

Coaching the Braves Way: Brian Keane

When youth hockey players move from the Peewee to the Bantam level they literally feel the difference.

That's because Bantam hockey is their introduction to checking.

"It's always a big transition for a lot of kids during the first month of the season," in the educated opinion of Brian Keane, the Bantam coach of the Wilmette Braves.

"They've got to learn how to give a check and to keep their heads up and be prepared to take a check. The big hits are going to come."

This is Brian's second year as the Braves' coach. He previously coached the Chicago Young Americans AAA Midget Major team.

He finds coaching Bantams to be more fulfilling.

"I feel I have an opportunity to make a big impact, rounding out all their skills and influencing their hockey IQ," the native of upstate New York explained. "When I was a Bantam, I had a great coach from Buffalo named Matt English (Matt English and Darren Bauer). Before that, when I was a Peewee, my coaches, Mark Nunn and Dave Montgomery improved my skill level and shaped my understanding of strategies and concepts.

"I try to build from the blades up. If they have good balance and are able to make plays they feel confident. If they're not confident on their skates and with the puck it doesn't matter what I tell them because they're not going to make plays. I want all of my players to feel confident with the puck and be able to make an impact."

"Every coach I've talked to here in Wilmette knows what they're doing and has a game plan. It's all about reps, getting the kids puck touches and putting them through drills that will



develop fast minds, fast feet and fast hands. Reps, reps, reps—that’s how they are going to get better.”

Ongoing self-improvement also is a point of emphasis in Brian’s work as a coach. He stays abreast of the latest training and teaching techniques and he incorporates his technological savvy into individual and game analysis.

Channeling the know-how that he uses in his job as digital sales planner for the Wall Street Journal into his hockey avocation, Brian has created a website, <http://www.prodigy-hockey.com>.

The website is a game and video analysis tutorial, and, according to Brian, its “main purpose is to help educate players and parents and coaches.”



It contains skill and development drills and an interview with author Tim Gallwey that explores the mental aspects of athletic competition. Although Gallwey’s book is entitled “The Inner Game of Tennis” his principles apply to all sports.

A hockey parent who posted a comment on the website praised the skills Brian demonstrated in coaching his son: “He is quick to assess strengths and weaknesses and develop a plan to improve in key areas,” the parent said of Brian.

As a coach, Brian looks beyond the here and now.

“At the start of the year I ask the kids where they want to be next year and where they want to be in the next few years,” he said. “I think it’s important for them to have goals in mind and we want to help them get where they want to be.

“A lot of these kids I’m working with will be really good high school players. There are a few who have what it takes to go to the AAA level and make a dent.”

As a high school student, Brian would play fall travel hockey in Buffalo until his high school season began in Rochester. Then, after his high school season ended, he’d go back to Buffalo travel hockey in the spring.

One of his teammates on the Buffalo Saints and in USA Festival summer competition was Blackhawks’ star Patrick Kane. On weekends during the season Brian often would stay with Kane and his family in Buffalo.

He remembers a tournament in Toronto when they were about the same age as his current Bantam players: “Pat had about 30 points in six games and in the last few games referees were coming up and asking him if they could have his stick and asking him to autograph it.”

For Brian, seeing what Kane has gone on to accomplish in the NHL is believing that he laid the foundation during their boyhood years.

“He was always working, always trying to get better,” Brian recalled. “He skated more than anybody. He skated in the morning. He skated at night.”

Brian left upstate New York before his senior year in high school to pursue his hockey career with the Chicago Steel, the Tier 1 United States Hockey League franchise based at The Edge in Bensenville. Living with a family in Long Grove, he attended Stevenson High School.



He spent a season and a half with the Steel before being traded to the Indianapolis Ice.

His play in the USHL earned him a scholarship at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst.

“I was lucky to have had great coaches as a youth player, a junior player and as a college player,” said Brian. “Now, I want to share my knowledge with the kids I’m coaching.”

“To get to Division I demands a lot of commitment. As you get to the higher levels the mental side of the game becomes so much more important.”

“In college I majored in psychology, and that also has been a huge help both in coaching and in my work in sales.”

After getting his degree Brian moved back to the Chicago area to take a job in e-commerce for a start-up company founded by a co-owner of the Steel and began coaching at the Midget level. Coaching was nothing new because when he was a teenager he had begun doing it at camps for kids.

When Brian took his present job with the Wall Street Journal he found that his work schedule conflicted with his coaching duties with the Young Americans but he wanted to continue coaching.

He learned that there might be an opening in Wilmette, called to inquire and subsequently was hired to coach the Braves, starting in the 2013-14 season.

“I love it here,” Brian said. “Coaching these kids is my passion.”

During the off-season a major event took place in Brian’s life: on Aug. 30 he married Lauren Tallon, oldest daughter of Dale Tallon, former general manager of the Blackhawks and current GM of the Florida Panthers.

“I thought about playing in Europe after college (I did very briefly but not important) but didn’t because I’d had some concussion problems and now I’m really glad I didn’t because if I hadn’t come back to Chicago then I never would have met Lauren,” he said.

Like her father who made his mark as a player with the Blackhawks and as one of Canada’s top golfers, Lauren also was an outstanding athlete. She was a collegiate track star at Holy Cross and was a member of two relay teams that set school records.

If she and Brian decide to start a family he might find himself coaching a kid whose skill brings back memories of Patrick Kane playing youth hockey for the Buffalo Saints.

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