

UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL ICEHOCKEY
HOCKEY CULTURAL PROGRAM
by Juhani Wahlsten

Red Storey, a Canadian sports legend was at the International Ice hockey Symposium held in Turku Finland in 1982. During his presentation he said. "There will be a time when we will not debate whether the Russians spear or the Canadians hook, but when we make this great game of hockey a world game."

FROM WAR ON ICE TO GAME ON ICE

My first contact with Canadian hockey took place in Helsinki in 1959. The Finnish National Team played an exhibition game against Canada. Both teams were preparing for the 1959 World Championships Games in Prague. This was the first World Championship that I played in.

Canada was represented by the Belleville McFarlands Senior Team reinforced with some former professional players. They also had a young 19year old star named Red Berenson, who later went on to be an outstanding NHL player and coach. This team went on to win the World Championship.

The Finns at this time had only two artificial ice rinks; one in Helsinki, one in Tampere. The rest of hockey was played on the outdoor rinks. It was 1947 when I first time got to know ice hockey in my hometown Kuopio.

I still remember how the Finnish National Team players themselves shoveled and cleaned the ice on one of the ponds and did their skating exercises. You might ask who won the game in 1959, Bellville McFarlands did 1-3 thanks to our great defensive tactics and strategy. We, players called it "the magic box."

For very practical reasons we were forced to play with four man in box in front of our goal. Only one of us was allowed to move around. I do not quite remember whether I was the fortunate one to chase the puck or not. What I remember was that most of the game was played in our defensive zone.

Even though we were not great on the ice we certainly did something right. When we could not skate with the Canadians, we, at least were standing there where the goals are scored from. We learned by doing and experimenting with an idea.

The International Icehockey Federation invited the famous Canadian professional hockey player Maurice "Rocket" Richard to the tournament in Prague. When asked in an interview what he thought of the games he said; "Almost everything looks the same as in Canada, only the game is different".

It certainly was different, both in the level of play and the variation in the rules. At that time bodychecking was only allowed in the defensive half of the ice. Whole ice bodychecking wasn't allowed until 1969.

In 1980 I was at the Viking Cup Tournament in Camrose Alberta, Canada. Our TPS Junior team defeated the Prince Albert raiders 8-6 in the final. I met "Mr. Goalie" the great Glenn Hall at this tournament.

He told me that in his playing days there was a saying amongst the pro players that had some similarities with our "magic box." It went "if you ever have a heart attack on the ice, please make sure you have it in front of our net." This pleaded that as a last service to the team the player should at least block the other team by placing himself between the opponent and his net before dying.

At the same tournament I met Scotty Bowman and he told me his approach towards winning Stanley Cups and he stressed defending the war zone in front of the net. He later signed my star player Hannu Virta who was the youngest Finnish player to make a NHL team.

He played four seasons for the Buffalo Sabres before moving back to his home town. Then he became a National team captain and won three Finnish Championships in a row. In this same tournament five players out of my team were drafted.

In 1959 the Finnish Icehockey Association signed Joe Wirkkunen a Canadian with Finnish origin from Port-Arthur, Ontario to set up our national program. This soft spoken,

very nice, quiet man is credited with setting up the development program which has made the Finns progress from their "magic box" to the level where we can compete at all levels and in all leagues including the NHL.

I played outside of Finland in the 1969-70 season in the Austrian professional league. Our team Klagenfurt won the league but it wasn't a surprise as the championship was their sixteenth in a row. This year helped me to understand the Austrians and now I had the opportunity to understand the Spaniards.

During my 11 years with the National team our most unpleasant opponent were not the Canadians. Even though they were strong individuals, their game was easy to read, the Russians were the real problem. When you played the Canadians you just adjusted to the puckcarrier and didn't worry too much about his teammates. With the Russians the players without the puck were always active creating openings for the puck. Before we left Finland for Austria my teammate and I celebrated that we would no longer have to play the Russians. Unfortunately our "Russian hockey school " was not over at all for us.

Klagenfurt by winning the Austrian Championship had qualified for the European Cup, they had beaten the German Champions EV Füssen. (I coached Füssen in 1984-85 and both of my sons were the imports). Now Klagenfurt had made it to the final and who did we get to play but the Red Army Team from Moscow.

Please do not ask who won. Icehockey in Austria is a very popular spectator sport as it is in many countries. However, it is a minor sport there and cannot compare with the level that the top Russian team plays. During the two weeks of the European Cup, we played some mixed games, this gave me the opportunity to play with Russian players. This was another good simple learning experience from another culture and it helped my hockey development even though I was an older player.

I went back to Finland and played the next season, but before the season started I attended the Czechoslovakian first league Skoda Pilsen training camp. The team was coached by my old national team coach Gustav Bubnik. In his era as a Finnish National Coach, Finland defeated Czechoslovakia 3-1 in Vienna in 1967 and Canada 5-2 at the

Olympic Games in Grenoble. This camp was a fantastic experience and I was faced with an unusual situation. The socialist club offered me a professional contract to play for Skoda Pilzen. They had even agreed to pay my salary in western currency. I didn't accept the contract. The same club runs a car plant and in 1959 when Rocket Richard was in Prague, they gave him a car. I wonder if he ever took it back to Canada with him.

These two weeks with the Czechs made me understand that not only the individual skills are needed to play successfully but also you must learn how to use those skills in game action.

The Canadian and European playing styles have combined in modern hockey. We see this when Wayne Gretzky makes the statement: "The players without the puck make the passing game go."

In 1972 I was coaching in the hockey virgin area of Barcelona when the first Russia-Canada series took place. Scott Young a Canadian author does a masterful job of describing the contrast in playing style and relations between the two hockey super powers in his book "War on Ice."

The rest of the hockey world intensely followed the series to the end when Paul Henderson scored the winning goal with only ten seconds left.

It was a nightmare with a happy ending for the Canadians. It opened up many eyes and made people realize that different approaches to the same game can enrich it and make it more spectacular.

I retired as a player in 1972 and I moved on to the coaching part of my life. I coached TPS Turku one season and three different times was asked to coach the Finnish National Team. I didn't feel I was ready for this level of coaching so I turned down the offers. However one of my friends told me there was a young Catalonian-Spanish couple who was visiting Finland to get to know more about ice hockey. I thought that my friend was joking when he told me they wanted to start ice hockey in Barcelona. The young Catalonian lawyer was a member of a famous Catalan sports family. His name is Pablo Negre. We met many times and became close friends. During one conversation I said that

if they ever need a hockey coach I am ready. I mailed my CV. to FC Barcelona and thought nothing more about it. In a couple of weeks I got an invitation from Barcelona. This invitation arrived on the same day that I was to sign my contract with a Finnish Club. I decided to accept the Spanish offer, surprising the hockey world in Finland.

In 1974 I got a phone call from my ex-teammate, Veli-Pekka Ketola, a National hero at the time. Because of my international contacts he wanted me to find him a place to play, in one of the middle European teams. I did not think it was a good idea, because the German hockey was not very strong at the time and the World Hockey Association was starting their league. The WHA later merged with the NHL but at the time they offered an excellent opportunity for the European players to become known and to learn about the North American professional game. I accidentally learned through contact with one American basketball lawyer that I knew that the Winnipeg Jets were ready to sign Ketola and Heikke Riihiranta. They did sign and got a chance to display their talents on the smaller rinks.

What was different?

Organized icehockey was known in Europe for almost 100 years. The first organized game was played in London in 1898.

Hockey was introduced to Russia and Scandinavia in the 1930's but was looked upon as a primitive game. The most popular ice game was bandy. This non contact game is played on a frozen soccer field with eleven players on each team.

Ice hockey became popular after World War II. In 1950 Lloyd Percival wrote his revolutionary "Hockey Handbook," Percival was far ahead of his time and was ignored in North America, but not in Russia. The Russians had no ice hockey traditions but did take a scientific approach in their other net centered sports such as soccer and bandy.

The Russians adapted the "Hockey Handbook" as their "Hockey Bible" and Anatoli Tarasov used its principles to develop a socialist athlete.

There is always controversy whether you win with good defense, or good offense. When Hap Day won Stanley Cups

with the Toronto Maple Leafs people agreed that defense wins. When Toe Blake won with the "Flying Frenchmen" of Montreal the same people said "a good offense will always beat a good defense."

The Russians did many things right. One of their main ideas was to first develop the athlete and then the hockey player. This was bad news for many of the stars from other countries, who took the summer off and played themselves into shape at training camp. A bigger innovation was to develop an offensive power instead of copying the defensive ways of the Canadians.

By doing this the great master Tarasov lived as he preached, always saying: "The original is always better than a copy." He followed the principle that, a good offense is the best defense. Tarasov introduced radical changes in practice organization. All over the world players had always practiced by skating around the ice without pucks, stopping and starting, shooting on goal, playing 1-1, 2-2, 3-1, etc. Tarasov introduced circuit training on ice. This suited his teaching concept to develop the individual skills to be an artist on ice with the puck and to develop passing patterns that confused opponents.

He did this by having every drill use many players instead of only one or two. This gives the puckcarrier more pass receivers to create opportunities. In this way the puck does work instead of an individual puck carrier. Five man units practiced together to create openings. Tarasov loved to say; "The puck has no heart and lungs, it does not get tired." Every drill had passing, receiving, shooting and basic plays, instead of the traditional isolated situation drills.

The 1972 series was the turning point in international hockey. The series was the beginning of frequent contact between all of the hockey powers. Club team played games and the Canada Cup have nurtured the development of the game.

In Canada the new generation of coaches started to study the "secrets" of European hockey. Many symposiums and seminars were held to share ideas and little by little people began to understand that there are only different approaches to the same game. In small rinks certain things

work and on a large ice surface there is more space and time for the offensive players.

George Kingston a professor from the University of Calgary traveled to the hockey centres of Europe in the 1970's to study the different approaches to the game. Now many prominent European coaches are invited to North America to conduct courses and seminars on hockey.

In 1985 I was invited by George to give a course on hockey at the University of Calgary. I had recently met Dave King in Germany and we exchanged ideas about the game for many hours. In him, I saw that a new generation of International conscious Canadian coaches was emerging. These coaches knew what they were doing and were open and receptive to new ideas.

We Europeans, started to see a different kind of Canadian player. The skill level was improving and they could still play the traditional Canadian strong defensive style. They were modern ice hockey players with understanding of both the offensive and defensive game.

The Russians also changed their style, giving up the unproductive passing and over complicated skating patterns. Everyone has learned from each other and this has made the game better.

Today there are no more secrets and it is recognized there are good hockey players all over the world. In the 1992-93 season Teemu Selanne a Finnish rookie led the NHL with 76 goals, this is just an example of how talent can be developed anywhere the game is played.

Although hockey does well in some parts of the world, it still is not played in most countries. The International Hockey Centre of Excellence in Calgary, Canada is promoting the development of the international game and has coaching and refereeing seminars every year. The centre also assists teams from Japan, Italy, France and other nations who come with their teams to learn in the birthplace of hockey. In the spring of 1993 a Japanese girls team was in Calgary for a clinic from the Centre. The war on ice is over, now we have peace and mutual respect.

The draft of 1992 saw a record number of Europeans drafted by the NHL. This partly due to the new political situation

that makes it easier for eastern Europeans to come to North America. Another reason is expansion has force teams to scout the European leagues. With the game becoming so similar on both sides of the Atlantic the international players can easily adapt to the NHL game on the smaller ice surfaces.

As an outsider a Finn who has played the top teams, I have seen the dark side of Eastern European sports. Their system just did not fit a free society, so I am very happy to see the cold war end.

When we compare the NHL and NBA it is easy to see how the NBA has taken the speed and artistic elements of basketball and made it so popular, even in Europe. Hockey has maintained its tough image and still allows fighting, appealing to much smaller percentage of the world audience. At the same time there are many spots that are cheaper, less complicated and don't allow fighting.

I am quite sure that most hockey people would be happy to have Wayne Gretzky on their team. I think I am not alone in my opinion that Wayne is a good hockey player. His 200 points a season make me think this way. In 1985 when I was in Calgary and met a hockey expert who thought Wayne was "chicken" and a "whiner." He said "Gretzky doesn't fight," I doubt if this man has changed his opinion. I believe that Wayne Gretzky was born to lead the NHL to a new era in understanding of the creative things that can be done during a hockey game.

The Future:

Today hockey features more complete players and the role of the hockey goon is diminishing. Even so hockey still has a reputation for being a "brutal sport." "We went to watch a fight and a hockey game broke out" is a favorite joke that comedians use to sum up what many non fans think of the game.

We all enjoy watching the body checks and tough battles in the corners. This is what makes hockey the most physically and mentally taxing sport of all. It is important for the players to learn not to retaliate when the going gets rough, but instead to keep playing.

The new focus on calling the stick work and holding have improved the game and allowed the skilled players more time and room to make great plays. In Europe ice hockey will only get public money for development if the violence is kept out of the game.

The Development:

In 1992 the Summer Olympics were held in Barcelona. The Spaniards have played hockey since the 1930's on natural ice in the Pyrennes. The president of the IOC Antonio Samaranch played hockey in his youth. They have been playing hockey indoors since 1972 and many people are excited about the game. There are many good players in Spain, I would say that most of the worlds hockey players are worse than the best Spaniards. If they had more ice time, they could play hockey as well as anywhere else in the world.

The promotion of hockey in Spain hasn't been a masterpiece. It is difficult to introduce a game that is foreign to a culture. It can be done, as is seen by the rising popularity of American football all over Europe.

There are many ice arenas being built around Europe, one is the new San Jordi in Barcelona. Someday Red Story's prediction that icehockey will be a world game may come true.

What can be done?

"When in Rome do as the Romans do."

It took me three months to learn this lesson in Barcelona. I wanted the players and management to act the "Finnish way" I was being paid by the world famous soccer club and social institution F.C. Barcelona. At that time they had 72,000 club members, now there are more than 120,000.

I was working at their arena, and was young ambitious and still very much a Finn. I wanted them to be punctual, to plan instead of improvising. After three months, I was ready to leave. I confronted the rink manager and asked one of the stupidest questions possible. "What is going to happen if I leave?". "Pasa nada - nothing happens" was his immediate answer. This shocked me for a moment, then I realized how much I had ignore their lifestyle. The next

day I started to do things in a more relaxed way and developed life long friendships with many of the people that I met in Barcelona.

In 1960 I played in my first Olympic games at Squaw Valley Colorado. At that time I remember that Japanese products were considered cheap and flimsy. Everyone knows that this is no longer true. The Japanese took the time to learn how to build their economy and now have an international reputation for quality.

Japanese hockey developed with the same kind of cultural structure as the rest of their society. Japanese society is very group oriented and they treat elders with respect. When they first started playing they followed their cultural model and were very easy to defend. The younger player would always pass to the older player, to show respect. The opposition caught on to this very quickly and simply covered the oldest player on the ice.

I tell this story to demonstrate that cultural background effects how each nation plays a particular sport.

Pat Molloy was born in Canada in 1906. He tells stories of playing hockey when no forward passes were allowed. There were seven players on the ice at a time. Three forwards, two defensemen and a rover. The defense always stayed back and the forwards stayed in their lanes. There was no use breaking for a long pass because they were illegal. The rover skated everywhere. The game featured a lot of stickhandling and individual play. There was a lot of bodychecking because the defense could really stand up when it didn't have to worry about someone getting a pass behind them. This history lesson explains where the Canadian style of hockey developed, as these players coached after the rules changed.

The North American players don't seem to be interested in learning other languages, and many times I have thought that they were arrogant. They seem to be very isolated from other cultures but this could be because English is so dominant in their part of the world.

The Spaniards are a very proud people and often wonder about us Nordic people, "the Nordicos no saben vivir - The Nordics do not know how to live." Who knows, maybe we are all right.

Back to Finland

The invitation to Spain was one of the reasons I got into international hockey development , instead of sticking with the seniors. The other reason was that both my sons got interested in hockey.

In 1973 there was only one outdoor artificial rink in my hometown of Turku. It was covered in 1975 and youth icehockey became very popular. There was very little ice time available and our mild winters only give a few weeks of natural ice a year. I was happy to run 30 minute practices for 120 players at one time. This early enthusiasm promoted building two indoor twin rinks for youth hockey and a 11,000 seat arena for the professional team. The 1991 World Championships were held there.

The few icetimes forced us to use ice very efficiently. Many of my players who ended up being pros or winning Finnish Championships did not have any organized practices when we only had natural ice. I thought then and still believe that the players need time for their own scrimmage. Now instead of 90 minutes, they can have 5-6 hours a week of ice time.

I have experimented with my teaching system since 1972. George Kingston was at the University of Calgary and started bringing in guest coaches every summer for an annual International Coaching Symposium. Some of the guest coaches were, Ludec Bukac, Hans Lindberg, Kjell Larson, Verner Persson, Roger Neilson, Clare Drake and Dave King.

I was invited to give the two week symposium in 1985. While I was instructing, I met Tom Molloy who was coaching college hockey in Calgary. Tom had attended the seven previous symposiums. We become friends when we found that out teaching and coaching philosophies were very similar. Now my system becomes little by little, our system.

We have collaborated by fax over the last eight years to develop a program for the international market. The program is called "Firstaid of Icehockey Coaching" and part of it has been put into a program called "The ABC's of International Icehockey".

It is a model program for the development of other sports instruction programs. This is one of the promotional products of International Educational Management Systems - IEMS.

IEMS signifies the trademark of the lifetime work of Juhani Wahlsten as an international educational developer. Tom has contributed many ideas to IEMS teaching and learning system as well as rewritten the English edition. He is a Physical Education teacher, an instructor for the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association and assistant hockey coach at the University of Calgary. He has tested the system at many hockey schools, and in over one hundred practices with Korean University and High school teams, as well as with the University of Calgary team. He also uses the teaching concepts with great success in his PE classes.

I have introduced the IEMS program internationally during the World Ice Hockey Championships in Turku, Finland in 1991.

Aren't there already enough books and other material produced?

I definitely say yes. There is coaching material being produced all over the world. We still don't think that anything is available that is easy enough to understand for the average volunteer coach to make his practice both productive and fun. This is why the whole system was developed. This system is not for experts but for coaches who love the game, care for the players and is ready to learn.

Red Storey also said; "When you coaches go out and coach the young players, coach them with respect. This is what the world needs more than young hockey players."

The International ABC's is a short cut to better use of the ice and to player development. It is for coaches who want to teach their players and learn themselves how to compete as sportsmen. That is to win and to lose with dignity. This kind of coach is needed to develop the worlds most exciting game.

Up to now we have not seen another step by step program of learning hockey where the system leads to an end product.

When I visit an automobile plant I see the whole process has been thought through. Everyone does their job. We are not dealing with cars but more importantly with human beings. The process has to have room for growth of the coach through interaction with the players. I have learned many things from my players. They have taught me more than I have taught them. We both have learned more by playing the game.

The Hockey Coachingabc's include all possible aspects of development and self improvement. It sticks very much with the game itself. There are numerous modified games to create movement and understanding of game principles. Gamelike activities also promote fitness and make practices a lot of fun. It is a "learn by doing" method.

Anyone who joins a hockey team wants to PLAY hockey. This is why players organize their own street hockey games and their own leagues if they aren't in organized leagues.

Our idea is to promote the game by following the natural way that a person would learn the game with his friends. We do not want to say that our way is the only way to do things. We give coaching guide lines that help the coach and players "to learn by doing." Everything takes time and the coach has to repeat the exercises many times before becoming an effective organizer.

This is why we use very few take off points in our practice organization. the repetition with little talking and maximum movement during practice is the key to learning.

We try to use common sense...When the great athletes of another era learned to play by scrimmaging for hours they were not wasting time. The NBA gets its great basketball players from the big city slums. where the kids play pickup games all day and learn to create moves that no coach would ever allow. We have gone drill crazy in the last 20 years and made practice very static and unenjoyable.

Playing more games doesn't mean that the time is wasted. Every simplified and modified game in our system has a purpose. The drills are important to develop individual skills. These skills are improved when modified games are played. Once the physical tools are developed the player must learn to use them in realistic gamelike situations

where the players is forced to read the play and make a good decision.

Anatoli Tarasov revolutionized on ice practices and the development of the complete athlete in ice hockey. Our system is a synthesis of all the techniques used in the international game. The drills and games are not the answer but are techniques for a systematic way of repeating the concepts that teach a player "to be in the right place at the right time." The system deals with both on and off ice practices. A good on ice practice is best because the ice is where the game is played.

The great Tarasov as we all do sometimes had a tendency to go to the extreme in his development of the total athlete. To develop courage in his players he was not satisfied to use only on ice activities. Before they could join his team a player had to demonstrate courage by going down the ski jump.

It is good this part of his training never caught on. If it became popular with coaches, most of the players would quit before the beginning of the season. I think hockey players want to play the game, and learn about the game by playing the game.