



Selection, Our Obligation to Players

by Beth Shea

Selection is defined as 'being chosen in preference to another or others'. In every aspect of life 'selection' occurs in many forms and in all sports 'selection' is a necessary evil" as it is the accepted method for sifting out players to ensure that the 'round peg' is selected for the round hole.

In the past 10 years hockey has changed dramatically, changes affecting every aspect of the game imaginable. Some changes have occurred rapidly (i.e. in coaching), often gaining their own momentum and requiring little impetus to keep progressing forward. Other changes however have occurred more slowly, almost waiting until they are 'compelled' to change by 'external forces' such as incorporation of associations, employment of professional coaches and administrators, development of processes like Human Resource Management, Legal, ethical and moral responsibilities, and accountability (financial and otherwise). Unfortunately, I believe selection is one of the elements in hockey which is being "dragged forward", and at some levels still 'resists mightily' the changes we are 'obliged' to make due to progress.

In its defence, when you consider the following - difficulties in team sports involving a weighing of 'individual vs team' interests, the range of selections in hockey today (i.e. from development squads through to national teams, squads and 'competition day' teams), all requiring different policies, procedures and criteria, and all involving different personnel; it clearly makes the selection process an extremely complex one. Add to it the sensitive and emotive nature of selection, throw in a mixture of personnel ranging from the professional coach to the honorary selector to the 'one-eyed' parent, temper the whole process with the 'thankless' nature of selection, and it is easy to see how selection rapidly becomes a tumultuous whirlpool regarded as a necessary evil.

I believe there is much we can do to see the selection process becomes a 'necessary experience' and I will discuss this further in this paper in two parts. The first will discuss the "selection process", the second will look at "our obligation to players".

THE SELECTION PROCESS

Selection fails easily into three categories - Selection Policy, Selection Procedure and Selection Criteria. The three components are closely linked, but also can be clearly defined.

Selection Policy

Is a set of parameters, defined by the selectors, coaches and/or the National body, usually to ensure that selection meets the needs of a 'broader' plan. They could include age restrictions (i.e. Youth Policy), fitness restrictions, or even representative restrictions (i.e. if you are in the open National team you are ineligible for the U21 team). Clearly, arguments can be offered as to the relevance of a given policy but not to the exclusion of a player due to the policy (unless the selection of an individual player fails outside the parameters of the policy).

Selection Procedure

Is the actual mechanical processes of selection, and includes all the administrative procedures (i.e. notification of trials, dates and venues; methods of announcing teams etc.) and the player assessment procedures (i.e. process of discussion between selectors and/or coaches, process of conflict resolution regarding differences of opinion with respect to individuals etc.) Selection procedure is an area where many problems may arise for all concerned.

Selection Criteria

Relates to the specific attributes of the athlete (and the team) which are being 'weighed' and judged by those responsible for selection, against the merits of others or another. They include physical attributes (speed, strength, agility, endurance, power, flexibility etc); skill attributes (technical execution of the hockey skills); tactical awareness (ability to read the game); potential; coachability; positional qualities, specialist skills (PC hitter) etc. With regard to selection process and its three components, consider the following:

Selection policy and procedure can be and should be both be objective components. However a common fault in selection today is to allow 'subjectiveness' to enter into this area, mostly due to poor preparation by selectors, coaches and/or administrators.

Selection criteria has a large *subjective* component as it will always include the use of 'subjective' personal abilities such as insight, judgement, instinct, experience, open mindedness etc, as well as a degree of technical/tactical analysis.

All three areas are still relatively underdeveloped in hockey, or unevenly developed for different types of selections at different levels, thus leaving selectors, coaches, administrators etc. all open to criticism of a kind due to inconsistencies that continue to exist.

OUR OBLIGATION TO PLAYERS

When referring to "our obligation to players", 'our' should refer to any individual, small group or organisation whose actions in some way impact on the selection process either at the 'procedure, policy or criteria' level, including selectors, coaches, managers, administrators, media, umpires etc. However, I believe that the selectors, coaches and administrators are in the position to have the most impact in this area as they have most access to the players, and are responsible for managing the three components that make up the selection process.

Our 'obligation' to the players, is to see that the selection process is as 'positive' an experience as it is possible to be. In most instances the selection process is a negative experience for most concerned, and definitely for those 'not' selected. It would be naive of us to believe we could make the selection experience entirely positive for everyone, as it will always involve the 'exclusion' of someone at some point, and the mere fact that the athlete is involved indicates that they 'aspire' to compete at the level they have just been excluded from (whether or not they ever will) and therefore suffer a 'failure' of sorts.

Our obligation to the '*players*' should be read to include all those people who interrelate with the player, as inevitably selection impacts on other parties as well (i.e. parents, partners, other players, other coaches, selectors at a different level etc.)

Now that we have defined '*Our obligation to players*', the method for 'discharging' this obligation has two distinct parts:

- helping the athlete cope with the selection process
- improving the entire 'selection process'.

Helping the athlete cope involves understanding three elements including, why players perceive the selection process as 'negative why we (coaches, selectors, administrators etc) react the way we do when we are involved in the selection process, and what we can do to alter both.

Players will react to, and cope with, selection in many different ways. Our experiences have shown that the range of reactions is extreme, and in the worst cases - life threatening. All range of reactions involve some level of emotion and that makes 'dealing' with the reaction difficult.

The following statements outline some of the reasons why players sometimes react 'badly' to selection:

- athletes often set themselves unrealistic goals, or have little idea of 'when' they should expect to achieve goals;
- athletes often have no awareness of selection policy, procedure or criteria, producing again unrealistic expectations;
- an athlete (or their support groups') assessment of their own and others performance is unrealistic or ill-informed and heavily tempered with well intentioned 'parochialism';
- athletes often feel they have been treated 'unfairly (usually due to inconsistencies that arise due to policy and procedure rather than criteria);
- there is often a 'lack of sensitivity' regarding the 'individuals' feelings simply because we deal with 'team/squad/group' ethics.
- lack of feedback, thus 'non-selection' is a surprise (again unrealistic expectations).

All of the above points have the capacity to be confronted (through Sports Psychology for example) to reduce the 'negative' response of the athlete (and others) and to help them to cope, why then does this not happen ?

The answer to this question lies in looking at the involvement of the officials and their part in the selection process.

Firstly, the responsibility or obligation to deal with these problems fails largely in the lap of the coach and the selectors as they are the people who have the resources to deal with these problems. However the main consideration here would be 'time'. The time consuming nature of dealing with a 'team' requires careful prioritising and directing of energies to see all responsibilities are met often at the expense of the individual. Unfortunately, if the individual perceives the priorities differently to us, they can feel they have been 'treated unfairly.

Secondly, there is a lack of clarification between the roles of the coach, selector, and administrator in the selection process, and therefore they don't know whose responsibility dealing with the athlete is, Sometimes the responsibilities may change due to 'familiarity. Again the leeway for inconsistency is enormous.

Finally, solving the problems involves discussions with players requires open-minded, honest explanations... these discussions are often 'emotive' and tend to make even the very best qualified, feel uncomfortable, therefore they are often avoided. We are 'merehumans' and it would be unrealistic to expect everyone to be excellent, competent 'councillors', we too need guidance and training in these areas.

What is then our 'obligation' to players ?

'Our obligation' to the players is to work towards improving the selection process. It is important to work towards increasing the objectivity in the process to its fullest and by endeavouring to see the subjective components of selection are encased in honesty and subject to extensive scrutiny by ourselves and others.

To achieve this consider the following points and weigh them against existing process to determine whether we currently meet our obligation to the players. An obligation that can be validated simply by my own desire to do my task as well as possible (i.e. as coach), and to assist others to meet that same criteria, as that will make 'my job' easier.

- Clearly identify *selection policy* prior to selection,
- Clearly identify *selection procedure* prior to selection;
- Eliminate all *subjectivity* from 'policy and procedure';
- Inform *all parties* of both policy and procedure;
- Update policy and procedure often, and be willing to discuss them with all parties that have an interest in them;
- Ensure that the selection process embraces fully the selection policy and the procedure; Any alteration to the policy or procedure during the selection process will serve to create an environment which allows valid criticism of the process, and ultimately the selections.
- Discuss and debate the *selection criteria*, and be willing, and able to clearly identify, the selection criteria that relate to players either being included or excluded from selection.
- *Communicate* frequently and honestly with the players throughout the selection process
- Establish a pattern of 'follow-up' for 'non-selected' players. Clearly *define the roles* of personnel i.e. selectors, coaches and administrators prior to selection.

The majority of these steps are achievable and objective, however they do involve a lot of paperwork and 'mechanical energy'.

The subjective components however represent the 'heart' of selection. as they are the ones that allow us to offer an opportunity to an athlete on a "whim", and provided that 'whim' remains tempered by the better subjective human traits (such as judgement, honesty, open mindedness and courage) then we will meet our obligations to the players. Sometimes the 'whims' will be justified by performance on the pitch, sometimes not.

In conclusion, the selection process needs to be as well as planned and monitored as every other aspect that influences a player during their hockey life. By ensuring that this is the case, we will increase the 'life expectancy' of players and officials, and make our own 'personal' involvement in the game more fulfilling.

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