

**The title reads  
'Hockey is Life'. It  
does not say that life is  
all about hockey. As you will  
see, this book makes it plain that  
life is in fact much more than hockey.  
But truly, hockey is life.**

Just one weekend of hockey games or a tournament can touch us in many ways and affect our attitudes and behavior. We can get addicted to, or at least develop a fondness for, the excitement of hockey and the roller coaster ride that is our life within hockey. Life on the road, in the dressing room, and on the ice is a break from the regular, the mundane. So many adventures - the practices, games, and tournaments, are like packages of life within a life. We could say the same of other sports, that they are equally exciting and unique unto themselves. But witness the game of hockey's amazing speed, constant split second decisions, dazzling moves, one second it's the fluid grace of the greatest skaters on earth, and the next second it's a great body check. Speed, grace, strength, finesse, strategy, luck, invention-on-the-fly, it all happens in a game and in fact hundreds of times in a game.

Playing hockey is an op-

portunity to live life both through our sports heroes and with our friends. There is genuine friendship between hockey buddies, sharing the intense high of a great pass or scoring a great goal, the gladiator mentality of going into battle together, celebrating victory and dealing with adversity.

And yet, there is also playing the game with empathy and respect for others, after all we are warriors on the same ice.

**"Because when we step on the ice,  
nothing else matters"**

**- Anonymous**

So, what is life? Living life well is about caring and sharing with family and friends. It is energy, good eating habits, being healthy with physical activity. It requires commitment and discipline, managing time and money. Life has drama and adventure. It can be fun or it can be serious. It is the good, the bad, and the ugly. Life is social and requires interaction that pushes our levels of understanding and communication. Hockey provides all the above.

Physical activity is one of the greatest gifts of life for yourself or your child. Children and adults have become less active. Less exercise for a child has been shown to increase that child's risk of becoming an obese adult, and the physical and mental

**PLAYING HOCKEY  
IS AN OPPORTUNITY  
TO LIVE LIFE BOTH  
THROUGH OUR SPORTS  
HEROES AND WITH OUR  
FRIENDS**



## WHY HOCKEY IS LIFE

effects that come with that. Greater physical activity reduces the risk of conditions like diabetes and imbalanced blood pressure. Physical activity releases chemicals in the body called endorphins that trigger positive feelings and help ward off anxiety and depression, plus boost productive thinking.

They are often called the 'feel good' chemical. Giving yourself or your child regular physical activity through sports is truly giving the gift of life. When you sign your child up for minor hockey you enter the most organized, prolific sport in Canada.



**HA HA HA!**



**Why did the hockey team  
sign a Ghostbuster?  
He always gets ghouls.**

*PHOTO CREDIT IGOR MOJZES/  
DREAMSTIME.COM*

"I learned to skate at 3 years old and joined my first hockey team at 4 years old. Hockey has been my life for as long as I can remember. Thinking back to when I was a kid, I remember how excited I was for Tuesday and Thursday to come around because those were hockey practice nights. It was always fun hanging out in the dressing room with my buddies. It bonded us and definitely made me feel good to be a part of a team. We built a comradery because we would go to battle on the ice together, playing for each other, and sticking up for one another when the time came.

Going to minor hockey tournaments were a highlight of childhood. It was always fun and exciting to get away and travel to another city and stay in hotel rooms with teammates. We would spend hours playing mini sticks in the halls until our knees bled, or go down to the hotel pool and ride down the waterslide. The most fun of all though was the fact we would get to play 3-4 games throughout the weekend.

Playing hockey as a kid gave us a purpose and it made us feel like we were part of a community. It kept us active and brought new friendships. But above all that it was fun! My journey through hockey has been a very long road, as you will see, but it has been a great ride! It is my sincere wish that it is for you as well!

- Dylan



# BEING A HOCKEY KID

**THIS UNIT IS FOR KIDS. IT IS ABOUT WHAT IS FUN AND WHAT IS CHALLENGING IN HOCKEY. IT IS ABOUT KEEPING YOUR DIRECTION AS YOU GO THROUGH LIFE AS A YOUNG HOCKEY PLAYER.**

**Freedom! That is what is great about hockey. Escaping school and home and off to the rink or street or driveway. A break from adults and issues and brain clutter. It is great to fly over ice! Catch me if you can! Way faster than last year, last week even, and the puck actually goes where I shoot it—sort of. Can't wait to play my first game!**



PHOTO CREDIT PHATZ/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

One day hockey is nothing but freedom and fun, alone with a hockey net in the driveway, street hockey with buddies or pond hockey at the rink, and the next day, it is organized. It appears that we want to be competitive, human nature some might say. Organize lines in pond hockey—me and Joe and Petey against you and Tanya and Justin and Ryan. Can't wait until hockey practice, until the first game, until we beat those guys from Valleyville. Okay, being competitive is fun too. Welcome Minor Hockey—coaches and

parents and all that stuff.

Yes, youth do need parents and coaches. It is the love from parents and the effort of adults that keeps a kid's hockey world turning. Parents that get you to practices and games, and keep you

headed in the right direction. It is a challenge. Kids, don't miss practice and be there on time, go harder, even if your legs are burning. Get along with your teammates, even if you don't hang with the nerdy kid sitting beside you. Don't make trouble and don't display a selfish attitude: do it my way—not your way. I need money, get money





**Russian pond hockey kids.**

PHOTO CREDIT ALEXANDR VASILYEV/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

to pay dues, get skates sharpened, new skate laces and stick tape and concession stuff. And my stick sucks, I need a new stick.

It would be nice if all parents were happy and had lots of money for the best gear and loved hockey too. And took kids to see NHL games and said nice things even when you did not play well. And just listened once in a while. But that is not reality. Reality is that life is not fair. Not fair in how people suffer the world over. Not fair in the plant and animal kingdom where you get eaten just because you happened to be standing in the wrong place. The reality is that every young person reading this grows up in different circumstances, some good, some okay, some just plain bad. Many parents have their hands full just being parents, working to provide a living, making ends meet, dealing with their own personal issues. So, you and your situation are unique. There is no one like you. You have your own life to live and your own story to tell, your own challenges, your own joy. That's life. What also is life is that growing up with all the great things given to you, what others wish they had, does not make you a better person or necessarily a better hockey player. Growing up in a family with more issues and more heartache may not be as pleasant, and

may be filled with challenges, but do not think for a minute that it means you cannot be a good person or a great athlete. There can be advantages learning to deal with hard times, such as becoming independent, and gaining an appreciation for the benefits that hard work brings. Becoming independent by circumstance can be a driving force in your ability to achieve. I am telling you this, trust me, I know. Just read my biography, *Common Man, Uncommon Life*.

Let's look at Minor Hockey and being a hockey kid in the following age groups: U-7 & U-9, U-13 (PeeWee), U-15 (Bantam), U-18 (Midget).

## MINOR HOCKEY

### U-7 & U-9 (3-8) YEARS

There are not many kids in your age group reading this so I will keep it brief. And, at this age you don't get a whole lot of say in hockey matters, or any matters. If mom says keep your hand out of



**When kids complain about poor fitting gear, particularly skates, parents need to listen. Pain = I quit.**

PHOTO CREDIT POLOLIA/STOCK.ADOBE.COM



the cookie jar, you just keep your hand out of the cookie jar. But here are a few thoughts.

If your parents are like many parents, they will take you skating somewhere, anywhere, at the ages of about 3 to 6 years old. And it should be loads of fun. Like all young children your senses of the immediate are keen and you are full of yourself—the feel of sliding on glass, the fresh smell of ice and snow, the cold on your hands, feet, nose and ears, the laughter that bubbles from within and the joy of parents. Your parents will likely have you bundled up looking like an Inuit, warm and toasty. If you like it you can ask your parents to take you again and again. If you are the type of child

who likes to throw things and kick balls around, then you will probably love knocking a puck around with a stick. Ask for a set of plastic mini sticks and challenge Mom and Dad to get down on their knees for some hockey fun in the living room. Tons of fun. Your first real hockey stick and

ball or puck are cheap to buy. The hours of fun zipping around the driveway, alleyway, and road way (safely!) is paid back in joy and memories many times over. By the time you are 6 or 7 years old, you and school friends with the same interests have signed up for Minor Hockey. Maybe your parents are not really interested in signing you up for Minor Hockey, not impressed with your begging and pleading about getting signed up. Surprise them; start taking out the garbage without being asked, make your bed by yourself, keep your

room tidy, offer to clean the table. If you get an allowance, tell them you will donate part of that for hockey costs. Who knows, they might be shocked into submission. You could also talk with your buddies and look on the computer to see whom your parents should contact for Minor Hockey. Tell them there are programs like Jumpstart, Kid Sport, Skate to Great, and Hockey Helpers, that will help with gear, signing up for hockey and other costs.

**HOCKEY IS A COMPETITIVE SPORT** with Minor Hockey coaches who have taken training programs. Combine this with keen parents and children who begin skating at 3 years old and

hockey at 4 and what you have is surprisingly advanced hockey skills and skating skills by 5, 6, and 7.

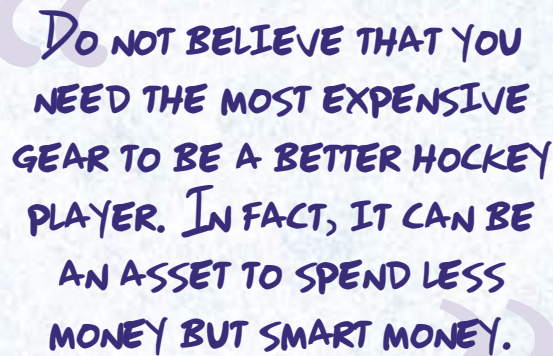
One always hears the stories of how many NHL players had started skating and hockey late in life.

These NHL players began hockey somewhere between 8 and 12 years old: Rod

Languay, Mike Grier,

Alex Ovechkin, Joe Mullen, Peter Stastny, Anson Carter, and others. Do you recognize the names? Some? No? That is because most of them were 5 or 6 years old 30 years ago, or more. With today's kids starting to skate at 3 and playing hockey at 4 or 5, and with the good coaches, it is difficult to catch up if a child joins after about 7 years of age. Best to join with the pack at 4 or 5.

Do not believe that you need the most expensive gear to be a better hockey player. In fact, it can be an asset to spend less money but smart money. As a coach or manager, time and time again,



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NEED THE MOST EXPENSIVE  
GEAR TO BE A BETTER HOCKEY  
PLAYER. IN FACT, IT CAN BE  
AN ASSET TO SPEND LESS  
MONEY BUT SMART MONEY.





HAHAHA!



**A boy told me I skated like a girl, I told him if he skated a little faster he could too!**

I would see kids show up with brand new \$60 skates (1995 prices). Dylan would show up with an expensive \$200 pair of Bauer Supremes or Tacks, and I could see the parents and kids glance at his skates and I guessed at what they were thinking—maybe you can afford those high-end skates but we can't. **WRONG**—They were \$200 skates we would buy used for \$50, or less. Skates in good shape and already broke in that were lighter and faster. Our daughter, Aaron, and son, Dylan, never saw a new piece of hockey gear until maybe 9 years old. Do not feel poorly if you are subject to hand-me-downs and second-hand gear; use it to your advantage.

Tell your parents if your hockey helmet or skates or any gear is not comfortable. Parents often think kids are just whining and need to toughen up, but tight skates that hurt and freeze your feet are unacceptable and will turn you off the sport in a couple sessions. Fake it and cry if you must. If your parents are not hockey wise, then help them understand that for kids your age to develop good stick handling and shooting skills the hockey stick still needs to be the right length and right weight/flex, not adult sticks cut down for an 8-year-old. When you wear skates, the stick should reach up to about your Adam's apple or

slightly lower. If you choose to become a defender and use a longer stick later, fine, but for kids it is better to learn with a shorter stick. And, it is far better to trade your used skates in each year than buy skates two sizes too large, expecting that they will fit next season. It can ruin your skating and skill development.

At the rink you will see kids you never expected to see there. Shy kids and kids from varying cultural backgrounds. Understand that you are all kids and share many of the same feelings and suffer many of the same fears. It can be difficult and embarrassing for some that are naturally shy to show up to a practice, kind of like crawling out from under a rock, so be kind. If you think you would like to play organized hockey but know that you do not fit in with the hockey group at school, give it a try anyhow. Minor Hockey is for everyone, and you might surprise yourself by making friends.

**IF YOU HAVE MORE SKILL THAN MOST**, be modest about it. You may be great, but there will always be those that are greater, much greater. It is wonderful that you love hockey and have seen a live NHL game and trade hockey cards with your buddies and scored two goals the last game. But there are kids in towns and cities who play



with kids two and three years older than them and scored 100 goals last season. Being a braggart or a smarty pants will advertise foolishness.

### U-13 (9-12)

From the ages of 3 to 8, Minor Hockey is a giant pool where kids swirl around generally having a good time. Often it is obvious which of your teammates have exceptional skill and some may already be attending summer hockey camps and high-profile tournaments. But generally, it is a giant mixing bowl. At the U-11 (Atom) level, about age 9 or 10, things start shaking and kids that have risen are often placed in higher-level programs called 'U', Tier 1, AA, Development, or something similar.

The point of this segregation is to allow more advanced players to play with others at about the same level so that skills can advance further. Some parents may feel that it is unfair if their child has not been selected as an elite player at the tryouts. "How can Johnny get better if the best kids are all gone from his team?" But it is not static; if you are on a lower level team but show higher level skills, and have the desire to compete, the chances are you will be moved up to the next level, often in that same calendar year. And if not, there is always next year. Countless numbers of kids who did not make the cut at some point in their lives were able to rise to the occasion with future opportunities.

**LOOK AT THE CONCEPT** of placing the most talented children together from another perspective. If you, or your child, is an accomplished piano player, chess player, or accomplished in any field of endeavour, you would consider the opportunity to play with those of similar ability very important in your development. Parents hear comments about highly refined hockey programs that are separate from Minor Hockey. The Atom age level is when eager young-



**Attending hockey camps and tryouts gets kids out of their comfort zone, opens minds by learning to work with others, and builds confidence for future tryouts.**

PHOTO CREDIT DOTSHCOK.COM/DREAMESTIME.COM

sters often begin to attend hockey camps and spring and summer hockey. By 10 years old many young players show high levels of skill and many are showcased in high-level tournaments like Edmonton's Brick tournament, which draws teams from across North America. PeeWee U13-level coaches of select, private, hockey programs are known to earn in excess of \$60,000 per season. As a young player you may feel you are being left behind by not attending these programs. There is no question that the more you practice at high levels the better you will become—up to a point. Many successful pro hockey players emphasize that they were able to maintain their love for hockey and life by taking a break after hockey season in order to enjoy sports like soccer, baseball, and lacrosse. The point here is that those who have made the highest levels of Junior-And pro hockey have come from many situations and backgrounds. However, by the time you are PeeWee U13 age of 11 and not playing at a higher tier, and have not attended hockey camps or played on spring teams, you are at a disadvantage when it comes to keeping up with the better



players.

The disadvantage can be mental and political as well as physical. Hockey in Canada is a grand sport with thousands hitting the ice, but at the higher levels, coaches, WHL scouts, and agents commonly network and are often aware of who's who in the PeeWee world. They are aware of who has stood out on Tier 1 teams, in high-level tournaments, and in hockey camps. If you are 11 to 14, perhaps living in a smaller community, and suddenly find yourself in a Tier 1 tryout, while never having played with or against players of that level, it can be intimidating to the point that you will not perform

to your potential. It happens all the time. Although you have elite skills in the town where you come from, when you jump on the ice at a Tier 1 tryout it can be unreasonable and unfair to expect a great performance. All the more reason to attend some spring hockey and summer camps during the younger years, if possible.

Hockey is a competitive sport but the benefit and joy of hockey outlined in the "Hockey is Life" section makes it clear that the benefit and joy of hockey goes well beyond competition. Players and parents of players in House or Tier 2 Bantam and Midget have pretty much given up on hopes of becoming pro players or making Junior-A or CHL teams. And guess what, they often tell you that once they gave up on becoming a pro player or earning a scholarship, they enjoyed House, Tier 2 and 3 years greater than ever before. No more pressure of trying to make it to the next level, of dealing with kids, parents, and coaches,

whose focus was on winning, and the unfair politics that occur because winning was paramount. Excellent.

**KIDS WHO HAVE FUN** in hockey are the first ones out the door playing pond hockey, street hockey, shooting at nets, and having fun trying all types of creative moves. This "fun" is actually freedom without adult direction, allowing you to develop creatively, which translates later into goals scored, assists, puck possession, and great entertainment. If you like Minor Hockey, you will likely love pond hockey, so go for it, it's good for you! Just be sure that even though it is only

pond hockey you wear proper gloves, shin pads, elbow pads, a jock, etc. I am writing this with less than 70 per cent vision in one eye because at 11 years old I did not have a face mask on my helmet.

The minds of youth in their pre-teen years are undergoing growth and hormonal

changes that will allow for increased abstract thought—creative thought. The PeeWee and Bantam years are a time of discovering self, understanding new concepts and ideas. In hockey this means understanding the plays, the details of the game, how to work as a team, and advancing the creative process. Parents in Novice who enjoyed watching their kids zip about and whack a puck around with a stick now see hockey as a well-tuned piece of cooperative work with individual creative moments. What was once laughter at ice follies is now OOOHs and AAAWs as parents applaud players who wear magic skates and hold dancing sticks, who deke with ballet-like finesse

**ALTHOUGH YOU HAVE ELITE SKILLS IN THE TOWN WHERE YOU COME FROM, WHEN YOU JUMP ON THE ICE AT A TIER 1 TRYOUT IT CAN BE UNREASONABLE AND UNFAIR TO EXPECT A GREAT PERFORMANCE.**





**Attending camps and competing in high level tryouts maximizes development by playing with better hockey players, particularly for those who have not had the opportunity. If you do not find competitive, higher level experience by the time you are in your teens, the stuff that you show in U-15 or any Tier 1 or Junior hockey tryout will likely not be enough stuff to impress coaches or scouts. Not to mention that you have not thrown your hat into the political arena of who's who in your age group.** *PHOTO CREDIT ANNA KRIVITSKAIA/DREAMSTIME.COM*

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and score goals.

As a PeeWee age person who loves the game, it can be frustrating, even devastating, when buddies are having growth spurts and now shoot harder, skate faster, reach further, while you are stuck in your same 4'8" frame. But because you love the game you will stay in the game, and you know what? Things will work out as they should. You will eventually grow and your skills will too, and if not, there are many smaller players in Junior-And pro hockey. Those who matured faster often hold steady sooner while late bloomers continue to grow and improve. Yesterday I was able to get on the ice with Dylan as he just returned from Moscow, Russia. I have not played with him for a few years. He is 27. And I was amazed how much harder and more accurate his

shot is than when he was 24 or 25. Talk about a late bloomer! Bodies and ability change constantly. As a PeeWee or Bantam player, you think that you can predict who will make Junior-A or WHL or NCAA, but the journey truly is a long and winding road. It is not a sprint but a marathon. Whoever sticks around to hear the lady sing in Junior-A and CHL hockey arenas with thousands watching is very difficult to predict.

Having confidence and believing in yourself is easier said than done during these puberty years. Who may make what team can come down to a single tryout. The confidence, the belief in yourself that allows you to show the skill that you have, can be a deciding factor. As explained earlier, having the experience of playing in some high-end tournaments, or for an elite spring



team, can be an advantage developmentally, politically, and for confidence. By the time you leave U-13 and head up to U-15, who's who in the provincial arena of best players is well known among those coaches coaching the best players. If your name is not in their minds or on their tongues it can be a disadvantage when you are at a tryout and doing your best, even if your best is as good as everyone else. I truly believe that kids in this situation must play so well that the coach cannot say "no" and will keep you on over someone he expected to keep. So, playing with and against the best will provide a comfort zone, confidence, when stepping on to the ice, and hopefully your name has already been tossed in the hat when it is time to pick players for U-16 teams, etc. If not, remember, there often is a next time, another chance, and in a variety of ways. As you will see, there is more than one way to succeed.

### **U-15 (13/14)**

The Bantam years are a "coming of age." Young players at this age are in the process of becoming adults. Personality, character and behaviour are more distinct as adults begin to emerge from puberty with boldness and a zest for life. Youth has an exciting sense of what the more serious life as an adult will bring.

It is a coming of age in hockey as well. An exciting time knowing scouts and agents sit in the stands, and high-end tournaments and selections for U-16 teams are just around the corner. And, on everyone's mind is the WHL draft for 14-15-year-olds.

For those playing one step below the elite levels, there is still some movement up the ladder during the season. This is a time when exceptional players from small towns elect to move to larger centres, if they have not already, to play with players of similar ability and to get 'noticed'. For

those who remain playing at House or A levels you get to have the fun without the pressure, and far less expense, while understanding that hockey is not the only great thing in life. And, have time to enjoy other favourite sports like snowboarding, lacrosse, soccer, or various creative activities. It is a good time to remind yourself that for 99.9 per cent of young players there is no pot of gold at the end of the hockey rainbow, and that there is a whole world out there in other sports and life that you can take full advantage of while still having loads of fun playing hockey with friends. For both the players and parents of U-15 (Bantam), everything jumps to higher levels, including the competitive drive of players competing for places and positioning on teams, the speed and skill of growing players, the level of play-making, higher levels of coaching, attention to training and conditioning, financial and time commitment of parents, and increased number of practices and games. Parents and kids, after having gone through their life in hockey, often look back at this time with fond memories because for the first time the game itself is fast, more exciting, more like pro hockey. There is a feeling of electricity in the air, at times a nervous energy, as players participate in tryouts and important games. Just look around and see those scouts and agents in the stands wearing dark coats, some crested with CHL team logos. And, the CHL draft is looming just ahead.

Kids are becoming athletes, not just hockey kids any longer. In later units we will look at being the best hockey player you can be, but at this point in hockey life, some players are beginning to grasp the notion that there is a difference between what is a hockey kid and what is a hockey athlete. A young hockey player is basically a kid playing hockey. An athlete is someone who truly understands that skill is only part of the equation for success and knows that growing as an athlete and



reaching the top of their game is possible only through discipline and following a recipe, a specific recipe best suited to self. This recipe involves what to eat, sleeping and rest, training, commitment to hard work, following a schedule, training to improve weakness in one's physical ability, and more. It means being an individual. Although you are all for one and one for all as a teammate, although you already do what the other guys are doing with training, you understand the need to go your own way with strategy, discipline and commitment.

This is a tall order, it is too much fun being just a hockey kid—I'm doing fine just the way I am, why change? Well, that is true, and that is why relatively few young hockey players are true athletes. Budding athletes know that researching good diet, engaging in dryland training to im-

prove specific body weakness, repetitive practicing of moves and shooting skills to improve mobility and accuracy, and learning about the lives and decisions of past hockey players, will give them an edge. And for some, living this life of dedication is fun!

**ONCE YOU GAIN KNOWLEDGE**, you will have it for the rest of your life; once you improve ability, you will play a better game; once you focus your work effort, your discipline becomes habit and you will be a better person and athlete. If you want to improve your status among Junior-A and CHL scouts, improve your chances in the CHL draft, improve your chances of being chosen for special competitions, then begin the transition from a hockey kid into an athlete. Trainer Andy O'Brien had this to say about Sydney Crosby in a Toronto Sun article by Carry Castagna. "He was



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**All successful Junior and pro players at some point in their teen years had transitioned from just having fun with buddies and hockey, into an athlete, someone who learns how to live healthy, train properly, and think the game. That takes both desire, discipline, and work effort. Some find that commitment fun, and they know that future success in life requires the same elements. If in your personal life you do not have control over much due to circumstance, just control what you can, meaning again, your work effort and discipline. You do not get to change life on earth. It's tough; always has been. Do you think cave people could have survived without tremendous effort and discipline while hunting and food gathering in all climates and all circumstance? There are countless moments and events in hockey and in life when we need to dig in, try harder. Feeling sorry for oneself does not amount to a hill of beans, or a meal of burgersaurus.**

*PHOTO CREDIT ICON SPORTSWIRE - PATRICK GORSKI*



this bright young kid who recognized at a young age that speed didn't come naturally to him and that his skating and speed were what he needed to work on because that was the direction the game was going in. I thought he had tremendous foresight as a young guy to make that recognition."

For those of you who have grown up being the best, or one of the best on the team, you have also grown up being privileged or entitled. Do yourself a favour and erase those feelings of entitlement. It could cost you a future in high-level hockey, it could cost you a free education through hockey, and it is key to your hockey survival in the future. You have come by entitlement honestly. Since Novice you have been a go-to guy on the team, scoring the most goals, always on the power play, the over-time hero with the crowd cheering your greatness, the cool guy at school all the girls adore. And the coach's favourite; he even turns to you for your thoughts. Your ears ring from all the accolades and everyone knows you will be chosen in the CHL

draft and likely go pro. You don't wear a crown on your head but at times you feel like you do. And your parents, they feel this entitlement as much as you do, demand it, in fact, whenever you may have been slighted with ice time or anything you rightly deserve. It only makes sense, you are of the best, one of the chosen ones, after all.

NEWS BREAK! *Everyone* gets slammed. As you advance to new teams, even the best can find themselves as the rookie on the bench, surrounded by older and better players. Even the best must prove themselves while getting maybe a shift or two in a game, and no word from an angry coach as to why. One day a hero with entitlement, the next just another fly having to fight for its space on the wall, while under a coach who hardly gives you a chance. Welcome to your future, the real world of Junior-And pro that is about winning, and money. Can those of you entitled,

those chosen ones who have not had to work for every inch, handle this? Can you pick up your crushed heart and go hard no matter what? Many with a sense of entitlement cannot cope with being dropped to survival mode and simply quit or get released



**Do not have it in your head that you are the big fish in hockey town. It could be that you are a big fish in a small pond, later to find yourself a minnow in rough seas.**

IMAGE CREDIT DOLIMAC/  
STOCK.ADOBE.COM



or fade away.

Entitlement can be recognized at any level, individuals with lots of skill but a lack of consistent work ethic at both practices and games. So, lose entitlement, find discipline and a consistent work ethic. Do not buy into the entitlement that your parents think you deserve. Discuss your desire to behave in a low-key manner. Scouts will, very often, pass over a player with high maintenance parents. They have seen it all, they don't welcome trouble any more than you do.

**I SAT ALONE IN THE STANDS** at the wonder-

ful arena of the WHL Spokane Chiefs, an hour before game time, about to witness Dylan for the first time as a Chief. He had clawed his way up the hockey ladder to be here. The Manager, bless him, found me alone and joined me in conversation. I said, "It surprises me how many kids are drafted

in the Dub draft, what, seventh or eighth place? And only a few are still here." And I added, "Then there's Dylan, who was never drafted at all. Hey, Dylan played with a kid who was drafted, what, number five over-all, I don't even know where he is now. What's his name?" Well, the manager knew his name very well because the Chiefs had drafted him. The manager said, "I knew as soon as I talked with his parents that the kid would not make it."

Go figure, all it took for an experienced manager is a conversation with the parents to know that the parents, and the kid, were bitten with the entitlement bug, and that even as a player with exceptional skill he would not cut it. Talk about

everyone losing because of questionable attitude. Most U-15 and U-18 kids who have spent their entire career in Minor Hockey, and the parents of those kids, will at some time during these ages consider attending a hockey academy. The many details of academies and the pros and cons are discussed in the section on Hockey Camps, Spring and Summer Hockey, and Hockey Academies. The decision to attend an academy, or not, may be a life-altering decision, for you and for parents. Among the concerns, for many, is the cost and the effect on family from having a child

leave home at a young age. Later we will look at the ups and downs, but for now you should be absolutely clear that there are many opportunities, including Academies, that astute parents and kids can take advantage of. You may have missed opportunities but through continued effort in hockey

you will have the chance to prove yourself again and again. This does not mean that you will make the cut or achieve the level of play you dreamed of, but it means you gave it your best shot. Hockey Academies are, for many, an important alternative from Minor Hockey, mainstream in many provinces and often beneficial for youth and the future adults they become, but not the only route to future success. Of the 32 players named to Canada's National Junior Hockey team in 2017, 12 had spent time in hockey academies. Impressive. But then, 20 did not.

### 15-17

If Bantam is a coming of age then Midget is the

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proving ground now that you have come of age. Those kids playing House or Tier 2 or 3 U-18 hockey are winding down their years in Minor Hockey and having fun doing it. The CHL draft has taken place. Tier 1 players are in the thick of things getting a chance to show off their stuff. Those who have not been drafted have the possibility of getting listed by CHL teams or earning tryouts with Junior-A or Junior-B teams. Be very aware that many players ecstatic about being drafted to the CHL at 15 will not stick in the CHL, and many of those listed later, will.

If I remember correctly, the year that Dylan joined the Spokane Chiefs of the WHL there were only two of the seven players who were drafted by Spokane during his draft year still with the team. Dylan was passed over in the WHL draft, and played Tier 2 U-18, as he was also

passed over by the Tier 1 Major Midget coach. Unknown to myself, Spokane had 'listed' him on their 50-player protected list. It truly can be a long and winding road. Thank goodness there is more than one way to take that journey when a ghouel blocks the way.

**THE MIDGET (U18) YEARS HOLD SURPRISES**—who emerges to make it to the CHL, Junior-A, or Junior-B teams, and who dropped out, leaving hockey behind or being left behind. And with those many surprises, hockey buddies, parents, coaches, scouts and agents ask themselves what happened to that kid? What happened that the Number One draft pick folded? What happened that an undrafted kid, barely a blip at

CHL draft time, is now on the ice, with more first and second line and power play time than those who were drafted? The CHL, Junior-A, Junior-B, Coaches, and Scouts will be discussed later. For now, Midget-age players need to strive to become that true athlete, need to look at that recipe that will keep them on top of their game, not just do what buddies do in terms of training or eating or lifestyle, but what is best for them.

Minor Hockey Provincial Branches have varying rules of eligibility. In some instance if you try out for your hometown U-18 team and do not make

it, you are then free to try out for another U-18 team. Take this opportunity. Coaches are different from one another as apples are different from oranges. They do not always agree on the value of a player, and they simply do not all want the same type of player. Due to the competitive nature of U-18,

16-year-olds will often not make a Tier 1 team until they try again at 17. It can be discouraging for players who have always been heralded as one of the best in the community to be suddenly turned away at the next level. But playing Tier 2 or 3 for a year before U-18 can be an advantage. You may have a limited role and limited ice time as a 16-year-old on a Tier 1 team, but develop your game with tons of ice time while piling up assists and goals at the Tier 2 or 3 level. Good for your confidence and good fun too.

Junior-A and WHL teams often have the desire to put their claim on coveted players, and at times encourage 16-year-olds to make the jump to Junior when, in fact, they would benefit greatly

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from another year or two in U-18. Unless you are a truly exceptional player assured of a significant role in Junior-A or the CHL, having a limited role with limited ice time rather than a major role on a U-18 team can be extremely discouraging. Contrary to what those coaches may tell you, primarily practice time, with limited game time, will often do less for your development than playing an important role on a Tier 1 Midget team. That Junior team may look like money, but it is often a greater benefit to continue developing your game at the U-18 level. Get an honest sense of the situation from both the U-18 and the Junior-A team and seek the advice of adults whose hockey minds you trust.

**AS YOUR MIDGET (U18) SEASON IS WINDING DOWN**, there will be talk among teammates about spring tryouts with CHL, Junior-A, and Junior-B teams that need to assess prospects for the coming fall. From the teams' perspective, these tryouts provide an opportunity to see how the new talent they have invited stack up against some of their returning, seasoned players from the previous season. It helps them decide who will be invited back to the main camp late next August or early September. And you never know, maybe one of the 'cannon fodder' will surprise them. Cannon fodder is my own terminology, what I began to call the hopefuls who sign up for these tryouts of 50 or more youth gathered for the weekend. I say 'cannon fodder' as most of the hopefuls are simply bodies signed up for tryouts that Junior teams need to have enough players to showcase the talent that management really wants to see.

However, if you go into these tryouts not expecting too much and skate and play as intensely as you can, they will be great experiences. In fact, I would encourage parents and players to attend a few of these tryouts each year of Bantam/Midget, to see if your talent compares favourably with

kids already playing on those teams. It will provide a sense of a player's true value, the writing on the wall so to speak, whatever that writing is. But the assessment of your performance needs to be your own first, and the coaches or scouts of the Junior team second. This is because, again, coaches, for a variety of reasons, often do not have an accurate assessment of who you are and what you can do. Having a great camp in your own estimation can be reason enough to keep trying, even if that particular coach does not recognize your ability or need the talent you have to offer. Quality coaches and organizations will often sit down with you and discuss your performance after the camp, but do not always expect this consideration.

At the end of these weekends there may be games with made-up "teams" that scrimmage against each other and then a final game played with players the coach rewards or expects to invite back to main camp. We attended many hockey camps. After his Bantam year Dylan had two excellent tryouts where I believed, from a dad's perspective, he was one of the better players. The first was with the Junior-A Merritt Centennials, which, at that time, was a team on the lower rung. At the end of the weekend I was sure he would be sat down and taken seriously as a fall prospect, but no, thank you for coming, see you later, out the door, not even playing the final fun game. We left licking our wounds.

Next was a tryout with the BC's Vernon Vipers, a true Junior-A powerhouse. Again, I believed he had an outstanding tryout. When he was not invited to play in the final game, we were both wholly discouraged, and jealous. There were a few kids Dylan had played spring hockey with who were in that final game. One year later, Dylan was eagerly recruited by Viper scout Doug Black, and as I sat in the coach's office with the scout while the coach finalized Dylan's agreement



to join the team, I thought, *You guys didn't even give him a chance to play in your scrimmage game last year!* To make a long story short, if I remember, maybe one or two of the new kids in either tryout racked up the goals and assist totals in their Junior-A or CHL careers that Dylan did. It is absolutely incredible how a coach can pass on a player who a year later becomes an impact player on a different team, with a different coach, a coach who was able to identify talent. It is the story of Dylan's amazing journey in hockey. But it defies logic—that coach of a basement team, that desperately needs talent, passing on a kid who, a year later, plays on Canada's best Junior-A team, scores the game-winning goal at the RBC cup, and earns a full ride NCAA scholarship! The message here is that if you love the game you need to ride the waves as long and as far as you can, or, more accurately, as long as it makes sense. Pro and semi pro players learn to live through hard times, to get tough. Having a thick skin helps.

Many of you, particularly those from smaller towns with House and Tier 2 associations, have parents who supported you in Minor Hockey and have enjoyed the ride, but draw the line when it comes to spring hockey teams or summer camps. *I'm not wasting money on those camps—you're doing great just where you are.* Then, suddenly, when all your buddies and kids your age are headed off to Junior camps, and you are eager to go too, your parents, also seeing your buddies excited about Junior camps, and how upset you will be if you do not get to go, finally relent.

Too late.

Ok, not necessarily, but probably. Going to these camps and playing with and against kids that are *all* at a high level will likely be too much for you if you have not already experienced intense play with high-level players; the game will be too fast to keep up, too fast to be in position, passes too hard to hang on to, and no time to make split



**Great effort does not guarantee that you advance to higher levels of hockey, but great effort and not quitting does open more doors in the future, both in hockey and in life.**

PHOTO CREDIT MATROSOVV/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

second decisions; do I cover that guy or that guy? How close to play the body, do I race in and fore-check or not?

What did you expect? You don't throw someone in the water to see if they know how to swim. This does not mean parents must necessarily sell the farm so junior can attend a \$45,000 hockey school, but you will be in awe and intimidated by strange kids, and before you get your legs and mind up to speed it will be too late. You snooze, you lose. If you are a talented player who wants to make the next level you need to attend high-end camps and tryouts. Preferably before or at U-13 and on.

**ALONG WITH LIFESTYLE**, living habits, and training, there are some intangibles that can make or break a career in hockey. The teenage years are a time of personal growth and emerging personality, all the while the game becomes more challenging. All you get is a fair chance on an ice surface that continues to slant against you—players and goalies get bigger and better, systems become more refined, coach's expectations more demanding, the play more intense. At the end of



the day what do coaches, scouts, agents, and the fans see in you aside from ability? Passion. It is exceptional passion for the game, passion to win, passion to support your teammates in battle, that allows a player to rise above in challenging moments, both on and off the ice. How in the world anyone can survive non-stop gruelling bus rides, bruised bodies, being bounced around from team to team, losing the coaches' favour, and yet still come back for more, if not for a love of the game—passion. If you are sitting there thinking that you are not an overly passionate type person, no worries, I am talking on-ice passion, not your off-ice personality. There are many quiet, gentle souls who display tremendous on-ice drive and passion.

Common sense might tell us that 15- and 16-year-old hockey players born with a silver spoon in their mouth, who always had the best gear and best support with never a worry about money, would lack passion and grit. But living in arenas for several years with a variety of parents and players puts that theory to rest. Predicting who has that eternal fire is a guess that, over time, plays itself out on the ice for all to see. Perhaps it is as much about who is born who, more than it is about who is born with money, or not. Maybe some who came up the ladder in more difficult circumstance want it more—an underdog's inner flame fighting for position and glory to prove himself. Maybe.

Pro players will tell you in an instant, and with a smile, the pride they felt playing with amazing teammates who made it on heart and not skill—players short on ability but long on passion. All

of the ability of the Sydney Crosbys, Alexander Ovechkins and Connor McDavid's does not in itself explain their success. What they have maintained is a burning desire for the game through the trying ups and downs. Only if you played hockey can you know how impossible it is, how much it hurts, battling for the puck then getting slammed into the boards by a 6'3", 230-pound tank. That players like Montreal Canadiens 5'9" Brendan Gallagher, Edmonton Oilers 5'8" Kailer Yamamoto, and many similar others, make their living battling hockey giants day in and day out is nothing short of amazing, impossible without an overdose of passion and courage. To truly feel their pain and know their grit you needed to have played the game.

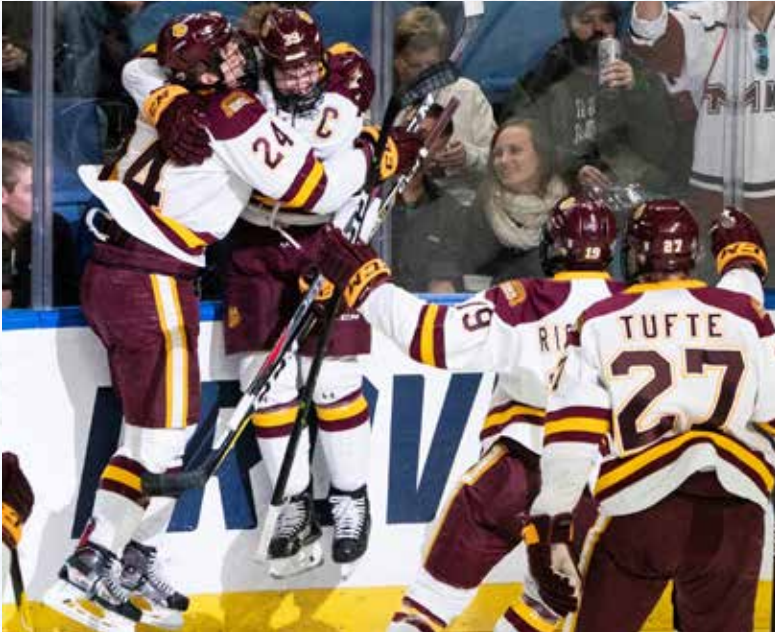
### **PASSION IS A POINT TO BE MADE,**

but how do you get more of it? If you know, then bottle it and sell it, and you will make a million. What can be said is covet and nurture it. That means avoiding living habits that take you down the wrong path, sap you

of strength and vitality and put you in emotional predicaments that take your mind and desire out of the game. Do not become that person who cannot say "no" to drugs and alcohol, that person who follows buddies to bars and parties like a lamb to slaughter, a hockey Pinocchio. Life in sports can be demanding and often stressful. The game itself is an adrenalin rush, the lifestyle addicting. It demands a clear mind and a good heart to make the right decisions, both on the ice and with life. If you open your mouth to alcohol and drugs, what also rushes in is poor behaviour and bad attitude, sleeping less, erratic eating behaviour, and just downright feeling poorly. And as you know from

**"Don't aspire to be the best on the team, aspire to be the best for the team."**





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**If you could manufacture passion, bottle it, and sell it, you would make millions. Cherish what you have and protect it, keep it safe with good living habits – eating, sleeping, who you hang out with, and smart choices.**

*PHOTO CREDIT MATROSOV/  
STOCK.ADOBE.COM*

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the lives of the rich and famous, and those around you not so famous, addiction and sadness often follow. Well, you might think, all my buddies drink beer, it's just a few pops with the boys, just letting go, blowing off steam and having a good time for a night.

Well, no, all the guys don't do it. And doing it once in a few months is not the same as doing it every week. Do not blame others for your own poor choices. If you look at the past few weeks of your life in hockey and in each of those weeks you drank alcohol, you need to have a serious talk with yourself. Being addicted to drugs and poor living habits sneaks up on you. It's not going to happen to you, and then somehow it did, caught like a louse in a web. Many great athletes with great passion were ruined with alcohol and drugs. For many, alcoholism waits until players leave the game, the game now gone and alcohol takes over. It is the legitimate selling point of Hockey Academies that generally they provide a healthy and stable environment for youth during the teen years. More on poor living habits in the chapter, "The End Game." We have focused primarily on the journey onwards

and upwards in U-18 hockey. But for those who do not see themselves going on—maybe the skill level is not there, maybe other interests are beginning to take over, maybe it is fun but not worth the financial or time commitment, these final years can be the finest years of your hockey life. In that one year of Dylan's Tier 2, U-18 hockey in Kamloops, BC, the common thread between most parents was that they were having the most fun ever. The pressure and the extreme travel and the high finance was over, the politics that always having to win brings to the game was gone. What a relief, now we are having fun!

There has been much studied and reported about why kids quit hockey in those Midget years, as if the Midget years dictate hockey trends in our country and reflect the peril of losing our national game. Really, it is just that time of life. Hockey is not for everyone all the time. You gave it your best shot and now it is time to move on. Just be glad it happened. You have made friends, gathered some of the greatest memories of your life while being physically active. Be sure to stay physically active in whatever activities you pursue!



YOU CAN PICK  
YOUR FRIENDS  
BUT YOU  
CAN'T PICK  
YOUR FAMILY,  
OR YOUR SIZE.

SIZE MATTERS.  
HOW TALL OR  
SHORT YOU ARE, YOUR  
REACH, YOUR STRENGTH, YOUR  
SPEED, YOUR MOBILITY, YOUR  
SHOOTING ACCURACY, YOUR  
TOUGHNESS, YOUR ATTITUDE -  
IT ALL MATTERS.

**As the hockey dad of a kid who almost reached 5-foot-9 yet made it to pro hockey, I have made some definite observations. Better to call them observations than opinion because they are similar observations made by many short players, parents, and coaches at all levels. Let's make the journey of small or tall from the beginning.**

From the ages of 4 to 13, prior to full contact and body checking, size is a much lesser factor. As hockey parents you have seen those tiny mighty mites flying over the ice at 5 years old, dippy doodling and fooling goalies who have to dig the puck out of the net again and again. The skating ability of many 5- and 6-year-olds these days

## DOES SIZE MATTER?

is amazing, and a joy to watch.

From Grade 1 Novice level to second-year U-13

– PeeWee, the size of a player, offense or defense, is less significant to hockey performance than skill and speed. You have heard the comment,

“That kid can stick handle in a phone booth.” Small

kids with skill and speed have a low centre of gravity, can turn on a dime, and yes, can stick handle in a phone booth. They can slip away from bigger, less-coordinated kids. They generally avoid getting held up or knocked down or squeezed into the boards because they are quick, and because checking is not allowed. There is also a wider skill disparity from team to team and much more relative space for the better players to really excel.

Dylan and many other pint-sized 4- to 7-year-olds regularly scored four or five goals in a game. But that was when they actually kept score, and back before the so-called Gretzky Rule, capping the number of goals any one kid can score in a game. It is a good thing those rules came into play. Seeing scores of 12 to 1 was no fun for anyone, except for the kids scoring all the goals. Limiting each kid to a few goals per game did those pint-sized Sydney Crosbys a great favour. It helped take the ‘me me’ out of the game and helped them, and their parents, understand that a greater part of the game is team work. It gave them more opportunity to learn passing and playmaking skills. Here is a tip for parents of small players: thoroughly enjoy those times when your smaller child is as good or better than the bigger kids. They may be the best times of your





**Brendan Gallagher of the Montreal Canadiens is a great example of speed, strength, skill, and grit, in a compact package. Shorter Junior and pro players need to be big on courage.**

*PHOTO CREDIT DAVID KIROUAC/ICONSPORTSWIRE*

hockey life.

**AND BE REALISTIC.** Anticipate that as the big kids get bigger and full contact enters the game, things change, literally overnight. So, in a very positive and fun way, prepare little Petey. I say Petey because little Sally will not have to worry about full contact (but the female game is nonetheless physical and gritty). Prepare your young player with encouragement, strategy, and practice time, that will help strengthen their overall game. A well-rounded player has a better chance of having fun and lasting longer in the sport. Give accolades for a smart

pass or a heads-up move that sets up the other kids as much as scoring their own goal. Celebrate their defensive plays as much as their offensive success.

If you have a hockey net in your basement or in the yard, get excited when the kids in the home game make a great deke or set up another player with a slick pass. Give them affirmations for more than just shots and goals. Stress the importance of the play being alive at all times if the puck is not in the net.

Teach strength in their hockey stance, legs apart, so they are not easily pushed around. Practise battling for the puck and for position, and make



them feel good when they win the puck or ball. Practise several different ways to score. Many young kids find a favourite way to score on young goalies, for example racing in, deke right then tuck it behind the goalie on the left side. You would be surprised how many kids carry these favourite moves up to the teen years, then discover it doesn't work anymore with better goalies, but, they do not have any tricks left in the bag. That's no big deal for a stay-at-home defender or a dedicated grinder, but no matter what your role on the team, versatility and "thinking the game" is always an asset.

But the reality for smaller players at all levels—from Bantam through Junior-And college and into pro—is they need to be skilled playmakers and goal scorers. What else have they got to offer? How many times have you seen a 5-foot-8 NHL player clear 6-foot-9 Zdeno Chara or 260-pound Dustin Byfuglien from the front of the net, or shove them off of the puck in a board battle? That would be an event.

In a Toronto Sun article Ian Shantz revealed some interesting statistics. In 1990-91 there were seven players 6-foot-5 or taller, and none were goalies. In 2018-19 there were 36 players 6-foot-5 or taller. According to the Wall Street Journal, the average goalie height had reached an average—average!—of 6-foot-2 by 2015, and NHL.com reported in 2019 that the shortest starting goalie in the National Hockey League was 6 feet tall and five of them topped 6-foot-5.

On average, pro players are getting bigger, not smaller, and there has not been a significant increase in the number of small players in pro hockey. In 2000-01 there were 33 skaters 5-foot-9 or shorter and in 2018-19 there were 29 skaters 5-foot-9 or shorter.

The per centage has not changed much, but, small hockey players in pro hockey are making a bigger impact, becoming more valuable to team

success. Six or seven players under 5-foot-10 are often in the NHL's top thirty scorers. Brendon Gallagher, Cole Caufield, Kailer Yamamoto, Jared Spurgeon, Brad Marchand, Patrick Kane, Johnny Gaudreau, Tyler Johnson, Cam Atkinson, Mats Zuccarello, and Johnathan Marchessault are examples of impactful undersized players. The shortest NHL player in recent times is Nathan Gerbe, listed at 5-foot-4. The shortest ever is Roy Worters, who played 12 NHL seasons with the Pittsburgh Pirates, New York Americans and Montreal Canadiens, winning the Hart and Vezina trophies along the way and inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame at 5-foot-3.

Not all coaches see the advantage or disadvantage of a player's height in the same light. Some NHL teams have no players listed at less than 5-foot-10, while the Nashville Predators have five listed at 5-foot-10 or shorter.

The bottom line is that in today's game of skill and speed and variable roles, players who can help teams win games, regardless if they are a stay-at-home defender or a 5-foot-8 offensive impact player, will earn a spot on the roster.

**"TOO SMALL"** is what some coaches and parents will say if you are a diminutive player, likely when you are not around. It hurts. Brian Gionta, a 5-foot-7 hockey great who played for Montreal, Buffalo, and New Jersey, and who set a Devils franchise record with 48 goals in 82 games, clearly remembers the first year he played contact hockey:

"They told me I had to play with my normal age group . . . I guess they were afraid I wouldn't adjust well to hitting. That's the first time I was told that because of my size, I couldn't do something . . . I was not happy at all," he said in an article entitled Little Big Man in USA Hockey Magazine. But he proved you can't keep a good small man down. He did that by developing the skills that an



undersized player needs to bring to the table.

**SKATE, SKATE, SKATE.** That is number one. Whether you are 8 years old or 28 years old, smaller players have to be fast and strong on their feet. A low centre of gravity helps but weight and size will be against them when battling in front of the net or along the boards. There is no advantage with a 5-foot-9 player's reach, so the speed to get into defensive positions to break up plays and the speed to race to open ice and to make plays must be a strength. Time and again I have seen smaller players fall off the hockey ladder because they were not able to keep up their skating ability. On the other hand, I've seen a smaller player who spent the off-season training specifically for skating strength and speed come back and fly, sending the doubters home mumbling.

**TOUGH, TOUGH, TOUGH** is what

small players must learn to become if they are to survive and thrive, whether in Bantam or Junior hockey, or in the ECHL or the NHL. Getting hit hurts. With considerable input from parents and medical experts, the age for full body contact was increased from Tier 1 and 2 U-13 to Tier 1 and 2 U-15, and up. Minor Hockey House-level hockey remains noncontact through U-15 House and even for many U-18 House-level teams. Those against the change often argued that injuries would go up if they did not introduce hitting at the PeeWee level to "teach the right way to take

a hit." They were wrong. Injuries of all designs dropped significantly at the U-15 and U-18 levels both.

But getting hit still hurts, particularly when you are 5-foot-8 and have been levelled with a legal open ice hit at speed, or have been smacked against the boards by a 6-foot, 190-pound bruiser with rock hard elbow and shoulder pads.

So, don't play that game. Adjust. Play the small-guys' game. Battle hard in front of the net and along the boards but do it smartly. When the puck is along the boards, let the big guy hit the

boards first then quickly dig the puck out and move it. Position your body between the big guy and where the puck is headed so you pinch them off from the play. When their back is toward you, along the boards or in front of the net, shove with your stick at the top of their pants. You can move them. Tie up legs and sticks with your stick so they can't

**I'VE SEEN A SMALLER PLAYER WHO SPENT THE OFF-SEASON TRAINING SPECIFICALLY FOR SKATING STRENGTH AND SPEED COME BACK AND FLY, SENDING THE DOUBTERS HOME MUMBLING.**

score. Don't get into a wrestling match you can't win, all tied up watching the puck squirt loose and you can't clear the zone. Keep your head up so when big guys go for a hit you are one step ahead and leave them in the dust, wondering what just happened.

Jake Guentzel, a smaller impact player who won the Stanley Cup with the Pittsburgh Penguins, had this to say about adjusting your game and not shying away from body contact. "Seeing a big body barreling down on you in the corners and near the boards can be intimidating, but it doesn't





Coach Don Nachbaur of the WHL Spokane Chiefs told Dylan: If you want to make it as a smaller player you need to do everything the big players does. I suppose being 165 pounds, 5-foot-8 (and  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches), and getting your head punched by a 6-foot bruiser is part of the deal. For fun, check out “Nick Walters vs Dylan Walchuk” hockey fights YouTube. Its got over 3,000 hits. But get this - Nick and Dylan later played U-Sport together in Calgary and became good friends. It was Nick, who was drafted by the St. Louis Blues, who basically got Dylan his first gig with pro hockey in Denmark. Yes, it’s a small world.

*PHOTO CREDIT COLIN MULVANY/THE SPOKANE REVIEW*

have to be. Keep your head up, feet moving, and a low center of gravity. Do not turn away towards the boards. Prepare yourself for contact, protect the puck and keep the wheels moving. You realize pretty quickly at a young age that you are going to take some pretty heavy hits, it’s just part of the game.”

**BATTLES HAPPEN** nearly every shift. In some games it appears as though hockey is a war, complete with blood and curses. “I went to see

the fights and a hockey game broke out,” is the old Rodney Dangerfield joke. If you are not part of the battles, regardless of size, you are not part of the army. The team won’t accept you as one of their own. If you shy away from a puck battle, the coach has just shied away from you.

Being small at 14 years of age does not mean you will be small at 18 years of age. As hockey parents and coaches, we envied those 14-year-old Bantam kids who had hair on places our kids never even had places, and voices like The Rock. We



knew they would be picked up in the CHL draft. So did they and their parents. They lived with an excitement we could only dream of.

Behold. Three years later at 17 years of age, many of those kids who were so physically developed at 14 did not develop so much after that. Other kids were now finishing growth spurts, and blending that with the talent they always had, but now they were at higher levels and playing with more intensity.

The year Dylan advanced to contact hockey there were smaller players who just could not play the physical game. They just seemed to fall away to lower levels of play or did not play at all anymore.

Not everyone needs to be a hockey player, needs to be tough enough physically and mentally to battle through those odds and specific conditions. Being a high-level hockey player does not mean you are a high-level person. In many cases elite athletes are not very nice at all. Looking

back, like many hockey parents, I see that it was the journey we enjoyed, not some status level our child reached or a super important tournament that we can no longer remember if we won or not, or even where it was.

**ENJOY AND CHERISH** the good years. The child you were so proud of the very first time in skates is still the same kid today, and still needs your love and emotional support, whether hanging up the skates at 14, reduced to the fourth line in Junior-A, or 5-foot-8 and off to a full-ride NCAA Scholarship.

All things equal with ability and attitude, a coach will generally choose a bigger player—greater reach, more battle strength, harder shot, less chance of being injured. Most sub-size players drafted into the CHL are drafted in the lower rounds or not drafted at all, just listed on a CHL team's 50-player list. In our case Dylan was listed by Spokane Chiefs of the WHL and I did not even know it.

When he decided, even with a full ride scholarship, that Northern Michigan NCAA would not work for him (not the fault of Northern Michigan), and he left to spend another season with the Junior-A Vernon Vipers, we got a phone call

from Spokane and a few days later he was in a Chiefs jersey.

Unlike the NHL, where relatively few players under 5-foot-10 make a career, the AHL and ECHL (NHL farm leagues) are loaded with them. Many smaller players also head to Europe.

Europe offers a viable pro hockey career, and

it can be an acceptable living in its higher levels for as long as those in it desire to stay.

U-Sport (CIS), the league for Canadian university hockey, is quality hockey with many former top level WHL players still developing their game while earning degrees. Many smaller players play in this league, however, the players who are most often invited to NHL tryouts are often larger in size. Smaller players like Dylan, who graduate from CIS hockey, often end their careers in Europe or perhaps the AHL or ECHL. If you are a smaller player who went the college route—NCAA or CIS—and earned a degree thanks

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to the sport, then maybe everyone was wrong. Maybe there really is a pot of gold at the end of the hockey rainbow. Good for you!

**SMALLER NHL DEFENSEMEN ARE AMAZING.** Defenders have many of the same challenges as smaller forwards, but there's an added twist. Defenders really do need to stop that 220-pound Milan Lucic-type tank from barreling through open ice, bowling over smaller types along the wall, or crashing the net and the smaller player along with it.

Some smaller defenders have proven their capabilities against the top players in the world.

Apparently, in the new NHL, a defenseman of smaller stature can thrive if they are smart, agile, fast skating, adept at leverage, smart at puck moving, and offensively minded. It is amazing enough that 5-foot-9 forwards are excelling in the big leagues, but that similar-sized defensemen exist at all

is a wonder, a small miracle, like the discovery of boson particles inside atoms. Consider the excitement around Vancouver Canucks super-rookie Quinn Hughes and his stalwart teammate Troy Stecher, Montreal Canadiens gamechanger Victor Mete, and Nashville Predators blueline leader Ryan Ellis, as examples, all 5-foot-10 or smaller. This was all enabled by a positive change in the rules of the game that better penalize grabbing and clutching in the name of a faster, more exciting brand of hockey. The need to protect players from concussions also triggered a crackdown in the kind of body checks that were permitted. And

when two-line passes were allowed, it opened up the ice and allowed faster breakouts. Slower defensemen could not keep up with speedy forwards so the crack in the door widened, and smaller, faster D-players sprinted into the gap. In the first round of the 2017 NHL draft, four of the nine defenders chosen were under 6-feet tall. They join the new age of quick, puck moving defenders including Jared Spurgeon, Tory Krug, Ryan Ellis, John Klingberg, John Michael Liles, and Duncan Keith. It is not surprising that many of the best scoring defensemen are under six feet tall. Highly skilled, speedy players who not only match forewords' foot speed, not

only join the rush, but lead it. They are, out of necessity for survival, smart, and have learned to adapt, blending an offensive and defensive game. Coveted defenders are increasingly a quarterback kind of player: distributing the puck, keying the power play, breaking out of the

“IN THE FIRST ROUND OF THE 2017 NHL DRAFT, FOUR OF THE NINE DEFENSEMEN CHOSEN WERE UNDER SIX FEET TALL.”

defensive zone with offensive momentum.

I often wonder just how kids new to hockey end up choosing to be either a defender or forward. Does a coach look out over the ice full of giggling, wiggling, 4- to 7-year-olds and say to the biggest kids, “You and you: stand on the blue line and don’t let any kid get past you,” or is it Dad who says, “Look, Sally, I was a defender when I was a kid and it’s the most fun; I want you to be one too,”

“What’s a defender, Daddy?”

“Just stand on the blue line and don’t let any kid skate past you.”

“How Daddy?”



“Just sort of tackle them, but in a nice way.”

**REALLY, YOU WANT TO GET IT RIGHT**—what you are best suited to. I know, we just pointed out that there is a growing number of smaller defenders in pro hockey, but if you predict your child may be vertically challenged, while at the same time they like to skate and rush down the ice, play it safe and find them a role as a forward. Dylan said it best: “I have played with some kids who played forward when they were young and later moved back to D. They made really good offensive defenders. But I never played with a defenders who moved up to forward.”

I made a point of asking some small-

er but talented D-players who got the short end of the stick, who did not grow as expected, and their hockey careers seemed to be shutting down. “Why,” I said, “don’t you take some hockey camps this summer as a forward then give forward a try next fall?” They just shrugged, they just didn’t seem interested, it was not what they knew how to do, was not in their comfort zone, was not what they liked. One tried and said he just did not know where to be from moment to moment, was out of place and out of position, and lost confidence. But in this new age of required two way play for both forwards and defence, “adapt and conquer” could be a valuable motto.

Growing up as a smaller hockey player was just part of life. It was just all fun and I didn’t feel like I needed to adapt at that time, it was just natural to outsmart bigger players and win puck battles. Looking back now and thinking about what us smaller guys did to be successful, I think about being quick, evasive, fast, and smart. And being able to make plays. This is where practicing skills was important. I wasn’t going to be a hard checking defender or a big power forward, so I had to contribute in other ways. Coach Don Nachbaur of the Spokane Chiefs told me some valuable advice during my time in Spokane. He said if you want to make it as a smaller player you need to be able to do everything a big player can do. He used Tyler Johnson as an example. Tyler played in Spokane a few years before me and now just won a Stanley cup with the Tampa Bay Lightning. He said “Johnny” did everything a big player could do like win face offs, battles, and races for the puck. Being a smaller player you need to be able to do all those things no matter your size. Another thing that helped playing at higher levels was the ability to play a gritty game. As a small player you need to play brave, go to the hard areas to score, and not be intimidated because its noticeable when a smaller player plays scared. Luckily for me I loved the challenge of going into the corner with a bigger player and coming out with the puck. It helps to play with a chip on your shoulder, probably a key contributor to the success of my hockey career. But one more important point. Just because you are small and have always been a skill player, and scored literally hundreds of goals, it does not mean you will always be a skill player at higher levels. You need to do what is needed by your team and your coach, in my case becoming an energy player needed for penalty kill, shutting down the opposition, and a mentor for younger players.

—Dylan



**SCORING GOALS  
IS GREAT FUN.  
IT MUST BE!  
JUST LOOK  
AT THE HUGE  
GRINS, THE  
HUGS, THE SONG  
AND DANCE, WHEN THE  
PUCK FINDS THE TWINE.**

## TIPS FOR FORWARDS

**Some of these tips are about shooting strategy and scoring goals. Mostly they are about what went into creating that scoring chance, because when forwards and defence do their job there will simply be many more scoring chances, and many more goals.**

Coaches constantly assess a player's value to the team. They want to win. This means assessing your offensive abilities and liabilities, as well as your defensive abilities and liabilities. Keeping a puck out of your team's net is as important as putting one in the opponents' net. It should feel great when you score a goal. It should also feel fantastic when someone calls you a "complete hockey player," a '200-foot player' or a 'two-way' forward. As a hockey player you have already spent hundreds, if not thousands, of hours practicing drills, skills, skating, and game strategy. This unit is about tips, tricks, and on-ice presentation that will help give you the edge. If you do not have the edge, someone else will!

**THESE TIPS ARE IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER:**

**1.** Great offence begins with great defence. Follow

the bouncing puck: the defender Joe rips a slapper from the blue line; winger Brooke steps in front the puck, it ricochets off her shin pads; a battle ensues for the loose puck in the corner; winger Pete squeezes out with the puck but opposing centre Tyler edges him off to the side boards; Tyler lifts the stick and steals the puck and gets off a chip pass to Joe who claps a one-timer in the net.

When you watch an NHL or even a Junior hockey game, you get excited watching great goal scorers, but you also see the important role that checking or "grinder" lines have in shutting down those super-human goal scorers. Most goals are scored after a gutsy flurry of energy. The game hinges on winning puck battles, forcing opponent turnovers, supporting your teammates if they have the puck, and protecting the puck when it's on your stick. When those third- and fourth-line players at higher levels were Novice, Atom, or PeeWee hockey players, they, too, were likely goal-getting wonders, prolific kid scorers. As they got older, they were competing for positions on teams with kids as good or better at scoring goals, while shooting at much better goalies. They grew and developed, as you need to grow and develop, to become complete two-way players. Being a goal scorer is not, and will never be, enough. Understanding the complete forward's job will improve your chances of future success greatly. Defensive responsibility is more work, but more rewarding. It is always pleasing when your friends and coaches acknowledge and respect your valuable contributions to the team. So, this



**As you get older the game gets faster and goalies get bigger and better. You need to invent new ways to score. Don't wait! Practice new angles, new dekes, varying distances, deception, and greater skating speed while shooting, now!**

*PHOTO CREDIT BILDBRYAN/IMAGO/  
ICON SPORTS WIRE*

first tip for forwards may be the most important tip—focus on your defensive game as much as offence.

2. Young Minor Hockey players develop favourite ways to score: a deke right and tuck it in on the left side, roofing it blocker side, or whatever. But as the years go by, a time-tested move may lose effectiveness. Goalies' abilities have improved; the science of goalie coaching has improved, plus goaltender gear has improved, and will continue to improve. Do not get stuck in a rut and fall behind with your scoring touch. "Soft hands" are somewhat natural ability, a gift, but scoring is a combination of soft hands, practice, and outthinking goalies (once you have managed to get into a scoring position in the first place). Offensive players need to re-invent themselves, discover a variety of ways to score, just like a major league pitcher can't just throw the same fastball right down the middle every time. Try a variety of moves and shooting angles and places to aim. Develop a

mental list of the most effective ones.

Practice bad-angle shots that catch goalies by surprise. You may find less D pressure and some open space near the boards and just forward of the goal line.

Shoot high from this abrupt angle and if you don't catch a break in the top corner you may deflect the puck off the side of the goalie and in, or off players fighting for position in front of the net. This goal-line shot works best from the off side. Similarly, when you see a pro player shoot from behind the net at an impossible angle and the puck accidentally rebounds off of a defender's skate, or the back of the goalie and in, it is often not an accident at all. It is good vision and aiming for the deflection.

3. Archery and puck shooting have something in common. You are far more accurate if, when you shoot, you have focused on the centre of the spot that you are aiming at, not the whole space. In other words, no matter if you are a D blasting a slapshot from the point or a forward only 10 feet from the net, when you glance at the space you are shooting at,



be aware that you glance at the centre of the space you aim for. With practice it is easy and it will improve your accuracy. An empty net or a shooter tutor is great for practicing tuning in to the centre of a space. Bear in mind, you can do this with wide, unwavering eyes and open body language that won't telegraph to the goalie the spot you're thinking of firing for.

4. It has been proven that when you practice shooting on your net at home, or at goalies, that you will become more accurate if you constantly change the distance. For example, shoot from three metres away, then six metres, then five metres, etc. Repetition is important but repeating from various distances builds accuracy better than repetitively shooting 10 pucks from the same distance.

5. Move. Practice shooting as you skate without slowing or stopping. Learn to do this on your off leg as well as your dominant leg; learn to do it for all the shot varieties (slap, snap, wrist, backhand). If you slow down or stop, you are telegraphing to the goalie that you are about to shoot. Keep your feet moving as you cross the front of the net, as it will force the goalie to move, which opens the five hole and other places with spaces. Talented goal scorers read the goalie

as they move, and in an instant decide where the puck needs to go then put it there. Studies have shown that this instant reaction to space and time while moving with speed is a mental and physical gift that the best athletes generally have. But while some have it naturally, it can be learned through practice. It might feel odd at first, it might be embarrassingly bad at first, but the results will come as you hone the mechanics.

6. If you stare at where you are shooting, you tell the goalie where the puck is going. Prac-

tice keeping your head up and glancing at where you are not shooting, as you shoot where you want to shoot. Goalies say that it is not your eyes they see, but where the shooters head is turned towards. This is even more important when you turn your head to telegraph a pass, then surprise the goalie with a shot. It sounds difficult but it is a worthwhile trick you can improve with practice. Your

peripheral vision is your friend. You can focus on the spot where you intend to shoot while maintaining head and body expressions that do not give away your intent.

7. Sometimes the simplest advice is the best advice. Teammates called me Stanley Steamer because I often tried really hard, head down and raced ahead. But they were being polite. I had the vision of a stump. All I got

**IF YOU STARE AT WHERE YOU ARE SHOOTING YOU TELL THE GOALIE WHERE THE PUCK IS GOING. PRACTICE KEEPING YOUR HEAD UP AND GLANCING AT WHERE YOU ARE NOT SHOOTING, AS YOU SHOOT WHERE YOU WANT TO SHOOT.**

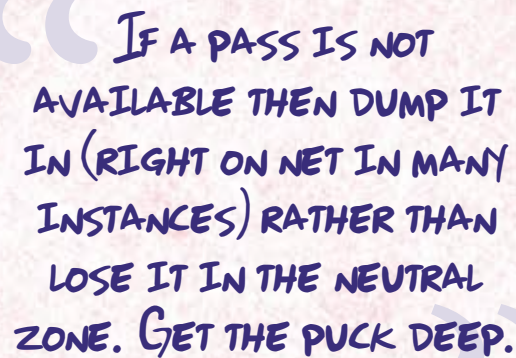


for my efforts was repeatedly turning over the puck. Then one day a local farmer gave me the best advice. "Send the puck where it needs to go, not where you want to take it." He was right, of course. I was being selfish. I became, instantly, a better hockey player. Here is the thing. The moment your foot hits the ice in a game, the very first thing you do is go to where you need to be. The moment the puck is on your stick the automatic thought should become Where does it need to go? Then move it. It may be that you need to rush the puck yourself, to make a move in front of the net for a scoring chance, but 80 or 90 per cent of the time the puck needs to get somewhere more efficiently than you can deliver it yourself. It needs to move in a hurry, and passing, dumping to open ice, or shooting at the net are all faster than skating.

8. If you find that as you rush up the ice you repeatedly get body checked or poke checked and lose the puck as you attempt to deke or dangle your way around an opponent, then you are breaking a golden rule in hockey, and that is: do not turn over the puck. If a pass is not available then dump it in (right on net in many instances) rather than lose it in the neutral zone. Get the puck deep. Make the defenders turn around to go get it. If you have a winger heading up the off-side, then shoot the puck to the opposite corner rather than down the close boards. Keep it away from the

opponent who can turn it quickly back your way. If you have no teammate on the rush, and you have the speed, then dump it in gently and race to pick up your own dump-in. If you're tired then dump it deep (on net, if your teammates are changing quickly, or make the opponents chase it if your line-mates are still far from making their swap) and change lines. It isn't a golden rule, but hockey is an anaerobic sport, so there is a guideline that you only have the energy to do two-three dynamic things on the ice, whether that's a hard puck battle in your own end or a rush up the ice

for a scoring chance. Once you've done your two or three things, get off the ice for fresh legs or you won't have enough gas in the tank to properly back-check or jump into the rush when your team breaks out. You don't want to leave your team short-handed even though there are six players on the ice.



**IF A PASS IS NOT  
AVAILABLE THEN DUMP IT  
IN (RIGHT ON NET IN MANY  
INSTANCES) RATHER THAN  
LOSE IT IN THE NEUTRAL  
ZONE. GET THE PUCK DEEP.**

9. Fear kills confidence. Without confidence you will want to get rid of the puck too soon, when, if you held on for a moment longer, you would find the teammate breaking out or a safe space to dump the puck, rather than commit icing or make a bad pass that ends up causing a turnover. Picking the place and time where the puck needs to go to is partly a learned skill and partly natural ability, but in either case try to lose the fear that makes for a bad play. It may sound foolish to suggest that you can pretend confidence while you experience stress and fear, but it can be done.



- 10.** What we love about hockey is that it is real life in real time. It is a game with grit—hard work, sweat, real battles, attacks and counter attacks, challenges and overcoming challenges. Shirkers and prima donnas are best to avoid it. The crowd can tell who is into the game, who skates hard, battles hard, plays with intensity, and, thinks with intensity. Yes, thinks with intensity, thinks eagerly and ahead of the play. Let's call it anticipating the play. You can't fake it. You are either eager and aware, or not, or some stage in between. Example: a player rings the puck around the boards, a teammate anticipated the move, took off like a shot to where the puck was headed before the sound of the shot, and beat the opposition to it even though an opposing player was closer. Anticipating the play makes you look like a genius. Not anticipating the play makes you look foolish, when you repeatedly chase the guys you missed, stick slapping at their ankles and shins. It keeps you behind plays and not in the action, and out of goal-scoring chances. Days when you feel under the weather or just not in the mood, it can be tough digging down and finding that grit, that reason to care enough to get yourself pumped. Pro players will tell you that one of the most difficult aspects of staying competitive is digging down deep for the strength when you just do not feel like it. It may not matter in Novice or Atom but when you get to Tier 1 U-15 and U-18 and beyond, anticipation is the signal that tells the world—coaches, managers, parents, scouts, agents—that you are in the zone. Winners are in the zone.
- 11.** Read the goalie. When you skate toward the goalie, is he backing up as you come in or staying still? Is he playing square to the puck or square to your body? Reading the goal-

ie will help you decide the move you make, the shot you take. If the goalie has backed in prematurely to take away the deke then they have opened bigger top corner and side holes, so you might choose to shoot straight on, or move to the side to open up a big five hole. If the goalie stays out, then that opens up opportunity for a deke. If the goalie is square to your body and not the puck, then the space your puck sees will be greater than what your eyes see, and you might take a shot on the long side. If you move across the goal front and the goalie anticipates the move and leaves the short side exposed too soon, then a short-side shot might be the winner. During backyard practice and pond hockey, get anyone you can to be a goalie, even if it's your grandpa or your kid sister, so you can practice reading the goalie and taking the right shot.

- 12.** This point has me baffled. It is so simple and has been so driven into every kid by every coach that it should be 100 per cent a given, at every level of hockey. And yet, from NHL to Novice, it happens every game. It's 5-on-5 hockey as the puck carrier heads up the ice. The opposing player with the task of stopping the rushing player anticipates, gets into position, keys in on the attacker and fluidly skates backwards. All good. Then, as the puck carrier moves laterally, rather than focusing on their chest and moving laterally with the rusher to get in the way of their body, the defensive player swipes their stick at the rusher—but it is already too late. Without losing a stride he blows by. Go figure. You can be a small player and still effectively check big players by simply focusing on the torso rather than the puck. By focusing on the torso, the rushing player cannot fool you. Eyes, head, shoulders, legs, skates, sticks can all be used by the puck carrier to fake you out, but the truth always



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## TIPS FOR FORWARDS

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lies in their chest and tummy. They can never go anywhere without taking their bellybutton with them. Instincts can kick in for a slick poke check or timing a hit if eyes stay focused on that telltale midsection. Play the torso.

- 13.** Think puck protection. Covet thy puck as if it were a thousand-dollar bill. Keep your body between the puck and the opposing player. Practice one hand on the stick with the puck while forcing the opposing player away with your free hand and shoulder (even your knee). Those 3-on-3 battles with nets in tight, so common at hockey camps, are great fun to watch. They reveal who's who in the world of puck battles: who has their legs planted firmly and strongly apart, who positions the body to defend and protect the puck while moving forward, and who plays with an aggressive stick. All players need to keep legs apart and use sticks as on-ice support. You do not have to be big to be strong on the puck. Smaller players have a lower centre of gravity and

quicker strides and to some extent those are an advantage. Tall players learn to bend their knees and lean down to lower their centre of gravity. All body types have their advantages and adaptations.

- 14.** Attack hard and back-check hard. Do not make it easy for an opponent to catch you. It is very disappointing to see a player overtaken who rushes with the puck while not skating at full speed. Rather than turn over the puck in the neutral or defensive zone due to a lack of speed, pass the puck or dump it in strategically. At least the puck will be deep. You get a good sense of where a player's mind, heart, and skating ability is at when that player attacks at full speed but repeatedly dogs it back, uninspired by defensive responsibilities. You will not win any friends or the coach's favour with poor back-checking. In those situations, if there is a teammate going after the puck carrier, you head toward the player most likely to receive a pass to block passing routes. Do



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**Be a two-way player, take pride in preventing goals as much as scoring them. Expect to reinvent yourself with new abilities if you want to keep up with the pack, for example learning to be a more aggressive energy player in U-18 hockey, even though you consider yourself a skill player and may have scored 30 goals as a U-15 player.**

*PHOTO CREDIT SIDOROV STOCK/  
STOCK.ADOBE.COM*

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## TIPS FOR FORWARDS

it at top speed or you are letting your teammates down.

- 15.** When you rush down the ice with the puck, use gaps as lanes to rush through. Open ice equals a green light. A common mistake by rushing forwards is to skate the puck vigorously straight towards a defending opponent then get in too close and get stripped of the puck. It is as elementary an error as shooting the puck right into the goalie's chest. It happens because there is a natural tendency under pressure to fixate on a big obstacle. Learn to think past this problem. Do things like vary your speed, keep your head up, and head for open ice away from the defenders. If you are rushing full out but slow up just a little, maybe a lot, then resume speed, the defender, who is trying to calculate the moment to check you, has to recalculate on the fly. This gives you time and space to make a pass or a play. Or, if you start out at less than max speed, the defenders will adjust to where they need to be and then you turn on the burners and might catch them napping. Or, if you slow down momentarily, particularly after crossing the offensive blue line, it will give your teammates a chance to catch up and create more options for a play. Just make sure, whatever you do, get a shot on net or keep possession of the puck. If your teammates are too far behind and the defenders are closing in, do whatever

it takes to get the puck to the net.

- 16.** When you are a forward defending in your own end, have it clear in your mind when to “contain” an opposing player, or when to play them tight, tie up sticks or grind it out on the wall. When killing a penalty, containment may be better than commitment. Avoid committing yourself to a wall battle as you are already a player down and getting tied up outside the defensive box will effectively put your team down by two if the puck squirts

out to the opposing team. Also, it is not necessarily the best choice to commit to a battle that already has another teammate committed, even if you want to get in there to help. If they are locked in battle along the boards, you can be close, but it's usually better to keep an active stick and dig the puck out of their scrum, then execute

a quick break out. This is particularly true if you are a smaller or lighter player who is less likely to win the physical fight. When pressing an opposing player against the boards, try forcing a leg between their legs and into the boards to hold them while the puck is being dug out. Try moving bigger players from screening the goalie by holding your stick in both hands sideways and shoving at the opponent's backside high on their pants. Careful not to crosscheck—you can push but you can't strike. If all else fails, simply use your stick to forcibly lift the opponent's stick and keep it lifted. If you do that by reaching over their

**A COMMON MISTAKE BY RUSHING FORWARDS IS TO SKATE THE PUCK VIGOROUSLY STRAIGHT TOWARDS A DEFENDING OPPONENT THEN GET IN TOO CLOSE AND GET STRIPPED OF THE PUCK.**



stick or on their body, it can be a holding penalty, but if you lift from underneath it is legal no matter how long you leverage it off the ice, and renders them almost useless.

17. Be sneaky. While sitting on the bench, observe board battles that occur deep in the offensive end, anywhere from the goal line to the hash marks. What you will notice is that there are players committed to the battle and others playing their proper positions, so that at times there is no one in the direct lane from the battle to the net. Learn these patterns (as you advance in hockey, they become more prevalent as individual players and team systems become habitual) so when you get your chance to be the outside player in a board battle and free up the puck, you may be able to take a few strides towards the net, catch everyone by surprise, and have a great scoring chance simply because you anticipated the open ice.
18. Generally, the net front in the offensive zone is a great place to be for screening the goalie, picking up rebounds, causing deflections, and tipping shots. However, if a teammate has the puck behind the net and you find yourself in front of the net, it is often wiser to move to the outside, toward the wall, where you can still be close enough to the crease to pounce on a loose puck, but far enough out of traffic to be a viable pass option or decoy for the puck carrier. When your teammate has the puck and a shot is unlikely, get yourself open to receive a pass. When a shot is more likely, and you are in the position to do so, get back to the crease and become that screener and chaos creator.
19. Generally speaking, keep your feet moving at all times. This makes it harder to be caught when you receive a pass, and it allows you

to be moving into an open position so that a team-mate can hit you with a pass. Always try to get open to receive a pass once your team-mate is breaking out. Communicate that you are open and keep your stick on the ice. Also, it takes energy to get back up to speed if you keep stopping or slowing down too much.

### UNDERSTANDING ALL THE POSITIONS

“At the end of the day hockey players all want to be the best they can be, and to get where they need to be they need a comprehensive understanding of the game. Having forwards understand and execute the defensive part of the game, and defense execute the offensive part of the game, is an important avenue for comprehension of their role, and their success as team players in the modern game. At times we have defenders spend time as a forward since in today’s game the defence jump into the offensive game quickly and aggressively, initiating and supporting offensive plays. I think all kids should experience all positions. Offense and defence are not just positions, they are mindsets. I have seen parents get bent out of shape because we switched their kid from defence to forward for a time, or vice versa. Instead, they should be requesting the experience!”

– Dixon Ward, Vice President, Co-Owner, Okanagan Hockey Academies