LEARNING BY PLAYING: The Legacy of Small Sided Games

Do we call them small sided games, small area games, mini games, street hockey, shinny hockey or pick up games? That was the game legacy to us and to the world as many of today's world class players in soccer and hockey learned the game and developed their unique abilities by playing street hockey – shinny hockey, pond hockey, street soccer or pick-up games. In hockey, we just need to look at the tremendous and never ending pool of talent the Canadians have developed over decades; in soccer the Brazilians with their technical superiority, their incredible coordination in tight spaces, and their self-control under the most intense pressure were based on the old-fashioned street soccer, beach soccer or pick-up games. Sadly they have become extinct almost everywhere where industrialization, modernism and X-Boxes have had an impact.

The small sided games recreate a similar environment where players can rediscover the joy of playing the beautiful game. We need to inspire ourselves to create the most challenging environment for all our players and to never deviate from our goals as to respecting and nurturing the most beautiful gifts in sports: **creativity and uniqueness!**

The advantages of small sided games are by far the best tool of 'learning by playing.' I do believe few people will argue with this principle of learning by playing small sided games, but lots of coaches have a hard time putting it to practice as it may conflict with the accepted culture of the sport. For the most part, training in practices still isolates the details of technique, tactics, or condition (speed, endurance, power, agility, coordination); even if most coaches recognize that these details are closely interconnected. Small sided games are relegated to beginners practices, if they're used at all.

Small sided games correspond to the game: a player who constantly faces new challenges and situations in practice develops the ability to participate in a more significant way at any level in a real game situation. We also have to re-create some of the magic by respecting the unique abilities and experience of our players. All the individual details can and should be taught trough game like conditions. While this methodology is especially important at the youth level, it's just as valid for the senior or professional level club of any organization.

To complement the small sided game analysis we are going to look at some of the facts from the scientific study by Rick Foligno (lecturer in the Exercise Science department at the Manchester Metropolitan University) during the 2002 - 2003 seasons as it provides scientific evidence for the benefits regarding the utilization of the 4 vs.4 games.

4 vs. 4 and 8 vs. 8 were videotaped, compared and analyzed according to the following criteria:

- number of passes
- number of shots
- number of 1 vs.1
- number of tricks and moves**.**

The results show that **compared to 8 vs. 8 games** (7 players 1 Goal Keeper), **4 vs. 4 had:**

- **135% more passes**
- **260% more shots taken**
- **500% more goals scored**
- **225% more 1 vs.1**
- **280% more tricks, turns and moves.**

For the players from Manchester United who played fifteen **4 vs. 4** games for the study, this meant:

- **585 more passes**
- **481 more shots**
- **301 more goals**
- **525 more 1 vs. 1**
- **436 more tricks, fakes, turns and moves.**

Small sided games offer tremendous benefits to all players at all levels:

- **Plenty of touches for each individual**
- **An easy way to try and creatively develop new tricks**
- **Constant attacking and defending with frequent transitions**
- **With absolutely no external interferences (from parents or coaches), players become the owners of the game.**
- **Constant dribbling, shooting, passing, ball control, and lots of 1 vs. 1**
- **Excitement, creativity, greater independence and leadership, a motivational atmosphere at all times (The joy of playing)**
- **It is an attack-oriented game: lots of shots on goal.**

The small sided games format is without doubt the best tool to allow players to participate and discover the beauty of the game on their own… lets support and enhance this so our players can build up a legacy for our next generations.

Smart Transitional Games (STG) ©

The smart transitional games © philosophy is one of change; one of remodeling; one of adaptation to the constant changes and mentalities that everyone has regarding the game

and how it should be played. To be able to evolve with the needs of the game, we need to constantly adapt to the game. Regardless of rule changes, the game itself has not changed that much over the last century - it is the human interaction and beliefs that create the different currents that sometimes take us away from the reality of what we want to accomplish.

To achieve our objectives, we need to put the emphasis on **CREATIVITY** rather than **prescriptive activity**. We need to stimulate our player's intelligence and inner self to become what they are supposed to be: a great expression of the game. We have absolutely no right to intervene on that perfect scheme of life: we need to understand that we are here to guide, to mentor, to facilitate the road map of a long love for the game and a most enjoyable experience through sport.

The long term objective of CPS and the STG © is to create the understanding among players that during every practice, every game, the players must observe and analyze what is happening, as well as performing the technical task. We also need to understand that with little or no influence from outside (coaches and parents), players will develop their uniqueness and freedom of expression and that we would not get even closer under the present hockey or soccer model. This requires an open mind and patience on our part!

It is my hope that the end product is not just players who are good, but players who are leaders of the game; players who are not afraid to take their place in any team and illuminate the game with their incredible inner creativity and intelligence; players who will empower other players to be the best they can be; players who can think and make their own decisions under pressure at any given moment at any game (rather than become 'feedback dependent' on the coach); players who can read the game and analyze their own performance; and players who will become the role models for our future generations…

Once the coaches have been convinced of the need to modify the traditional way of teaching the game and their players, they will soon discover that the process of understanding and learning in sports will shift increasingly to 'self-teaching.' In both technical practices and practices using small sided games and smart transitional games © players will be stimulated to solve problems rather then being given all of the answers (or given a set of lessons or drills which are delivered regardless of the players' ability, success or failure rate.)

Exposed to this training philosophy, many of the players will become aware of problems they have never noticed before. Facing them, players will have to develop an analytical mind; they will have to judge and evaluate the problems at every moment until they find the solutions via the game it self – instead of those typically presented by the coach. On the contrary, when a coach instructs or just tells players what to do in certain or at any time / moments / situations of the game, the player does not stimulate any of these active mental processes. The real problem and challenge in training today with many drills and exercises is that they teach a stereotypical response to situations while the real game demands flexible and unpredictable responses at any given moment.

The Foundations

Creativity – The Game as a Teacher

- Creativity can be considered one of a humans most elevated mental activities
- **'Creativity is Unpredictability and Spontaneity in Motion'**
- The outcome is to protect, cultivate and refine the player's decision making skills
- Let the players think; let the players resolve their own challenges on the ice; in any specific situation, stimulate their mind. (**Coaches must challenge themselves to create the environment in practice that combines different skills at the same time so the players are always looking for solutions on their own.)**
- Intelligent and selective feedback or none at all!!! Ask the players what they saw / learned… don't just 'tell!'
- Handball games (develop the cognitive skills and dexterity at a young age), improve and refine speed of reaction, awareness of space, decision making and the '**Transition in Anticipation' Principles**
- Multifunctional or split games - all conditions – all challenges – time – space – nets - etc.
- A tool to create, manipulate, transform, and rediscover the game
- The Competitive Edge – keep the score at all times in practice. (STG © vs. drills)

1 vs. 1 "The Spice of the Game"

- The foundation of the game (offense / defense)
- Individual technical mastery (skating, puck control, passing, receiving, shooting)
- Know yourself and then your opponent (CPS attacking philosophy)
- Relentless training in all conditions (games - space –time – nets - balls – opposition – no GK – with GK)
- The age challenge (+/- 1 – 2 - 3 Years – Vs. the Pro or elite player)
- Attacking mentality at all times and **"Super Sneakiness"**
- Learn to master the principle of "Defending / Attacking Transition" when winning or losing the puck
- Learn to be composed under the most stressful situations
- Confidence to take the game on his / her own at any level
- To spice up the game with their unique style of playing and unpredictability

The Silence Methodology

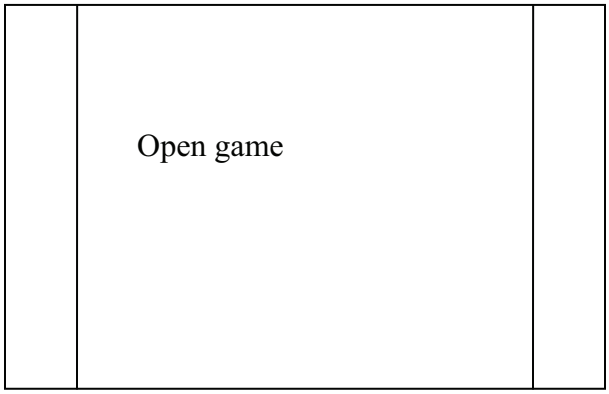
- Head up at all times (improvement and refinement of cognitive processes)
- Allows inner creativity / discovery at any age
- Space and time awareness at all times
- Reading - interpreting of the game and teammates /opponent's body language
- Self-control and composure to enhance creative play and develop personal style
- Stimulate the problem solving skills under game situations
- Open / silence approach enhances communication skills at any level of the game
- Promotes self-esteem and self-confidence
- **'Play FAST but take your TIME'** philosophy.
- Coaches: **Constant feedback tends to strangulate more than stimulate** the player's capacity of CREATIVITY, FANTASY AND INNOVATION. Silence will teach you to LISTEN.
- "**Without the gift of silence, they cannot hear the guidance of their inner spirit, which speaks softly but with great wisdom"**

<u>The Reaction Games</u>

- Body language reading under competition conditions
- The spice of faking and body deception at all levels
- The confidence factor to execute in all conditions
- Dryland handball games competition at all times
- Anticipation as a tool – refine and push the limit of possession under pressure
- Speed of movement with / off puck – change of pace
- Foot work / body fakes / head fakes
- Stick handling fakes / shot passes / game condition fakes
- Reading opposition strengths and weaknesses
- Emotional control so one can execute under pressure

The Games

<u>The End Zone</u>

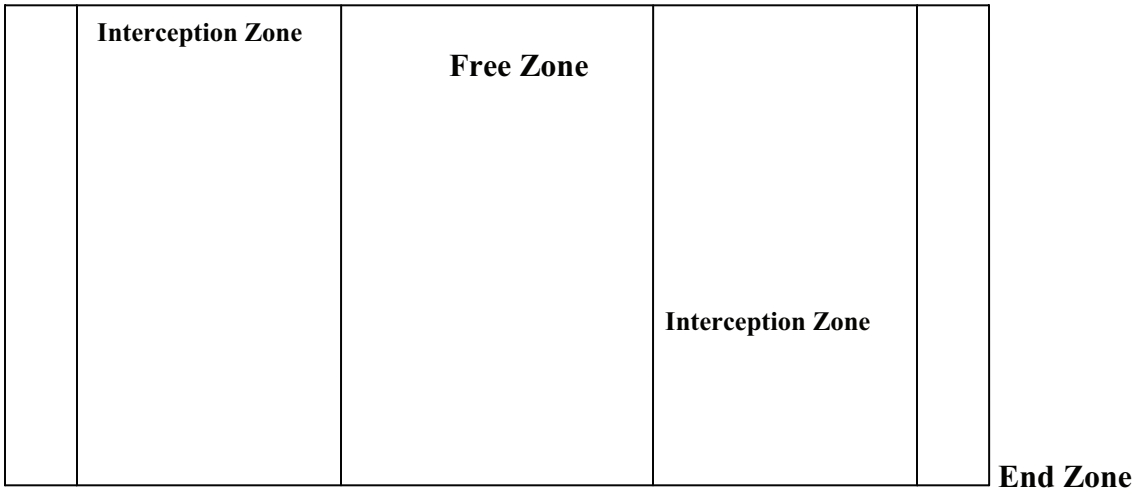


End Zone

End Zone

- End to end zone – Handball – 2-3 sec possession time
- Handball one bounce / 1-2 sec possession time
- 3/4 min. games (10 -10 for losers – keep score)
- Speed of execution under pressure
- Space and time awareness at all times
- Movement and support off the ball
- Teamwork (short or long pass decision-making?)
- Open game Vs. the silence rule
- Use the under-shoulder (underhand) pass limit
- One bounce game – redefine pass on the space
- Compete at all times!

End To End in Transition



- Total transition /play quickness
- Total awareness – game sense under pressure
- Speed of transition – decision making
- 1-2 sec. possession time
- Silence game Vs. open game (one team in silence - one team open)
- The 'sneaky factor' on the free zone – change of direction – look-away pass
- Refine and improve the transition and anticipation in transition principles
- Redefine change of space / switching to the other side / play away from pressure
- Team play and players visual communication
- Manipulation of flows in game situation
- 3 vs. 3 (Hard!) 4 vs. 4, 5 vs. 5, 6 vs.6
- 3 - 4 teams – complex generation of games
- Compete at all times (2-3-4-5 Teams)

Fast Break

- Open game – free flow
- Positional awareness at all times
- Movement off the ball – active and smart support
- Speed of transition / choice of direction and pace of the game
- The possession element – learn to “ keep the puck” under pressure
- Space movement and anticipation in transition
- Player’s movement out of the gate
- Use a “ Joker “ to create outnumbered situations (PP Vs. PK; give and goes)
- Play open / 1 touch outside
- Play two touches inside / one touch outside
- With handball games / 2 sec. possession time or less

Enjoy your new experience, open your mind and let the GAME come to you. This journey is dedicated to all those players who had to quit or never had fun playing the great game of sports. I look forward to seeing you on the road less traveled. Enjoy these wonderful quotes:

"To teach people how to play and to want to play is to enhance their potential for humanistic experience. To develop a society of players and a culture devoted to play is to contribute to a civilized humanistic future."

Darryl Siedentop
Developing Teaching Skills in Physical Education (1983)

"Sports are the highest product of civilization and the most accessible, lived, experiential sources of the civilizing spirit. In sports, law was born and also liberty, and the nexus of their interrelation. In sports, honesty and excellence are caught, captured, nourished, held in trust for the generations. Without rules, there area no sports. Without limits sports cannot begin to exist. Play is the essence of freedom: The free play of ideas. Play is the fundamental structure of the human mind. Of the body, too. The mind at play – these furnish our imagination with the highest achievements of beauty the human race attains."

Michael Novak
The Joy of Sports (1988)

"The daily work of a man (a coach) without revising it constantly is not worth living"

Johan Wolfgang von Goethe

"The Soccer from the past we have to respect, the soccer of today we have to study, the soccer of tomorrow we have to anticipate"

Bora Milotinuvic
International Soccer Coach

"The greatest gift you can give to your players is to teach them to Coach themselves so they can act independently of you, the coach"

Anatoli Tarasov

Russian Hockey Coach

I would like to thank all the coaches and people who have directly or indirectly helped me to evolve as coach and human being over the last 25 years of my life.

Recommended lecture and resources

- The Hockey Coach Guide to Small-Area Games : Paul Willet
- Mastering Hockey Agility (Mini-Games) : Dr. Yashin Smushkin
- Play Practice : Alan Launder
- Rethinking Games Teaching : Rod Thorpe, David Bunker, Len Almond (1986)
- The Art of War - Sun Tzu : Ralph D. Sawyer
- Stuff Good Players Should Know : Dick Devenzio
- Enseigner les Sports Collectifs : Le Fondamentaux Tranversaux: Laurent Bengue
- Le Grand Jeu : Jaques Caron
- Techniques du Hockey en URSS : Guy Dyotte- Andre Ruel
- Emotional Intelligence : Daniel Goleman
- Apprentisage des Sports Collectifs – Hockey / Basket : Jaques Caron, Christian Pelchat
- Revellier la Creativite - Cirque du Soleil : John U. Bacon
- The Joy of Sports : Michael Novak (1988)
- Darryl Siedentop (1983)

Provided by Jim Johnson and Mike Sullivan.