



Soft Skill Area (Psychology): Mental Preparation for Goaltenders

5 Questions with Dr. Peter Jenson; Hockey Canada Sport Psychology Consultant

Hockey goaltending is one of the most mentally demanding positions in all of sports. It is crucial that goaltenders prepare themselves in an efficient manner prior to competition. HC goaltending was fortunate to sit down with Sport Psychology Consultant, Dr. Peter Jenson and get answers to 5 questions that are commonly asked in the world of goaltending...

HC Goaltending – *“How important is it for a goaltender to have great practice habits?”*

Dr. PJ – *“In a game situation you can only rely on the level of your training. What I mean by that is that the way you train dictates the way you play. What you are trying to do in training is to move from conscious competence to unconscious competence, that is automatic expertise. When you are learning a skill you are very much in the front part of the brain thinking your way through the technical aspects of the performance that good coaches are emphasizing. Over time, through constant correct execution, the physical responses become automatic and move to the back section of the brain. In pressure situations when we over think we actually move back into a beginners mindset in the sense that we are thinking our way through it in the frontal cortex rather than reacting to what is happening. This requires that you trust your training and that only comes with constant repetition and great practice habits.”*

HC Goaltending – *“Is it necessary to have a strict routine to follow on game days?”*

Dr. PJ - *“It is necessary to have a routine to follow on game days but it need not be rigid or strict in the sense that is unbending or inflexible. The reason you need a good routine is to be able to get yourself into a mindset where you perform your very best. Different goalies will have different routines because they are different people. Introverts for example, need time and space when under pressure whereas extroverts feel more comfortable interacting with others in the same situation. The routine is important because if everything changes in your approach each game then how do you know where to make the subtle adjustments necessary for you to get into the right space to be the best goalie that you can be? If after a game you can identify something that happened in the pregame that might have thrown you off course you can make a subtle*

adjustment to that and leave the other stuff constant. You can only learn about yourself by adjusting one variable at a time and the pregame routine, because it is set, allows you to do this.”

HC Goaltending – “What types of things should a goalie visualize before they play games? How long before a game should this visualization occur?”

Dr. PJ – “I prefer the word imagery to the word visualization because visualization implies that it is visual. 15 to 20% of the population doesn't really get a clear picture when they do imagery but they sure can feel it, or sense it, or hear it, or smell it, or taste it, etc. Imagery is very much the language of the body in the sense that you can't do things you can't imagine. Because it's the language that your body speaks you need to translate how you want to play into the feelings, emotions, pictures, etc. of what you want to happen.

Elite goalies spend a fair amount of time imagining the various situations that can occur in the game and imagining themselves reacting to those situations. Sometimes this imagery is quite spontaneous and occurs throughout the day of a game. At other times they consciously take time, usually 3 to 4 hours before game time, to intentionally work through what they may face in that game. They will spend time on screenshots, breakaways, 2 on ones, rebound control, etc. Sometimes their game plan will involve how they are going to deal with a specific player or a set play the other team may use, for example, on the power play.

The research on imagery and goaltending is very, very, clear. Goalies that use imagery to prepare, whether that imagery is 1st person [watching it as they would see it in a game] or 3rd person [watching it as they would see it on TV] perform much better than goalies who do not use imagery.”

HC Goaltending – “How does a goalie re-focus after a bad game, or a string of bad games. How do they maintain belief in themselves?”

Dr. PJ – “Confidence is absolutely essential to a goaltender. An incorrect decision made with confidence often produces a better result than a correct decision made with hesitation. You cannot build your confidence as a goalie by being the ‘heckler’ in the crowd of your own performance. You need to support yourself and this is especially true after poor performances. By all means evaluate your performance as any fair person would, make the changes, spend some time imagining those corrections, then let it go and move on to the next game. Pucks are round. They bounce in funny unpredictable ways. If you spend time beating yourself up on pucks that entered the net as a result of ‘an act of God’ you are not supporting yourself. Let go and move on. Period.”

HC Goaltending – *“Obviously proper rest and sleeping in habits are crucial to strong performance. Can you re-iterate why this is so important to young goaltenders?”*

Dr. PJ - *“Rest is as critical to performance as training. The body needs to recover, rebuild, and repair and cannot do so without proper rest. Proper rest does not occur in front of a television set, a cell phone, an iPad or any other electronic device that occupies the mind. Learning a good relaxation technique can be invaluable to a goalie particularly on those nights before big games. Every once in a while even the hardest working woodcutter has to stop working and spend some time sharpening the blade.”*

