

The Progressions of Player Development

A recent discussion with the parent/coaches of a couple squirt teams in the metro area revealed that the coaches “just want their players to get better” which of course should be one of the primary goals for all of the coaches in youth hockey. I asked them why the comments and they then began to lament the lack of adequate practice time. When asked what their practice to game ratio was they looked at each other and finally determined that it was about 1 to 1 although they did have a couple weeks of practices in the first few weeks of the season. In mid season they explained they have some weeks with more games than practices. They both felt that the players were not improving very much but did say they were winning most of their games. When asked if a 3-1 practice to game ratio throughout the season would be something they could accept both coaches quickly said yes.

Practices to game ratios are a nice idea but exactly what do our kids need to flourish not only as hockey players but growing youngsters and adolescents? The *“American Development Model”* recently outlined by USA Hockey provides the roadmap for those who truly want the best overall development for their children (Long Term Athlete Development) LTAD. An overview of the program follows for boys. Girls’ levels are one year younger in the three phases after the Under 6 phase due to earlier maturing cycles than boys. In both cases the core concepts apply.

Under 6: Active Start

This time frame is when children begin to develop “physical literacy” through play activities. The four areas they need to experience are: in water- swimming; on the ground, athletics; In the Air- gymnastics; and on ice and snow- sliding-skiing-skating.

During all of these activities they will develop basic movement skills and motor skills required for physical literacy and are the building blocks for more complex movement and activities.

From a hockey perspective the goals would be to develop on-ice balance, coordination and agility and basic skating movements preferably without a stick.

USA Hockey recommends that parents guide their children to be physically active in building a base of physical literacy.

- Structured and unstructured play
- Activities that include swimming, running, jumping, balance, agility and gliding

FUNDamentals Ages: Females 6-8 Males 6-9

This is the age where children learn physical literacy which means the relationship between movement skills and sport specific skills. This is the level where the activities need to be properly structured, positive and done in a FUN and social environment.

Skipping this stage is very detrimental to an individual's future participation regardless of the eventual level of participation. This level needs to be monitored for proper skill progressions by certified coaches, parents and volunteers. It is at this level where young players develop a passion for sport.

In regards to hockey development this is the first window of opportunity for speed development. It is also a time to practice and master fundamental movement skills and emphasize the overall development of athleticism. The introduction of strength training is recommended using the athlete's body weight as well as medicine ball and Swiss ball exercises.

All of the activities at this age level should be fun, positive and motivating. The programs should build confidence through a high rate of success and promote individual and group participation in a "no excuse" atmosphere. Fair play concepts should also be introduced at this age level.

The training/competition level recommended for this level is no formal competition. Hockey twice a week in the Learn to Play program with a third session for informal competition- cross ice/half ice games. The recommended season is 5 months with a maximum of 16-20 cross ice/half ice games and 34-40 practice sessions. Overall activity ratios at this age are 25% hockey and 75% other sports and activities.

Team formation consists of 12 players with the goaltender position rotated among all the players. All teams should consist of an equal number of advanced, middle and less skilled players. All competition should be informal and cross ice.

Learn to Train: Females 8-11 Males 9-12

This phase is where players refine overall sport skills and develop sport specific skills. In this stage there is an acceleration of learned coordination and fine motor control and is the **Critical Stage** for the acquisition of hockey skills.

At this stage players should still participate in two or three other complimentary sports. At this juncture attention should be paid to develop solid skating skills and puck control. There is no need to specialize in specific positions except for goaltenders. Team formation would still emphasize development considerations over the desire to win considerations.

This phase has many variables that need to be addressed however the basics are as follows.

10& under- Squirts

95-100 ice touches per year
3-4 times per week during a 6-7 month season
75 to 80 practices and 20-25 games
10-12 skaters and one goalie per team

The training/competition ratio is 70% training, 10% competitive specific training, and 20% competition.

12& under- pee wees

105-120 ice touches per year
4 times a week for 60 minutes
7 month season
80-90 practices and 30-35 games
15 skaters and 2 goalies per team

Train to Train: Females 11-15 Males 12-16

The objective of this stage is to further develop sports specific skills, introduce competition and proceed with maximum skill development. Good training habits are established in this phase. The focus should continue to be on training and development and competition is secondary.

The LTAD window of opportunity describes this phase as the “make or break” time for the athlete. This is when the athletes are most receptive to skill development. There are numerous components to this stage as it encompasses 4 years of time when the athletes are undergoing significant physical and psychological changes. Attention needs to be paid to individual athlete training, psychological development, and start to focus on preferred position opportunities and skills. Athletes should learn how to focus plus effective goal setting and communication skills.

In this phase the program should consist of 60% training, 10% competition specific training and 30% competition. Training volume of 3 to 4 times a week with a 7-8 month season is the ideal for player development. For the under 14 level it is recommended that players have 105 ice touches which equates to 35-40 games and 80-85 practice sessions.

The outlined phases and protocols have been determined to be the optimal developmental process for athlete development in all sports. The guidelines for hockey were developed many years ago and have been applied in many other hockey playing countries with much more success than the current models in the US.

In Minnesota we have a unique structure with local community based programs that have served us well for fifty years. Application of the American Development Model could enhance our programs with a more thoughtful developmental approach that should result in lower costs to participate, more players joining hockey, increased retention of players, and much better skilled players at all levels.

The USA Hockey program also outlines two other tracks one being High Performance Clubs and the other Hockey for Life. The first one does not fit Minnesota due to our strong high school system and the hockey for life is essentially a pure recreational level program which is already being developed here in Minnesota.

The USA Hockey programs will initiate next fall and maybe be modified to fit each district that chooses to participate. Each USA Hockey District has the ability to implement the programs as they determine may fit their area. Participation is voluntary on the part of each district. Additional resources, to be identified, will be available from USA Hockey to Districts that choose to participate.

If you wish to learn more about each of the development levels and recommended protocols they can be found at;

http://www.usahockey.com/ADM/default.aspx?NAV=AF_04&ID=252288

A task group comprised of Minnesota Hockey board members and several hockey development experts has started to review all of the materials in order to determine how best to benefit from the “American Development Model”. More information will be available over the course of the next several months.

Hal Tearse
Coach in Chief, Minnesota Hockey

