CHAPTER 13

The Coach Can't Play the Game

I don't believe a manager ever won a pennant.

My idea of managing is giving the ball to Tom Seaver and sitting down and watching him work.

— George "Sparky" Anderson
former major league baseball manager,
Cincinnati Reds, Detroit Tigers

THE COACH'S LESSON

I have always played hockey. All my life. That's what Canadians do. During my time coaching the Rockies, I was still actively playing in a competitive, adult men's hockey league. You can imagine the struggle in my mind between "Coach Rob" and "Rob the player." My problem was that I could never seem to turn off the player in me.

I often found myself trying to get into too much detail with players at the wrong time. I was always mentally playing every one of their shifts. I

would be hollering orders like, "Cut to the left" or "There he is; pass it to him!" I would grab players as soon as they got to the bench to tell them what they should have done: "Hey, you had Damien coming across the blue line; if you made a move to the left of that man, you could have completed that pass." Let there be no mistake, my advice was futile more often than not.

In my early days of coaching, I tried talking to players on the bench after they came off of the ice. I would constantly lean over and try to teach. And oh, would I try! I would draw out movements and plays in front of their faces. My fingers would try to redirect their focus from the current action to spots on the ice that were meaningful minutes ago.

After a while, I couldn't help but notice their eyes. They were fixed on the game with an intense "I gotta get back in there" gaze. Or they would stare at me with a searching gaze, trying to recollect the moment I was talking about. (Since the game is moving so fast for them out there, they might have had a hard time recalling the detail that I was talking about.) They looked around me, beyond me, deaf and blind to everything I said and did. And for a moment I would be furious that they weren't listening to me. Then I'd remember my own playing days. Hell, I wasn't listening either.

Upon realizing this, I noticed my behavior and how ineffective it was. What I thought were valid pointers at the time were actually irrelevant for that particular player at that moment. I wasn't teaching them; instead, I was trying to play the game for them. I was momentarily taking the player's attention away from the game while I questioned something that had already happened. No matter how I looked at it, "task interference" and "micromanagement" were all that came to mind.

Obviously, I had to back off of my overbearing attempts to capture their minds with my lessons. I came to grips with the fact that I was ineffective as a teacher during the game, and I reevaluated my role. Knowing that my role was more important in the preparation and practice phase, I had to find ways to take advantage of that.

I forced myself to change my behavior on the bench. I stopped making a big deal out of little errors at the time. I quit trying to give pointers during the game to players who weren't paying attention. To put it mildly, I shut up. Any observations I made were used to build my training plans and my practice exercises. I refrained from making any statement regarding a player's moves, unless it was linked to our overall game strategy. Instead, I substituted a quick reminder of the overall game plan whispered in the ear of a

player, or I said nothing. Somewhere along the way, I began to act like a coach—instead of a player.

While on the bench during a game, I began to make a habit of noting mistakes that were made on the ice. While done initially as a way to preoccupy myself, it helped me to maintain an analytical view of what was happening. I would pull out these notes during the next practice. We would review them and discuss what happened. Botched plays would manifest themselves in practice drills for playing units, or perhaps in individual lessons held away from the group. While I had to fight the urge to correct mistakes at game time, I found that waiting to do it during practice or in team meetings was much more advantageous. This allowed the team a better chance to grasp the lesson and to improve much more significantly upon their past performance.

After games, losses especially, there would be plenty of discussion from the group. Mistakes made by the team during game time were suddenly a little more tolerable if we could learn from them. We would use the next available opportunity to talk about our miscues, work on correcting them, and practice the skills to deal with similar situations again. This strategy allowed us to change our behavior by letting mistakes happen during games and waiting for a better opportunity to learn from them: practice.

The Coach as an Active Observer

A coach is responsible for developing the team. Training them. Teaching them to overcome their shortcomings. Leading them through adversity. He should nurture each player's individual role and develop different aspects of the player's game to help him become a more formidable foe. The coach must teach players how to win by delivering to them a game plan and preparing them to execute it. This is one of his major roles, but it's not one that he can play during the game.

At game time, the coach's role changes. Instead of being a teacher and mentor, the coach must learn to become an active observer. A coach must stand back and hope that the players execute the game plan that was created, discussed, and practiced. Oh sure, he can make adjustments to lines, change pitchers, or call different plays, but he is still a hostage to the players' ability to execute the game plan. That isn't an easy role to accept for many coaches.

It is one of the first and most difficult lessons for an ex-player turned coach to learn: The coach does not play the game. And no matter how much

a coach may *want* to, he *can't* play it. Good coaches will understand the vital importance of staying in their prescribed role. A coach getting too involved in the details of the player's performance during a game can become counterproductive. Our impulse is to correct mistakes right then and there. We want to point it out to the player immediately. We *know* what the player should have done. Sure, we're coaches now, but most of us were players once upon a time. We know what the right plays are. Unfortunately, we're not the ones playing.

That can create a feeling of helplessness that will overcome any coach at some point while walking the bench. You're watching mistakes being made. Players are not following the game plan or adhering to their assignments. A player misses an open-field tackle that ends up in the end zone. The left fielder misjudges a line drive that drops for a triple. As much as he may want to, a coach really can't help that during a game. Nor should he try to.

Don't Try to Teach During the Game

A coach can't teach during a game. It's that simple. The fact is, it's hard enough to even get a player's attention during a game. Players who are gasping for oxygen and swimming in sweat and adrenaline are not listening intently to anything a coach says. The player is immersed in the game. Totally overcome with energy, emotion, fatigue. He sits on the bench and mentally rewinds through past plays. He watches the opponent's moves, looking to pick up something. He talks to himself. Chastises himself for poor mistakes or miscues. Urges himself to try harder. Tells himself to remember to do it differently next time. Talks to the teammate next to him about the blown play. A coach simply can't compete with that.

How can a coach expect any player to have reacted the same way he would have? The answer is, he can't. A coach trying to explain how he "would have done it" is only an attempt to clone the coach. Every one of us is different. We each have our own physical, mental, and emotional idiosyncrasies, and we may each react differently when presented with the same situation. Now, to each personality, add the speed of the game, factor in the surging adrenaline, and throw in a healthy dash of emotions, and you'll end up with wildly different reactions from everyone. That's why the coach has to accept that it's the *players* who must play the game.

Reinforce the Game Plan With Constructive Correction

Now keep in mind that a coach should reinforce the game plan. Correcting

a player's positional play, strategical error, or failure to execute the game plan can help during a game. That's constructively moving the player towards the coach's vision of the overall team and its game plan. "Hey, remember we said all week that we have to bump that receiver as soon as he leaves the line of scrimmage. You need to get closer to him and contact him as soon as he jumps," would be an example of this type of correction in a football game. That kind of coaching needs to happen during a game so that the player's contribution is always focused. Correcting a player's situational responses can only help to support the team's game plan for that game.

There are plenty of lessons to be learned during a game, but they will not be lessons taught by the coach. Instead, they will be taught by the opponent, the referees, the environment, or any other outside influences. But what can that knowledge contribute during the game? Nothing. Those lessons refer to one-time events that may never happen again in that game, or another one. There is no need to correct it then and there. That may only serve to drag the player back to a moment in time in which he made a mistake, instead of staying focused on the overall game plan. Those lessons are best saved for later.

Lesson from a Legend: Scotty Bowman

For more than three decades, as the NHL's premiere coach, Scotty Bowman has built a solid reputation on his ability to prepare his teams to play consistently at championship caliber. During a career that has resulted in eight Stanley Cup championships, he has been known as a strict disciplinarian, a detailed strategist, and the league's preeminent tactician. Despite his success and his stature, Bowman hasn't always been liked by his players. In fact, many are on record as saying they hated playing for him, although they respected him for his knowledge, his preparation, and his ability to put together and teach a game plan. This speaks more to his strong-handed approach to practicing, following team rules, and simply giving one's best effort during every game, than it does to him as a person.

Despite Bowman's attention to the details of teaching, he is best known for his role during game time. In what seems like a complete change in purpose, Bowman lets go of all teaching

and simply deals with matching up player lines with those of the opponent. In hockey, this practice is known as "running the bench." And Scotty Bowman is the best in the business.

In hockey, teams normally play a game with three or four lines, consisting of a center and two wingers. These lines normally will cycle through in order, except for adjustments to match up with the lines of opposing teams. For example, if a coach is "running the bench" he might make certain that his best defensive checking line is on the ice at the same time the opposing team's most potent offensive line is.

Bowman focuses solely on this task, one that was first mastered by a predecessor of his in Montreal, Dick Irvin. Requiring great patience by a coach, this task may only lead to perhaps a few mismatches during a game. However, that may be all a team needs: to have their best line on the ice, while the opposing team's best are catching their breath sitting on the bench. Showing the understanding of all the team's necessary roles, Bowman puts just as much effort into matching up his defensive players with the enemy's best scorers. Speaking of Bowman's work from behind the bench, former NHL coach and general manager Al MacNeil said, "Scotty perfected it. He's a line or two ahead of whoever he's coaching against."

Throughout his coaching career, Bowman's players have noticed that he serves a purpose behind the bench during games. While noting positive and negative observations for future feedback, Bowman also contributes in the only other way he can by manipulating player match-ups. His players recognize that. Former coach, player, and general manager Cliff Fletcher has said that Bowman's players "knew they only had to be as good as the other team. Scotty would make the difference."

The Coach as Manager: Preparation Is Your Top Priority

All of the team's preparation is practice for the moments when each individual employee must perform his or her role to execute the plan and help achieve the organization's goal. That is "game time." During these situations, the quality of execution will almost always be directly proportionate

to the quality of the preparation. Because of this, a manager should always be less concerned with the event itself and more focused on laying the groundwork and shaping the group to meet the challenges of the event.

Employees, while engaged in the performance of their role, will and must be focused on their duties. They must be attuned to the immediate and dynamic challenges presented by their customers, their tasks, or their workforce. Intensity must be focused on the task. And chances are, it will be. If they have been prepared, they will carry out their actions like players who have practiced the same moves every day for weeks.

Because the period of preparation is more crucial for managers than the actual moment of execution, the development and preparation of employees is one of the manager's biggest challenges. That is a tough thought to accept, especially if you're a manager who likes to get involved with the day-to-day activities of your work group. The fact is that a manager is much more useful to employees as a teacher, guide, and coach during preparation, then as an assistant, or worse yet, an interruption, during the completion of work.

Delegate, Delegate, Delegate

In business, it's not always easy for any boss to "let go" of tasks and trust employees to perform them well. It is, however, necessary. A manager must delegate tasks to employees and allow them to perform those duties. It's unrealistic to think that any good manager can be involved in every detail. Unfortunately, some managers believe they can.

In most workplaces, managers were once something other than the manager. Chances are they once did similar work at similar levels as the people who report to them. More often than not, they have risen through the ranks from the grunt jobs to the upper echelon. Rarely does a manager arrive on the scene without historical references to, or experience in, the work that is being performed.

While this experience can help managers be great teachers and coaches, it can also set the scene for "micromanagement," a common problem cited by many workers as a prime reason for lack of productivity. It frustrates, distracts, and often confuses employees, and it is seldom confined to the lower ranks of organizations, either. It has more to do with a manager's need to become involved in the details of a job than the employee.

A manager who has a different idea about how a task should be performed will often express it. It may be in the form of direction for a future

task, or criticism of a past action. The problem comes when the manager questions an individual's actions while it is happening—for example, the manager who points out a customer service rep's mistakes while the rep is taking calls from customers. Now, here again, a correction of an employee's actions as they align to the overall direction of the work group is one thing. That would be acceptable and in line with a manager's role to keep everyone focused on the same overall objective while executing a common plan. However, a deep dive into the "how to's" is unlikely to be constructive at a time when the action is still happening.

Since managers have the ability to impact their subordinates' livelihoods, any direction that managers provide will have an effect. Often the result is some form of a knee-jerk reaction in an attempt to appease "the boss." An employee may totally change what he or she is working on, or how, as a result of the boss's direction. The end result is still the same: it's a distraction. If a manager seeks to intervene at any time, it will be an interruption to the employee, regardless of what the intervention was for. It absolutely *will* take the employee's attention away from the task at hand, but the manager still will not have the employee's full attention to learn at that moment.

PUTTING THE LESSON IN ACTION

Every workday, I see managers and leaders questioning employees' actions or the details of their work. You probably see it in your organization, too. Just sit through a presentation and watch as managers question the way data is being summarized or how statements are worded, and you'll see it. It's a hard habit to break. I still do it myself on occasion, although not as frequently as I used to.

I remember catching myself once. I was reviewing a package of material that an employee had prepared for distribution. It was an interpretation of data that led to a number of conclusions, and she had worked for several days preparing it. We needed this information quickly in order to make some crucial decisions.

As I was reading, I reached for a red pen. I began to scribble on the pages, "Change this font." "Bold here." "This page looks too busy." Soon, I had created the blueprint for completely rewriting the report. I had successfully given this employee specific instructions on how to make this report look like one that I would have written.

As I handed it back, I saw the look of frustration, disgust, and futility in the face of my assistant. She assured me that it would be no trouble to make the changes and that she would be happy to rework it. With that she left, with three days' worth of wasted work under her arm. It took me a couple of minutes to realize what I had done.

Then the coach in me stepped in. "Step back from the game! Stand behind the players' bench!" I told myself. I had to change my mentality. I could be more useful to the group if I stepped back from the action and looked for opportunities to teach, develop, and help. I would have to step back far enough so that I could not interfere, but close enough to watch and critique my employees' performance. I had to be a coach.

I chased after her, brought her back into the office, and took back the marked-up copy. Reviewing it, I ignored everything that had previously caught my superficial disapproval and focused on content. I read it over and quickly grasped that her interpretation was on target and would definitely point us in the correct direction. I only made a few recommendations. These I wrote on a separate piece of paper and handed that to her as my edits. I kept the marked-up package for my own waste bin. Needless to say, she left my office with a different attitude.