

## **Ask questions before selecting a hockey camp**

By Andy Bryan

It's the season when every hockey camp within an hour's drive of Ottawa begins to plaster local arenas with posters and flyers designed to convince parents that they offer the best option for your child's off-season development this summer.

Selecting a hockey camp can be a tough decision and quite confusing for a hockey parent, especially one who is making the decision for the first time. Chances are if you've already had your child in a summer hockey camp, you've either been very satisfied and plan to return, or you've had a negative experience and are in the hunt for an improvement.

### **Many factors should be considered when choosing a hockey camp:**

- **Safety:** have a good idea about the camp's overall approach to each participant's safety. A camp should have policies and procedures in place for eliminating potentially unsafe situations, including proper supervision rules, and should have formal staff training prior to the start of camp. Some camps make first-aid training mandatory.
- **Staff:** the leadership of the camp is important. Be sure the camp director has the necessary experience to ensure quality instruction. Just because a person has played the game at a high level, that does not mean he or she is qualified to teach the game to youngsters or administer the camp in a way that makes sure his or her support instructors are executing an effective lesson plan. Most relevant is experience in the coaching and teaching field. Having played the game at a high level makes it likely that a person has had quality coaching, but being qualified to teach the fundamental skills of the game is another matter. A camp should also have a deep enough pool of instructors to be able to have a low ratio of instructors to participants. A minimum 8:1 ratio should be used for a typical skill development session, although some variation depending upon the lesson being executed may be expected.
- **Background and reputation:** Is the camp new or does it have an established reputation for delivering quality instruction in previous years? This is not meant to suggest that a new camp can't be a quality camp. When we opened our doors at the Bell Sensplex for our first round of summer hockey camps in 2005, we had already taken many steps to ensure all of the key factors were covered and we enlisted the

leadership of a world-renowned hockey instructor (Ron Davidson) to put forth a top-notch product for our participants. This is just to suggest that when looking at a new camp, be sure to ask a few more questions than you would when considering a well-established one.

- **Value:** Look at the price for the camp, versus the amount of time on ice or involved in other worthwhile activities. Is the camp an “ice only” camp, where you need to stay there with your child for an hour or two, or is it a full-day camp? If it’s full day, do the organizers have well-planned activities for the off-ice portion of the day to keep your child learning and having fun?
- **Facilities:** If it is an “ice only” camp, it isn’t much of a factor if the arena isn’t much smaller than a regular rink or so old and poorly maintained that it could be unsafe. Where facilities come into play is for half-day or full-day camps, where players need other areas to take part in their off-ice activities or to eat lunch. A nice bonus for us at the Bell Sensplex is that we have an indoor fieldhouse, as well as a state-of-the-art meeting room, the Roger Neilson Coaches Centre, for off-ice activities, along with a fullservice restaurant where participants are able to eat a lunch they have brought, or take advantage of a quality meal plan. Other facilities in our area aren’t able to boast this kind of setup, but are still able to offer a quality overall experience through their proximity to city sports fields and a little bit of extra effort to be creative with their space.
- **Goals and objectives:** do you have a specific goal in mind for what you want your child to accomplish during their camp? This can range from a very specific goal like improving their backwards skating or shot, to something very broad like improving their overall skill set and enjoyment of the game. Some camps are designed to be specialty camps, where a player may hone the skills that most specifically relate to their desired position. Some camps focus on specific skills like stickhandling. The most common type of camp focuses on the full range of skills from A to Z and for this they should have a plan that follows a natural progression through the duration of the camp.
- **Fun:** regardless of the camp’s goal from a skill development perspective, the camp must make fun a priority. Everyone knows that regardless of what a person is trying to learn, they do so much more effectively in an atmosphere of fun. The problem is that not all instructors puts this knowledge into practice and actually conduct themselves that way. It is true that some players need a more firm approach to push them outside their comfort zones to become the best player they can be. You will likely find, with more competitive or “elite” camps, that

instructors will be more aggressive in their approach. This is particularly true in camps that feature a conditioning aspect. At the Bell Sensplex, we do have competitive and elite-level camps where our instructors do take that more aggressive approach, but never forget the golden rule of keeping things fun and always being respectful to each player. It isn't a bad idea to ask how much of an emphasis a camp puts on having fun.

More and more individuals and organizations are opening hockey schools in the National Capital Region these days, but not all possess the necessary characteristics to provide a quality experience for young hockey players. My bottom-line recommendation is that parents should ask questions.

They may be surprised at some of the answers.

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