

The Value Of Small Area Games In Ice Hockey Development

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Scientific knowledge indicates that the greatest window of opportunity for the development of physical skills exists between the ages of 6 and 13 years old. It is vital that during these ages young players are physically active, mentally stimulated and having fun during youth practices.

Highly structured activities, slowly paced and pre-determined practice drills, dictatorial coaching styles amid adult pressured environments with an emphasis on winning will produce robotic, tentative, skill deficient, mentally limited hockey players. Adults can envision an ideal workplace versus a 'difficult' working environment to draw a personal analogy.

We can easily look to other venues for successful models of teaching and general learning methodology. In his book, The Disciplined Mind,

Howard Gardner examined successful kindergarten and elementary classrooms around the world. Gardner observed that the most successful tend to have a number of children simultaneously engaged in activities. You may see kids all drawing in their own coloring book, playing with their piece of clay or slopping their finger paints on a sheet. The kids are allotted a certain freedom to experiment, learn and discover at their own pace and in their own manner. Also, you may see a group of young children working together on a project with little adult interference. You do not see twelve kids in line in one corner of the classroom and one at a time going to a board and putting a crayon mark on the easel and returning to the end of the line.

The teacher moves around quietly and occasionally offers a bit of advice and encouragement while

maintaining control of the overall climate. It is this type of creative and positive environment governed by a level of discipline that needs to be duplicated during a youth hockey practice.

I believe that the introduction of small games into your practices will allow a team to move toward this ideal practice environment.

Why use small games?

Small games have been around for a long time. Kids have been creating small games in the basement, driveway and in the back corner of a local rink all on their own forever. When kids drag out hockey nets they do not put them 200 feet apart. Matter of fact when young adults have a chance to create their own surface on a pond or street they tend not to choose the 'olympic sheet' option either! I have not

seen too many pond hockey games with ten year olds placing the nets so far apart that you can barely see them! A pond the size of a rink will often have two or three games going on simultaneously.

As far as 'organized hockey' goes I have gleaned a great deal in regards to 'Small Games' from the cultivated minds of Bob Richardson (Calgary Flames), Gary Wright (AIC) and Bill Beaney (Middlebury College). Among others these coaches have long professed the value of 'games' for practices and the development of players of all ages. Over the past couple of years I have witnessed many Hockey East, US National and NHL teams utilizing these games during their practices. I conclude that if our most esteemed coaches who function in a 'results oriented' world (their jobs are literally on the line) choose to utilize them during their valuable practice sessions then

they must trust their developmental value.

By nature, hockey is a read and react sport. It is a 'feel' sport. There are very few 'set plays'. A player is constantly reading the ice as to what situation is developing and what the options may be. These options are constantly evolving, often by the second. Further, often there is no one answer or exact solution for a player. A player must be able to 'see the ice' or 'sense the play' to be creative and ultimately make 'smart plays' with and without the puck. In order to become adept at this decision making process a player must be allowed to flourish in this environment. Small area games provide your players with this learning environment.

Drills we tend to use have certain benefits but the down side of drills is that they are usually predetermined to all involved. A 1V1

is a 1V1 until the end. The players involved, including the goaltender know both ahead of time and during the play what they are confronting. Conversely, small area games are spontaneous in nature and can produce a variety of situations. In this end they duplicate 'real game' conditions. Consistently playing within these circumstances will undoubtedly enhance the physical skills and creativity of a hockey player. There are no drills which provide this combination of 'thinking', 'reading', 'reacting', 'competing', skating, passing, shooting and stickhandling as experienced in a small game.

Referring back to the world of education Gardner suggests, "An individual with a keen memory might well understand a topic; however, it is plausible that he or she merely remembers the information and has not a clue about how to use it appropriately in an unfamiliar

circumstance.” Virtually every play in hockey is slightly or drastically different depending on a number of circumstances. Having your players constantly repeating contrived situations will not lead to a deep understanding and feel for the game of hockey.

Individual physical skills as well as the ability to ‘see the ice’ and ‘be creative’ are what separate the great players from the average players. Small games foster the development of all of these skills within a competitive and enjoyable environment.

During small games the players touch the puck more, are placed in tight area situations and have more attempts at the net than any drill I have ever witnessed. Obviously this plays well for both the development of the skaters as well as the goaltenders!

Over the last few years at Northeastern University we have played many cross ice games following light practices on the morning of game days. The coaches all play along with players coming off injury and those who may be out of the line-up that night. We have a full sheet of ice to use but we choose to use only one zone. We are confident that this small area will assist the players out of the line-up in developing their stickhandling, passing, shooting, hockey sense and conditioning. Quite frankly all of us, including the coaches, enjoy it more because you are never far from the action! A shot on one net can lead to a rebound and an immediate attempt at the other net! Obviously, our backup goaltenders are also benefiting because they are getting ten times the scoring chances as they may otherwise. Finally, we all have fun. These games are a blast. If you can get the coaching staff together having

fun with the players who are ‘out of the line-up’ then these games must be magical! Yeah, every now and then you might get an errant puck or elbow from a disgruntled young man but that’s all part of the action!

All facets of the game of hockey can be taught and emphasized through small games. A young player can learn defensive themes, offensive themes, sportsmanship, technical or tactical skills. It is left to the coach to emphasize and implement various conditions to achieve the desired results. The imagination is all that limits the type and scope of games we can create.

An extremely important element to the success of your games will be the personality a coach exudes and ultimately the game environment created. Remember, the game must be placed in the hands of the players. The players must feel the independence of playing with the

ability to make 'smart plays' and make 'mistakes'. We all learn through mistakes. This is where a fine balance of coaching must come into play. The independence of playing is lost when coaches are constantly barking orders and directing the play. Also, quite frankly, this becomes annoying. Imagine playing golf and some guy following you around yelling at you to hit the ball here and there and when to hit it and how to hit it and on and on! The game must be in the player's hands and should take on a life of its own.

Scientists also believe we only use ten percent of our brain. How could we ever approach our potential if we did not experiment. How could a coach or teacher ever try to limit a young player's scope? Could you imagine the consequences if one of Gretzky's youth coaches demanded he not stop behind the opponents net? Would a coach ever tell magic

Johnson not to pass behind his back or smile when he played the game he so enjoyed?

This does not mean that a coach just let's things run amok. Overseeing the sportsmanship, discipline and abiding by the rules of the game are vital. Players must be held accountable in these respects. Players want to play. Usually depriving a player of shifts serves as a pretty quick reminder. However, think of yourself as that elementary school teacher working your way around. Stay somewhat in the background. Let the kids have the game and offer encouragement and advice when you see fit. Step in as the disciplinarian when necessary. John Wooden, former champion basketball coach at UCLA always believed that, "Young people need models, not critics."

The ice and the game itself will become an effective teacher. A

player will often know when he/she has made a mistake. The players will start to govern themselves in a number of ways. When a player finds that something works they will probably repeat this often. When they find that certain moves or decisions are not working, they will probably remove this from their repertoire over time. One must remember that these decisions and overall development will happen at different times. Some players hop in, figure out the game quickly and begin to add creative elements to it within minutes. For others it may be a much longer process. This would be true of any endeavor. I suggest you read Dr. Mel Levine's latest book, A Mind At A Time, for a closer look at this learning process.

However, this is one of the best elements of small games. They allow the better players to flourish and move along. The activity and

environment is in place to foster development. This is also true for the lesser player. They are certainly challenged but the opportunity remains to improve physically and mentally and come along over time while still playing the game and having fun. Both levels of players and all in between are engaged, challenged, empowered, competing and having fun! The space is reduced so the better player is forced to 'do more' while the reduction of space allows the lesser player to always 'be involved'. In this case the 'rising tide surely lifts all boats'.

Contrast this situation with a typical 1V1 where for one, the situation is predetermined. No one has to think to figure out what the situation is and in the end the better players tend to blow by the weaker ones and neither player gets anything out of it. If the offensive player misses the net or shoots from four feet

out then even the goalie gets nothing out of it!

Another important variable to the success of small games with younger players is the use of modified equipment. In particular younger players must be using lighter pucks. To ask a seven or eight year old kid to use the same weighted puck as does Steve Yzerman and Brett Hull is absolutely absurd. Not only is it a foolish concept but it is actually detrimental to the motor skill development of the kids. Young kids playing with a regulation puck is akin to an adult using a five pound rock! Not only is it not fun, but one is not developing dexterity and fluidity in their motions. Matter of fact, what one is developing is rigidity and poor movement.

It would also be advisable to use modified nets for youngsters. Again, a small child is being asked to cover the same ground as Patrick

Roy and Curtis Joseph. Would we ever do this in soccer with our young kids? A good idea is to hang an L shaped piece of plywood off the cross-bar covering at least one foot of the top and one foot of one side. This is cost effective and can be done quickly prior to practice. Now a young goalie has a chance and the shooters must be more accurate.

If a team is using small area games while the coach is low key and supportive and the players are using modified equipment one has created an ideal playing, learning and teaching environment! You now have all the ingredients for mental, physical and social development.

As much as anything these games are fun! Bob Richardson refers to two words previously mentioned when discussing small games: engaged and empowered. The players become engaged and empowered during practices because

the game is put in their hands and they are 'playing hockey'! Lou Vairo once commented that, "He never heard anyone say, 'Let's go work hockey.' It is always, 'Let's go play hockey.'" I agree and I'll add one more. I never heard a kid say, "I want to go drill hockey." Remember, the kids come to the rink to play hockey. John Wooden also felt that, "When we are out of sympathy with the young, then our work in this world is over." As leaders of the hockey world it is incumbent upon us to protect the game and the opportunity to play the game for our youngsters.