

Coach Rex's Corner - NHL Rink Size Debate

For decades many hockey experts and fans have discussed and debated the size of the hockey rink dimensions. Is the standard NHL rink 200 feet by 85 feet too small? Should the NHL expand all the rinks to international size 200 feet by 100 feet to make the games more exciting? Expansion would allow an additional 3,000 feet of playing space but it would be a very costly league venture.

For years, I have been one of the believers and advocates that big ice is better for the game. I always felt the bigger ice allowed the more skilled players to showcase their many talents. But I have to honestly admit after watching the 2014 Olympic hockey tournament that I was definitely wrong! The majority of the games in the tournament were played like soccer on ice. The Olympic hockey was a different style of hockey with a very defensive coaching philosophy; of trying not to lose rather than attempting to win. Sure there were at times moments of tension and drama - close games - but it truly lacked the excitement of NHL playoff hockey. Much like a billiard game – not what you make but it seemed what you leave appeared to be the norm throughout the tournament. Often the games displayed very tight defensive hockey – choking defensive hockey – a chess style game on ice!

Many of the European teams such as Finland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and especially Switzerland and Denmark played a no flow - trapping style of play - with very little pressure and mostly containment in mind. No fore-checking pressure, often a 1 - 4 system, 1 - 3 - 1 system or worst at times 5 players inside the centre ice red line. Even the powerful Russian team were playing a trapping style at times! Even though many players on the lower rated European teams did not play in the NHL, they all possessed supreme skating skills. Players played smart positional hockey on the larger ice surface with very little body checking. The Finnish team especially had many supreme skaters and played exceptionally well without the puck.

Canada dominated Sweden in the probably the best team defensive performance ever played to win the Gold medal with a 3 to 0 score. Bravo to Coach Mike Babcock and his assistant coaching staff on their game plan and execution! It was defence first with tremendous overall team speed, puck possession domination and short 35 to 40 second shifts throughout the tournament. All the players understood and executed the team system and were very unselfish to play

a total 200 foot team game – taking backside pressure to another level for the game of hockey. Canada surrendered only 3 goals in 6 games, the fewest allowed by a gold medalist since 1928. Canada also scored only 17 goals, the fewest by a gold medal-winning team in Olympic history. For star NHL players it was a big adjustment to play only 12 to 15 minutes a game when they normally play 22 to 25 with their club teams.

Basically 2 on 1's, 3 on 2's were non existent on most occasions throughout the tournament! Team Canada found themselves in the opponent's zone attacking 2 on 5 or 3 on 5. To create scoring opportunities and win the coaches had to activate their defensemen into the rush such as Weber or Doughty to generate enough offense to create scoring opportunities and win. Teams were conscious to keep players outside the dots. On the international ice the neutral zone is bigger while the offensive zone is smaller than on the NHL size surface. Team Canada had to work hard to get scrams in the net zone area and pucks to the net on a consistent basis. It was difficult to create offensive plays and get to the prime scoring area in front of the net. Often the majority of shots were generated from the blue line from the team's defensemen.

On the men's side, the most entertaining game was the USA vs. Russia game which featured tremendous skill, flow and excitement that ended in a dramatic USA shootout win. Overall the Olympic hockey had its tight hockey moments of tension, drama with some moments of excitement. By far the best game of the Winter Olympics was the thrilling and unbelievable come from behind 3 to 2 win by Canada over the U.S.A. in the women's gold medal contest. That was awesome hockey to watch! What a game!

Even with Canada winning double Gold which was awesome to see I personally felt the Men's Olympic hockey was a bit of a let down for overall entertainment and excitement. So I humbly must say I now will take NHL playoff hockey on the smaller ice any day over the less than exciting Olympic tournament style of play on the bigger ice! Is it the size of the ice surface or the style of play implemented by national coaches to try and win or be competitive at this level? You be the judge. But Coach Rex, I am sorry to say is no longer a fan of the big ice game but I still hope the 2014 World Hockey Championship in Belarus this May will generate some exciting hockey to watch! Let's keep the faith!