

# Shortchanged And Shortsighted

*A Long List Of Problems Can Arise When Coaches Opt To Play A Short Bench*

**Bob Schaller • Illustrations By Kirk Lyttle**

In hockey circles, as in life, what goes around comes around. Call it a case of coaching karma, but a coach who lives by the short bench will ultimately be done in by the short bench somewhere down the line.

Providence College coach Tim Army has coached at all levels of the game. He has seen how a lack of depth can haunt a team, especially at the most inopportune times.

“You certainly want to play and develop your depth, because if you think about it over the course of a year — or even the course of a game — things can roll out where you need more than just a few players or two lines,” says Army, who joined the Friars after three years as the head coach with the Portland Pirates of the American Hockey League.

“You have to have players who contribute to the team’s success, even if it means finding them a role and developing them for it. The more contributors you have on your team is going to work to your advantage in the long haul. It’s even going to make the ‘best’ players on your team more content because you’ll be winning more games.”

Playing a short bench, while usually done to improve a team’s chances of winning, can often have the opposite effect. A short bench can actually hinder a team’s chances for success, especially in a situation where the team is playing consecutive games toward the end of the regular season or during a tournament.

Not only will some players get discouraged by a short bench, but the fact that the team is not developing any level of quality depth will haunt it at some point in the future.

“At all levels, if you don’t develop your bench you are in trouble — you won’t be the team that you should be,” says Ken Martel, USA Hockey’s coordinator of youth hockey, who is also a former coach with the National Team Development Program.

Players who develop their skills and get a fair share of ice time are obviously more likely to be happy and remain in the program.

“We still believe in developing players and trying to get them to the next level,” says Jim Marchi, hockey director with Team Illinois who has coached teams at various age groups. “It’s important to get them repetitions in both practices and games, otherwise they are not going to get better.”

No matter how good a team’s top players are, there will simply come a time when that’s not enough to win a game.

“Over the course of a season, just playing two lines will lead to burnout,” points out Kevin McLaughlin, USA Hockey’s director of youth hockey.

“The great coach is the one who runs a great practice and develops players — gets his players to become better. Anyone can figure out the first line — that’s easy. But to find out about the rest of the team, and develop the other kids, that’s key.”

One of the best examples of developing players came several years ago as University of Denver coach George Gwozdecky amazed coaches and fans everywhere by benching a star player who broke a team rule for the 2004 NCAA Championship game. Gwozdecky never built his program around one player or one line, so other players were in a position to step up — which they did, leading DU to the National Title.

“DU’s leading scorer gets benched, and if Coach Gwozdecky hadn’t developed other players — not only their ability but also their confidence — that could’ve affected the outcome,” McLaughlin says. “George had to go deeper into his lineup to pick up the slack.”

The debate over running a short bench has been around as long as there’s been winning and losing. However, in this era where kids focus on one sport or are being tugged by other sports to get involved, a “short bench” season could cause a short foray into hockey for many young players.

“My personal opinion is that it is not acceptable as long as you are paying to play,” McLaughlin says. “I’m a firm believer that parents and coaches all have an inflated perception of the level we are playing at: We think if we are at Peewee Tier I, it is the NHL. If you are paying, you deserve to play.”

The pay-to-play argument is especially compelling in hockey because, compared to many other sports, the cost to participate can be considerably higher. Factor in league and travel costs, and hockey players — and their parents — will want at least a fair and equitable return on their investment in terms of playing time, which does not mean sitting on the bench for the final period.

Coaches can also help avoid the short-bench syndrome: At tryouts and “drafts,” coaches should not take players who they don’t envision a spot for on the roster — a player they really have no intention of playing.

“You have to confront the issue at tryouts. Don’t take more kids than you can play, or plan to play,” McLaughlin says. “Don’t take more kids to get the team nicer jerseys, stick bags, or coaches’ salaries — only take the kids that you will play.”

Once a player is selected, it’s up to the coaches to develop every player’s skills, not just those playing on the first or second lines. The investment in time and effort spent early in the season will pay off as the season heads into the home stretch.

Martel says developing depth can’t be overemphasized.

“You won’t be as good in the short run or the long run,” he says. “If you start shortening the bench in September and October, how good of a team do you really think you’re going to have in March when it’s playoff time and you need everyone? The bottom line for a coach at any level is to be better at the end of the year than at the beginning of the year. You have to find a way to insert your players — all of them — into the lineup and become better.”

It’s not uncommon, especially for travel teams, to lose one or even two players at a tournament to injury or illness, and see that team collapse.

“If one of the top guys gets sick or injured, or simply can’t make a trip, and you haven’t developed other players, you will be in trouble when it really counts,” Martel says. “You have to develop the player on the fourth line as much as the one on the first line.”

Even if parents don't complain about coaches running a short bench, the problem exacerbates itself.

"The huge problem is when we have parents convinced it is OK and coaches convinced it is OK, because then it trickles down to the kid," McLaughlin says. "That's why they quit. They want to participate, and some end up brainwashed to accept [sitting on the bench]."

Situations will arise — power play, penalty kill and key moments late in the game — where certain players will get more ice time than others. But a coach that is able to throw fresh legs on the ice through the game or the season will be more successful in the long run.

McLaughlin recalls a recent University of Wisconsin team that might have been out-talented against several top teams, but had used its entire roster throughout the season. As a result, other teams simply couldn't keep up with the Badgers late in the third period during tournaments and the post-season.

"Wisconsin had so much depth that they hit teams with waves and waves," McLaughlin says. "They didn't have any superstars. They just wore other teams down."

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