



Beyond the Bleachers. Beyond the Bench. *Beyond the Divide.*

Changing the Culture of Youth Hockey, One Conversation at a Time.

Why We Started This Journey

This all started with a simple idea over the summer.

For years, I've had hockey parents come to me with questions about tryouts, evaluations, team selections, and the overall youth hockey development process. And year after year, I found myself having many of the same conversations, answering the same questions, and trying to explain things that, quite frankly, I believe parents deserve to understand better.

The reality is that so much of youth hockey happens behind the scenes. Decisions are made, teams are selected, players are evaluated, and development paths are recommended, yet families are often left trying to make sense of it all with very little explanation.

And when people don't understand something, they naturally begin filling in the blanks themselves. Sometimes those assumptions are accurate. Many times, they're not.

This past summer, I finally decided to do something about it.

I hosted a Tryout Presentation where I could openly discuss the tryout and evaluation process from my perspective as someone who has experienced youth hockey from nearly every angle...as a player, coach, evaluator, director, and hockey business owner.

I wanted parents to have an opportunity to hear the honest realities of how decisions are made, what evaluators and coaches are looking for, and why certain situations may not always be what they appear to be from the outside.

I also invited Coach Art Burns, my mental skills coach, to join the conversation. Art brought two incredibly valuable perspectives: his experience as a hockey parent and his expertise in mental skills coaching. Together, we could discuss not only the hockey side of these situations but also the emotional and psychological challenges families experience throughout the process.

What happened next opened our eyes to something much bigger.

We quickly realized just how hungry hockey families were for information, transparency, and honest conversations. Parents weren't necessarily looking for someone to tell them what they

wanted to hear. **They wanted someone willing to explain what they didn't understand.** They wanted to ask questions without feeling judged. They wanted to understand the other side of decisions that directly affected their children.

And perhaps most importantly, they wanted to feel heard. What stood out to us was how much parents appreciated the honesty and transparency, even when the information was difficult to hear. That was a defining moment for us. It reinforced something I've believed for a long time:

Sometimes the biggest problem in youth hockey isn't the decision itself. It's the lack of communication and understanding surrounding that decision.

And the more we talked with families, the more we began recognizing a much larger issue.

The Problem Isn't Always the Decision. It's the Disconnect.

Youth hockey is an incredibly emotional environment. Parents invest tremendous amounts of time, money, energy, and emotion into their children's hockey experiences. They want their kids to succeed, develop confidence, be treated fairly, and enjoy the game they love.

Coaches, meanwhile, carry an entirely different set of responsibilities. They're trying to develop individual players, build team chemistry, manage different personalities, balance expectations, make difficult decisions, and create an environment where their teams can succeed.

Both sides care deeply. Both sides want what's best for the kids. But they're often looking at the exact same situation through completely different lenses.

A coach makes a decision based on what they believe is best for a player or the team. A parent sees that same decision and wonders how anyone could possibly think it was the right one. And here's where things can begin to unravel.

The coach may have legitimate reasoning behind the decision, but that reasoning isn't always communicated or understood. The parent is left confused, frustrated, or feeling that their child has been treated unfairly. Without an explanation, frustration can turn into assumptions. Assumptions can turn into conversations with other frustrated parents. Those conversations can create division, mistrust, and resentment.

Before you know it, one situation has created a ripple effect that impacts an entire team.

The snowball effect is real. And it can turn what should be an incredible hockey season into a long, stressful, and emotionally exhausting experience for everyone involved.

The parents are frustrated. The coaches feel criticized and unsupported. Relationships become strained. The atmosphere around the team changes. And unfortunately, the kids can end up caught in the middle. The frustrating part is that some of these situations might have played out very differently if everyone had simply had a better understanding of the other person's perspective.

Not every disagreement will disappear through better communication, and not every decision will be the right one. But understanding the reasoning, emotions, and challenges on both sides can make an enormous difference in how people respond.

Who Is Supporting the Parents? And Who Is Supporting the Coaches?

As we continued having these conversations, another realization became impossible to ignore. **Where is the support system for the adults navigating youth hockey?** We spend so much time talking about player development, skating skills, hockey IQ, training, and performance. We invest heavily in helping young athletes become better hockey players.

But what about the parents trying to navigate the emotional roller coaster of a hockey season? Who helps them understand coaching decisions, manage expectations, process disappointment, or navigate difficult conversations?

And what about the coaches? Who supports the coaches when they're dealing with challenging parent relationships, organizational pressures, team conflicts, difficult decisions, and the emotional demands of leading young athletes? Coaches spend countless hours supporting their players, yet many have very few places where they can openly discuss their own challenges without feeling judged.

We realized that both parents and coaches need something that has been missing: a place to feel heard, supported, understood, and connected.

And that's when our vision started to become clear. We don't believe most of the challenges in youth hockey come from people who don't care. In fact, we believe many of these challenges exist precisely because people care so much. Parents care deeply about their children. Coaches care deeply about their players and teams.

But caring about the same kids doesn't automatically mean we understand one another. And without understanding, even the best intentions can create conflict.

What If We Could Change the Conversation?

What if parents had an opportunity to better understand the realities and challenges coaches face? What if coaches could better understand the emotions, concerns, and expectations parents experience? What if families realized that many of the frustrations they're experiencing aren't unique to their club, but are shared throughout the youth hockey community?

And what if we could create a culture where people felt comfortable asking questions, sharing concerns, and learning from one another without fear of judgment?

What if we stopped assuming the worst about one another and started trying to understand one another? One of the biggest things Art and I have learned is that people become much more open to different perspectives when they first feel that their own experiences have been heard

and understood. Validation doesn't necessarily mean agreement. It means acknowledging that someone's feelings and experiences matter.

And when people feel heard, their defenses can begin to come down. Trust develops. Conversations become more productive. And suddenly, there's an opportunity for genuine understanding and growth. We believe that connection is the missing piece in so many of the challenges facing youth hockey today.

This Is Bigger Than Hockey.

At the end of the day, this isn't about eliminating disagreements or pretending that every coaching decision, parent reaction, or organizational policy is perfect. It's about recognizing that we can do better in how we communicate, how we respond to challenges, and how we treat one another.

Imagine how different a hockey season could feel if a parent approached a difficult situation with curiosity instead of immediately assuming the worst. Imagine a coach who better understood the emotions behind a parent's frustration. Imagine families from competing organizations discovering that they're navigating the same challenges and building relationships instead of divisions. Imagine a hockey community where coaches felt supported, parents felt understood, and everyone had an opportunity to grow.

Because when the adults surrounding our young athletes communicate better, support one another, and develop healthier relationships, the kids are the ones who ultimately benefit.

That's what this is really about. This journey started with a presentation about tryouts, but it opened our eyes to something much more meaningful. We realized that the hockey community doesn't just need more information.

It needs more connection. More transparency. More understanding. And more support.

We know we won't solve every problem, eliminate every disagreement, or have all the answers. But we believe we can make a difference. Not by telling parents they're wrong. Not by defending every decision coaches make. And not by pointing fingers at organizations.

But by bringing people together, encouraging honest conversations, and helping everyone recognize that there are often multiple perspectives to every situation.

We're not trying to change the culture of youth hockey by telling people they need to change. We're creating an environment where people feel supported enough to grow.

And that is why we created **Beyond the Bleachers** and **Beyond the Bench**. Because youth hockey should be an incredible experience for our kids, and the relationships surrounding them play an enormous role in making that possible.

Beyond the Bleachers. Beyond the Bench. Beyond the Divide.