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Preparing Professional Hockey Players for Playoff Performance

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Introduction

Working with professional hockey teams in playoff situations is a very unique consulting experience. I have been privileged to work “behind the scenes” on a number of occasions with both National Hockey League (NHL) and American Hockey League (AHL) teams during their long, intense playoff runs. In this article I will describe some of the strategies that we have used to help the players, the coaches and the teams get mentally and emotionally ready for the challenge of playoff hockey. I will also discuss the differences that I have observed between providing sport psychology consulting services to professional hockey teams in the playoffs and working with our Canadian national hockey teams in short-term events such as the Winter Olympics and the World Hockey Championships.

The Consulting Approach

I use an “interactionist” approach when consulting with both our Canadian national hockey teams and the professional hockey teams. My interventions can be categorized as being player-related (Person), or related to the team and the surrounding social and physical environment (Situation). It should be noted, however, that interactionism is not a word that ever comes up in my conversations with professional hockey players and their coaches. In addition to considering social and physical environmental factors which affect the players, it is also important as a consultant to be aware of the unique “hockey culture” which exists in professional hockey (Halliwell,1990). Throughout this article I will discuss the role of the interaction between certain personal factors and a number of physical, social and cultural factors.

In addition to having a sound conceptual framework to guide the delivery of sport psychology consulting services to professional hockey teams, I feel that it is quite important to adopt a very low profile. By maintaining a low- key, “behind the scenes” approach, especially when dealing with the increased media presence during the playoffs, the players and coaches will respect your professionalism (Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza & Rotella, 1999). The last thing that they want to see is the sport psychology consultant doing a lot of television, radio or newspaper interviews. I like to follow the motto “high input – low profile”.

The Unique Task Demands of Professional Hockey Playoffs

As a consultant working with professional hockey teams during various playoff series, what has really struck me is the length and the intensity of the playoff competition. In contrast to the Winter Olympics or the World Hockey Championships which last two weeks, with teams playing seven or eight games (including preliminary and medal round games); professional hockey playoffs begin during the second week in April and they don’t end until the second week in June. As was evident in the drained and battle-scarred faces of the players during television interviews in the recent Stanley Cup Final playoff series between the Tampa Bay Lightning and the Calgary Flames, NHL playoffs are an endurance contest with teams playing two months of extremely intense, emotional, exciting and physically draining hockey. This year the Stanley Cup Champion Tampa Bay Lightning team played a total of 24 playoff games before finally winning 2-1 in a hard-fought seventh game of the final series.

In addition, the teams travel across several time zones in short periods of time and in this year’s Stanley Cup Final games in Calgary, the players had to cope with playing at a high altitude. Some of the players could be seen getting supplementary oxygen on the bench between shifts during the game.

Given the special task demands of professional hockey playoffs, there are a number of areas where the sport psychology consultant can help the players and coaches deal with the mental and emotional demands of this two month marathon of games. In the next section I will identify some of the areas that we focus on to help these professional athletes master the mental and emotional side of their game.

Mental and Emotional Skills for Professional Hockey Players

Whenever I talk to professional hockey players about mental and emotional skills I always remind them that what we are talking about is not exactly “rocket science “. I like to keep things simple and emphasize a lot of “C” words such as **control, composure, concentration, commitment, confidence** and **consistency**. Specific examples of areas that we work on include:

- helping players get focused and stay focused so that they can “stay in the moment” and focus on playing “one shift at a time” for the entire length of the

- game. In the playoffs, some games can last over 120 minutes with 60 minutes of regulation time and another two or three periods of sudden-death overtime hockey
- helping players refocus if they get distracted and frustrated during the game because of missed scoring opportunities, bad plays, bad bounces, and questionable calls by the officials, for instance
 - helping players control their emotions and not get frustrated by things like:
 - opponents' stifling, close-checking tactics
 - opposition goalies playing "out of their minds"
 - inconsistent refereeing decisions
 - helping players control their emotions, maintain their composure and not retaliate to opponents' aggressive, intimidating actions and verbal comments
 - helping players develop the resiliency and mental toughness to bounce back and reenergize themselves after tough losses
 - helping players deal with playoff pressure and the media and fans' expectations
 - helping players stay loose and play with intensity
 - helping players cope with the mental, emotional and physical fatigue of the long playoff grind
 - helping players play with a high level of confidence and consistency
 - helping players develop an unselfish "team first" attitude with a total commitment to doing "whatever it takes" to win (e.g. blocking shots, playing through nagging injuries, playing fewer minutes per game,.....)

Delivering the Mental and Emotional Skills Information

Having identified some of the mental and emotional challenges of playoff hockey at the professional level, we can now take a look at some of the strategies that have proven to be effective in delivering the mental and emotional skills information. However, before we examine the **what** and the **how** of the delivery of this information, it is important to consider **who** we are delivering this information to. On every professional hockey team there is a mix of young players, mid-career players and older experienced veteran players. The players on an NHL team could range in age from 18 to over 40 years old. The veteran players prefer the term "40 years young"!

In terms of their ability to deal with the mental and emotional aspects of playoff hockey at the professional level I like to classify the players in three groups based on their years of playoff experience:

Inexperienced players:

- these are players who have no playoff experience so they "Don't know what to expect and they Don't know how to respond"

Players with some playoff experience:

- these are players who have limited playoff experience and they "Know what to expect but still Don't know how to respond"

Experienced, veteran players:

- these players have years of playoff experience and they “**Know** what to expect and **Know** how to respond”
- players in this category include Steve Yzerman , captain of the Detroit Red Wings, Scott Stevens, captain of the New Jersey Devils and Joe Sakic, captain of the Colorado Avalanche. Each one of these players has won more than one Stanley Cup and they have “figured out” how to get focused, stay focused and if needed - refocus. They also know how to control their thoughts and their emotions and create a mindset which enables them to elevate their game and play with both confidence and consistency in pressure-filled playoff games. These players truly enjoy the challenge of competing and playing hard every second night for two months and getting the opportunity to lead their team mates to victory.

Knowledge and Experience

In this broad classification of playoff performers it is clear that knowledge and experience are two key factors which enable the top players to perform to their potential. From a conceptual perspective, it can be said that this knowledge consists of what a player knows about **himself** and what he knows about dealing with various **situations** (Interactionism once again jumps into the picture).

Veteran players with their years of experience have acquired this knowledge and as a result they **know** what to expect in the playoffs and they **know** how to respond. In their words, they have “figured things out”.

To help younger players acquire this knowledge and figure out the mental and emotional side of playoff hockey, I like to show them video clips of experienced playoff performers and top athletes from other sports discussing topics such as focusing, visualizing, breathing, dealing with pressure, and dealing with frustration, for example. Professional hockey players do not like to sit through long meetings with a sport psychology consultant discussing mental training techniques, however they love to watch short video clips of other world-class athletes talking about their experiences and their mental approach to major competitions. As Malcolm Gladwell vividly states in his brilliant book “The Tipping Point” (2002), **packaging** information in the right way is the key to “**getting it to stick**” in people’s minds.

A recent television interview with one of the world’s top golfers, Tiger Woods, provides a good example of an effective video clip which can help hockey players grasp the concept of “staying in the present” and “playing one shift at a time”. In this interview when asked a question about his mental approach to each shot Tiger Woods states “You have to make a commitment to each shot. At that moment in time that shot is the most important thing in your life. You have to stay in the moment and be totally focused”. This is exactly what coaches want their players to do every shift during the game and because

NHL players have such great respect for Tiger Woods they will listen to his words and apply them to their sport.

Another great video clip related to focusing and staying in the moment has future Hall of Fame pitcher Roger Clemens stating that “When I am on the mound I create a lane between me and home plate and I block out everything else. I just focus on the target that my catcher has given me. Nothing else exists”.

Also of interest in this interview with Roger Clemens is his emotional description of the role that his mother plays in his life as a source of inspiration. With his voice cracking and his eyes watering, he says “When I workout I think of my mother. She is such a great inspiration to me. She raised six of us while working three jobs after my Dad passed away.

On the topic of dealing with frustration, during the 2003 Stanley Cup playoffs there was a great interview after the first period of the seventh game final with New Jersey Devils forward John Madden. His team was completely outplaying their opponent, the Anaheim Mighty Ducks, but the game was still tied 0-0 because of the terrific goaltending of the Mighty Ducks goalie Jean- Sebastien Giguere. When asked if it was frustrating to be totally outplaying and out shooting the opposition and not being able to score, Madden replied “No, it’s not frustrating. It would be frustrating if we weren’t getting scoring chances. The second period is always our best period and I’m sure we’ll be okay”.

In discussing this interview with players I like to point out that John Madden never mentioned the opposing goalie and he focused on three positives. His team was dominating the game, they were getting scoring chances and they always play well in the second period. History will note that John Madden’s team, the New Jersey Devils, went on to win that game and win the Stanley Cup and the opposition goalie, Jean-Sebastien Giguere, won the trophy for the Most Valuable Player in the playoffs.

During the same intermission of this game another veteran player Steve Thomas was interviewed and when asked how he dealt with the pressure of playing in a seventh game Stanley Cup Final, he replied “We just try to keep things simple and we remind ourselves to breath”.

These short video clips from experienced professional athletes provide a nice way of communicating information on topics such as focusing, motivation, dealing with frustration and dealing with pressure.

On the subject of dealing with pressure, during the recent NHL playoff finals the players on the Stanley Cup Champion Tampa Bay Lightning received some unexpected and highly appreciated advice from a former Stanley Cup winner and Hall of Fame player Raymond Bourque. Before game five of the finals one of the Tampa Bay players Tim Taylor received a telephone message from his former teammate Raymond Bourque with a reminder to “enjoy this great opportunity” to be battling for the Stanley Cup. Taylor

played this voice message for his teammates on the speaker system in the Lightning dressing room and in television interviews a number of the players talked about how much they appreciated this great former player taking the time to share his experience and how the words “enjoy” and “opportunity” really helped them approach the final games with a healthy, positive perspective.

The experienced, respected professional athletes that I have mentioned in the aforementioned examples all have years of experience playing in pressure-filled situations and they all know how to embrace the pressure and “let their training and talent come out”. Quotes from these athletes are readily available in television interviews and in the sports pages of newspapers and magazines. By preparing video clips and posting the comments of high profile professional athletes in the locker room we can help young professional athletes access this “timeless wisdom” and they can use this information to improve their mental and emotional skills.

Process – Oriented Focus Thoughts

Due to the importance of each playoff game, players have a natural tendency to focus on the outcome of the games instead of focusing on the process of winning. To get the players focused on doing what it takes to win, instead of focusing on having to win, we have had a lot of success by asking forwards and defensemen to “program their computers” with action-oriented key words such as “Move your feet”, “Drive the net”, “Speed wide”, “Battle”, “Protect the puck”, “Finish your check”, and “Head on a swivel”.

For goalies we use key words such as: “square”, “challenge”, “high and set”, “out and big” “fluid”, “solid”, “a wall” and “one shot at a time”.

Players have found that these process-oriented key words really help them focus on things that they can control and when combined with visualization techniques in their pre-game routine, players are able to create a confident mindset in which they can see and feel themselves in game situations playing their game. Experienced players have already figured out how to “program their computers” with positive images and words, so in sport psych speak they know how to combine positive self-talk with visualization.

Playoff Team Themes

Another area where I have really enjoyed contributing to professional hockey teams in their playoff preparation is the development of specific team themes and slogans. These themes evolve from discussions with the coaching staff and with input from the players. Once a playoff theme has been identified we will print up T-shirts for all the players, coaches and support staff and these T-shirts will be handed out at the first team playoff meeting.

Examples of themes that we have used include: **“Pay the Price”, “Discipline Over Emotion”, “Whatever it Takes”, “Short Shift Hockey”, “No Regrets”, and “Each Other”**.

When the Colorado Avalanche won the Stanley Cup a couple of years ago their playoff theme was **“It’s All About Commitment”**. This reminder was painted in huge letters on the dressing room wall and it appeared in the team’s playoff motivational videos. It is an enjoyable and creative process working closely with the team video coordinator to produce highlight videos with high energy music that the players like. We will usually prepare a pre-playoff motivational video and follow-up videos during the playoffs with highlights from each playoff round that we win. One of the keys in preparing these videos is to ensure that all players appear in the video and that it is not just a presentation of the highlights of a few of the more high-profile players on the team. Also, these videos should not just show great plays by individual players. Instead they should show players displaying good discipline, players winning battles for pucks, players showing great second effort and sound cohesive team play from an offensive and defensive perspective.

It was interesting that a playoff theme for this year’s Stanley Cup Champion Tampa Bay Lightning was **“Safe Is Death”**. One of the assistant coaches came up with this team theme because he didn’t want the team to sit back and play too safely when they had a lead in a game. The theme apparently had an effect on the Tampa Bay players as they often times extended their lead by continuing to “push the play” instead of playing cautiously and trying to protect the lead.

From this example it can be seen how playoff themes can have an influence on the players’ mindset and it is an area where as a consultant you can provide creative input by coming up with themes which will stick in the players’ minds and provide a constant focus for the way that they want to think and play.

Playoff Situational Factors

During a two month playoff journey there are many situational factors that can be potential distractions to players. The coaches and team management of NHL teams do a great job of organizing travel, lodging and meals. Teams travel on charter flights, stay in first class hotels and have team meals together at excellent restaurants. However, due to the magnitude of the Stanley Cup playoffs more demands are placed on the players as media coverage increases and players’ families and friends fly in to visit and share the Stanley Cup experience. Thus, players find themselves doing things such as scrambling to find extra tickets for games and making sure that their families and friends are looked after.

These extra social demands can affect the players’ normal game day routine so for home games many teams have their players check into hotels the night before the game. This allows the coaches to organize a team meal and a team meeting and it is a great time for the sport psychology consultant to find time for informal individual meetings with players.

When working with hockey teams at the Olympic Games or at World Championships, players and coaches do not have these distractions as they are living in

the Olympic Village or in a hotel. At these major international competitions it is much easier to put in place a family plan and a media plan and to develop distraction control and focus plans such as those described in Terry Orlick's excellent book "In Pursuit of Excellence" (see Orlick, 2000).

Another unique social factor in the playoffs is the increased number of players on the team as NHL teams will have extra players up from their farm team and there could be as many as 30 players available to play. Since only 20 players dress for each game the extra players have to do extra on-ice and off-ice training to keep in shape and be ready to play in case of injuries. This group of reserve players develops an identity and they are referred to as the "Black Aces" because they wear black jerseys in practice. As the legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden points out in his wonderful memoirs (Wooden & Jamieson, 1997), spending time with the reserve players and recognizing their efforts is one of the keys to any team's playoff success as these players must have a positive influence on the team and be ready to contribute. The coaches that I have worked with have taken the time to build a positive attitude in the reserve group and the regular players also take time to mention the importance of the depth of their team when talking to the media. Spending time with these players is also an important role for the sport psychology consultant and I have thoroughly enjoyed chatting with these reserve players and helping them stay mentally and emotionally fit.

Summary

Professional hockey players face many mental, emotional and physical challenges during their long, gruelling playoff journeys. Working with these high-profile athletes and seeing the passion that they demonstrate in working together, growing together and winning together is a very special consulting experience. Hopefully the experiences that I have shared in this article provide some insight into the uniqueness of the professional hockey playoffs and shed light on ways that we can deliver sport psychology services to this special group of professional athletes.

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