

## Hockey Made Easy- Question and Answer Re: "shortening the bench"

What are your feelings, opinions on coaches, "shortening the bench", be it either in critical game situations, or regular season games, from Novice up to Midget age players. How does a coach justify this? How as parents do you explain it to your children if it is happening to them? How or do you approach a coach that is doing this? I look forward to hearing from you. My husband is a coach and a Dad first, and does not believe in this practice at any age level. We are also parents of three boys and have faced this "practice" with all of our boys at some time or other. Thanks for your time.

Sincerely, Youth Hockey mother and coaches wife

### Thanks for your great question.

As a former coach I do not intend to be politically correct with my answer and you may not agree with some, or all of it, but here goes.

There are 2 answers to your question based on the hockey program children play in.

1. The goal of House League Hockey is to **have fun and improve your skills**, not win every game.

The rule of thumb for most **House League/ Recreational Hockey Programs** is to give every player as much equal ice time as possible.

Rotate 3 lines and 4 or 5 defence with about the same amount of shift time throughout the entire game. Please, no stop watches.

However, in the last 2- minutes of a tournament or playoff game, most Minor/Youth Hockey Associations give the coach the green light

to "shorten his/her bench" to allow your top offensively skilled players out if you are a goal behind, and your best defensively skilled players out if you are 1 goal ahead.

If you are ahead or behind by more than 1 goal, most House League coaches play the next line up.

As all House League teams make the playoffs I do not believe coaches should "shorten the bench" during the regular season.

However playoffs are a little different and if a team loses too many games their season is over, but some coaches will never shorten the bench.

Here is a novel idea, the coach should ask the players prior to the playoffs if they would like to continue with the current practice of equal

ice time or if in the last 2 minutes they should try to win a close game by using specific players?

For most players, if this "shortening the bench" situation is explained to them prior to the playoffs, they will agree to give up their one late shift

if it will help their team succeed. If the players say no way, the coach should respect their wishes and not shorten the bench.

2. If you are coaching or playing on a **Competitive/ Travel/ Representative** team of any age there is a major difference.

The goal of competitive hockey is to **improve skills and win enough games to make the playoffs**.

Players, playing in this program know at the beginning of the season they have to earn their ice time.

Parents know when they sign up their child the chance of equal ice time in every game is very remote.

Competitive coaches in most programs have the green light, rightly or wrongly, to "shorten the bench" any time they desire.

If the team is playing well the coach will try to give equal ice time to all players, however if one line is being scored against, their ice time may diminish at any time during the game. This is competitive hockey, and winning is the goal at this level.

Other factors the coach will consider: where the team is located in the standings, is this a must game to make the playoffs etc.

Most coaches I know want to give as much equal ice time to all players as possible, however situations arise when they must "shorten the bench."

This is what should happen at the start of the year. The coach should hold a parents and players meeting before selecting his/her team and explain what they intend to do regarding equal ice time, earned ice time, and the length of shifts etc.. No surprises during the season.

Parents can question the coach, and if they do not like the answers, or do not believe in the ice time practice the coach intends to use, they still have the option of signing on with another team.

However, if during the middle of the season the coach suddenly decides to "shorten the bench," you can bring up what was said to you at the parents and players meeting at the beginning of the season.

How do you explain what is happening to your child if this "shortening of the bench" is happening to them?

I suggest honesty. If your child is not put out late in the game and they ask you why, it is because the coach believes he has more skilled players for this specific situation to maintain the current score or to score a late goal. Players generally know which players are more skilled than them.

If s/he starts doing this in the first or second period I believe you have the right to complain to the coach or General Manager.

This practice is hard on players and parents, and most parents will be upset, because "shortening the bench" is a coaching decision, out of their control, but it is reality in competitive hockey. If the team loses too many games in the regular season or the playoffs their season is over.

Look at the NHL and see who is out on the ice during the last minute for both teams in a close or critical game.

The best offensive or defensive players based on the score and the location of the faceoff.

I realize Youth Hockey is not the NHL but some competitive coaches and players believe winning tournaments or playoff championships will get them to the next level.

Some House League and Competitive coaches are so good with their bench management they have their top players on the ice during the last minute without ever "shortening the bench". Lets hope all coaches are as good with their bench management.

This topic is very controversial and has already generated a lot of passionate pro and con e-mail feedback.

Yours in hockey,

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