

Ken Johansson (1930-2018): Pioneer in Hockey Coaching Education

By Stephen Hardy and Andrew C. Holman

Anyone watching the NCAA, Olympic and IIHF Championship tournaments, or the Stanley Cup playoffs marvels at the players' skating, shooting, and puck-handling. Speed and skill are clearly ascendant in the world's coolest game. Much of this stems from improved coaching education programs, such as USA Hockey's American Development Model, now in its second decade. The ADM offers extensive materials (both print and multi-media) and clinics for coaches who want more than just a schedule of games and travel plans.

Until the 1970s, however, there was little in the way of coaching education. In fact, many youth coaches could not even skate. Ken Johansson was at the vanguard of efforts to change that. He grew up in Edmonton, Alberta. He remembered listening to radiocasts of hockey innovator Lloyd Percival's Sports College. As Ken revealed in a 2014 interview with Steve Hardy, "4:30, Saturday afternoon, everything stopped. You went to listen to Ace Percival on the radio. He always told you that he had a hint about coaching. And then he would say, 'here's the hint of the week.' And it was the hint that you were just absolutely looking for." Like many others, Johansson considered Percival's *Hockey Handbook* (1951) more like a hockey Bible. "I carried that book from the day it was published and had it all my life."

Johansson's interest in coaching grew when he chose to play at the University of North Dakota over the Canadian junior system. At UND (1950-53) he earned a degree in Physical Education while also playing hockey. After graduation, he played in England and Switzerland, where he was a player coach with the Zurich Grasshoppers. There, he played against and watched the Soviets, the Czechs, and other European teams before returning to Warroad, Minnesota for a teaching/coaching job that linked him for a year with Bob Johnson, who became a life-long friend. While Johnson moved steadily to coaching full-time, Johansson began a career at the Mayo Clinic. But he continued playing with the senior-league Rochester Mustangs, where he grew friendly with Arley Carlson, a native of Minnesota's Iron Range (Virginia). In the early 1960s, Johansson helped Carlson run Saturday morning clinics for local youth coaches. They had no templates for instruction: "So we'd make some notes and get together in one of the dressing rooms on a Saturday morning for an hour and a half or two hours and say 'here's an organization that you can use for getting out of your zone, and here's the defensive set-up, and here's the attacking zone and how you work a power play and stuff like this.' Well, quite a few guys attended and over the years we refined our system."

In the late 1960s their work caught the attention of Hal Trumble, a Minnesota hockey executive and well-known referee, who became AHAUS (forerunner to USA Hockey) executive director in 1972. As Johansson recalled, Trumble was challenged by the AHAUS board to address the "inconsistent" coaching around the country and "do something...that would be helpful to the people who pay some money into AHAUS and wonder what they're getting back." Johansson was game, created a subcommittee, then held six or seven open meetings around the Midwest and Northeast, assessing the interest in coaching education. He and his colleagues heard a story repeated in versions only slightly different from one region to the other: A father registers his son for youth hockey and is asked to sign up as a volunteer. After declaring zero hockey background—not even skating ability—the father agrees to help in any way he can. "So pretty soon he gets a phone call or a letter and it says, 'we'd like you to be a coach on such and such peewee team or squirt team.' And he talks to the [local AHAUS registrar] and says 'listen, coaching, I don't know anything about hockey, I can't even skate.' And [the registrar] says,

‘don’t worry about it, there is a good head coach there and he’ll help you along.’ Couple weeks later he gets another letter that says that ‘you’ve been elevated to the head coach. The old head coach got transferred, he’s in a different job.’ So the [registrar] says ‘don’t worry. We’re going to send you help.’ Well, a couple weeks later the help comes. It’s the schedule. It’s the ice times, and the game times...” So this is a guy who was showing up, who got into hockey somehow because he was obligated because his kid was involved.” Johannson’s story is matched by one 1970s survey, which reported that over 85% of youth teams were coached by fathers who had never played. There was much work to be done.

Johannson’s committee focused its efforts at the beginner’s levels, ages 8 to 14, the base of the development pyramid, fully stocked with coaches whose lack of experience might prime them to embrace education. At the same time, Johannson recognized that coaches at the higher levels “probably weren’t going to listen to us anyway.” The plan was to create a manual that would instruct each AHAUS district coach-in-chief. It served as a “program guide” so he could “teach what’s in this manual to the coaches and then give the coaches a copy of the manual.” The topics included general knowledge in first aid and coaching philosophy as bases on which to build specific skills like stickhandling and passing. A Mayo Clinic colleague, Gail Anderson, was a key editor and suggested the manual include marginal space for note-taking. Johannson sent drafts out to “good friends and respected hockey coaches, mostly college people” like Bob Johnson, who had just turned Wisconsin into a national power.

Manual in hand, they began their tour of the AHAUS regions, where they ran special clinics for the coaches-in-chief, who then ran clinics for the local coaches. They revised the formats from all-classroom to classroom-plus- on-ice sessions. They tried to involve local college coaches, who for decades had stood at the top of the American hockey system. There was mixed reaction. As Johannson recalled, “Some had been running their own coaches’ clinics and may have viewed AHAUS as competition. However, there were exceptions. Notably Bob Johnson (Wisconsin), Dan Farrell (Michigan), John McInnis (Michigan Tech) ... who sponsored our clinics and provided facilities and staff. The American college coach is an integral part of USA Hockey. I would be pleased if the coaching education program helped nurture this important relationship.” Some long-time AHAUS coaches were agitated saying, “what the hell does this guy know about coaching; I know more about coaching, and I’ll put on the coach’s clinic here.” But over the course of the 1970s, Johannson, his team, and, most importantly, the people who continued to create new and better education programs, collectively changed the hockey landscape in America.

The original manual was published in 1975 with the simple title *Coaching Youth Ice Hockey*. Hal Trumble and Gail Anderson were co-authors with Johannson. In the years ahead, USA Hockey would become the engine driving America’s hockey coaching education. In 2014, Johannson was tickled to note that USA Hockey had just run a Level-V coaches certification program in Phoenix that attracted “550 people from all over the country. And by the way they had to write a thesis before they were accepted.” Now that’s progress.

Stephen Hardy and Andrew C. Holman are co-authors of *Hockey: A Global History* (University of Illinois Press, 2018). Thanks to Dave Ogreaan for arranging this interview. The 1970s survey information is drawn from Kevin Allen, “Houston, We Have Liftoff,” *USA Hockey 75th Anniversary Commemorative Program* (Minneapolis: USA Hockey and Touchpoint Media, 2012), 16-18.