

Developing Skills is All About Ice Time Part 1

Several years ago many of the people who have been associated with hockey for several decades came to recognize that the US players were not developing skills that can take them to the upper levels of the game. In other words, the percentage of professional players who are US citizens continues to decline relative to the European and Canadian players. Not that developing pro players is our goal, but it can be argued that it is an indicator of how successful we are at player development.

The NHL and college coaches all chimed in and told the national and state youth hockey organizations that they needed to do a better job at developing highly skilled players. USA Hockey responded, with the help of numerous coaches from Minnesota, and created the CEP (Coaching Education Program) in the late 1970's. The program grew slowly over the next 20 years until USA Hockey implemented a mandatory certification requirement for all youth coaches starting in 2000. This program has helped a great deal. The Initiation Program for the 8 and under skaters is also a wonderful program for the youngest players. Minnesota Hockey developed a skill development program (STP) for the Pee Wee and Bantam players which currently has over 1500 players participating during the off season.

Also during the 90's there came a rink on every corner and more ice time. The new rinks attracted more and more players, especially in the girls, junior gold, and adult recreation levels. Ice time has again become a problem.

In the 90's hockey became a real business. The NHL expands south, and the junior leagues appear all over the country. USA Hockey starts a program in Michigan for the top 40 high school age players. Spring leagues (Elite, AAA, AAA ELITE!etc) and fall leagues and summer leagues all supposedly designed to help players get to the next level. Many youth players participate in 120-140 games per calendar year. Gosh, that should make them better players. So how come most of our players still do not have enough skill to go a Division 1 colleges, or make the next step into the professional ranks?

I believe it all comes down to TIME on THE ICE. Especially when the kids are young. Let's look at how much time a youth player spends on the ice during the course of one year. Using the winter averages of 45 games, 12 minutes of ice time per game and 60 hours of practice we get 69 hours of actual ice time during the winter season. Add to that another 45 off season games, 10 practices, and 20 hours of clinics you get an additional 39 hours of ice time. Remember that very little of the ice time is devoted to skating with a puck. Total: 108 hours of ice time per year. That averages 9 hours per month on the ice over a twelve-month period. I believe you would be hard pressed to argue that anyone could be come proficient at anything with only 9 hours of involvement per month.

Just for fun, let's think back to the good old days in the in the 50's, 60's and 70's. As kids we played 15 to 20 games in the winter season. We practiced 2 hours a week with our teams. We also skated for fun an additional 12 hours every weekend. If you assume only a ten-week season (December, January and two weeks of February), and add an additional 30 hours of skating during Christmas break, you can estimate that kids were on the ice for at least 175 hours. Then of course we attended hockey schools in the summer for a couple weeks that added an additional 20 hours of ice time for a total of nearly 200 hours of ice time each year. This was all accomplished in only three months a year.

Clearly what we are now doing is not working as well as it could. We have institutionalized the game to a point where the original purpose of having fun has become lost, or perhaps redefined. It is time to step back and rethink what the purpose of all this is. This is especially true for the 12 and under levels.

So how do we remedy the situation, if in fact we want to? I have some ideas that I will share in the second part of this article that may be worth considering. In the meantime, check my numbers against your own situation and see what is really happening in your programs.

Hal Tearse
Revised version.