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## **The Psychology of Professional Hockey**

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### **Introduction**

Professional hockey is one of the most emotional and complex environments I have ever experienced. Ice hockey has become an international game, but its roots are in North American “pond” hockey. In particular, it became part of Canada’s culture and heritage (Dryden and MacGregor, 1989). Canada’s passion for the game is often hard for others to understand or appreciate!

Hockey may initially have been played recreationally, but it soon came to epitomize the “pioneering” spirit of the country. The passion, the toughness, and the competitiveness that was deemed necessary to explore and develop this new land (with its rugged climate) became part of “the game”....

To this day, passion, toughness, and competitiveness are considered fundamental requirements of the game. Add to these volatile elements, increasing speed, bigger fitter players, better equipment, huge competitive salaries, passionate public and media interest, and the oldest most cherished sport trophy (The Stanley Cup), and the mix is “dynamic” to say the least! Certainly the dynamics have changed since I wrote previously about “Sport Psychology and Professional Hockey” (Botterill, 1990).

### **Subculture**

Appreciating and understanding the world of professional hockey is not an easy task. There is a “subculture” to ice hockey that is different than the “culture” of other sports. Rooted in the early Canadian pioneering spirit - being obsessively competitive was often seen as necessary to thrive and survive. Being tough, persistent, and being able to defend one’s self was seen as essential. Given these “cornerstones”, a “win-despite-cost”, and “eye-for-an-eye” value system often prevailed!

In the hierarchy of moral functioning, “win-despite-cost” and “eye-for-an-eye” are not considered very mature advanced values/behaviors (Weinberg and Gould, 2003). Perhaps they were “fundamental” in pioneering, because they seemed to become part of “the code” of the game in Canada. When passionately exaggerated, these outlooks can be very destructive to the game and the participants (the “cost” can clearly outweigh the benefits—witness Todd Bertuzzi, Marty McSorely, and Ted Green/Chico Maki violence incidents). The inability to officiate this passionate, dynamic game in a consistent “just” way has resulted in “enforcers” on every team to enforce the “olde code”, and ensure justice or advantage “at any cost”.

Built into this subculture is a fierce allegiance to “team”. Players are expected to support one another in all circumstances, and are expected to “play hurt” if necessary to help the team. As a result, injury dynamics can often be complex with players sometimes risking long term health and capability for the team’s short term ambition.

Having described this history and subculture, it is also important to point out that many of hockey’s better players and “character” people have demonstrated higher levels of values and functioning. Certainly Wayne Gretzky, the greatest player ever to play the game, (Gretzky, 2001), seemed to epitomize a “positive rivalry” approach to the game. His humility, respect, and love of a challenge provided a refreshing improvement in hockey perspective and moral functioning.

Even some players who excelled at the “olde code” (eg. The Amazing Sutter Brothers - Spiros, 1990), brought character and growth to it. The Sutter brothers grew up on a pioneering prairie farm in Canada, so they knew the code. They also were part of a strong caring family, and they knew the value of humility, respect, hard work, and team work. These were impressive “transition” players, who knew and lived the olde code, but had the attributes to bring positive rivalries, teamwork and emotional preparation (Botterill, 1996) to the game.

Today, Jarome Iginla (Calgary Flames Captain) may be the best known example of a player whose perspective and attributes reflect the full spectrum (olde and developing codes). Is there progress?? Hopefully a higher level moral and functioning code is developing. More severe penalties for violent acts, and the emergence of high quality female hockey have probably both helped. It might be pointed out that female hockey at times also regresses towards the “olde code”. Hopefully strong monitoring and a desire for a better product will enable the female game to continue to be a “leader” in these aspects of the game. We must remember, though, that subculture effects can be pervasive! Anyone working in hockey needs to understand that culture affects the passion, and the transitions that are part of the game....

## **Psychological Effects**

The mix of subculture and competitive effects in professional hockey make it a difficult environment to “read”. The perceptive Sport Psychology Consultant, however, quickly notices that trying to improve the “psychological effects” in the environment (or

reaction to the psychological effects) is the first priority! Psychological skills may be part of the recommended strategies, but psychological effects (which are often very dynamic) often need attention first.

For example, supporting the trainer (who may be tired, overloaded, stressed) may be the best initial investment. The trainer has so much contact with players, coaches and staff. It is often critical to help him/her cope and optimize psychological effects around them. Similarly, assistant coaches, equipment managers, massage therapists, strength coaches, etc. periodically need reinforcement and feedback on the important role they play in optimizing psychological effects (or affects—they are almost always emotional).

Head coaches, management, scouts, and travel assistants can also benefit from feedback and suggestions on psychological effects. The psychology of management/administration should be considered more often. Perhaps the most important people affecting psychological effects with players are spouses, partners, and family. Efforts to make spouses, partners, and family feel informed, part of the “team”, and supported in their activities, can dramatically improve psychological effects.

For players, good team discussion that addresses “psychological effects” can be helpful. Shared priorities and commitments by the team can help improve psychological effects for individuals, as well as the team. Sometimes, however, individuals have personal psychological effects to work on.

For example the player wrestling with injury dynamics, his/her role on the team, and the desire to do what’s right, may need work on “perspective”, getting medical assessment, and relaxing to optimize recovery. The player getting limited playing time may need reminders on how to optimize preparation, readiness, and contribution regardless. Imagery of “playing your position in the skates of the person out there” can help improve psychological effects and perspective. The player starting to fear the performance environment needs help with emotional preparation and reminders on how to stay “want to” vs. “have to” in one’s orientation.

## **Perspective**

“Perspective” has been mentioned several times as part of a solution. Certainly it is important in the dynamic world of hockey—and when we “lose it” we really notice the difference!! Perspective is part of “fundamental” psychology. We often neglect our “fundamentals” - and when we do, it’s easy to get off the track what is best for us. When we feel strong about our “perspective”, psychological effects and skills are much better.

What is “perspective”?? A study by Dr. Matt Brown et al (2001) that involved in-depth interviews of Canada’s top “character” athletes identified 3 basic components that seem to play a role in strong perspectives. The first core component of perspective identified was “identity”. People with great perspective know they are much more than a hockey player or an athlete. They remind themselves they are also a spouse, a brother, a son, a friend, a hobbyist, a teammate, a student, a community member, etc. Realizing

(and valuing) that many roles and attributes are part of “who you are” gives you a strong multi-dimensional identity. As well, it was clear that “self-acceptance” was much more important than self-esteem to these people with a great perspective!

The second core component of perspective uncovered was “support”. People with great perspective know where their “unconditional support” is - people who love them for “who they are”, not “what they achieve”. Nurturing relationships with these people (family or not) can be great for inner peace and perspective. Emotional acceptance and expression are invaluable assets in life.

The third component of perspective was “values”. People with great perspective know “what they value” and “how they want to live/compete”!! Their values enable them to find “meaning” in experience—in adversity, in opportunity, in movement, in being part of a team, etc. Appreciating “positive rivalries”, realizing “what’s within ones control”, and valuing “team”, “work” and “persistence” are often part of it. Values provide “authentic” guidance through the tough times....

Things that cause us to lose “perspective” include over-analysis, obsessing, lack of recovery, dysfunctional emotions, and outlook shifts (e.g., responsibility vs. privilege). A strong perspective, on the other hand, can help prevent these things from being problems. Work on “foundational” psychology would seem a good investment for anyone seeking health, happiness and high performance. In the volatile world of professional hockey, it seems “fundamental” to having much success with psychological effects and skills. A good “perspective” helps us deal with basic human needs (Maslow, 1962 - acceptance, success, control, fun), and helps us see the world in a more effective way. By seeing the “big picture” more clearly, we are able to focus better on the task at hand.

### **What Does It Take?**

What does it take for a Sport Psychology Consultant to thrive and survive in professional hockey? Probably the two most important attributes are a strong “perspective” yourself, and an understanding of the hockey subculture. Without these attributes, there would seem little chance of being successful! The consultant needs to be “authentic” and “rational” in what is often an irrational world! Without the frame of reference that one’s own strong perspective can provide - the consultant is prone to some powerful, dynamic, complicating forces. As well, understanding the subculture of the game is likely to be critical to one’s credibility and effectiveness. An ability to cope with (and deal with) powerful dynamic emotions and feelings is also essential. It is NOT an environment for the faint of heart!!

Honesty and the ability to nurture trust and respect are important. Hockey players “see through” people quickly, so it is critical to be “authentic”. Hockey is a “team” sport, and authenticity, respect and trust are essential to becoming a “real” team vs. a “pseudo” team (Botterill and Patrick, 2003). Obviously good listening and empathy skills can be a big help. In the end, hockey players want “No B.S.”!!

Openness and flexibility are also essential in the world of professional hockey. It is not unusual to go in to meet the team with as many as 7 different intervention options in mind - only to discover an 8th option that is better!! Being a Sport Psychology consultant in professional hockey requires tremendous “professionalism” - one needs to be “ready for anything” (including what you haven’t considered)! It’s also important to be flexible regarding when you are available. The best timing may be “on the road”, “on short notice”, by e-mail or phone, or at a different time than you might have thought!

Openness is also critical in how we counsel in hockey. Hockey players are proud, often independent, in their nature. The key is to help them discover what is best for them, rather than assume you know. The response of the player is usually much better, and this approach keeps the counsellor/consultant learning and growing from every client.

Professional hockey is “tough turf” for Sport Psychology Consultants! Very few have thrived and survived for very long in the field. It is, however, a great test and rich learning environment if one gets the chance.

### **Organizational Possibilities**

Perhaps the best place to start in an organization is with the “farm” team. Developing players are usually keen regarding anything that can help them make the step to major professional hockey! If one does a good job at this level, the word spreads from those who advance - and receptiveness may be enhanced with the major pro team.

Even if one is working with a major pro team, some work with the farm team is probably a good idea. Not only can it help the farm team, but it can be a good experience for the consultant, and players coming up know what is going on (and are more likely to fit in and contribute). Long term, this role can pay big dividends to the organization....

A role with the scouts in an organization can also make a lot of sense. Young talent can be a big investment by the organization. Individuals with great “perspective” and character attributes are much more likely to reach their potential. Spending time with scouts helping them identify these key attributes, and helping them develop strategies for “field validation” of same, can help ensure good decisions at the draft.

Sometimes the management and office staff of a team are keen to work on the same team building, focusing, and preparation skills as the players. This is an exciting way to improve team dynamics and performance with the management team. It can be very motivating, and bring the staff closer to the team as they share the collective pursuit of excellence!

As mentioned earlier, a support role for wives, partners, and families can also be helpful. Families relocating from all over the world are part of most teams today, so skill in cultural differences is most appreciated. Also, the wives, partners, and families of the team’s support staff (who put in long hours, often away) can be a forgotten group who can benefit from support.

Applied Sport Psychology has become “health and performance psychology”. The ideas involved can help people in any field, or any aspect of the organization. The astute professional stays alert regarding places they can help with optimizing psychological effects and skills.

## **Emotions To Be Ready For**

Every possible emotion has been experienced in the world of hockey! However, a shortlist identified by Robert Vallerand (1984) is a good one to start with. The 7 basic emotions have regularly tested individuals and teams in hockey. Fear, anger, guilt/embarrassment, surprise, sadness, happiness, and interest are often part of every day in hockey. Those who are most ready for these feelings usually perform the best!

For starters, let’s acknowledge that emotions are powerful, dynamic, situational, and spontaneous. The best we can do is learn to “manage” them better - it’s impossible to totally “control” them.... Two ideas, emotional preparation and emotional management seem to have merit in the world of hockey.

Emotional preparation involves imagining a feeling/emotion and rehearsing an effective response. It’s a form of “emotional inoculation” which dramatically improves one’s readiness/response when the real feeling occurs. It can be a big help in keeping one’s emotions functional in the volatile world of hockey. It’s valuable for players, coaches, as well as staff....

Emotional management is also an important complementary idea due to the tremendous schedule demands of professional hockey. It is one thing to be emotionally prepared, and it’s another thing to be emotionally rested. If players don’t “process” their feelings effectively (on and off the ice) it is easy to get stressed and emotionally exhausted. The key idea in emotional management is learning to “accept” feelings and “process” them rather than let them drain you. Good friends are huge in emotional management!! Being able to share feelings, have feelings “accepted”, and get help interpreting feelings, enables most of us to process emotions and channel our energy constructively. Taking pride in emotional management can help us handle demanding schedules/circumstances and stay emotionally healthy.

The 3 basic emotions most often talked about are fear, anger, and guilt/embarrassment. Like all emotions they have functional value. Fear’s function is preparation (let’s get prepared), anger’s function seems to be to mobilize (fight for what you deserve), and guilt/embarrassment seems to motivate (to do things for loved ones). If we prepare for these emotions and process them well - they are likely to stay functional and enhance our performance. If we don’t, it is very easy for them to become “dysfunctional” regarding both health and performance.

Surprise is another emotion we need to be ready for, as is happiness and interest. Most of us want to live our lives happy and interested, but strong positive emotions can also cause us to lose focus if we are not ready for them. The 7th emotion is sadness - it is

a “recovery” emotion (and the only one that doesn’t produce energy). It’s about “grieving”, and when we grieve properly we end up grateful and interested again. On the other hand, in high performance environments sometimes we have to be “prepared” to work through these feelings and “process” later....

In the wild and crazy world of professional hockey, emotional preparation and emotional management give one a chance to stay healthy and realize their potential. It would seem important to “CARE—SHARE—PREPARE—DARE” to realize one’s potential.

## **Conclusion**

Hockey is an amazing world.... It has been a vehicle for my growth and development as a person, and it is a game my children love and enjoy. It regularly brings out the best, and the worst, in people. I once heard it said that: “The great thing about sport is that it enables us to care passionately, about something that really doesn’t matter!

If in any way this is the case, hockey is the ultimate example! In the range of global priorities, hockey surely can’t be very important. BUT the 1972 Canada-Russia series, Canada’s World Junior gold medals, and Canada’s 2002 Olympic gold medals were fervent examples of how much Canada cares. As perhaps the most passionate sport, hockey generates powerful emotions. Unfortunately we don’t always manage them well! However, if we learn and discover better ways of functioning, perhaps all the world can benefit. For now, enter prepared, and be part of the growth.

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