



“Practice?? We are talking about Practice, not a game but Practice.....? “



There have been numerous clichés’ written about practice. “Failure to prepare is to prepare for failure”, “you play like you practice”, “practice without improvement is a waste of time”, “practice is the study (preparation) for the weekly test (game)”, practice is for learning and development, the game is for execution and implementation” and many others. We **talk** about the importance of planning and executing effective practice plans at all levels of the coaching education program. USA Hockey has developed and published numerous books, videos and DVD/CD’s on teaching skills, concepts and tactics; the most recent being the *Age Appropriate Small Games Handbook* and the *Complete Skills and Drills DVD*. USA Hockey and Hockey Canada have published numerous studies regarding puck possession and puck touches in games vs. practice. The bottom line in all these publications and studies is that players learn and develop skills at practice. We need to put developing players in situations where ice time, puck touches and decision making are maximized. We often ask ourselves, can hockey sense and game understanding be taught? The answer is an overwhelming, yes **if** they participate in effective and challenging practices. When discussing development with our counter parts in Europe and Canada the overwhelming recommendation for development of skills is that the practice to game ratio should at a minimum be 3 to 1; three hours of practice to one hour of game. Do we follow this guideline? Clearly too many of our associations are game driven. Perhaps that is what the membership wants. If so we need to recognize / accept that player skill development expectations will be diminished.

If the Michigan State University Study which paralleled the Hockey Canada Study is correct, 70% of kids drop out of hockey by age 14 because they are not having any fun. The second reason is increased costs to play. Kids enjoy participating in activities that they are good at. It is not about winning, it is about participation in an activity and doing it as well as you can. If all these studies are correct should we not be working harder to improve our players’ skills and conceptual understanding of the game? With game understanding and skill improvement come enjoyment and appreciation of the game.

If we believe what experts tell us that games are 90% mental and 10% physical? Then why are practices structured and controlled? Players will follow the specific drill format as drawn, very little thinking and creating. Should our practices mirror the game situations in terms of mental creativity and decisions? Certainly when we teach specific skills related to skating, passing, receiving, shooting or angling we need to slow things down and be specific. Once the fundamental stage of learning the specific skill set is completed, then the coach should move into transition stage of combining skills and adding components of traffic, speed and competition. At this point I believe the drill sets should become less controlled and structured and the players must begin to make decisions based on on-ice situations. Certainly we will need to go back to repeat and refine the skill sets. Repetition is a key component to learning skill sets. Effective practices must have purpose. Drills should have outcomes and consequences. The use of *Small Games* can accomplish many if not all these things. *Small Games* with a purpose are less structured, allow players to make decisions with and away from the puck and have outcomes and consequences. Bjorn Kindling, former Swiss & Swede national team coach and a regular speaker at USA Hockey Coaching symposiums, completed a detailed study in 1994 indicating that **only** 2 to 3 players' typically touch the puck during a team's possession in a regular game. The implications of this statistic suggest that players must be proficient in 1 vs. 1, 2 vs. 2 and 3 vs. 3, as well as odd man situation involving these combinations.

Goaltenders: our practices must be more goaltender effective. Once a goaltender is warm, I believe shooting from the same pre-determined lane numerous times in a row is boring and ineffective. Further I believe goaltenders need to be coached on skating, puckhandling, technique and angles during practice. Once warm-up has occurred, I think an effective practice for goaltenders must have a variety of shots coming from all angles. *Small Games* can and will put goaltenders into game-like situations.

It is up to every ACE Coordinator and every coach to understand the purpose and mission of effective practices. The challenge is to **“walk the walk”**.

“What you see is what you coached”

Al Bloomer
USA Hockey Inc.
National Coach in Chief
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November 13, 2006