

PRACTICE PLANNING MODULE

PRESENTED BY: TERRY BANGEN

“Practice makes permanent”

“You play the way you practice”

I. EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT ON-ICE PRACTICE SESSIONS

Sport coaching is a very demanding task that offers numerous challenges to even the most experienced practitioner. In order to meet these challenges successfully, the key processes of organization and preparation are essential.

These processes can start to take specific form as per the following outline:

- helping athletes become better hockey players in a positive and safe environment
- knowing the skills and habits that lead to success
- knowing the best ways of assisting players achieve success
- monitoring, assessing and evaluating progress

The practice environment is where the majority of this process is activated by the leader-coach. The two fundamental prerequisites of a good coach are the ability to effectively teach and develop the required skills of the sport and the ability to plan the practice activities to enhance the learning methodology.

It is critical that practice sessions offer effectiveness and efficiency – hockey players must participate in the most appropriate activities to enhance their development and the environment (ice facility) is one that features limited accessibility (1-2/week for most participants) at a high financial cost.

The material that follows has a variety of noted sources. It is offered in a format that allows the mentor to possibly share it with coaches on a ‘hand out’ basis. At times the information is repetitive, however, the importance of it bears repeating.

SKILL DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG PLAYERS

Clare Drake

Coaches must ensure they do not eliminate the fun element from practice sessions – this removes the essential relaxed attitude that allows youngsters to take the risks inherent in learning.

The learner has to go through developmental stages. Skill develops slowly through stages – from a primitive to less primitive, to somewhat skilled (skill with “mistakes”), and finally – after much repetition and practice – to a truly skilled form.

We have to continually reward the youngster’s effort and willingness to try and not be punishing and critical for “not doing it right”.

Considerable repetition plus experience is necessary to refine skills.

Eventually it is possible to move on to a highly technical approach to teaching and criticism that the athlete not only tolerates, but welcomes if he/she has become motivated to master the activity.

Principles of Learning

1. Build in variety and change of pace into your practice organization. Introduce new drills, variations, self-challenge and competitive drills; rearrange the order and sequence of the practice; change activities frequently (allow enough time for success).
2. Select drills which are challenging to the players and demand concentration and application of effort to realize success.
3. Focus the players on drills which are relevant in overcoming personal weaknesses. Build in the opportunity for individual players to practice drills which they personally need to become more effective.
4. Accept player suggestions for drills or activities.
5. Employ spaced practice of skills rather than massed. If a choice is available, schedule two one-hour practices rather than one two-hour practice.
6. Develop player confidence in your leadership by being thoroughly prepared and well-organized for practice sessions.
7. Always explain the rationale behind the drill or skill development activity so that players understand what they are doing.
8. Encouragement and approval are powerful influences on learning. Withhold approval when performance is not what it should be. When warranted, reasonable punishment that “fits the crime” is useful.
9. More learning takes place if success is possible but not certain.
10. Improvement will be faster if player s are given the means to recognize their own progress. Comparisons with teammates can be discouraging.

General Criteria

1. Is the skill realistic? Does it resemble a game situation?
2. Does the skill practice offer the opportunity for evaluation and exploration of individual capabilities and the establishment of insight?
3. Is the skill practice self-motivating?
4. Is the objective of the skill recognized and understood?
5. Does the skill allow for athlete estimation of progress and improvement?
6. How does the skill relate to the game situation?
7. Does opportunity for variation exist?
8. Has a suitable level of difficulty been reached – is the skill challenging?
9. Does the skill offer opportunity for total participation?
10. Does the practice of the skill incorporate the factors of cooperation and competition?

SKILL TEACHING

Here is a good planning/teaching sequence to follow:

1. Explain the skill
 - name the skill and describe it
 - emphasize why it's important and when it's used. Highlight the key teaching points (words or phrases used in instructing and giving feedback to your players)
2. Show how it is done (demonstrate/explain/practice/correction method)
 - demonstrate
 - state key points again
3. Give time to practice
 - instruct players to practice the skill right away (imitation/self-discovery method)
 - ensure everyone is involved
4. Tell them how they're doing
 - move around to each player
 - provide individual feedback
 - ask assistants to help

PRACTICE PLANNING (Hockey Canada Development Workshop)

The 3 main practice principles coaches should be aware of are:

1. Quality – players learn best when fresh (first 15-20 minutes), this is also when the ice conditions are most favorable for skill development.
2. Concentration – 50 to 70 minutes is the limit for players to maintain a high level of interest.
3. Intensity – the long term objective should be to practice at game intensity.

Skill development can be a straightforward task once you have taken the time to develop a practice plan. The plan is made up of a number of important components as follows:

1. A practice plan form on which to record your plan:
 - meets all your needs for information
 - archive your plans for easy reference at a later date
2. Measurable outcomes for the plan:
 - players need to know the goals of each practice
 - record information about the execution of the plan
3. Elements of the plan:
 - practices/drills should be more active than passive
 - a well balanced practice contains about 5 activities
 - may include warm up, teaching components, technical skill execution, drills under game like conditions, fun elements, competitive activities and a cool down
4. Assign the coach responsibilities to lead the drill:
 - ensure that all support people understand the purpose of the drill so they can provide appropriate feedback to guide improvement
 - all coaches should be engaged in the delivery of each drill
 - coaches may be required to provide stimuli to start or maintain drill focus
5. Clear illustrations
 - take pride in illustrating good plans
 - make it a habit to use international symbols

6. Descriptions to include:
 - details of the drill execution, key teaching points and key execution points
 - plans should note any extraordinary equipment required

SKILL DEVELOPMENT

1. Introducing the Skill
 - Appropriate terminology
 - Eye contact
 - Formation (all can see the demonstration and hear the explanation), no distractions
2. Demonstrating and Explaining the Skill
 - Whole skill, different angles – repetitive looks
 - Sequence of actions
 - Relevant teaching points
 - Explanation is simple and brief, use key teaching and execution points
 - If appropriate teach only part(s) of the skill; progressions
 - Questions
3. Practice
 - Immediately after the demonstration and explanation
 - Skill discovery
 - Be prepared, creative and enthusiastic
 - Formation – safety, effective/efficient practice
 - Drills that emphasize skill
 - Explain and demonstrate drill
 - Minimize fear of failure
 - Stop and common error correct if necessary
 - Explain and demonstrate errors and corrections
 - Drills and activities should be changed frequently within a practice but repeated over consecutive practices until players experience success
 - Skill inventory – a tool for monitoring and analyzing hockey skills
4. Feedback to Correct Errors
 - Observe and evaluate
 - Avoid information overload, pick out 2-3 common errors
 - Be specific and constructive as well as visual (diagram, video)
 - Use patience and encouragement in order to realize improvement
 - Be positive and provide realistic, practical opportunities to develop skills

Selecting the appropriate skills to be taught over the course of a season and prioritizing them is determined by the team goals and objectives, the difficulty of

the skill and use of the pyramid progress concept (establishment of the foundation first).

Three components to a level of readiness to successfully perform a skill are physical maturity, mental maturity and experience in the skill.

An important concept for coaches to be aware of is competence motivation – when we achieve, we want to go to the next level. The better you become at an activity the more enthusiasm you have towards that activity.

PRACTICE PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

1. Goals and objectives for the training phase
2. Schedule for regular, multi-practice sessions per week
 - Mon – individual skills, short, tempo
 - Tues – defensive emphasis, conditioning
 - Wed – offensive skills, specialty teams
 - Thurs – specific opposition preparation, specialty teams, tempo
3. Practice form
 - Something you use consistently
 - Include space for objectives, date, location, time, practice #
 - Arena diagrams with space for explanation and key teaching points
 - Space for time allotment (keeps you on task to get the most out of practice)
 - Announcements and reminders
4. Components of the practice plan
 - Objectives
 - Line combinations, colors
 - Warm-up
 - Body of lesson – individual, small group, team
 - a. technical
 - b. tactical
 - c. conditioning
 - Cool down
5. Coaches meeting
 - Short, 10-20 minutes
 - Know all drills, responsibilities and key teaching points
6. On-ice organization
 - Go over 1-2 key drills in dressing room
 - Use of assistants (one coordinator, positive reinforcement and feedback, keep drills moving)

- Teaching aids (use old gloves instead of cones, sticks with blades cut off for penalty killers, distinguish forward lines and defense pairings via jersey colors)
 - Division of the ice surface
 - Allow for breaks (water, coach organization)
 - Be flexible to adjust, manipulate and react instinctively to the flow of the practice
 - Have a set of practice conduct rules
7. On-ice Communication
- Teaching boards (diagram on glass)
 - Group formations for effective teaching
 - Talk to every player
 - Constructive, positive feedback – do not ramble
8. Specific drills
- Must state a purpose for each drill
 - Adjust repeated drills to add a new area of emphasis
 - Maximum participation
 - Tempo/pace of practice – work towards practicing as close to game speed as possible. This creates an ability to perform skills at greater levels of stress, continuous development of conditioning levels and an ability to think and react quickly and appropriately to game conditions.
 - Conditioning – do not over do it. The priority is to create a conditioning effect throughout practice by maintaining a “tempo” that is similar to the game. Conditioning skating takes away from skill or tactic development time.
 - Add goaltending drills each practice or have specific objectives for them in each drill
 - Practice just prior to competition should be quick-paced, short and very positive in nature. Avoid new drills, difficult drills and unfamiliar ideas. After a tough, competitive series of games drill selection should involve simple activities that are not overly demanding physically.
 - Pre-think drills to ensure proper location of personnel and proper distribution (numbers in appropriate locations).
 - Encourage on-ice communication amongst the players.
9. On-ice formations
- The purpose is to maximize teaching time vs. organization time. Also to develop the most effective use of space available and provide some variety.
 - Examples – 2 groups, diagonal corners, between hash mark and goal line; 2 groups, corner of blue lines; 2 groups, red line; 4 groups, corners of blue line; 4 groups, corners

10. Evaluation and filing system

- Review practices with coaching staff and randomly encourage player feedback
- File all practices so they may be used as a reference at a later date
- Possibly file drills according to area of emphasis – drill bank

DRILL DESIGN

- Drills can be designed for various objectives
- Drills should progress and compliment each other over the course of a practice and season
- It should be noted that drills are not a recipe for learning, nor do they teach but, rather, they compliment the teaching process. Practice then should not simply be a series of drills to keep the players active. Objectives for the practice should be set and appropriate activities selected to achieve these objectives form the practice plan. Coaches should challenge themselves to design their own appropriate activities (drills) as opposed to simply copying them from whatever source. At the least coaches should go through an editing process of existing drills to specifically adapt them to their needs.
- The purpose of the particular drill should be defined (teach new skills, improve the quality of a skill, review a skill or tactic, simulate a game situation).
- The objective of a drill can vary depending on the difficulty of a skill. Coaches should have a specific purpose in mind for each drill depending on:
 - a) quality at which a skill is to be performed at (success)
 - b) quantity of repetitions (high repetition frequency?)
 - c) speed at which the drill is executed
 - d) amount of pressure
 - e) skills/tactics involved (combination activities)
 - f) a blend of the aboveA quick evaluation of each drill should follow the practice – did learning take place?
- When teaching tactics, coaches should utilize a 4 step process:
 1. identify and communicate the key teaching points
 2. review the skill(s) involved
 3. practice the tactic repeatedly
 4. conclude with an appropriate game situation or efficient drill
- Drills that are challenging and demanding will probably result in an excellent effort or at the very least an honest effort from the players. People are most motivated when the task is slightly ahead of their skill level and they have a model to work from. If the task is beyond or below the capability of the player, they will not be motivated.

II. RELATIONSHIP TO THE SEASONAL PLAN

Coaches should attempt to be consistent and progressive in their approach to practice planning. Each practice needs to relate to subsequent practices and have relevance to the particular phase of the season the team is presently engaged in. This means the coach or coaching staff needs to go through some type of written long range planning process. This process has several steps as follows:

- the individual coaches philosophy and role, which needs to be appropriate to and compatible with the particular team in question
- the philosophy of the minor hockey association specific to this team
- assessment and definition of the team situation (age, ability level, member league, practice and game schedule, history etc.)
- team goals and objectives (3-5 specific statements) – what do we want to be good at? What type of identity do we want to create? Player input is needed here.
- these first 4 steps can lead to the creation of a vision for the team's season
- at this point the coach needs to identify and select the appropriate material to be taught throughout the season while taking into consideration the player factors of age, physical/mental/emotional maturity, experience, playing ability and motivation level. Subject areas include technical skills (particularly primary ones which create a base for the more advanced), individual tactics, team tactics and team play systems. Refer to the hockey skill checklist/inventory as a guide.
- organizing and prioritizing the material is next and is determined by the team goals, objectives and vision, the degree of difficulty (some require an extended learning curve, reviewing and refining skills/tactics is also a consideration) and the development pyramid – a constant mix of skills, tactics and team play systems will be necessary as the season progresses. This step forms the basis of the seasonal plan.
- regular evaluation of the overall plan is very important. Each individual practice needs to be reviewed and judged on its success vs. the set objectives. Weekly, monthly and training phase evaluations are also necessary to guide progress and dictate necessary change. Game performances should also impact the agenda of subsequent practices.

The keys for individual practices, as well as weekly, training phase and seasonal plans are as follows:

1. Practice

- a written record is necessary as an execution guide and for reflective analysis
- specific objectives, theme
- allow for flexibility
- develop progressions such that the practice gradually builds to a peak, then drops off (physically, mentally)
- teach key ideas during the prime learning period
 - a) first 45 minutes – players are most alert mentally
 - b) 75 minutes is the ideal length of time from a learning perspective – mental abilities decrease from there
 - c) be aware of the personality and learning ability of the team

2. Weekly

- identify key areas to be covered, new activities and skills or tactics that require continual practice and repetition
- build up to the competition based on its nature and importance

3. Training Phase

- goals and objectives as well as a specific plan for each (eg. training camp)

4. Seasonal

- the vision which evolves from the above; the “big picture”

The Nike Skill manuals offer a practical example of the drill-practice-training phase- season planning process. The player development pyramid (see attached) forms a guideline for the yearly plan and identifies the various progressive components of the coaching process and sets priorities by percentage for each age group. General seasonal outcomes provide an overview of the yearly plan. The next step is to divide the season into training phases and identify coaching points of emphasis and player outcomes for each. The Nike program consists of 24 lesson plans divided into 4 equal training phases of 6 sessions on a simple progressive basis. In a regular hockey situation, the training phases could possibly be identified as pre-season or training camp, early season (prior to Christmas), the Christmas break (potential tournament), second half of season and playoff preparation with objectives or outcomes specific to each. The third step in this planning process is to calculate the number of practice sessions, identify the dates of each plus any related concerns (i.e. just before a long road trip) before deciding on a general overview for each – the specifics of the individual session will be left until just prior to the actual practice. At that point the specific goals and objectives for the practice at hand is determined, along with the activities and drills that will be incorporated.

III. HALF-ICE PRACTICES

The most common complaint heard in discussions concerning minor hockey is “there just isn’t enough ice time”. This complaint is voiced by administrators, coaches, parents and players alike. It seems, however, that when we compare the number of ice facilities that we have in Canada versus other traditional hockey playing nations it is apparent that this complaint is not necessarily valid. Our challenge is that we have large numbers of users, including those who either are not hockey players or are not under the jurisdiction of the minor hockey association. Obviously we need to become much more innovative in our approach to the whole subject of ice utilization

The Open Ice Summit discussed several issues that have direct relevance to the subject of practice planning including skill development, practice to game ratio, creativity and thinking skills. In order to not risk opportunities to play the game for our youth, the challenge is to come up with alternatives to the usual practice: game structure that a majority of our minor hockey associations operate with. In order to develop skill our players need to practice more often. In order to do this, can each practice be shorter and still be effective? What can we do off the ice to compliment on-ice activities, including skill development, in order to make the on-ice practice more efficient? Can our coaches learn to be more organized and prepared as well as plan better in order to improve practices? What can we do to change the connotation that practice is boring and a necessary evil? Can practice be less structured and still effective? Can half-ice practices have a positive impact or are they a waste? What about shared or combined practices? The answers to these questions are definitely positive, the next step involves implementation. This module on practice planning will supply a number of answers to the implementation process.

IV. OFF-ICE TRAINING ACTIVITIES

An obvious area for innovation after examining the various identified problems of practice planning concerns the tasks we can do off the ice in order to save valuable ice time for activities that are strictly on-ice in nature. This approach can include time before and after the actual on-ice practice session as well as separate sessions entirely, which will enhance the practice: game ratio.

The general topic areas for off-ice training activities include:

1. conditioning
2. warmup
3. pre-ice
4. mental preparation
5. team and program organization
6. social psychology
7. technical preparation and evaluation
8. skill development

V. CREATIVITY AND ON-ICE THINKING SKILLS

Hockey's traditions and history in Canada are rich with stories of the "outdoor game", be it on a frozen lake, river, pond or, perhaps, an actual rink complete with boards made specifically for the sport. Continuous games of "pickup shinny" were the order of the day. Important skills and tactics for the participants included those necessary to attempt solo rushes, beat numerous opponents 1/1 and score. Stickhandling became an admired art form as was the ability to execute extended displays of "keep away". Hockey for young players today features organization and structure – teams, leagues, associations, competitions, practices, coaches, administrators etc. What was once a game for the masses has been replaced by something often approaching elitism. Lost in this attempt at progress has been the individual creativity shown by players on the ice as well as the ability to "think" the game – quickly finding the most appropriate solution to the on-ice situation presented (which instantaneously happens hundreds of times per game) and then acting. This ability is also referred to as decision making or hockey sense. Structure has stifled these qualities to the point of alarm as pointed out strongly by the Open Ice Summit. Compounding this problem is that structure, particularly relating to practice, has led to boredom. Practice has come to mean exactly that to the average minor hockey player. When the Summit is also calling for additional practice time in order to improve skill development, it appears we have a bit of a crisis. Surely we want young players to ENJOY PLAYING the game. Fortunately, recent practical research in sports similar to hockey has offered a solution that addresses all of these concerns! The incorporation of small-aside modified games into the practice setting has the exciting potential to be THE answer.

Hockey is a fluid game of read and react that features a transition situation (offense to defense or vice-versa) for each team and subsequent player several hundred times in the course of a game. Players must learn to think – analyze (read) and provide a solution (react) to a given situation quickly and accurately. Practice is intended to assist the player in this process in order that he/she performs well in games – the goal of practice is to learn to play better. The best way to learn the game is to play the game – the game itself becomes the teaching method. Small aside modified games do not have the inherent concerns of regular games – lack of time handling the puck for each player for example.

The advantages of small aside modified games are several:

- FUN !
- promotes skill development; each player is given ample opportunity to skate, shoot, pass, handle the puck, check etc.
- rule modifications can be made depending on what the coach wants to teach, including individual skills and tactics
- players are forced into situations that build read-react abilities (hockey sense)
- puts players into situations that they cannot handle and creates a real “need to know” mentality amongst them (I need to get better at that, how can I ...). Skill and tactical drills that address deficiencies then become an easy sell – they have relevance for the players and they buy in.

A simple example of a small-aside modified game is cross-ice 2/2. The coach organizes the game to allow for continuous action, quick player changes on the fly and maximum activity for each participant. An appropriate rule would require a minimum of one pass on a turnover before a shot on goal. Note that, for the most part, this is an opportunity for the players to simply enjoy playing the game with minimal interference by the coach. If anything, the coach should encourage the players to try new things, be innovative and take risks without the concern of making mistakes.