

Modern Hockey Thinking

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Background

The following ideas are based on information gathered from international players, coaches, umpires and technical officials attending major international fixtures in recent times.

This document should be of interest to players, coaches and umpires at all levels of the game in New Zealand. The thinking behind this document will be conveyed to technical delegates, umpires managers and umpires attending national tournaments, coaching courses and national presentations in NZ. It is hoped that it will help to outline the direction that Hockey NZ and it's umpires have agreed to adopt over the ensuing years, which will ensure our attitude and style of play achieves winning and more enjoyable outcomes. A version of this document was presented to our top coaches at the Olympic Solidarity coaching course held in January 2007. These coaches endorsed the ideas and objectives outlined below and requested that the main points be communicated to the wider hockey community.

Overall Philosophy

It is the intention of the Hockey NZ Umpire's Council to keep current with modern rule interpretation and international trends. The modern game is becoming 'less technical' and is requiring the umpire to take on a more management approach to hockey umpiring. By 'less technical' we mean that the outdated view of blowing all feet, raised balls and stick clashes that occur when players are competing for the ball are now being ignored. Penalty corners and defensive free hits are being awarded less frequently.

In the modern game, less whistle results in a more open flowing style of hockey. Ultimately, faster plays and higher scoring matches result in greater spectator appeal, participation, sponsorship and television coverage opportunities. This approach is a worldwide response to the development of the modern game. The New Zealand hockey community needs to keep updating itself so as not to be disadvantaged on the world stage.

The Link to Skill Development

Some people are not comfortable with changes in rule interpretation. However the game is a dynamic one that has undergone much change. For example, the rules have been adapted to encourage raised ball (while always being aware of dangerous situations). Are we encouraging raised ball in New Zealand, or just tolerating it?

Skill development occurs more effectively when the players 'umpire themselves.' For example, remember when we moved from grass to turf? Recall that you could not receive the ball 'facing the wrong direction.' If you did, you got a good push from the opposition and you conceded a free hit. Now, on turf, players receive the ball facing any direction and they are protected by the rules. However the umpires no longer need to manage this situation – the players do. No-one pushes from behind anymore – it is an aspect of the game that is umpired by the players. Look how receiving skills have developed as a result. Would these skills have developed if players were still crashing into one another?

Umpiring Philosophy

From an umpiring perspective, we need to be more approachable, flexible, and in touch with playing and coaching philosophies. Adapting to changes and developments in the game requires umpires to also adapt and change their thinking, attitude and approach. Keeping up-to-date and being willing to listen and respond to change is the key to keeping pace with hockey developments and umpiring strategies.

Specific Interpretations

- Ignoring out-dated technical breaches – Be certain that a breach has actually occurred. Do not ‘search’ for free hits.
- Ball hitting the foot (or body) - Differentiate between situations when a player stops the ball with their foot (or body) as opposed to the situation where they stop it with their stick, then it merely touches the foot (or body). The latter should be ignored and result in a play-on situation. Is our instinct in New Zealand to play on or is it to stop and wait for the whistle? Think about our representative age-group players. What is their ‘instinct’ after they emerge from age-group tournaments? Surely developing a culture of ‘play on’ is a key to developing greater speed and intensity.
- Ball in the air –Remember that a hit in open play that is deliberately raised is an ILLEGAL shot. No matter how skillful or ‘not dangerous,’ is not allowed in hockey.

Raised ball is now encouraged in the rules. How have we encouraged raised ball in New Zealand? What might the possibilities be if we embraced this rule in NZ rather than tolerated it? For example, how have our aerial receiving skills been hampered by players not remaining five metres from descending aerial balls? For the past few years, the whistle has needed to go while the ball is in-flight, therefore not allowing this skill to develop.

- Tackling - Allow players to wrestle for the ball. Ignore stick clashes when players are competing for possession. Dispossession of the ball carrier will not be a silent process. If a player carries on with the ball, allow play to continue using the advantage rule. Remember to watch the direction of the ball when a tackle is completed. If the ball travels in the direction that the tackler has made, then the tackler must have hit the ball first (and then maybe stick afterwards – a breach may not have occurred).
- Placement of free hits – this rule was changed to encourage players to take quick free hits from an area close to where the infringement occurred. Too often, the hit is replayed and all advantage is lost. Be less technical and more liberal with free hit placement.
- Flow and Advantage - Encourage play to carry on. Remember we are trying to build a culture whereby it is the player’s first instinct to play on – not to search for technical breaches or free hits. When players realise that ‘play on,’ advantage and flow are the priorities, the speed and intensity of the game will increase.

Conclusion

Umpires should ensure the game is played fairly, skillfully and safely and this approach should be aligned to global expectations as to how the game should be played and umpired. Together with players and coaches, the playing culture and style will be determined, adapted and progressed. A commitment to modern thinking will ensure the hockey culture in New Zealand is current and aligned with the latest trends in the international game.