John Russo

Changing how we teach – Part II (/online-edition/russo/1352-changing-how-we-teach-part-ii.html)

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Note: This will be one of the articles (Chapter 4; Effective Practices) in John Russo’s soon to be published new book “Best of Coaches’ Corner - 26 Years.” Watch for it in 2013.

Last week I laid out the reasons why I believe we need to do things differently in practices for our youth teams. This increased self learning (lower coach involvement) philosophy harkens back when kids learned most of their hockey by themselves on outdoor rinks. It was also when individual hand and head skills were better and the youngsters had, I believe, more fun.

I would like to go to any arena for a day and watch Mite, Squirt, PeeWee and Bantam practices that don’t include:

- Grinding skating drills that are obviously for some kind of unknown conditioning.
- Numerous rink-length drills that wear players out but teach little.
- Push-ups at the end of practices on the ice. At $200/hour ice, these are better done off the ice.
- Many youngsters standing around waiting in lines most of the time.

The following are more zone shinny games that I have found successfully teach many aspects of the game and skills — as well as pace/intensity and competitiveness.

- Drill #4: 3-on-3 ice – in zone

  - Variation A (basic)

    - There is nothing fancy about this drill, except that it has many variations. It has more length for passing — and involves both goaltenders. It also has board play on one side.

    - The players form the blue line boundary and bump the puck back into the zone. If it goes out the coach shoots another in.

    - Again, many skills are involved: stickhandling, passing, shooting, etc., as well as man-on-man coverage and other strategies/concepts.

    - Due to the increased length, the transitioning game can be stressed.
• I like to pull the goals out three or four feet so the puck can go behind them.
  
  – Variation B (crunch down)
• Everything the same except, the “top” side gets crunched down to the top of the circle.
• Less room demands more stickhandling and passing skills.
  
  – Variation C (nets in corner crunch down)
• Everything the same except now the nets are put in the corners at a 45-degree angle and the top crunches down to the dots (or even the bottom of the circle).
• This just makes everything tighter and the game becomes very much along the boards play – players learn to use the boards and play along them.
  
  – Variation D (fun nets)
• There is a big change here since the nets are placed back to back (facing opposite direction) at the middle of the ice.
• The zone is stretched back out to the blue line.
• This is more of a fun drill for variety.

- Drill #5: Points (this is a very popular drill!)
• This drill is basically a 5-on-5 scrimmage in one end zone. Players not involved work on personal skill improvement at the other end or do 3-on-3 tag up, other end.
  
  With each group, three pucks are faced-off on each side faceoff dot. The offensive team gets one point for each shot on net and five points for each goal scored.
• The defensive team gets one point every time they clear the puck out of the zone and three points each time they move the puck out of the zone under control.
• Lines rotate around so each gets six chances for offense and slot chances for defense; defensemen rotate and alternate as offense and defense.
• The points aspect of the drill gives each team a chance to strategize; to maximize shots (on offense) and to move or clear the puck on defense, depending upon score.
• The centers get many faceoffs and faceoff coverages and strategies can be developed. The coaches can counsel with three-person teams and defense between rotations to help them improve, but basically they spend most of the time dropping pucks and keeping score. The coaches are the referees and scorekeepers. The game belongs to the players!

Drill #6: 3-on-2 in-zone (35-7 drill)
• Again, a very basic drill with many variations. The drill should last 30-40 seconds.
• The basic format is simply one line versus a defense pair. The forwards are always on offense. The coach keeps passing in pucks when the line scores or the defense clears the zone.
• It teaches forwards offensive zone play and defensemen defensive zone play.
• The coach should change the rules often; new rules to include:
  
  - Forwards must pass the puck within 2 or 3 seconds. This encourages better support by linemates and also forces puck holder to keep the head up.
  
  - Defense cannot dump the puck out of the zone. Must carry or pass to partner to work it out. This encourages defensemen to get their feet moving and look for openings to skate or pass.
  
  - Forwards must cycle (three passes minimum) before shots can be taken.
• The coach allows 30-35 seconds for the drill to develop; then whistles and passes another puck in to a forward and they then have seven seconds to get a shot on the net. One pass and a shot is all there is time for.
Drill #7: 3-on-3 in zone

- This drill adds a center working with the defensemen to make the situation very much like a game. The forwards are always on offense.
- Again cycling is a good addition by the offense if the lines are ready for it.
- The variation includes adding two defensemen (to the offense) after 15-20 seconds, then the two wings (to the defense) after another 15-20 seconds.

Drill #8: 3-on-2 at the net

- This game is very tough on the goaltenders. It is a very intense drill and very close to the net.
- The coach, with six pucks, stands at the hash marks. One line and one defense pair jockey for position in front of net. The coach feeds pucks into the feet or to the forwards and the battle is on.
- As pucks go away from the immediate area, the coach calls “pucks coming” and dumps another one in. Six pucks will generally create a 15-20 second game.
- It teaches tough play at the net for offense and defense.
- Players generally like it.

Drill #9: 2-on-1 or 3-on-2 off side boards

- I like to run 2-on-1’s and 3-on-2’s off the side boards from various positions on the ice. I very seldom will do them full ice because they don’t happen that way in games.
- My favorite position for starting these drills is in the neutral zone anywhere between the two blue lines. The two (or three) forwards swing out and across the ice and the defense go out at the same time. I generally make the passes myself or have an assistant do it. These competitive drills are freewheeling and are required to be at fast pace. The players are encouraged to try new moves and strategies (crossing, drop passes, center stopping with wings breaking, turn backs along the boards, etc.). When the forwards feed out from the side boards, they must be conscious of timing as well.
- These drills can be conditioning too, if the start rate is increased so there is little time in-between.
- The primary variation to the 2-on-1 is run out of the offensive corner and is a simple in-zone 2-on-1 attack on the net. This can be done out of both corners or all four corners at once if double teams are on the ice.
- I very much like the 2-on-1 (especially) and occasionally the 3-on-2 for learning and development. Mastering the 2-on-1 is the basic to our game. I believe that players need a great amount of repetition and spirited, fast-paced competition to get good at anything. Off of the side boards, players can get 15 or more good 2-on-1 experiences in 10 minutes.

John Russo, Ph.D., is founder and director of the Upper Midwest High School Elite League. He was a captain at the University of Wisconsin, and his Coaches’ Corner columns have appeared in LPH since 1986.