

## **From Minnesota Hockey Publication**

### **Putting the Play in Player Development**

By Ryan Williamson, 07/19/19,

For many hockey players of past generations, finding time to play the game in an unstructured environment was easy. Kids ventured to their local lake, pond or park and got a game of shinny or boot hockey going. They'd emulate their favorite player's stickhandling moves and score the state high school tournament game-winning overtime goal while a friend announces the play-by-play.

But today, many young athletes' only exposure to the sport is during organized practices and games.

With that in mind, it's more important now to make sure kids have that play time in order to maximize development. That's something Roger Grillo, an Apple Valley native and USA Hockey ADM regional manager, believes is the key to building successful athletes and hockey players.

#### **The Issue**

A veteran Division I hockey coach for 20 years, Grillo has seen some problematic trends with youth hockey practices that don't involve enough play.

"I think practice needs to look a lot like the game and some aspects need to be more difficult than a game, especially physically and emotionally," Grillo said. "A lot of the practices I see are too static and are too unrealistic for our young athletes to really develop at the pace we'd like to see."

#### **Sizing Up the Solution**

One of the challenges that comes from incorporating play into practice? Maximizing reps, battles, decisions and situations without draining all of the kids' energy. Kids self-regulate their energy during free play at the pond or in any other activity. That can be more difficult in organized practices.

One solution: adjust the playing surface. This lessens the physical toll of practice and gives all players more chances to play.

“Station-based practices can have a lot of game-battling, decision-making and conflict,” Grillo said. “When you try to do things on full ice in practice, you’re stretching the kids physically, but you’re not getting the reps.”

### **Different with Age**

The implementation of play in practice can vary by age group. It all depends on maximizing that work-to-rest ratio.

“I think the older kids, it’s more about the quality of play and making sure things are going the right way,” Grillo said. “With the younger kids, you just let them play and get out of the way and learn through experience.”

Grillo admits that sometimes parents look at “play” or “fun” in a hockey practice as a bad thing. For parents watching from the bleachers, play during a practice may look unusual, disorganized or even unnecessary. However, play and fun are critical to unlocking passion, engagement and internal motivation, especially in young players.

### **Less Travel Games, More Play**

One of the greatest challenges of today’s youth sports culture is the drive for more games, tournaments and travel, which have drastically increased the cost and commitment of participating in all sports.

“I think the competition part of youth sports has taken over the training part of it,” Grillo said. “I don’t think that’s healthy at all.

“I think the games are important and it’s the reason why kids get into it. I think we can make training important and more important than the games.”

One of the best ways to do that is by increasing the amount of play (or small games) within practices.

## **The Results of Play**

“When we watch kids, who come from a healthy environment in practice, they seem more aggressive and competitive,” Grillo said. “They handle adversity better and their decision-making and hockey sense is better.”

Let the kids *play*.

“It’s an absolute no-brainer,” Grillo said. “This is the way we have to train kids. We have to make sure our indoor structured practices look closer to the unstructured environment the older generations are used to.”