



Practice to Game Ratios

The question of how much practice should a team have compared to the number of games they play is an ongoing discussion. Occasionally an email comes to us with a suggestion that Minnesota Hockey or USA hockey put a limit on how many games can be played. We respond that decisions like this are up to the local programs to decide.

What we do know is that the higher the practice to game ratio the better skilled the players will become. A minimum of two (2) practices to one (1) game ratio is recommended by Minnesota Hockey and USA Hockey. This number is way to low in my opinion and yet many teams find it quite difficult to get a 2-1 ratio by years end. There are many reason why including not enough ice time, the parents prefer games and invitational tournaments, and we have other things to do.

The solution is to start with the end in mind. After scheduling your practice ice for the season divide by the desired ratio and you will come up with your own game limit. If you have 60 practices then your game limit would be 30 with a 2-1 ratio. To get more practices, share ice with other teams, skate before school once a week, and in the cities travel to under used rinks where ice is available. Invitational tournaments are fun but they consume ice time that could be used for practices. Take for instance a 16 team tournament beginning on Friday evening and ending on Sunday afternoon. With pool play and 4 or 5 game guarantees this event will consume much of the ice on two or more rinks for the better part of the weekend. The local association will have one or two teams in the tournament but the rest of their teams will now have to go elsewhere to skate and that usually means games. Invitational tournaments raise lots of money but also consume valuable ice time that could be used for practice and other programs like unstructured open hockey.

We seem to have a bias towards games in our culture. They are fun and we keep score so that we know if we are winners or losers. The whole family can be there and have a good time. Practice in comparison is just not much fun for the family even though we recognize that it takes 4 or 5 games to equal the amount of ice time a practice generates for each player.

Minnesota sends more hockey players to Division 1 schools and the NHL than any other state. One of the main reasons is that our high school system favors practice over games. The high school team I coach will practice nearly 90 hours and play 25 games. Compare that to many Bantam teams in the state that are lucky if they have a one practice for each game they play. Many of those teams play seven days a week mostly late in the evenings and by January each year the players are worn out (but will not admit it). The high school system has its flaws but they do have the practice to game deal figured out and the results are quite good.

In September I had a chance to work with eight high school players on some new skating and puck handling concepts from the Czech Republic. One of the boys is a tenth grade exchange student from Slovakia. In conversation I inquired how many games he played last year and he replied 50. Thinking that the Europeans are following our games model I inquired how long the season is in Slovakia? He replied 10 months. Therefore they play 5 games a month. Asked how often they practice he recounted that they had 90 minutes of skills in the morning and a 2 hour team practice in the evening, five days a week. That works out to 17 ½ hours of practice each week and on average 1.25 games per week. No wonder there are so many northern European players in the NHL. Practice makes perfect.

We have a different model in North America as we are more interested in having a large quantity of players knowing that on a bell curve a small percentage of the players will become elite players. The larger the number of participants we have the more elite players will emerge. This model suggests that we need not worry about practice to game ratios or in some cases practice at all because it does not matter. I am not one who agrees with this philosophy.

We need to find a better balance between a pure development model used over seas and a recreational model used here. In the future we need to look at structuring our programs to provide a development track for our elite players, competitive travel programs, and pure recreational programs.

The XL League, a second year recreational no check league for high school age players in the Twin Cities, is a first step in providing alternatives. Minnesota Hockey/USA Hockey will also be developing a recreational program for new players ages five to 9 years old that are not interested in the commitment levels of A, B & C travel hockey. A district team development program for the top end bantam and pee wee players has also been under consideration by the planning committee at Minnesota Hockey for a couple years. These are just some of the new ideas being discussed and implemented.

Within the context of our current system achieving more than a 2-1 practice to game ratio is difficult but coaches and parents should strive to that benchmark and exceed it if possible. The results will be better skilled players, less travel, and much less expense.

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