

Planning a Practice

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Introduction

Every hockey team receives practice time from their associations. During a practice, the head coach relays drills for the players to execute. Individually, each drill should help a player develop and improve a skill. Combined, the drills should help the team achieve a common set of goals. As a head coach, you will need to plan your practices to accomplish both.

Planning a practice requires you to know three major components:

- How to create a practice plan.
- How to implement the practice plan.
- How to evaluate the practice plan.

Each component is critical to developing proper practices that maximize the time spent on the ice. However, prior to learning any of those components, you need to understand why you should create a practice plan. By understanding why you need to prepare for each practice, you can better appreciate the time you spend planning each practice.

Why You Need a Plan

When you take your first Hockey Canada certification course, one of the first topics an instructor will cover is planning. The instructor will tell you to plan each practice and your entire season. Further, they will show you sample practice plans and even explain reasons behind planning. However, you should not plan a practice because Hockey Canada told you to. While Hockey Canada is correct in telling you to plan a practice, further explanation is required.

When you plan a practice, you prepare yourself for the practice. This is critical. Any coach or parent who has spent at least one year attending practices has witnessed a practice run awry. Whether the culprit is your son's coach or another coach, at some point you have seen a practice where the players are not performing any drills that relate to their development. And every coach can avoid this by preparing for each practice. As a coach, if you prepare for a practice, not only do you give your players and coaching staff confidence, you will also feel confident. You will know that your drills are developing players to their fullest extent. Further, you will understand why the players are executing each drill.

Planning a practice not only allows you to prepare, but also to ensure that the year plan is successful. Each practice should relate to a set of objectives in the year plan for the team. For instance, your year plan could contain a goal to increase the team's passing

accuracy by November. During September and October, you will need to plan each practice to focus on passing drills, helping the players to accomplish the goal.

Finally, when you plan a practice you also guarantee to use all of the ice time allotted. Unfortunately, ice time is a commodity in minor hockey. While Hockey Canada recommends that each team receive a *minimum* one practice for every game, economic and population factors help to restrict this. Some teams are fortunate and enjoy one or more practices for every game, while other teams feel fortunate to receive one practice for every 3 or 4 games. As a coach, coming to the arena with a practice plan allows you to use all of the ice time by:

1. Preparing your assistants and trainers. Informing your coaching staff of the practice enables them to have each drill ready immediately. Further, they will also have a better understanding of the drills and be able to provide important feedback to players during the execution of the drill.
2. Explaining drills in the dressing room. This will minimize the time spent at the coach-board explaining drills and maximize the time on the ice.

Planning enables you to prepare for a practice, follow the year plan, and maximize the ice time. With a complete understanding of why you need to plan a practice, you can now create the plan.

Planning the Practice

Creating a practice plan may seem a bit daunting at first. After all, you need to ensure that:

- The practice relates to your year plan.
- Players stay active.
- Drills flow together.
- You don't waste time.

To keep the process simple, you can break up a practice plan into three manageable chunks. Each chunk will help you plan the next part of the practice, and you will find that planning a practice will become a simple task.

Creating Objectives

Objectives guide you in developing drills for the practice. Each objective should relate to a component in the year plan or a skill that the players need to work on. However, you need to be wary of creating too many objectives for a single practice. Each drill should not relate to a new objective as this will cause both confusion and poor results from your players. Instead, you should create 3 objectives for each practice.

For instance, compare an 80 minute practice with three objectives to the same practice with five objectives.

5 Objectives	3 Objectives
Increase backwards skating mobility	Increase backwards skating mobility
Work on passing	Work on passing
Introduce slap shots	Introduce slap shots
Introduce Penalty Kill system	
Work on 1 on 1	

In the practice on the left, you can spend approximately 15 minutes on each objective. However, the other practice allows you to spend 25 minutes per objective. While you may not require 25 minutes to work on passing, you could spend 30 or 40 minutes introducing slap shots to players and still spend enough time on your other two objectives. Further, in the practice on the left, both you and your players have no room for error. If you need extra time to work on the Penalty Kill, you cannot.

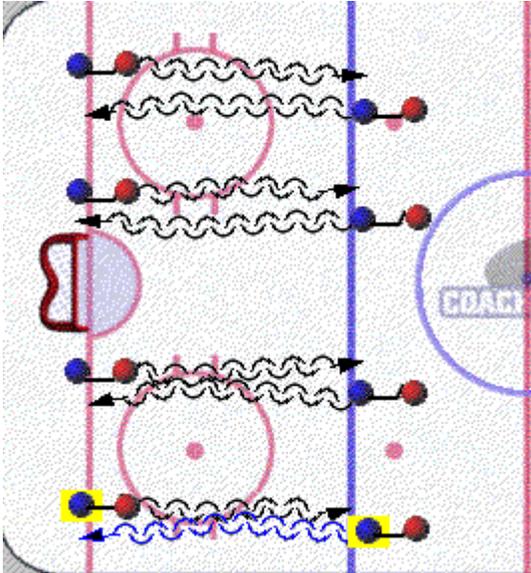
The objectives listed above were chosen randomly. You may only have one objective for a particular practice – skating. The point is to not create too many objectives that you and your players cannot accomplish them.

Creating Drills

After you decide on the objectives for the practice, you need to create drills. Each objective translates into a skill, allowing you to follow three steps when creating your drills:

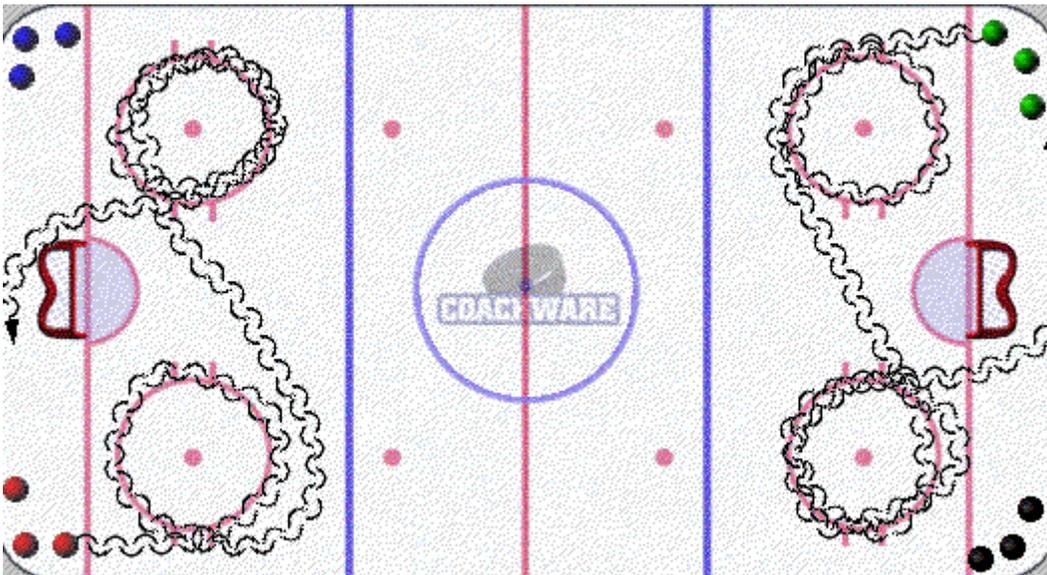
1. Teach the skill.
2. Execute the skill.
3. Incorporate the skill.

When you teach a skill, you perform a drill that will either let you teach the skill for the first time or allow players to re-teach a skill already learnt. For instance, if you have a Minor Peewee aged team, they will already know how to skate backwards. Therefore, to accomplish the first objective (increase backwards skating) you could have the players perform a backward pull drill, as shown below:



In this drill, players pull a teammate to the blue line, switch, and pull the other player back to the goal line. In both cases, the player doing the pull (the red player going to the blue line, the blue player going to the goal line) will be skating backwards. This drill teaches players to use quick cross-overs to get started, and use power cross-overs to reach the blue line.

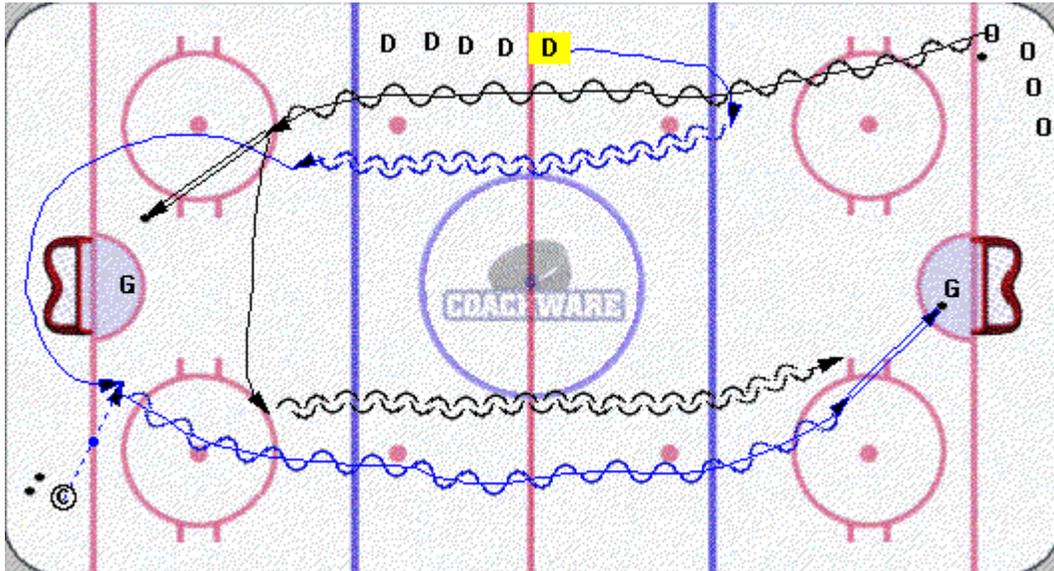
After teaching the skill, it is important to execute the skill using other hockey abilities. For instance, after having players perform the backwards pull, you could perform a drill where players skate a figure-eight backwards with a puck.



In this drill, players are divided into four groups of three. On the whistle, opposite corners (in this case, red and green) skate a figure-eight backwards with a hockey puck.

Players are now focusing on performing proper cross-overs and maintaining control of a puck.

After executing the skill using multiple hockey abilities, you need to incorporate the skill into a game situation. For instance, after performing the drill above, you may execute a one on one drill, similar to the following:



In this final drill, both offence and defensive players will skate backwards in a typical one-on-one situation. It will be important for the players skating backwards to continue to perform cross-overs so that they do not get beat by the offensive players. Notice that the defensive player receives a pass to start the second one-on-one. While this pass is minimal, it provides a good segue into the next objective: passing.

In three simple drills, your players have focused on backwards skating. However, the first drill incorporated strength and endurance training, the second drill used puck control, and the final drill included shooting, passing, and system training. While the focus of each drill remains backwards skating, you still build on other “smaller” objectives.

Reviewing for Flow

While creating three drills for a single objective is simple, designing 8 or 9 drills that flow together and accomplish all three objectives is more difficult. The premise remains the same (teach, execute, incorporate), but you will need to structure the drills together to provide flow.

Flow ensures you do not confuse the players. For instance, you should not follow a drill on backwards skating with a drill that focuses on checking. Players will not absorb what you are teaching, nor will the drills flow together. Further, imagine this article began to discuss pre-game speeches. As a reader, if the topic was not properly introduced, you

would stop reading to figure out how pre-game speeches fit with practice planning. The same will occur with your players if drills do not flow together.

To create flow in a practice, you should ensure that:

1. Drills are easy to understand.
2. You explain complex drills in the dressing room.
3. You execute repetitive drills quickly.
4. You create an intermediary drill when moving from one objective to another.

To make a drill easy to understand, think of what a player's brain can comprehend. For example, you should not create a drill that requires Novice aged players to remember eight steps. The players will begin to forget what you said at step 1 when you talk about step 6. Complex drills will result in you wasting time at the coach board re-explaining the drill. However, if you do need to use a complicated drill, you could explain the drill in the dressing room.

If you plan to run a complex drill, show the players in the dressing room first. This allows you to spend five minutes explaining the drill several times, ensuring that each player has ample opportunity to understand the steps in the drill. Then, when you execute the drill on the ice, you can spend a few seconds "reminding" players of the drill. This allows you to execute drills quickly, minimizing time on the coach board.

Finally, use drills several times. Each practice should not have a new set of drills. Not only will players not remember any of the drills, but you will waste a lot of time trying to create new drills for a skill that you already have several drills for. When you use repetitive drills, you can tell players the name of a drill, and then always reference the name of the drill at subsequent practices. You will find after one or two practices that by simply mentioning the name of a drill, players will quickly move to the appropriate starting positions for the drill.

Finally, to complete the practice, when you move from one objective to another, include an intermediary drill. An intermediary drill showcases skills from two objectives. For instance, in the three drills explained earlier, the final drill included a passing portion, which would lead into the next objective – passing. While the amount of passing in the drill is minimal, it still incorporates the skill and flows nicely into a drill where players will need to focus strictly on passing.

Implementing the Practice

After you finish planning the practice, the next step is to implement it. Implementing a practice is generally the easy stage in a practice. You already ensured that the practice will focus on the year plan, that drills are simple and easy to follow, and that the entire plan flows. Therefore, when you implement a practice, you only have to ensure that you execute the practice properly.

Executing the Practice

With the players on the ice and fully stretched, it is time to execute the practice. At this point, you need to get your players in motion and enthusiastic about the practice to keep their energy up. To do this well, you will need to rely on your coaching staff.

More often than not, an assistant coach is a puck pusher. A head coach will inform the assistants where to push the pucks and pylons and then explain the drill to the players. However, most head coaches agree that assistant coaches are vital to the success of their team. Therefore, you should use them actively in a practice.

When you use your assistants in a practice, you involve them with the team. You could have an assistant run a portion of, or an entire practice. During this time, you can act as the assistant coach. Not only will you encourage your assistants to take an active role, but you can also show your assistants what you expect of them.

Further, as a head coach, your responsibility is to teach both players and your coaching staff. View each assistant on your staff as a potential head coach. It is your duty to ensure that your assistants become strong head coaches. Provide them with the opportunity to develop during practices.

During the practice, you need to keep the players moving. Every moment a player stands still causes their heart rate to decrease, their muscles to tighten, and their interest in the practice to fade. During the practice, you need to minimize the time you spend at the coach board and group players in small numbers. The previous section, “Reviewing for Flow”, explains how to lessen the time at the coach board by using repetitive drills, keeping drills simple, and explaining complex drills before the practice. However, keeping players in small groups is a drill design issue.

For example, if you have a one-on-one drill where only two players went at a time – one acting as a defenseman, the other as the forward, you would have 13 skaters and 1 goalie standing still. Players, especially those at the end of the line, will become bored and find other activities to amuse themselves. Instead, divide the ice lengthwise and have 2 one-on-ones occurring simultaneously. This will reduce the number of skaters standing still to 11, with both goalies active. Finally, you can increase the drill speed by having the next set of one-one’s begin before the first set finishes. This could result in having 8 skaters moving at one time, with 7 skaters resting for a very short time before they start the drill.

By having players stretch, using your assistants, and keeping the players active, you increase the chances of running a successful practice. However, after every practice, you need to perform one final step, evaluation.

Evaluation

Part of your job as a head coach is to provide constructive feedback to players. Your feedback will help players to correct their mistakes and increase their abilities. However, as a coach, you also need to receive and *accept* that same constructive feedback to improve.

Contrary to popular belief, coaches are not perfect. Each coach has room to improve, regardless of their experience level. The best coaches realize they need to improve and constantly solicit feedback and evaluate themselves. As a coach, to improve your practices, you need to evaluate and seek feedback on each practice.

When you evaluate a practice, you are not assessing whether the practice accomplished the objectives. This should have been handled by designing appropriate drills. Rather, evaluation comes in the form of asking questions about how you ran the practice.

The following is a list of questions that every coach should ask after a practice:

1. Did the players work hard?
2. Did the players have fun?
3. Did the drills work?
4. Did I use my coaching staff?
5. Did I teach the players?

If players are sweating or appear exhausted after a practice, you will know they worked hard. Otherwise, you need to ask why they did not push themselves to their limits. Were the players tired prior to the practice? Did you motivate them enough? Were the drills too complex to understand? Was there enough flow and movement? Your answers to these questions will help you ensure that players are always pushing themselves to exceed their limits and develop their skills.

The second question is critical. Every player on the ice should have fun at all times. If players are not having fun, they will not want to play hockey, and you will not be coaching. Do not get lost on this concept. Once you remove the fun from the sport, players will stop playing.

You can evaluate the third question during and after the practice. If you need to stop a drill to explain it several times, obviously, the drill did not work. Ask yourself why and find out if you can fix the drill. Otherwise, remove the drill from your collection.

The next question ensures that your coaching staff is also having fun and learning. If you do not use your coaching staff, their enjoyment, participation and enthusiasm will shrink. If you did not use them, ask yourself why? Was it on purpose? Did you need to explain a complex drill or system? If you do not use your assistants during a practice, talk to them about it also, that way they know why they were left in the dark.

Finally, as a coach, you are a teacher. If you did not teach the players during the practice, what did you do? Each practice should result in players learning something. That is why you are their coach and why the association chose you.

To gather information for a proper evaluation, ask players, coaches and yourself the above questions. When you ask your coaching staff, simply find out what they thought of the practice. You can apply the same line of questioning with the players. Ask players after a drill what they thought of the drill. Find out which drills they hate and which they love. Further, you can also ask the parents who show up to a practice what they think. They often provide another set of eyes and usually welcome the opportunity to participate in their son's or daughter's development.

After you have evaluated the practice, it is time to start creating the next one. Use the feedback and your knowledge to develop future practices that improve upon your last practice. By consistently going through this process, you will notice an improvement in your practices, your players, and your coaches.