



Red, White & Blue Hockey!

The Advantages of Cross-Ice Practicing and Playing

The USA Hockey Red, White, and Blue Puck program is based on a model of practicing and playing hockey across the ice surface as compared to practicing and playing along the full length of the ice surface. This cross-ice practicing and playing model actually has been around for as long as the game has been played. When players played on a pond did they use an ice surface 200 x 85 feet? No, they played in a small area that developed and sharpen their skills without the rules of off-sides, icing, penalties, face-offs, or even positional play. Hockey sense and hockey instincts were developed. This model has been used in many of the leading hockey nations and by the world's best players for a number of years and has stood the test of time. It has been shown that children who begin their hockey training in this environment have an outstanding hockey experience and develop a better base of skills as they progress through our sport.

Practice

For practicing it means that more players are on the ice but the group sizes are smaller. With more players on the ice it reduces the costs for each individual player practicing. This increases the ice usage and the efficiency of the practice by increasing the activity level of the individual player during the practice as their involvement time grows. Time spent waiting in line for the next chance to go is greatly reduced. This increases repetition and learning in any environment involves repetition. Besides, little kids are doers; the more active we can keep them the more enjoyable their experience will be.

In this environment, players have more time with the puck for puck handling, passing and shooting. Drills are designed to focus on multiple skills and situations, increasing puck touches and situational repetition. On top of this the goalkeepers are more involved in the drills and get more shots to stop. Practicing cross-ice and in small area's is beneficial for players of all ages and levels, and they have fun.

In small area drills or cross-ice games, players control the puck in tight situations and will typically have more shots on goal than in any normal drills – all while competing at game pace and having fun! This is a more competitive practice environment and players develop game strategies to make better decisions. Finally it reduces the need for traditional conditioning drills.

Game Play

The key playing benefits of cross ice are that it promotes creativity, creates an environment for self-learning hockey, increases player participation, speeds up the learning process, improves decision making opportunities so the player reads and reacts quicker, maximizes skill learning and development, increases tempo, creates a positive environment and a passion to play.

Many countries and National Associations have now included cross-ice hockey into league play at the Under 10 age group. At any level of play, an average player may only have control of the puck for a few seconds during the course of a game. In a small area game, that same player may have over a minute of puck-possession time over 6-7 shifts in one 10 minute game. One cross-ice game can have the development benefits of 10 -12 full ice games because of the closeness of the players to the puck and constant action.

Parents may ask the question "Why should my child play cross-ice, what will they learn?" and say "I want my child playing on full-ice like the professionals do". In reality, nothing an 8 year old does looks like the game we watch on TV and this is exactly the point, children are not adults, they see the world differently and learn differently to adults. We would never consider having our children at 8 years of age play on a full sized Major League Baseball diamond and try to pitch from 60' away and run to first base 90' away. They play on an appropriately sized little league diamond. When attempting to teach your 8 year old to play golf, you would not have him tee off from the black tees. Soccer uses a smaller ball and reduced size field, basketball uses a smaller ball and lowers the rim. Every other sport downsizes the playing surface and equipment to fit the size and maturity level of the children involved.

This isn't just about the physical skills development of our player but their mental development as well. The full ice game for kids at this age actually makes the play less engaging for the players and reduces the competitiveness of the players involved. Kids quickly learn on the full ice surface that they can't get the puck before the opponent in different situations, so they learn not to try hard all the time. In the cross ice game, players are closer together and

they are much more engaged in the action. The full ice game builds poor competition or effort related habits into our players.

Surgeon General Warning: Full ice hockey at Mites is detrimental to a child's optimal development!

Now let's think about a child trying to skate with a puck from one end of the rink to the other. How long will this take? How much energy will this require? In which situation will the child be more involved in a game? Will the player's decision-making skills be enhanced more in the close action of the smaller cross-ice surface or in the wide-open area of the full-ice surface? In which situation will the child be more involved in the action? To help address these questions, we have countless statistics that show there is really no comparison.

A study of hockey games played on the full-ice surface was originally done by George Kingston in 1976 and has since been replicated numerous times. The original results found the following:

- In a sixty-minute running time hockey game between 6-8 year old children, the average player had possession of the puck for 20.7 seconds.
- Top National Hockey League and international professional players were also timed and no player exceeded 85 seconds of puck possession time.
- In a sixty-minute children's game the actual playing time of the game was 20 minutes and 38 seconds. Taking this into consideration, the individual player is only on the ice every third or fourth shift depending on how many players are on the team, resulting in even less ice time.
- An average of less than 0.5 shots per game for youth players and only 1.5 shots per game for junior and professional players.

The study concluded that:

- For young players in the "full-ice game model" of development, the youngest players would require 180 games and the older youth players would require 80 games to enjoy 60 minutes of actual puck possession time to execute their stick handling, passing, pass receiving and shooting skills.
- Professional and international players would require 60 games to ensure 60 minutes of puck control skill development.
- **Many players never touched the puck in the game, especially in youth hockey.**

There are other augments made by adults who though well meaning simply don't understand. They insist that, "my child needs to learn off-sides, face-offs and their position, and that's why they need to play full ice hockey." At this young age the focus need to be on activity, fun and the internal competition created between players. We need to focus on what the best use of our time and resources for the long term benefit of our kids. The cross-ice small area hockey model places the kids in the appropriate environment.

It takes years to develop hockey skills and while you can teach kids where to line up for face-offs, how not to go off sides and player positions, the time and energy spent doing so comes at a price. What may take weeks to get across to players at age seven can take days or even just a single practice session at nine or ten. We need to sequence what we teach to the kids to maximize the limited ice time we have. The cross-ice and small area environment helps to develop hockey sense or hockey instincts. By starting in on positional play hockey at such an early age, we have developed a population of players that know where to stand, yet can't read, react or make a play, they don't have a sufficient skill set to allow them to advance.

Cross-Ice Program

To help you further understand the benefits of the cross-ice practicing and playing model, some of the advantages are listed below.

PRACTICING

- The children have more energy with which they can improve their skills when they are skating 85 feet across the ice surface as opposed to the 200 feet length of the ice surface.
- Group sizes become smaller which means learning and teaching will become more effective.
- Drills designed according to the varying skill level of players within the group are easier to organize.
- More puck contact, resulting in improved puck control skills.
- More repetition/frequency in drills in one ice session.
- Decision-making skills are enhanced, as more decisions must be made more frequently at a higher tempo.

ACTUAL GAME

- Playing on a smaller rink results in increased puck possession time for each player.
- Individual technical skills develop more quickly.

- Line changes are made quickly since the players are directly beside the playing surface.
- Ice utilization is improved with a reduced number of face-offs which means more playing time for each player.
- Skating skills get more repetitions on the smaller ice surface as players stop, start and change direction more frequently.
- Scoring skills are enhanced since the players have more shooting opportunities.
- The goalkeeper's reading of the game and reaction to changing game situations become more effective.
- More scoring chances equal more repetition for goalkeepers.
- The speed in playing situations increase, which will require quicker mental and physical reactions by the players.
- Due to increased tempo, all of the team members take part in solving the playing situations, which leads to a sharing of responsibilities between players.
- There are no unnecessary breaks in the game (i.e. off-sides, icing).
- The feeling of being an important part of the action increases because of the small size of the rink.
- **Hockey sense and hockey instincts, or understanding the principles of the game, is being developed at a young age.**

GENERAL ORGANIZATION

- More efficient use of ice time and space.
- The size of the rink is in proportion with the size of the players.
- USA Hockey recommends that teams play with two or three units of **four** players and one goalkeeper at 8U, which results in each player having more ice time.
- More ice time for practicing and playing is made available to more teams within a single association.
- Many teams can practice together by sharing the ice surface.

GENERAL SPIRIT OF PARTICIPATION AND FUN

- More children get a chance to be involved in the action.
- More children will experience a feeling of success when playing hockey.
- The same exciting and fun environment as in a "real" game is created.
- More and less gifted children will benefit from close/tight action on the ice.
- Children are excited and motivated to continue playing hockey.
- Hockey will be more appealing and rewarding to a wider range of children and their parents.

References:

IIHF Coaching Program Manuals
USA Hockey Coaching Program

Red, White & Blue Puck - Cross-Ice Game Format (4 Teams)

Make certain that the on-ice instructors are available and ready to go as minimum of 3 coaches are needed on the ice during jamboree; 2 officiate the two games and 1 to organize the practice in the neutral zone. It is suggested that all the coaches participate and help on ice with managers or other adults controlling the resting/bench area. This makes it easier to organize the on-ice activities and player rotation. No penalties should be called but coaches must know rules and be proactive to stop situations from getting out of hand. When an infraction occurs, the coaches can instruct as to proper fair play and respect.

A practice plan should be developed for the neutral zone so that the coaches can start immediately, once the players move into the zone.

Cross-Ice Game Format:

	Zone 1	Neutral Zone	Zone 3
Game 1:	1 v 2	Skating	3 v 4
Game 2:	1 v 4	Puck Handling	2 v 3
Game 3:	1 v 3	Passing	2 v 4

For a 60 minute ice slot, have a quick 5 minute warm-up in the zone where the teams are playing. Then play three 17 minute games with a minute break in between each game.

Player rotation is Game to Practice to Rest

Group your players by ability and try to match lines – best against best, etc...start first game with your first group.

Play 4 v 4 plus a goalie, if possible. For the 6 and Under age group an additional skater can be used as a goalie. Be flexible - if rotation works better to play 3 v 3 a combination can be utilized, i.e. 4 v 4 one shift, 3 v 3 the second shift if it makes rotations even. Teams can even play 5 v 4 or 4 v 3 if it makes your teams rotation smoother or one group is significantly stronger.

For each game, blow horn every 90 seconds for line changes. The clock continues to run while player's change.

Use Face-offs to start each game and after each goal. Do these very quickly and don't worry about all players being lined-up perfectly. Drop the puck & get play going. Another variation to speed the game along even faster, when a goal is scored, have all the players on the scoring team each touch their own teams goal post and then immediately get back into the play. This give the team which was scored upon a chance to dig the puck out and start the play.

Face-offs can also be done to the side if goalie covers puck. Again be very quick and don't worry about all players being lined-up perfectly. Drop the puck & get play going. The tag your own net variation works well in this instance also.

Coaches running the games should have several pucks in their pockets. The idea is to drop the pucks quickly and keep the action going.

The Outcome

- All the principles of the Red, White and Blue puck Program are fulfilled in one event.
- Maximum ice utilization
- Increased activity time for all the players
- Technical skills are taught, practiced, learned and used in games
- Players get to play the game
- Coaches learn to teach
- Everyone is involved
- Fun for all participants

Red, White & Blue Puck - Half-Ice Game Format (4 Teams)

The half ice format can be used when there is a reduced number of coaches, instructors and additional adult help. This format eliminates the extra neutral zone skill work station.

Two coaches are needed on the ice during jamboree; 1 to officiate each of the two games. It is suggested that the coaches participate and help on ice with managers or other adults controlling the resting/bench area. This makes it easier to organize the on-ice activities and player rotation. No penalties should be called but coaches must know rules and be proactive to stop situations from getting out of hand. When an infraction occurs, the coaches can instruct as to proper fair play and respect.

Half-Ice Game Format:

	Zone 1	Zone 2
Game 1:	1 v 2	3 v 4
Game 2:	1 v 4	2 v 3
Game 3:	1 v 3	2 v 4

For a 60 minute ice slot, have a quick 5 minute warm-up in the zone where the teams are playing. Then play three 17 minute games with a minute break in between each game.

Group your players by ability and try to match lines – best against best, etc...start first game with your first group.

Play 4 v 4 plus a goalie, if possible. For the 6 and Under age group an additional skater can be used as a goalie. Be flexible - if rotation works better to play 3 v 3 a combination can be utilized, i.e. 4 v 4 one shift, 3 v 3 the second shift if it makes rotations even. Teams can even play 5 v 4 or 4 v 3 if it makes your teams rotation smoother or one group is significantly stronger.

For each game, blow horn every 90 seconds for line changes. The clock continues to run while player's change.

Use Face-offs to start each game and after each goal. Do these very quickly and don't worry about all players being lined-up perfectly. Drop the puck & get play going. Another variation to speed the game along even faster, when a goal is scored, have all the players on the scoring team each touch their own teams goal post and then immediately get back into the play. This give the team which was scored upon a chance to dig the puck out and start the play.

Face-offs can also be done to the side if goalie covers puck. Again be very quick and don't worry about all players being lined-up perfectly. Drop the puck & get play going. The tag your own net variation works well in this instance also.

Coaches running the games should have several pucks in their pockets. The idea is to drop the pucks quickly and keep the action going.

The Outcome

- All the principles of the Red, White and Blue puck Program are fulfilled in one event.
- Better ice utilization
- Increased activity time for all the players
- Players get to play the game
- Coaches learn to teach
- Everyone is involved
- Fun for all participants

Red, White & Blue Puck - Cross-Ice Game Format (6 Teams)

Make certain that the on-ice instructors are available and ready to go as minimum of 3 coaches are needed on the ice during jamboree; each officiates the one of the three games. It is suggested that the coaches participate and help on ice with managers or other adults controlling the resting/bench area. This makes it easier to organize the on-ice activities and player rotation. No penalties should be called but coaches must know rules and be proactive to stop situations from getting out of hand.

A practice plan should be developed for the neutral zone so that the coaches can start immediately, once the players move into the zone.

Cross-Ice Game Format (6 Teams):

	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Game 1:	1 v 2	3 v 4	5 v 6
Game 2:	1 v 6	3 v 2	5 v 4
Game 3:	1 v 4	3 v 6	5 v 2

For a 60 minute ice slot, have a quick 5 minute warm-up in the zone where the teams are playing. Then play three 17 minute games with a minute break in between each game.

Game rotation: Teams 1, 3, and 5 stay in their zones. Teams 2, 4 and 6 rotate.

Group your players by ability and try to match lines – best against best, etc...start first game with your first group.

Play 4 v 4 plus a goalie, if possible. For the 6 and Under age group an additional skater can be used as a goalie. Be flexible - if rotation works better to play 3 v 3 a combination can be utilized, i.e. 4 v 4 one shift, 3 v 3 the second shift if it makes rotations even. Teams can even play 5 v 4 or 4 v 3 if it makes your teams rotation smoother or one group is significantly stronger.

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- Maximum ice utilization
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