

## ETHICS COUNT WITH NHL COACH MIKE BABCOCK

By Sheila Robertson

Ask anyone who follows the National Hockey League (NHL) who the league's top coach is and nine times out of 10 the reply is, "Mike Babcock, of course." In only six years in the NHL, the Detroit Red Wing head coach has compiled an impressive win-loss record, has set a new NHL record for road victories, and has led the Red Wings to back-to-back 50-plus wins in a season, only the fifth NHL coach to do so.

Less known is the philosophy that guides Babcock's coaching. It's an approach that Canada's coaches — at all levels and in all sports — would do well to emulate.

Of course, it goes without saying that coaches who reach Babcock's level are masters of their game. However, effective coaching is more than technique and tactics; ethical principles are critical. Knowing that, the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) has developed an online Ethics section on their website in order to generate discussion about ethical issues in coaching.

### A Coach's Ethical Principles

- Integrity in Relation to Others
- Respect for Athletes
- Coaching Responsibly
- Honouring Sports

Babcock endorses the initiative, explaining that CAC's four ethical principles should form the foundation of coaches at every level. "Integrity comes first and foremost in building trust, and trust is the foundation of ethical behaviour," he says. "If you don't have integrity, your coaching career will be very short. People very quickly see you for what you are by how you handle yourself each and every day. If you have integrity and character, for sure you practice the other ethical principles."

Babcock agreed to take CAC's Quiz, "An Ethical Checklist for Coaches", which is designed to help coaches identify their ethical strengths and weaknesses. Babcock did well on the Quiz, scoring 95 out of 100. That should come as no surprise, he says, because any coach with integrity will score high. He lost a few points in just three areas, noting that with NHL players, he doesn't "share issues, context, or rationale for decisions, doesn't ask about his players' ethical development, and doesn't attempt to instill commitments to dignity and responsibility." He explains that when he coached college and university players, ethics was definitely a discussion point because at that level, the goal is to develop great people as well as skilled players.

As for the rest of the Quiz, "it was easy for me to give myself a 5 on all of them, without hesitation," he says. "We may not spend time discussing ethics, but I believe in modelling ethical behaviour and all of my core group of leaders — our captain Nicklas Lidstrom, assistant captains Pavel Datysuk, Henrik Zetterberg, and Kris Draper, assistant coaches Paul Maclean and Todd McLellen, goalie coach Jim Bedard, and video coach Jay Woodcroft — are the same, or else they wouldn't have these roles."

Insisting that he isn't unique, Babcock says that before making it to the NHL six years ago, he surveyed each general manager to discover the five most important characteristics of a head coach. Once in the league, he repeated the survey and added the coaches. "Integrity and character were number one, almost across the board," he says. Also highly ranked was

communication which he describes as "a message sent and received. A lot of us coaches get caught up in being big talkers and not very big listeners. I've been accused of not listening and I try to work on that all the time. One of my coaches suggested that sometimes I should zip it up and just listen. I'm working on it."

According to Babcock, the Detroit Red Wing organization, as developed by general manager Ken Holland, is committed to doing the right thing every day. "I've spent my life building the reputation I have today and people know I'm going to do the right thing. And I expect the same from the people around me. My point is that it is very easy to work for someone who has integrity like Ken Holland does."

Babcock applies the same standard of behaviour to volunteer coaches. "Calling yourself a coach — and I take great pride in being able to do that — means being prepared and being organized," he says. "Your number one responsibility to those children is to grow their love of the game and you do that by treating them properly, creating a demanding, supportive atmosphere that allows for individual growth." And that, he stresses, applies to every level of coaching. "Anyone who says 'I'm just a volunteer coach' should not be coaching. Just because you're a volunteer doesn't give you the right to be unorganized and unprepared and unprofessional."

An advocate of lifelong learning, Babcock urges coaches to strive to get better every day. "In our business, if a coach isn't active in self-development, someone else will get his job," he says. "Scotty Bowman, in my opinion the greatest coach of all time, did that better than anyone else. He's our consultant and I talk to him about this all the time." Babcock also learns from reading, the Internet, surrounding himself with intelligent people, and by constant questioning. "Whoever does something better than me, I'm taking their idea and moving ahead with it. I'm interested in anybody, anything that can help us get better and I think that's the norm across my profession. All of the best I've ever met have the same passion for self-improvement."

Babcock doesn't buy the old adage that sport builds character. "It's the people within sport who build character and to do that, you have to have character yourself. The best teachers and the best coaches I had were uncompromising and full of integrity and I believe this is true of every coach in the National Hockey League. And I believe all of them would score high if they took the Quiz. These days, a coach can't survive in the league without integrity; it's impossible."

As John Dalla Costa of the Centre for Ethical Orientation noted in working with CAC to develop the ethical principles and the Quiz, "while few people disagree with the principles, day-to-day adherence remains challenging, in part because coaches teach in the middle ground between exceptional athletes who deserve special attention and ordinary athletes who deserve equal right to play or be their best." In other words, determining the right balance for respect is not always straightforward.

Coaches also operate in the tough middle ground between the spirit of sport and the intense pressure to win at all costs. So striking the right balance responsibly is not always easy.

There is also the challenge of nurturing technical excellence and the obligation to engender fair play. Instilling the right balance for integrity is a tough test of character.

Coaches are important mentors, but are not the only influence on an athlete's values. Culture, competitors, parents, and peers — Babcock adds the media and agents — can sometimes undermine the values that seem to them to get in the way of succeeding. Insisting on the right balance for winning honourably is often unpopular.

Babcock urges coaches, from grassroots to high performance, to complete the Quiz. "I believe in what I call 'kitchen table accountability' and that means you don't get away with anything. And that's the best environment you can create. Taking the Quiz will provide coaches with a very important ethical checklist of their own behaviour."

For more information on the Coaching Association of Canada, visit their web site at [www.coach.ca](http://www.coach.ca). To visit the Ethics sections, click on <http://www.coach.ca/eng/ethics/index.cfm>.

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### An Ethical Checklist for Coaches

Ethical Principle	Questions for Coaches Rating 1-5	(1 low/5 high)
<b>INTEGRITY IN RELATIONSHIPS</b>	I expect for my athletes what I expect from myself in terms of effort and conscientiousness for ethical responsibilities.	
	I am true to my word: I mean what I say and I say what I mean so that my athletes are clear about our goals.	
	I am true to my personal values in my public role as a coach, and I stand up for what I believe is right.	
	I not only try my best to avoid what is wrong and do no harm, I also try my best to do what is right.	
	I extend to others the same respect I would wish for from them.	
<b>RESPECT FOR ATHLETES</b>	I am clear upfront with athletes (and parents) about my ethical principles and goals.	
	I take the time to learn where my athletes are on their ethical development.	
	I set clear parameters for practices and competition relating to ethical conduct.	
	I allow my athletes to participate in ethical decision-making by sharing issues, context, or rationale for decisions.	
	I extend the courtesies to my athletes that show consideration for their rights and dignity.	
<b>COACHING RESPONSIBLY</b>	I invest time and energy to stay current with new developments in technical proficiency.	
	I invest time and energy to develop more competence and confidence for the ethical issues affecting my sport.	
	I create a practice and competition environment in which my athletes can trust that their best interests are being served.	
	I teach my athletes to respect the rules and strive to not only win, but win the right way.	
	I use the lessons and power of sport to instill in my athletes commitments to dignity and responsibility as well as success.	

<b>HONOURING THE SPORT</b>	I use examples about what is best in the sport to motivate athletes and grow in them respect for the game.	
	I use practices to focus on ideals and responsibilities as well as skills and technical proficiency.	
	I celebrate my athletes' achievements that represent the best values as well as the best sporting efforts.	
	I engage officials, other coaches, and stakeholders in conversations about the ethical risks or threats to the sport.	
	I take seriously the public trust I am to discharge as a coach, and try to earn that trust in all my words and deeds.	

Add up the score. You have a starting point. Look to the 4 or 5 ratings – these are your strengths to leverage. Anything 3 or under needs some attention. Based on the scores, prepare a "To Do List" for building momentum on these four ethical principles.