



“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 also 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 must learn and develop skills at practice. We often ask ourselves, can hockey sense or game understanding be taught? The answer is an overwhelming, yes if they participate in effective and challenging practices. When checking with our counter parts in Europe as well as Canada the overwhelming recommendation for development of skills is that the practice to game ratio for youth programs should at a minimum be 3 to 1; three hours of practice to one hour of game. Ask yourselves do we follow this formula? Yet we expect our players to develop. 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 will be diminished.

If the recent Michigan State Study which parallels the Hockey Canada study is correct kids are dropping out of hockey after 3 to 5 years 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 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?

If we believe what experts tell us that games are 90% mental and 10% physical? Then why are our practices so structured and controlled? Players follow the specific drill format as drawn, very little thinking and creating. Should our practices mirror the games 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 on the ice, have outcomes and consequences.

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