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World Juniors



How a hockey game becomes a mind game

JOHN ALLEMANG

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When a sport becomes a mind game, all bets are off.

Something happened to the Canadian junior hockey players in their world-championship loss to Russia that seems to defy rational explanation. How can a dominant team that held a three-goal lead with only 20 minutes to play fall apart and lose 5-3? Giving up five goals in a single period is hard for any team to do, let alone the powerhouse that is Canada.

“It was tough to watch,” said veteran coach Dave King, who, in four decades of coaching, had never seen a collapse on quite that scale.

And even tougher to explain. “As much as you try to get players mentally prepared for the moment,” said Mr. King, who coached the Canadian juniors to gold in 1982, “and as much as you talk about being able to deal with a momentum swing, sometimes it just gets out of your hands.”

And into your head. For Mr. King the turning point of the game and the psychological battle within the game was when the Russians scored their first goal. “They started to believe in themselves, they knew they had nothing to lose and from then on they played the game in a spontaneous way. When you’re able to be spontaneous in hockey, you see more of the ice, you make better plays. At the same time, the Canadians became more

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deliberate and more hesitant. And when you become reflective like this, unconsciously, you start to slow down.”

In a game built on speed, impulse and constant improvisation, overthinking will always be the enemy. “The more complex you try to make things under pressure,” said John Dunn, a professor of sports psychology at the University of Alberta, “the more completely things will start to fall apart.”

“Our unconscious brains are fantastic at playing sports, at making a shot,” said British sports psychologist Simon Hartley. “And that’s because it’s the unconscious part of the brain that learned how to do it in the first place. But the moment players start thinking about what might happen if they lose, playing in front of all those Canadian fans who expect them to win, they focus on that and not shooting the puck. It becomes a very quick downward spiral.”

That’s certainly the way the disastrous third period looked to most hockey observers. Scientists don’t like talking about momentum because they find it hard to quantify. Yet when sports insiders talk about a momentum shift in a game, it’s as if they’re describing something visible, almost tangible. “After the first Russian goal, the Canadian players looked lost and traumatized,” said TSN hockey analyst Pierre McGuire. “They seemed frozen in time, as if they couldn’t believe they’ve given up a goal.”

No one likes to give up a goal when they’re winning so effortlessly. But why should that initial response lead to an almost instant reversal of fate? Prof. Dunn pointed to the pressure of the moment, the game situation that intensified and magnified the negative feelings felt by the teenage players. “All these extraneous thoughts that have nothing to do with the task at hand flood in and they all interfere with your focus. And when the stress levels rise to this extent, then your breathing rate changes, your adrenal rate goes up, and it becomes very hard to control your muscles. In the last five minutes of the game, you saw players swinging at the puck and missing it, unable to execute.”

So what’s the best response when things start to go wrong in the middle of a game? Call a timeout (as Canada coach Dave Cameron finally did when the score got to 3-3)? Change goalies (which Mr. Cameron refused to do)? Order up a crushing bodycheck that stops the Russian momentum in its tracks (but may draw a penalty)?

If only it were that easy. Because momentum is seen in physical terms as a relentless oncoming force, hockey experts like to counteract it by stopping time – the timeout, the goalie change, the injury (real or feigned). But, said Mr. Hartley, “slowing down time is good only if you know what to do with that time. If you don’t know what to say, players are going to implode because they have more time to think and think.”

Golfers, he noted, find the hardest part of the game to be the walk from one shot to the next when their thinking brains go into overdrive. At the same time, timeouts and changing goalies are a very public statement of non-confidence – is that really the message you want to send to your players?

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For Mr. Hartley, the best solutions clear away the negativity, reinforce confidence, bring the game back to its simplest form. “If you’re feeling under pressure, find ways to get comfortable again, play the patterns you’re supposed to be playing according to your game plan.”

That’s more a mental trick than it is a prescription for brilliant hockey – reverting to instinct and simplification clears away all the distractions that are clogging up a player’s brain and preventing him from playing like a spontaneous Russian. A coach’s game plan becomes a safe fallback position when the alternative is the chaotic desperation exhibited by the young Canadians.

But the problem with hockey, which is also its brilliance, is that it moves too fast for last-minute psychological counselling of the kind seen in timeout-laden basketball’s endless dying seconds. Most of the sports psychologists’ work, much like those who prepare troops for combat, has to be done well in advance, before things start going wrong.

“We talk about normalizing the stress response,” Prof. Dunn said. “We try to expose people to the kind of stress that might occur, so when it happens, they have a mental plan.”

If they took nothing else away from the game against the Russian team, the young Canadian players at least can say they’ve been exposed to the kind of stress that few people will ever experience in their lives. In the long run, that may even be a good thing.

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