

This guy nailed it. When he is right, he is right. A tweak here and there, and we probably can apply the same principles to our teams over here in multiple sports.

Comments Canadians have gone through much of this “international game is different, we have the best players but don’t win, etc.” business over the last decade or so in hockey. The parallels in many ways are eerie, and well worth looking into. The influx of Europeans into the NHL draft was a huge issue in the late 90s, for instance.

But strangely, after some huge disappointments (e.g. the men’s team not winning in the Nagano Olympics) the country radically changed the way it handles international competitions. And I do mean radically.

First, they appointed a “general manager” responsible for personal selection for each international team. They do this for the annual tournaments like the World Junior’s and for the multi-year ones like the World Cup and the Olympics. This GM basically acts like the GM of a major franchise. He scouts for player selection, both on Canada’s team and to identify the strengths/weaknesses of other country’s teams. He selects the coaching staff. He is in charge of the whole process.

In Salt Lake City, after Canada tied a (much) inferior team, he gave a (now-famous) rant to the media about how the refereeing was biased against his team and how everybody in the world wanted the team to fail. The talk worked: the team didn’t have even a marginally close game the rest of the way. He took *responsibility* for the whole process.

Second, the country as a whole politicians, editorialists, and average fans made it clear that losing wasn’t acceptable. Sure, international rules are different the size of the rink is completely different! So what? We expect our teams to return with a gold medal each and every year in each and every tournament. Always.

Third, a wide array of developmental programs at the youth level were changed to help address the skill-deficiencies that had become evident at the international level. In hockey it was primarily skating and passing that had been under-emphasized for greater defensive and physical play. The bigger ice-surfaces in international hockey made this far more apparent. So now young players (e.g. age 6 and up) here get lots more training on those issues.

Fourth, being a member of the team was treated and regarded as a *privilege*, not a right. At any one time there may be three or four players in the NHL who would be assured of an invitation: the Shaq, KG, TD, and Kobe of the NHL, basically. The rest of the team? They go to a *TRY-OUT CAMP*. That’s right. Professional players get together with the coaches and go through drills and practices for a few days to get to know each other and for the coaches to see how they would fit together. There have been players who played themselves into positions on a team during these camps, and players who played themselves out of positions here too. This works because team membership is treated as a privilege.

Fifth, and finally, there was a concerted effort to decide on a style of play from the GM down to the coaching staff and to choose players that would fit that style. Recently one of Canada’s defensemen for the upcoming World Cup of Hockey withdrew. The coaches selected a youngish player who had attended the try-out camp. In explaining why they selected this guy, they explicitly described how his game was suited to both the style they wanted to play and to the structure and flow of the international game.

One final example of this approach at work: in Nagano, the Czech Republic had the single best player in the world on their team (Jagr). He was dominating the NHL, and was a threat to score just about every time he stepped on the ice. Team Canada knew that the Czechs were probably semi-final match-ups, so they took a defensive specialist with them. For that one game, he matched up with Jagr and held the guy scoreless the entire game. That’s like taking a Bowen or Artest on your team so that you can handle Arroyo or whoever else happens to get hot.