



14U/16U: Why Proper Practice-to-Game Ratios Matter In High Performance Player Development

By: Michael Rand - Special to USA Hockey

Bob Gaudet has more than 25 years of experience as a men's college hockey coach, including the past 17 at Dartmouth College. He also has three children – two boys and a girl – who have risen through the youth ranks to play college hockey at Dartmouth.

There might be a few people in this world more qualified than Gaudet to speak about the importance of practice in hockey and the ideal ratio of practices to games, but there aren't many. He understands that it can be frustrating for parents and youth players at the 14U and 16U levels to have far more practices than games, but Gaudet also knows that, in the end, it is beneficial to do it that way.

USA Hockey's American Development Model recommends somewhere between a 3-to-1 and 2-to-1 ratio of practices to games for 14U (bantam) and 16U (midget) players, accounting for 120 to 130 practices and 40 to 50 games during a nine-month training calendar in which there are four to five ice sessions per week.

In college, teams typically practice four times a week and have two games. The 2-to-1 ratio works at that level, Gaudet says, and it's even more important for younger skaters.

"The ratio is really important. I coached both of my boys in college and I have a daughter who is a freshman in college," he said. "The whole thing about off-ice skill development and on-ice skill development is big. I've had some really good mentors over the course of time, and a good practice ratio, having specific drills to teach the things that apply to games, is essential."

Here are some reasons why and ways to make it possible:

Make Practice Fun

If players dread practices, they are far less likely to take out of them the skills coaches are trying to teach, Gaudet says.

The key, then, is having drills that create competition while also building the necessary skills and stamina players will need in games.

"Even at my level, 18-23 year old guys, you want them to feel good coming to the rink," Gaudet said. "You kind of disguise the skating or play a small game sometime in practice. The whole idea in practice is to help guys develop, so you decrease the space and increase the pace. When you play in small areas, that's good and makes it fun, and it translates to games."

Avoid Burnout

Parents who push too hard for more games are often well-meaning, Gaudet said, but they are also stressing the gratification of a scoreboard result over the healthy development of skills.

That, in turn, can have a dual effect of creating unhealthy competition at an early age while also depriving players of the tools they need to handle game situations. And that's when kids start to quit hockey, he said.

"There are some parents that get frustrated with things and want that immediate result of a game. But as we've seen time and time again, it's the kids who put the game away for a while that come back to the game fresh," Gaudet said. "There is a lot of merit to what USA Hockey is trying to do and has been trying to do."

Late Bloomers Need a Chance

More practice time also allows players who aren't on the fast track to catch up with their peers who might have developed earlier skill-wise or physically.

Games, on the other hand, call for different strategies.

"The really good kids have the puck, and the coaches are pushing the other kids to give those kids the puck because they want to win," Gaudet said. "When you are practicing, it's different. The competitiveness is there, but you don't remember the score. Even the mental skills that are really required in a game are honed in practice – the competitiveness, drive and ability to be resilient."

Those late-bloomers often thrive when given more chances, Gaudet adds.

"I've had a lot of really good players who, over the course of time, were late-bloomers," he said. "Maybe they didn't make their top high school team as sophomores. Some of those kids have gone on to play professionally."

Practice Makes Perfect

In the end, it comes back to an old but simple adage: practice makes perfect – or at least it makes players better prepared.

"We preach preparation," Gaudet said. "Being ready for practice and trying to move toward excellence – making that conscious choice every day. If you're not, you're probably taking a couple steps away from excellence in not being prepared. ... I've seen it from all different facets and I like what USA Hockey is doing."



Tips for Planning & Executing an Effective Practice



Opening Comments:

- Create an environment where players are not afraid to make mistakes – Creativity.
- Players do not know what they don't know.
- You cannot teach a player that is unwilling to learn. Players have responsibility for their own development.
- Look professional – be prepared.
- Strive for low player to coach ratio – allow time to teach details

“Too often the habits players develop in order to be good are the habits that keep them from being great”Tiger Woods

An Effective Practice:

- Is Age Appropriate
- Engages the players – fun, positive, competitive
- Uses proper skill progressions...players cannot learn tactical concepts until they master the technical skills to execute. Some Technical Skills to consider:
 - Skating – skating should become second nature / automatic
 - Puck handling /Puck Protection
 - Passing / Receiving
 - Shooting
 - Body Contact / Angling / Checking
 - Goaltending – do not neglect; include in all skating and puck handling drills; fundamentals.
- Maximize participation – embrace the chaos - high level of activity. **Keep players Moving**
 - Learn **SLOW** – Do not be in a hurry to execute skill(s) improperly. Once skill is learned at slow speed “ramp it up”. Be ready to slow it back down for corrections/adjustments.
- Minimize the “coach speak” – reduce time at white boards. Players learn by doing.
- Deliver a clear message – KISS
- Give positive feedback to your players - success is often in the details; reward good effort.

Characteristics of a Good Drill/Exercise:

- Often has a name
- Requires a very short explanation
- Age appropriate -
- Maximizes player participation / activity – Use station(s) - Keep Players Moving
- Allow encourage players to make decisions – not too structured.
- Modify as needed – do not practice failure
- Incorporate Small Area Games as a teaching tool
- Short Duration / traffic / outcomes & consequences / competitive
- **FUN!!!!!!**

The best part of Disney World is the rides! What is the worst part???
Play is the key to unlocking extended effort

Al Bloomer – USA Hockey Director Emeritus