



THE MAGIC OF MITCH

The GOALIE ISSUE

Mitch Korn's Selfless Approach To Coaching And Caring Has Impacted A Legion Of Goalies

By: Tom Worgo

Mitch Korn's mind works like a hockey super computer. The unflappable goaltending coach is able to process and analyze all aspects of not only the position, but the sport in its totality at blazing speed and accuracy.

He is actually better than the best machine money can buy because, most of all, he connects with people. The native of the Bronx, N.Y., has the high emotional intelligence to understand what makes players tick and adapt to such different styles from Dominik Hasek to Braden Holtby.

It all started in the early 1980s when he did every job imaginable at Miami University in Ohio, from marketing the school's hockey program, to broadcasting its games, managing the ice rink, running the hockey school and overseeing intramural programs.

"He did such an incredible job, we had to find a way to hire this guy as our goalie coach," recalled Steve Cady, the senior associate athletic director at Miami and the school's former long-time men's ice hockey coach.

"I have been at Miami 40-something years. He is the most talented, hardworking, creative person I have ever met. He has an intellect that is off the charts. His hockey IQ is off the charts."

Cady isn't exaggerating. Korn's track record over 28 years in the NHL with Buffalo, Nashville, Washington and now the New York Islanders makes him one of the most influential American goalie coaches of all time.

Korn, who currently serves as Islanders director of goaltending, has coached Hall of Famers, Vezina Trophy winners, and all-stars, while also transforming under-achieving goaltenders into over-achievers.

He coached Hasek, who won four Vezina Trophies and two league MVP awards during that tenure. He also tutored future Vezina winners Pekka Rinne and Holtby along with all-star Thomas Vokoun.

While he was able to get the most out of the game's best goaltenders, it's what the 61-year-old Korn was able to do for the careers of unheard of goalies that is a large part of his legacy.

He helped launch the careers of Hasek's back-up Martin Biron, as well as Mike Dunham, Chris Mason, Carter Hutton and Philipp Grubauer. Others never seemed the same once he didn't coach them anymore, including Dan Ellis and Anders Lindback.

"He is an encyclopedia for goaltending," said Dunham, the Johnson City, N.Y., native who worked with Korn for six years in Nashville. "I bet you wouldn't

be able to stump him on anything when it comes to goaltending. Over the years, he has put his blood, sweat and tears into goaltending. He's really done his homework."

Back in the late 1970s, when he was a 5-foot-5 netminder at Kent State University, Korn had a lot to overcome. He knew he wasn't going to play professional hockey, and quickly discovered his love for teaching the game. The ground work for his NHL coaching career involved a one-year stint at Kent State and five years at Miami University.

With Korn, it's always about the goalies and not himself. His former pupils, both coaches and goalies, describe him as a father figure.

"You know he is going to give everything he can to help you improve as a goaltender," said Mike Valley, a former Dallas Stars goalie coach who worked under Korn in the Nashville organization. "He doesn't take any short cuts. He really analyzes the game. He always does a really good job of being prepared and working with the goalies to make sure they are prepared."

A large part of that preparation is mental. Washington backup goalie Pheonix Copley, an Alaska native, says that's the factor that enabled him to reach the NHL, and it was Korn who introduced him to it.

"He lets you know how emotionally demanding goaltending is," Copley said. "He really helps you create a good mindset to overcome obstacles. He's been a great mentor for me. I tried to learn everything I can from him."

Some of Korn's best work came with Holtby, who backstopped the Capitals to the Stanley Cup in 2018.

Korn got Holtby to play under control instead of relying so much on his athleticism. Suddenly, Holtby's arms were tight to his sides and pushing off to get across the crease didn't take him outside of the blue paint too much. Korn also referred Holtby to a specialized optometrist for vision training.

"I knew there were some things that needed to be fixed," Holtby said. "But I really didn't know how to do it. He found ways."

Islanders goalie Robin Lehner was a more complex project for Korn.

When Lehner parted ways with Buffalo, he publicly disclosed that he battled mental health and alcohol issues that led to his subpar seasons. Confident that he received the proper care and treatment, he was ready for a fresh start with a new organization.

Islanders general manager Lou Lamoriello signed him to one-year, \$1.5 million contract and Lehner, an eight-year veteran, proved to be a bargain.

Korn and goalie coach Piero Greco had to find a way to improve Lehner's technique while supporting him in his personal struggles.

It worked wonders. Lehner is a finalist for the Vezina Trophy, setting a career-high with 25 wins and posting a 2.13 goals-against average and .930 save percentage.

"One of the things Mitch did change was Robin's pad length," Valley said. "Why did he do that? Robin has played for as long as he had and no one's ever mentioned that. Mitch challenges you to think about things in a different way."

It's hard to talk about Korn without mentioning Barry Trotz. Korn worked under Trotz for 16 years in Nashville and another four in Washington before joining the Islanders last year.

Trotz called Korn an innovator, famous for his ingenuity using props. The thought behind the props is to make tough saves feel routine.

Whether it's the pros or youth goalies, Korn will break out a medicine ball for goalies to hold, strengthening their core and teaching them not to fly out with their arms while sliding across the crease. Deflection boards, lighting systems, screens, mirrors, blindfolds-it's like Korn carries around a magician's suitcase.

"He has been very innovative coming up with everything from the screen board to the deflection board to the ramp board, Trotz said. "He had done so many things I can't even think of them all."

Trotz, like so many others, emphasizes that Korn is more than a prop master.

"To me, it's also communicating his thoughts and what he sees to the goalie so they visualize and comprehend what he's talking about," Trotz said. "The goalie language is very specific and they all talk in their own verbiage."

Korn's goalie camps and defensemen camps throughout the U.S. are as important to him as coaching professionals. His summer goalie camps-with 400 participants-sold out in the winter.



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-MIKE DUNHAM

"When I decided to get into coaching, I spent a week at one of his camps," Dunham said. "He treated 8 and 9-year-old kids as enthusiastically as he did with the NHL guys. That's part of his success. He truly enjoys getting out there on the ice with the goalie to teach and make the kids better. Mitch lives for teaching."

Korn's connection with his "Children of the Korn" goes beyond the ice where he doesn't seek headlines. According to Cady, when two fathers of players at the Miami hockey school passed away, Korn made sure they could finish college.

"I think he is an amazing coach, but I think he is even a better person," Cady explained. "He is one of the most generous people on the planet and no one ever sees that side of him. He never lets anybody know that."