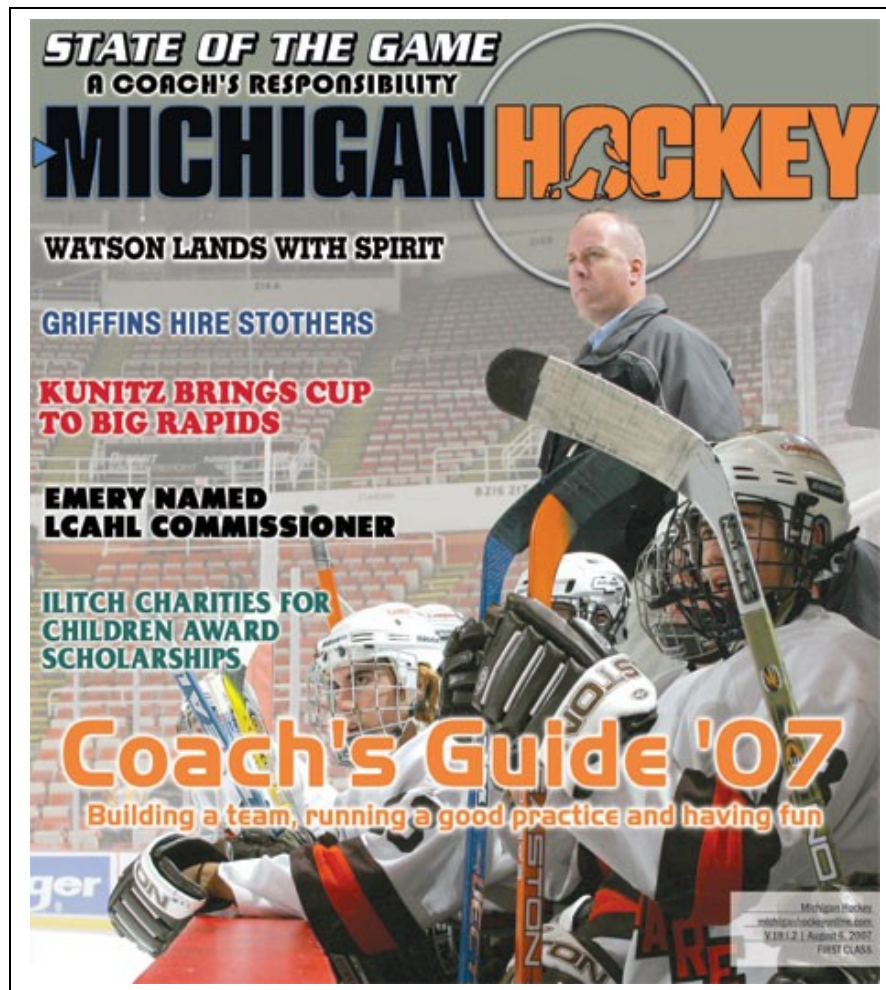


Five questions for five veteran top-level head coaches

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By Christy Hammond

Vellucci, Comley, Daniels, Berenson and Jackson talk about the game and their craft

Michigan Hockey's Christy Hammond talked to some of the state's top level coaches – Plymouth Whalers' Mike Vellucci, Michigan State's Rick Comley, Ferris State's Bob Daniels, Michigan's Red Berenson and Notre Dame's Jeff Jackson (a native of Fraser) - about the game and their careers.

Here is an excerpt from those interviews:

1. What has been the biggest change in the game since you started coaching?

Mike Vellucci (Plymouth Whalers): Well, the rules have been the biggest change over the last several years. Besides that, I think that the players' skill development is much better at this age. I believe that they are getting better coaching at a younger age and when they get to junior hockey they can skate, shoot and pass a lot better than 10 years ago.

Rick Comley (Michigan State): Probably putting facemasks on. I think over the period of time it has affected scoring and the offensive part of the game. And I think in some negative way it has affected the contact that we see in the game.

Bob Daniels (Ferris State): Well, at the college level it's recruiting. Recruiting has changed dramatically over the years. I think there used to be a time when you started looking at the kids in September and now it's a year round process and we're looking at the kids younger and younger.

Red Berenson (Michigan): There are fewer Canadians and more Americans in college hockey, the expansion of college hockey, better facilities and bigger and newer rinks, and more media coverage of the game (TV and so on). As far as the game itself, personally I don't think the game has changed as much as some people think, but I'm glad that they are trying to eliminate all the interference, hooking and holding in the game.

Jeff Jackson (Notre Dame): I believe the game has evolved in a lot of different ways. I think the game has become a lot more structured and system oriented and probably a lot more difficult to generate offense. It hasn't been the free flowing game that it used to be. It slowly seems like it is evolving back, but there was a prettier time that I remember when I first started coaching in midget hockey it was always aggressive forechecking and then trying to make plays without even dumping the puck in. The game became a lot more difficult to get through in the neutral zone and more difficult to use offensive skills to get through. I think that's probably the biggest change I've seen since 30 years ago.

2. How has your coaching style changed since the beginning of your career?

Vellucci: When I first started I did not have any children and now, since I have two, I believe that I have become a little more patient. Not a lot but a little. I believe that the make up of your team will dictate your style. I think I am very fair to my players, if you give me an honest effort you will get the ice time. I do not care what age you are. If you have a good attitude and are coachable, you will play.

Comley: I think my basic beliefs are the same, but I think how you deal with the players has changed based on how the athletes today are different than the athletes 30 years ago.

Daniels: I think the biggest change for me is that I think I'm more known to take advice from or listen to the players than I might have been when I was younger.

Berenson: I think that I've had to grow with the game and I understand that being successful at this level is a year-to-year thing. You can't be satisfied with any success. You have to keep pushing and we've certainly been able to rely on the

young players. We've lost some of our best players and we have filled holes at the last minute so I've had to be flexible in that area. I continue to learn more about the game and about college hockey as I've grown older.

Jackson: I think it's again kind of like an evolution. I mean I took some things from when I first started coaching amateur hockey and you learn from so many different people. I think I learned a lot when I first started in college hockey after having coached amateur and junior hockey in Detroit.

In college hockey, I learned a much different style of game. I guess part of it was Mike Tutelich and working for Frank Anzalone. Then it changed dramatically when I took the national coaching position for USA Hockey (Jackson was the first coach of the Ann Arbor-based NTDP) and trying to understand the differences between the international style and North American style. They've all had different impacts and then coaching in the Ontario Hockey League had a much more pro-oriented impact on my philosophy. My philosophy has always been somewhat the same, but it takes turns in different directions.

3. How have players and parents changed since you started coaching?

Vellucci: Players are bigger and stronger and a lot more skilled. Parents on the other hand really have not changed. It has always been like this. Unfortunately they all believe that their sons are going to make it to the NHL. I think that is where my job has changed is there are some kids that come to us and their parents have put so much pressure on them during their AAA years that I have to actually build up their self esteem when they get to the Junior level.

Comley: Well, I think it's a combination of factors. I think players have changed from the standpoint that I think overall you know that they probably get up and down the ice better. Their conditioning level is extremely high. I think their game sense is perhaps not as good as it was. Certainly, the parents have changed dramatically in that they are so over-involved now than what they used to be. I think it's a very negative factor.

Daniels: I think the players have changed. I do think that they are bigger and stronger. They're certainly a lot better trained than they were in the past and they have year round conditioning. It's a lot different than it would have been 20 or 25 years ago. Parents, as far as I can tell, have pretty much stayed the same. I haven't seen a whole lot of change in them. We don't have very much involvement with them you know at this level and it may have changed at the youth levels, but at this level the relationships are the same.

Berenson: I think everyone is in a rush now and the high profile players that we have...for example, of the last eight All-Americans we had before last year, only one of them played four years. The eight kids who were All-Americans before those eight all played four years so the difference is in the parents and the expectations and the pressure put on by the pros and a little bit the hype of being drafted so it's really changed in the last seven to eight years.

Jackson: I think both (have changed) to some degree. I think the number of players playing across the country has become a little bit generic. I see that there

is a lot of strong, high-caliber defensemen across the United States. I mean we used to have great goaltenders and forwards, but I think it maybe goes in stages. But I think in recent years some of the great American forwards, like when I was coming up through the Detroit system, (aren't there). I remember the (Pat) LaFontaines, the Mike Modanos, the Jimmy Carsons, and even a little later then that the Doug Weights and players of that caliber, but there isn't as many highly gifted forwards as there used to be and there are probably more gifted defensemen. Why that is, I can't tell you.

I don't know if the players have changed a lot, but they are a lot more professionalized now and that goes in hand with what you were talking about with the parents. The players are trying to get to the highest level as soon as possible and sometimes I think that has a negative impact on their passion for the game. I think there has been the pressure to succeed, the pressure to get a scholarship, the pressure to play in the NHL, and they've become much more professionalized.

4. What is the most important thing in your mind when selecting players?

Vellucci: Character is number one with me. Is he a selfish player or a team player? You cannot win with selfish players. Skill in today's game is very important. When we draft, I do not look to fill positions. I take the most talented and best character player available.

Comley: Out of all of those priorities, it would be character, intelligence and skill.

Daniels: Well, here it's a combination of skill and character. You know certainly we want the players we recruit here to have both. You know we certainly find that character is very important, but we're looking for a combination of both highly skilled players and kids who have character. One of the ways I like to phrase it myself is, "We're looking for character. We're not looking for characters."

Berenson: Well, I think it depends on the kid. We've had kids who were character kids and they got here on work ethic, character, and being good students and outstanding individuals. Other kids were recruited because they were the highly skilled players. You end up with a combination of both. It's not that everyone is one or the other. In general, we look for kids who are good players, good students and good people.

Jackson: We try to emphasize five things and probably the top three are the player's ability to skate, his willingness to compete and his ability to think the game – they are all of primary importance in today's game. And then obviously puck skills, scoring skills, and things like that are extremely important too. The last thing is size or height and probably in today's game small players can be big too if they play big. I don't necessarily know if it's the height of the player, but the size of his heart, which probably goes back to his willingness to compete.

When we're recruiting at Notre Dame, character has to be like anything else in life. It's appearance first and then you have to get under the hood. I mean if you're looking at a sharp car, you want to make sure it has got a good engine. Appearance is always the first attraction in recruiting, but if he doesn't have a

good engine or if he doesn't have good character and all those things then his chance at development is probably minimal.

5. Who was your coaching mentor or the coach you admire most and why?

Vellucci: I have played for several coaches but some of the guys that I respect the most and would say are mentors are guys that coached me at the youth level. My first coach was when I played for Mic Mac in Detroit was Angelo Jordan. I have not seen him in a long time but I would love to. My first Compuware coach was Ken O'Rear. He was very laid back. My Midget Major coach was Mark Craig. He was very tough as a coach and he was not really liked by all the players but we respected him. I talk to Mark to get advice or even when things are going tough to get some encouragement. I tried to take something from all my coaches over the years.

Comley: Ron Mason. Well, I played for him you know and then I worked under him and then worked with him for many years. I just felt that he had as good of a grasp on the game as anybody I knew. I never had the fortune of working with somebody like Scotty Bowman or Al Arbour or some of the other great coaches, but I think Ron isn't the best coach ever, but he's certainly right up there at the top couple. He taught me passion for the game and in that passion comes respect, preparation and doing things the right way.

Daniels: I have a couple of them at least that come to mind. Number one is my dad. He coached when I was growing up and I always respected him. I never played for him, but he coached other teams and I respected the job that he did. And another one would be Ron Mason. I was part of the Michigan State program and I didn't play much, but I was part of it and I had the opportunity to watch and see how he communicated with the players and more importantly, how he went about building a program. I was always very appreciative of his professionalism.

Berenson: I probably learned the most from Scotty Bowman. I played for him and I also coached with him so I got an idea of what it was like to be a player and I also got to be in the coach's locker room with him. I learned that finding roles for everyone on the team that they can take pride in is important for a team to be successful.

Jackson: I think Ron Mason probably had as much of an impact as anyone on me. I never really worked for the man; well, I did for like a week. Before I took the head-coaching job at Lake Superior State, I was his assistant for two weeks. But I think in a lot of different ways, he had the biggest impact on my coaching career.

From an overall perspective, I kind of admire so many of the basketball coaches. There are certain parts of Dino Gaudio, Mike Krzyzewski and Bobby Knight. Certain parts, mind you. We all have our strengths and weaknesses, but there are certain aspects of professional coaches maybe now in hockey that have influenced my thinking. I would also include guys like Lou Holtz too.

But probably hockey wise, I'd have to say Ron Mason and I'd have to give Greg Angelo credit for giving me the opportunity to learn about some of the important

traits of discipline and work ethic. He was probably the first guy who had a direct influence on me. But from the overall perspective and guidance and different aspects of putting me in the position to be surrounded by great hockey minds was Ron Mason.

I learned a lot from Ron, not necessarily directly from him, but I learned a lot more from his professionalism. I mean his stature of how he held himself. I think that his demeanor and his communication skills are all things I may not have learned from a direct contact, but I learned a lot from his willingness to make coaches better too. I think helping coaches is part of being a coach too. Ron would always be honest and straightforward and I think most importantly, it's just his professionalism in dealing with people and not just players, but everyone you're involved with.

6. What is your favorite part about coaching?

Daniels: Interacting with the players. I really enjoy that part and I enjoy practices. I just love being on the ice with the players and the team with the coaching and teaching.

Berenson: Obviously, winning is important, but seeing kids grow up and graduate is also important.

Jackson: I love teaching. I love being on the ice with the kids. I love being in that environment where they learn and watching them from the initial contact and seeing what you've told them and them trying it and putting it into action. Then because the dots finally connected, they finally start running with it. They build confidence. All things are big things that you try to teach them and it's not just on the ice, but it's off the ice too. One of the reasons I keep coming back to college hockey is because of the relationship with the players. It's the only level that I've ever been in that you can actually have a direct relationship with your players and that, in a lot of ways, goes to building trust, which is a huge component of being successful.