

Half Ice Practices

By Author?

Frustrations within the hockey circles, regarding too many half ice practices, have been going on for many years now. Lately with an increased shortage of ice availability, within the City of Calgary, the topic has gained more familiarity. Currently, we are seven to eight rinks short of ice demand and even with the proposed expansion to existing facilities such as Max Bell (Fall 2007), Family Leisure Centre, South Fish Creek and Calgary centennial Arenas within the next four to five years; we will still have a shortage of ice!

The shortage of athletic facilities in Canada has become such a hot topic; it will be part of Hockey Canada's AGM agenda this year. The annual general meetings started up Friday, May 18th in Winnipeg, MB, and will have representatives from across the country discuss the current lack of rink facilities in Canada and examine possible solutions.

What to do? What to do? The shortage of practice ice doesn't appear to be going away any time soon unless there is more and accelerated private and government funding available to develop additional rink facilities. Parents, coaches and administrators are frustrated with the lack of available ice. In order to experience full ice practices teams have often booked extra ice slots in parts of rural Alberta... more

than an hour drive from the city. Getting up at 4:30 am for a 6:00 am Saturday or Sunday practice on a cold winter morning and travelling outside the city can be a challenging exercise indeed. It can be tough on the kids as well as everyone else involved.

Here are some of my views on half ice practices and possible coping solutions. I trust it will lead to some good hockey talk.

During the summer of 1994, I attended Hockey Canada's International Coaches Conference held in Calgary and observed an on ice presentation by Tommy Tomth, "Helping Young Players to Understand the Game." Tommy is one of the top coaches in the Swedish Ice Hockey Federation. He has coached both their World Junior and World Senior Teams. Tommy did a masterful job of explaining how coaches could properly utilize a small ice surface, i.e. half ice practices to teach young players the fundamentals of the game. Tommy demonstrated and had a number of kids execute skating, passing, puck control and shooting drills on a small ice surface. On that particular day, lots of top notch skill development was accomplished on a small ice surface.

Currently, I feel too many parents, coaches and administrators have a negative mindset about half ice practices. Often coaches do not utilize the ice properly which adversely affects a young player's potential development. Between the ages of six and ten, the primary focus should be on hockey technical skills development, especially skating. Good skill development can be taught very effectively on half ice practice surfaces.

For example, the Hockey Canada Nike Player Development Pyramid emphasizes the following breakdown between technical skills, individual tactics, team play systems and strategies based on the age and skill level of the players. The Initiation Program recommends player development based on practicing 85 per cent technical skills and 15 per cent individual tactics. The Nike Skills Development Program for Novice hockey recommends 75 per cent technical skills, 15 per cent individual tactics and ten per cent team tactics. The Atom program recommends 50 per cent technical skills, 20 per cent individual tactics, 15 per cent team tactics, ten per cent team play and five per cent strategy.

This pyramid was created to assist coaches to develop a seasonal plan. The age and skill level of the players on the team will define the seasonal plan. Often I feel too many minor hockey coaches, who are coaching at the Initiation to Atom levels, could use a friendly reminder/tune up of the importance and the benefits of practicing proper skill technique to this age and skill level. Less emphasis should be placed on winning and team play and more on teaching the proper tech-

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nical skills/fundamentals of the game such as skating, passing, puck control and shooting.

Practices on a small ice surface, if run properly, can allow a number of benefits; better interaction between players, more on ice repetitions of technical skills and individual tactics, players can touch the puck more often, it allows for more “short game” drills which emphasize skating agility, puck control and puck protection skills as well as more active/involvement scrimmages than full ice. Coaches can utilize the ice better and cooperate with their fellow minor hockey association coaches to incorporate two teams (e.g. Atom Div 2 and Div 3 on the same full ice practice for game type scrimmages, skating drills such as forward striding and group/game tactical drills, just to name a few).

Here’s a suggestion for improved ice sharing and utilization within the minor hockey association.

For a 75 minute practice: Team A practices full ice for the first 15 minutes. Teams A and B practice half ice for the next 45 minutes. Team B practices full ice for the last 15 minutes.

For a 60 minute practice: Team A practices full ice for the first 15 minutes. Teams A and B practice half ice for the next 30 minutes. Team B practices full ice for the last 15 minutes.

Improved monitoring of the ice conditions may allow for less flooding between ice sessions among the tyke and novice groups. It may free up more time for the kids to practice over the course of the season. I am sure that keen hockey minds can offer more, varied

and better solutions to this issue if we give it a little more thought.

Here’s a little food for thought on half ice utilization by the NHL teams. The typical NHL game warm up requires the two participating teams to share the ice surface. Each team warms up on half ice. For example, the Flames will warm up their goalies, conduct various skating, passing, puck control and shooting drills, perform one on one and two on one drills, as well as break-out and regroup drills involving three on two plays. If NHL teams can execute their warm up drills on half ice, I can see no reason teams up to the Atom level especially, and maybe lower level Pee Wee teams cannot do the same with equal success.

With improved cooperation, communication and open minded thinking, parents, coaches and minor hockey board administrators can provide kids with more practice times to develop their skills and have fun. Kids really don’t care if it’s a full ice or half ice practice – they just want to be on the ice, playing and having fun.

The trend towards half ice practices will not improve; rather, if anything it will increase over the next few years. Why not work together on and off the ice to generate possible solutions so that the kids will ultimately reap the rewards, improve their skills and enjoy playing the game more.

Your thoughts on this topic are greatly appreciated. Letters to the editor are welcome at programs@tuckerhockey.com.

Half ice or full ice practices – let’s keep enjoying our hockey!