



“Some forwards just seem to play well together, know in advance what their line mates are going to do, and like playing together ... coaches need to find these combinations with the players’ assistance”

COACHING LEADERSHIP – RIGHT PLAYER, RIGHT FORWARD LINE MATES

You have tentatively decided on player positioning, now you need to decide on who is going to play with whom on your forward lines.

If you have forwards with about equal physical and mental talent, that is, no 3 or 4 forwards have physical and mental offensive and defensive skills beyond others, you may just want to balance the forward lines so each forward line will be able to perform about at the same level.

If, however you have what most teams have, that is, 3 or 4 forwards that have physical and mental skills beyond the skills of other players, and they meet the criteria for wingers and centres, try putting them together on the same line with the idea that that may become your best creative scoring and defensive line.

If you take your best 3 forwards and place one of them on each line for balance, you will probably dilute the effectiveness of your entire team. If you balance the lines and don't lose games by one or two goals, great, but if you are losing a lot of close games and your opposition is equal or more talented than your team is, you probably should “stack” a forward line. This is especially true in leagues where the games are very short and are won or lost in low scoring contests.

Some coaches say this will leave the other two lines significantly weakened, with “no team balance” but I have found that these so-called weakened lines can be taught effective defensive and offensive systems to allow them to contribute effectively to the team through their style of play and skill level ... it's just different.

One advantage of “stacking” a forward line in minor hockey particularly is that you can then adapt the standard of the tactics and systems you are teaching to the physical and mental skills of your forward lines. For example, if you are trying to teach forwards to execute various types of 3 on 2's, which require reading the opposition's defensive positioning (for example, backing off or standing up at the blue line) and very good skating, puck handling, anticipation and passing skills, and one player on each of the lines cannot read and adapt, or pass or skate well enough to execute team puck control, the entire line will fail on the 3 on 2 play. Some of the better than average players will become frustrated. The whole line will end up playing at a lower level.

So put forwards with about equal levels of skill together, even though they probably will have different kinds of skills. You will be able to teach them much more. They will become more creative together raising the bar themselves.



Another very significant advantage in minor hockey in “stacking” a forward line is you have a built in forward power play unit playing together and learning together all the time. They will learn to know and feel where their line mates are without looking. Many games that are short in time compared with regulation three stop time 20 minute periods are won with power play goals, so having a producing power play forward unit is usually a must if the team really wants to win championships.

Still another reason is, if you are short equally talented good defencemen, you can afford to put your weakest defensive pair with your “stacked” forward line, as the stacked line should be able to play the game outside of our zone most of the time. Of course then you can put your strongest defence with your weakest forward line to better support them.

Also, with this strategy you have a forward line that you can put out in the last minute or two when you need a goal or are just protecting a one goal lead that is your best that has played together and knows each other. It is surprising to me how some coaches think they can introduce an outstanding forward to a new line at the end of a game all of a sudden and expect good line results.

Don't forget to ask the players who they feel they should play with to help the team the most. If they psychologically feel more comfortable playing on a line with certain players they like they will probably play better and try harder that way.