

Winning Weekend Hockey Tournament Strategies

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

Weekend hockey tournaments continue to be popular avenues for teams to test their mettle during the year. It is also the path that teams take to compete for top honors in their particular program; such as USA Hockey, Hockey Canada, and NARCh; to name just a few. Weekend tournaments provide an opportunity to test individual and team skills against new teams, play at different rinks, travel, and compete at regional, national and international levels. Tournaments also provide the intangible opportunities of learning, expanding your mental game at the next competitive level, and of course having some fun. If you have ever watched or participated in a weekend hockey tournament, you know that they can provide very exciting and challenging experiences for players, coaches, and parents. Winning a tournament is even more rewarding, but it rarely *just* happens. A well prepared and effective coach will have an initial plan designed to effectively utilize all players; one that is flexible and tailorable to different playing situations.

Don't be fooled though; not all tournaments are alike. Tournaments vary in terms of facilities, level of team competition, tournament organization, prizes, certification and experience level of officials, and participation and support of the various gear manufacturers. Before you enter a tournament, determine the track record of your tournament organizers.

What should a team expect while participating in a weekend tournament? Some points to consider *prior to* entering a tournament include:

- **Entry fees.** Tournaments cost money to enter. Entry fees cover items such as rink time, officials, advertising, and awards/trophies. Planning for this cost at the beginning of your season, in addition to your travel, food, and any lodging costs, will determine the number of tournaments you can enter, your practice schedule, and parental/team support required. Teams have many options to raise their tournament monies; from raffles and car washes, to sponsorship and hitting up the old piggy bank.
- **Game schedules.** With many novice tournaments, coaches and teams do not know who (and sometimes when) they play until the tournament starts. The more experienced tournament organizers provide this information at least a week in advance and available online. This information helps out in terms of planning, scheduling, and scouting.
- **Playing format used.** Formats include double elimination (two losses before you are done for the tournament); bracketed elimination (winners continue to play in the winners bracket while teams that lose continue in the losers bracket); and a full round-robin format, in which each team plays all other teams one time.

Points to consider *during* your tournament include:

- **Know your players.** Playing several games in a couple of days is a rigorous demand on both a players' mind and body (that goes for the coaches and parents as well). Proper nutrition and rest will keep your team at its peak performance level. A dilemma can occur when your team is traveling. Exploring the new city's hotel, restaurants, pool, and tourist attractions is of great interest to players during these tournaments, but it also takes time and energy away from a

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teams' overall purpose. Try to keep the team focused on the tournament and celebrate their new surroundings at appropriate times.

- **Communication.** Since a tournament presents so many new variables to a team, the coach and players need to communicate often. Communication from the coach should involve some instruction and lots of feedback. While players should discuss effective and non-effective plays every time they come to the bench. If a coach has a question about a specific call by an official, he should *talk with* the official at the end of the period (or call a time-out if the call has a major impact). Speaking with the tournament organizer during the tournament is a great way to let that person know what is working and what needs improvement.
- **Stay disciplined.** This is perhaps the most difficult factor to control. When playing in your own league, players become accustomed to their opponents, officials, and facilities; which they see on a weekly basis. Playing new teams, with different officials, in an unfamiliar facility can cause players to become anxious and lose focus. The coach needs to quickly re-focus the players (giving them feedback) and get them playing to, or above, their potential.



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- **Scouting your opponents** provides the coaches and players with real-time information on how to best play an opponent. A well prepared team knows what their opponent is capable of doing and what to expect from them. Information gathered covers all major components of a team; offense, defense, special teams, goaltending, strengths, weaknesses, and overall observations. Identify your opponents' goaltending style (butterfly, stand-up) and whether he (or she) is more effective on the glove or stick side. Note the strong players (the ones that control the flow of the game) and their best shooters. Determine the opponent's defensive style (aggressive or patient) and the effectiveness of their special teams. Discuss this data with your team and use it to fortify your strengths and shore up your weaknesses. Even if you have never played any of the other teams in the tournament, you can still evaluate most of the teams before playing them through scouting or through talking with other coaches.
- **Game time.** The coach's role during this time frame is to ensure that the game plan is relayed to the team and that the players are mentally ready to play. During the pre-game meeting, the coach should cover the game strategy and the opponent's strengths and weaknesses, according to your scouting information. Additionally, the coach should make sure that all players are mentally ready to play at 100% for the entire game. There is no way that a team is going to improve physically just prior to a game, but the mental component can be guided so that the players are focused and ready. Having done all this, the coach must be ready to make quick decisions on playing personnel throughout the game and must have a *feel* for which players are playing well and which ones are not. It is important for a coach to decide before the game which players he is going to use in certain situations, such as the power play or penalty killing roles. The coach also needs to consider the starting lineup, changing lines, the tight game, when to use a time-out, overtime roles and key shootout players.

After each game and the overall tournament, the coach must provide *constructive* feedback to each individual player and the entire team (sometimes parents too). Playback any video taken and encourage the players to speak up during the viewing. Note which strategies worked and which need improvement and use this information for future games.

Being *on the road* and playing a variety of new teams over a short period of time is definitely a challenge. Teamwork is a *must*; and there will be several teachable moments for players and coaches during each tournament. Plan ahead with a winning strategy and make the most of your tournament time by learning, having fun, and expanding your game.

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