



Early Season Coaching Suggestions

In the first few weeks of your season it is a good idea to spend most of your practice time reviewing basic fundamental skills and then moving the players to the next skill level. Although you maybe tempted to schedule several scrimmage games “to get ready for the season” you might consider using the ice time for intensive skills sessions instead.

The most basic skill required to play hockey is skating but most coaches feel that they are not prepared to teach skating. Actually, teaching skating is not particularly difficult but you have to make an effort. Minnesota Hockey has produced two skating videos that are available from each [District Coach in Chief](#). If you are willing to spend 20 minutes watching a video and then take the drills to the ice for your players you will be headed in the right direction. Many of your players have done these drills, but there is a misconception that there is a time to quite doing skating drills and get on with it. That is simply not true. Players need to work on skating technique all through their competitive playing career if they want to advance.

The next skill for youth players is passing and receiving. A simple pepper drill with one player passing back and forth across a line of 4 other players and then changing positions will give each player many repetitions in just a few short minutes. Stress tape-to-tape passes and good receives. Correct the players each day as they do this important drill. Do not forget backhand passes. There is an average of 300 backhand passes in each NHL game.

Stick handling can be improved quite a bit with a simple figure eight puck handling drill. The players use their own gloves placed 4 feet apart on the ice and move the puck around them in a figure eight pattern. The entire team can do this drill at the same time.

The first three segments above will take you about 20 minutes to accomplish which leaves 40 minutes in the average youth practice. Again, for early season work you will want to consider moving next into skating with pucks and passing drills, starting slowly, correcting and demonstrating often, and eventually speeding things up.

One common mistake by youth coaches is to move into complicated drills before their players have mastered the basics. Even simple zone entry patterns need hundreds of repetitions before adding pressure and decision making. If the players have not mastered the fundamentals to successfully execute a zone entry without pressure then the drill is a waste of time.

Skill assessment is a critical part of your job. As you review the abilities of your players you will then determine which skills need some extra attention and instruction. Then you can design your practices to focus on those skills.

Regardless of your practice mix of drills it is always a great idea to end practice with a fun and competitive game. Cross Ice games are terrific for teaching read and react skills, puck handling, passing and shooting. They are also FUN. Make sure your players have fun at practice and they will look forward to coming back.

Hal Tearse
Minnesota Hockey Coach in Chief