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Q&A from NJP

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Covering New Jersey High School Ice Hockey

THE COACHES CORNER

This edition features

OCEAN TOWNSHIP HEAD COACH

DAVE SMITH

Tell us about yourself? Married? Kids? Interests?

I am married with three kids, ages 23, 20 and 17. In addition to ice hockey, I enjoy tennis, sailing, waterskiing, music and the beach.

Are you a teacher? Other occupation?

I am a partner in a financial publishing company.

How long have you coached? How long have you coached at Wall?

After coaching several high school club teams, I started my career as the first varsity coach at Rumson-Fair Haven Regional (R-FH) in 1999. After seven years at R-FH, I was invited to join Mike Dianora's staff at Wall High School, where I remained for three years prior to being offered the privilege of helping to establish the new varsity program at Ocean Township High School.

Where did you grow up? Where did you go to school?

I grew up in Rumson, NJ, attended Rumson-Fair Haven Regional High School and Hobart College before graduating from Monmouth University in 1985.

Can you tell us about your playing career including which clubs and teams you played for?

I played Youth Hockey for various teams, Bantam and upward to the Junior level for the Eatontown Ice Hockey Association, and club hockey for Rumson-Fair Haven H.S. and later played in various men's leagues at New Shrewsbury Ice, Navesink, Wall Sports Arena and Red Bank Armory.

Describe your roots in hockey?

I began following hockey as a young fan of the NY Rangers in the late 60's and early 70's. Prior to getting involved in organized hockey, I played on the ponds and rivers in the Rumson-Fair Haven area. While attending Monmouth College in the early 80's, I spent two seasons as coach of the RFH club team and coached the RFH Club team again in the late 90's, prior to becoming the school's first varsity head coach at the start of 1999-2000 season. After 7 years at RFH, I joined Wall High School as associate head coach. For the past five years I have been a head coach in the scholastic division of the Garden State Games, and assistant coach of the Garden State All-Star team under tournament director Cory Robinson.





Who was the greatest influence on your career?

My father taught me to love and respect the game; George Davidson (who coached me at Eatontown and also coached Jim Dowd) was a very positive coaching influence during my high school years,. Cory Robinson, Director of the Garden State Games (who won a NJ State High School Championship at Hudson Catholic before becoming head coach and now athletic director at Fair Lawn High School) has been my greatest influence since becoming a high school coach.

Can you speak about what distinguishes your hockey program from other schools in the state of NJ?

Maybe as the smallest team with the biggest heart? We will certainly have one of the smallest programs in terms of over all numbers, but given the size of our district, that could change fast. We'll also be one of the youngest teams, presently with no seniors, five juniors and the rest freshman and sophomores. We hope to distinguish ourselves through our preparation, work ethic, discipline and sportsmanship.

Can you tell us a bit about your players?

We've got a great group of players, all of whom really love the game. Our program is small enough that I could easily list them all, since they all will be contributing. But to name a few- Junior Corey Zimmel is a great offensive force at forward. His fellow juniors include a set of twins- forward Devon Ribsam and defenseman Talon Ribsam, both of whom have good skills, speed and grit, along with defenseman Vinny White and goalie Dan Wotton. Among our sophomores and freshman are forwards Stephen Reu, Nick Lane, Dan McGuire, Kevin Joirle, Alex Gornish and Ryan Thiel and defenseman Ryan Michaels.

Which seniors do you expect to be your key players for next season?

As of now we do not expect to have any seniors on the roster, but we hope this changes!

Have you chosen your assistant coaches as of yet and if so can you tell us a bit about them?

I anticipate having Blake Abbot, who was the leading scorer on the 2001 Divisional Championship team that I coached at R-FH, working with our defensemen. Blake also spent some time on the R-FH coaching staff under Jerry St-Cyr who succeeded me there in 2007.

Will Wall be on your schedule this upcoming season?

We do not expect to be playing Wall this upcoming season, but since we've not yet been officially placed in Shore C, I wouldn't rule it out either. I expect both of my former teams (Wall and R-FH) to be very competitive this coming season and wouldn't be surprised to see either of them playing in March at The Rock within the next four years.

Shore C had some great teams in the inaugural season and should continue to improve. How do you expect your team to fit in competitively?

As a division, I consider Shore C to essentially be an extension of Shore B, especially with Howell and Marlboro remaining there after they each had such successful first seasons. Realistically speaking, like Shore B, Shore C will have a mix of B and C teams. There is no easy place for us to start. Every team in the Shore Conference can play. We'll just have to take our lumps and hope to overachieve.



What are your views on the state playoff split between A and B teams? Should there be one Public champion?

I used to admire that NJ High School Ice Hockey had one overall Champion, even if it was usually, if not always a non-public team. The present format is a good one, but I'd still prefer to see one Champion, even if it were decided among the three. It makes our sport unique from the others. Placing the word "multiple" in front of the word Champion has a way of diminishing its meaning.

What will be your biggest challenge as a Head Coach?

We have a very motivated and coachable group of kids at Ocean. Our biggest challenges as coaches will be to prepare ourselves (and our players) to play consistently hard with a very short bench (at most we expect to dress 15 players each game), and, given that we'll be facing some very, very tough competition, to keep our heads held high, even if we at times feel like we are getting our heads handed to us.

In your opinion, what makes a great Coach?

In addition to a solid understanding of the game and the ability to transfer that knowledge to his or her players, a great coach has to care- about his team, his players and the sport itself. A great coach sets proper expectations and applies them consistently, and holds his players and himself accountable to certain standards of work ethic, discipline and sportsmanship. And just as great players make those around them better, great coaches find ways to get the very most out of each player, and in turn, the team.

Is there an NHL coach that you try to emulate and which is closest to your coaching style and philosophy?

I'm a Rangers fan so this could sound like heresy, but the coach I feel most philosophically aligned with is Larry Robinson. He is an excellent teacher, he gets along well with his players and he displays tremendous patience, discipline and sportsmanship and expects and receives the same from his players. But back to the Rangers, I also admire the aggressive style employed by John Tortorella.



Do you feel coaches have a responsibility to be role models for their players?

Yes I think that coaches cannot lose sight of the fact that they are role models, and that kids are perceptive and observant. They want to be taught and even disciplined, but they want and deserve to be respected and can easily differentiate between sincerity and insincerity. At the same time, parents should recognize that coaches are imperfect mortals, just like everyone else. I believe the perfect scenario is one in which coaches, parents and players are all operating with mutual respect, in which everyone is doing his (or her) best to make a positive contribution to the experience.

High School hockey is extremely competitive. Coaches receive pressure from many sources to develop a win at all cost philosophy. How do you find ways to build character in "all" of your players when this mindset exists?

Having a passion for winning is instrumental to success, but its important to keep in mind that success isn't always contingent on winning. In my mind a team is successful if it consistently competes at its maximum level, and if its players have a healthy love and respect for the game, and respect for their opponent.

How do you motivate your players?

We motivate in a number of ways. We teach our players that by way of thorough mental and physical preparation- through hard work on and off the ice, we can confidently compete with anyone at the high school level. We want each player to believe he is an important part of a greater a effort- a team effort; We also believe our players are motivated by the fact that we as coaches truly care about them, and want them to care for each other.

Club hockey and High School hockey schedules often collide in New Jersey. What is your philosophy regarding commitment to both clubs?

Again, I think club hockey is instrumental in the development of high school aged players, and serves a tremendous purpose. That said, the two sides need to get on the same page. The scheduling conflicts create unbelievable stress on coaches, parents, but most of all our kids. As far as commitment to both, as much as most kids would like to be equally committed, it is virtually impossible. When two equally important things collide, something has to give way—and year after year for a growing number of kids it does.

It is not uncommon for top public high school players to jump from public school teams to private or prep schools to advance their careers. In your experience, do players always benefit from these transfers?

Having spent my entire coaching career with public high schools, and after watching my fairly talented son play public high school hockey for four years, I am obviously a strong proponent of the public school experience. It's certainly a trade-off. The excitement of playing in your home town, in front of friends, neighbors and family is short lived and hard to replace. On the other hand, private and prep schools do a wonderful job preparing high school kids for college and for life. For our own son, we chose a four year public school education, followed by a post graduate year at a wonderful New England prep school, where he was able to further develop as a student, athlete and as a person, before moving on with his life. Given the long odds of becoming a professional in any sport, I believe that making such a jump purely to benefit a kid's "career" is not prudent, unless they have such truly exceptional talent that they would be otherwise thwarted by remaining at their public school. If the decision is made for the right reasons- to maximize one's potential as a student, an athlete and a person- and with realistic expectations, it will hopefully be beneficial.

In your opinion, when is junior hockey the best alternative to playing for your high school team?

As an alternative, almost never- unless the player is exceptionally talented. One has only four years of high school eligibility (five if you incorporate a post grad year). Alternatively, a player has two to three years of junior hockey eligibility after having played for his or her high school. In fact, its totally feasible to play four years of high school hockey and a PG year at a prep school, followed by a year or two of junior hockey. Unless you are being recruited for the National team or the NHL, why sacrifice one experience for the other if you can have both (or all three)?

Do you have a favorite quote or saying that you impart to your players each year?

I have two that come to mind:

- 1) Be intentional. Do everything with a purpose.
- 2) Good is the enemy of Great. Once we fall into the trap of thinking we are good, we can never be Great.

What advice do you have for parents of NJ High School hockey players as they prepare to have their child enter college?

Enjoy your child's high school experience – and more importantly, let your child enjoy it. And try to keep things in the context of each step being preparation for the next.

What advice do you have for current players that want to continue their hockey careers after high school?

Work hard and be prepared for just about anything. Manage your expectations and your ego, but don't be afraid to dream, and never say never.

