

Letter from USA Hockey

We at the USA Hockey Coaching Education Office have had an unusual amount of anonymous letters this year from parents from all over the country claiming bias, nepotism, favoritism, totalitarianism, aristocratic authority and good old political favoritism on the part of the administrators and coaches in hockey tryouts.

This is the most stressful time of the season for even the most successful and experienced coaches. They are making judgments, choices and decisions on the most precious people in parents' lives.

It is a traumatic and tense time for many players and their parents, who value the selection to the higher level teams as a prize, an ego boost and a levitation in social standing in their local hockey community.

At the same time, it challenges the integrity of the hockey boards and administrators who are empowered to shepherd a democratic process that must be fair. The process of selecting players is an art rather than a perfect science; it is a subjective exercise based on the premise that "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." This is the essence of the problem.

But we can be more objective like many successful associations have been by having published guidelines for policies and procedures and tryouts that are available to all.

The tryouts encompass two different windows of grading. The first is skill grading: skating, passing, stick handling, shooting with all published drills. The second is scrimmages, beginning with skill warm-ups and one-on-one drills. This is where you find out who can play. You can have the best of skills on cones, but cones don't move. By integrating skills with other players on the ice, players with game understanding, hockey sense, and read-and-reacting skills are immediately identified.

The graders are hockey knowledgeable people who do not have a player trying out at the level they are grading. The graders are schooled in the drills so all know what to look for, and they are advised to share their evaluations with each other.

The cuts are made in one-on-one meetings with all players beginning with the less skilled, until the cuts are completed and the team is selected.

Regardless of how much ability, skill or finesse a player possesses for a sport, the success or quality of his or her performance will, in the final analysis, probably depend on his or her personality, motivation and attitude.

All hockey associations should advocate a philosophy of humanism. Effective communicators should be chosen. The associations should stress that hockey development is a growing, maturing and achieving process and the tryout are a placement exercise for that particular year. With these guidelines in place, hopefully there would be less turbulence.