Small Area Games

Mike Sullivan

Why has there been so much talk in the hockey circles about small games? What are the benefits of these games if we were to incorporate them in the practice environment? In order to answer these questions it is important to step back and try to better understand how the game of hockey is being played. I hear a lot of comments around the rinks about small games and how they are a waste of time; "Hockey is not played across the ice, so why are we doing this with our kids. We should be playing full ice." I believe that one must scratch beneath the surface in order to appreciate the benefits of small games. In order to prepare our players to succeed in games it is important to practice how we play. This is a true statement that has been used as an argument against the use of small area games. I would argue that we should practice how we play in order to prepare our kids to be successful in game situations, and small games is an invaluable tool in that preparation process because a small area game scenario is ***precisely*** how we play.

How is hockey being played today? Hockey is an instinctive game. Instinctive games are games that require players to act on their "instincts" in order to have success. Time is a critical factor involved with instinctive games. Players that are able to recognize opportunity and execute on the recognition in a "timely" manner are at a competitive advantage. If the ***recognition*** of the opportunity is too slow, then the opposing team will react and defend against the opportunity. If the ***execution*** of the hockey play is too slow, then the opposing team will react and defend against the opportunity. Recognition skills are intellectual skills, commonly referred to as "Hockey Sense." Execution skills are the physical skills required to act on the decisions that players make throughout the course of a hockey game. Passing skills, skating skills, and shooting skills are examples of the physical skills. Both intellectual and physical skills need to be developed in order to allow players the best chance to be successful in games.

Hockey is also a game of "time & space." The best players understand this concept of time and space. In order to maintain possession of the puck teams need to have a sound understanding of time and space. Where do I go on the ice in order to offer support to the puck carrier? How close or how far do I need to be to the puck carrier in order to offer proper support? The answers to these questions lie in the understanding of time and space. Where a player decides to go and how close he decides to get to the puck carrier depend a great deal on the opposition. Positioning of opposing players, the amount of pressure on the puck by the opposing team, and the level of puck control are all factors that players will consider in order to make the proper decisions. This information needs to be processed and acted on in seconds or less. Players have to become "instinctive" when processing and acting on this information.

Situations in hockey games never truly occur the same way we draw them up in practice. We, as coaches, would like to make the game black and white. The fact of the matter is that the game, by nature, is Gray. Coaches design system play in order for their teams to be somewhat predictable for one another when playing together. We practice these systems to the point of exhaustion. We give players "roadmaps" on where to go or what

to do in certain situations in an attempt to help our teams be successful. We work diligently on breakouts, defensive zone coverage, neutral zone and offensive zone forechecks. We are all well intentioned in the process of trying to teach our players how to play the game. Sometimes an unexpected bi-product of an over-emphasis on system play is that we condition our players not to think for themselves. In our attempts to make the game black and white for our players we unintentionally condition them not to think the game. Although there is a place in hockey for "systems" depending on the age group and level of play, the very fabric of the game is defined by the "Hockey Decisions" that players make within the framework of system play. These hockey decisions are critical to a team's success and a player's success. These hockey decisions occur because the game is "Gray." Situations never play themselves out in games the same way they do in practice. We can't go back to the huddle and try something new if the previous play didn't work.

The nature of our game is "Instinctive" and "Gray." If this is the way that hockey is being played today, then how de we prepare our players to be successful? What are the necessary skills that players need to develop and possess in order to be successful in games? What is the best way to develop these necessary "game-like" skills? We have defined intellectual skills and physical skills as the tools for success. We have talked a lot about "Decisions." Players make decisions with and without the puck every moment of every game. These "Hockey Decisions" are critical to a player's success and a team's success. We have talked about the concept of time and space and the importance of understanding this concept in order to have success. Small games are an invaluable tool in order to develop these essential intellectual and physical skills. Small games will give players a chance to better understand the concept of time and space. There are no reference points (Hash Marks, Circles, etc…) on the ice to help players get to certain spots. They can't be given a "roadmap." By placing certain conditions on various games (Making rules) players will be conditioned to think the game for themselves in order to take advantage of the conditions of the respective game. Small Games, by nature, are "Gray". They will condition players to think and make "Hockey Decisions" both with and without the puck. Small games will give players an opportunity to develop the necessary physical skills to be successful in games, as well. Players will touch the puck often by nature of the confined space which will develop puckhandling skills. They will have the opportunity to pass and receive. They will develop tight area skating skills that will allow them to create time and space for themselves to make plays. The best benefit of incorporating small games in your practice environment is that they are **FUN**! Kids love to play and compete. They will enjoy coming to practice to **PLAY HOCKEY** not work on drills. Lou Vairo, a well respected USA Hockey Coach and ambassador for USA Hockey says, "We go to the rink to **PLAY** hockey, not **WORK** hockey." Small games are a fun way to develop essential hockey skills where the game becomes the teacher. The players will learn and discover the game through the experience of playing and competing. Research suggests that "experiential" learning is the most powerful way to learn with the longest retention time of what has been taught. Anatoli Tarasov, the famous Russian Coach says, "The greatest gift you can give to your players is to teach them to Coach themselves so that they can act independently of you, the coach."

Incorporating small area games in your practices will go a long way to helping you create the optimal environment for development and fun. Small Games will give the players an opportunity to think the game for themselves. Let's give the game back to the kids! See you at the rink!

*"We go to the rink to **PLAY** hockey, not **WORK** hockey."*

Lou Vairo

USA Hockey Coach and Ambassador