

Running Effective Practices and Drills

“How you practice is how you play.” The quality of a team’s practices will determine the quality of the athletes’ skills, conditioning, and mental preparation as well as team tactics and strategy. Running effective practices and drills is one of the most important aspects of coaching. Good performance in games is the result of good practices, which require careful planning and hard work from you, the coach, and dedication and motivation from the athletes. You need to develop weekly, monthly, and season plans that outline the team’s practice sessions and identify the drill progressions that will be used throughout the season.

Planning the Practice

You need flexibility in designing your team’s practices. Each practice is one part of the total season plan. Every practice should include working on individual skills (technical), team play and systems (tactical), and conditioning. In addition, the strategy aspect of the game should be addressed in practices, especially with older athletes. Also allow time in each practice to work on weaknesses and problems that have arisen in past games or practices. The following list provides some guidelines to consider in designing your practices.

Guidelines for Designing and Running Effective Practices

- Have a weekly, monthly, and season plan for the general progression of skills and team play.
- Set goals and objectives for each practice. Make sure your players, assistant coaches, and support staff are aware of these goals and are involved in the planning process.
- Plan your practices to suit the age and skill level of your players.
- Progress from basic skill practices to more complex and challenging practices.
- Have a good progression from practicing skills to working on team play in each practice.
- Teach new skills and new drills early in practice.
- Make practice and drills applicable to game situations.
- Keep all players active and include the goaltenders in all drills.
- Give clear and concise instructions throughout the practice.
- Make sure you have the players' attention when you are speaking, and maintain eye contact with the players. Position the players in the best formation to hear you speak (usually a U formation).
- Explain and demonstrate skills and drills clearly. Have the players begin the drills quickly after the demonstration.
- Don't talk too long. One to two minutes at a time is enough for explanations of skills and drills.
- Use all of the ice surface if possible.
- Use smaller groups when working on individual skills so that the players can have more repetitions.
- Involve your assistant coaches in all aspects of the practice.
- Observe, evaluate, and give feedback throughout the practice. Assistant coaches should also be involved in this process.
- Be positive and upbeat. Greet your athletes using their first names before or at the start of practice. Early in the practice, use verbal communication more frequently to show enthusiasm and to establish a good rapport.
- Include a warm-up and cool-down in each practice. The warm-up should include general skating and dynamic stretching (slow movements to fast movements), and the cool-down should include static stretching (slow movements that are held for 30 seconds at the end point).
- Before the practice, have the players do individual stretching off ice to save on ice time.
- Use conditioning drills at or near the end of each practice.
- Stop a drill if you observe a general error or a lack of effort.

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- Explain new drills before practice if you want to save on ice time.
- Include a fun drill in each practice.
- Place a rink board on the side-board glass for on-ice instruction.
- Have between 40 and 50 pucks available for each practice.
- If time permits, have certain players work on specific skills with the assistant coaches after the formal practice ends.
- Evaluate each practice with the assistant coaches and team leaders when finished.
- Demand excellence.

Types of Practice and Practice Structure

Before determining which type of practice to conduct on specific days, know the amount of ice time available for each practice, the number of practices per week, and the ratio of practices to games. Ideally, each practice should last 1

to 1.5 hours. Professional, junior, and college teams usually have 2 hours of ice time available to them, but at lower levels, a team may have only 1 hour. In some situations, two teams may even have to share an hour of ice time. Schedule your practices accordingly. If you can't fit all the skills into one practice, spread them over the practices for the week, or even the month.

A Typical Practice

A typical practice should include work on skill development, team play, and conditioning. For younger age groups (under 10 years old), the team should focus more on the basic skills of skating, passing, shooting, and puck control, with less emphasis on team systems. Teams with older players still work on fundamentals but should spend more time on game situations and team play than the younger age groups. Practices can include the following:

- Individual skills and techniques
- Offensive play
- Defensive play
- Special teams (power play, penalty killing, face-offs)
- Conditioning
- Having fun

Here is an example of the sequence of activities in a typical practice. A variety of drills for each skill can be performed. And, as mentioned before, depending on the amount of time you have and the age group you're coaching, you may not be able to cover everything in a single practice. But remember, each practice should include stretching and one individual and team warm-up drill at the start, and a fun drill or game toward the end. And always make time for your players to cool down.

1. Dressing room dynamic stretching and instruction
2. Individual warm-up—skating, passing, puck control, and dynamic stretching
3. Team warm-up—full ice with shooting
4. 1v1
5. 2v1
6. 2v2
7. 3v1
8. Breakouts
9. Positional skills—forwards, defense, goalies
10. Scrimmage
11. Fun—conditioning relay
12. Cool-down—including a group discussion with the coach and static stretching

Theme Practices

With high-level teams that have many practices, you can design “theme” practices. For example, a theme practice may focus only on offensive play, defensive play, or special teams.

- **Offensive Practice.** In an offensive practice, the team would focus on quick puck movements, passing, receiving, shooting, scoring goals, going to the net, breakouts, and various offensive situations. The practice would be high tempo and would include little defensive resistance, such as in 2v1 and 3v1 drills with regroup and neutral zone counters. This gives players the space to execute offensive skills without resistance (resistance is added in other practices that focus on defensive tactics).
- **Defensive Practice.** In a defensive practice, the team would focus on forechecking, backchecking, defensive zone play, and defensive team play. For teams that practice daily, this type of practice is usually used once a week. A defensive practice may also be conducted when a team has displayed poor defensive play and must focus on this specific aspect of the game.
- **Special Teams Practice.** Special teams practice is extremely important in today’s game because referees call more obstruction penalties. The day before a game is often a good time to focus on power plays and penalty killing because this type of practice is usually not exhausting. If practice time is limited, this aspect of the game should be included in a regular practice.

Other types of practices are fun-only practices (with special games) and simple (no-brainer) practices. The simple type of practice is a good choice after tough games—the practice is short and includes basic, fast-moving, noncomplicated drills. These kinds of practices aren’t used often, but they can give players a chance to take it easy when necessary.

You need to decide what aspects are to be emphasized in each practice. The weekly, monthly, and season plans should be the guide to well-designed practice sessions.

Designing and Using Effective Drills

The development and implementation of appropriate drills are the keys to effective practices. And since drills are the primary tool a coach has to help players practice and perfect important skills techniques, good drills are paramount. To help athletes improve their individual skills and team play, select the most effective drills and place them in the proper order within the practice plan. Your ability to do this will determine the team’s level of success. Below is a common and effective teaching progression to help you choose and then implement drills into your practices. There are drills in this book that address

each of the skills and strategies listed. Pick drills that focus on each area below in the order provided. Drills focusing on basic skills and fundamentals should be at the beginning of practice as they are most important. Then progress towards more advanced drills, as illustrated. As previously mentioned, younger players, just starting out, should focus almost entirely on the basics, like skating, puck control, passing, and shooting. For older, more advanced players, you can incorporate drills that develop offensive and defensive zone play and power play and penalty killing strategies.

- Skating
- Puck control
- Passing and receiving
- Shooting
- Checking
- Goaltending
- Breakouts
- Regroups
- Offensive zone play
- Defensive zone play
- Power play
- Penalty killing
- Face-offs

Clearly explain or demonstrate the drill you are using to work on a skill. You can demonstrate or give instruction on how to perform drills during the practice before each drill and during skill practice. Some coaches prefer to explain drills before practice begins, especially with older athletes. Keep instructions brief in order to maximize ice time and activity during practice. To communicate effectively, remember the KISS principle: “Keep it simple and specific.” After you demonstrate the skill, the athletes should practice the skill immediately. Athletes can practice the skill alone, in pairs, or in groups, depending on the drill.

Also remember that athletes need to know how they are doing in their efforts to learn skills. Provide specific feedback during and after the practice of a skill. As the athletes practice the skill, you and coaching assistants should circulate among the athletes, giving feedback and correction. Group corrections can be given on common errors. In most cases, feedback should be positive, emphasizing correct movements and helping athletes correct or refine incorrect movements. Athletes learn more quickly in a positive environment.

The drills used for practicing the skills should be challenging and as game-like as possible. If there is a large difference in skill levels within a team, you may want to match players of similar skill levels in practice. If the difference in skill level on a team is small, this type of matching is not necessary.

Following are some guidelines for the development of drills:



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Guidelines for Developing and Using Effective Drills

- Drills should be suitable to the age, skill level, and physical maturity of the players.
- Drills should have a specific purpose and should meet the objectives of the practice.
- Drills should relate to the skills used in the game.
- Drills should follow a progression moving from simple to complex.
- Drills should challenge the skill level of each player.
- As much as possible, drills should be interesting, competitive, and fun.
- Drills should be designed to get maximum participation from all the players.
- Drills should have an optimal number of repetitions for each player. For drills used to work on basic skills, you may need to divide the players into smaller groups so that each player gets more repetitions.

- Explain each drill clearly and demonstrate how the players should practice the skill. The explanation and demonstration should take no longer than two minutes.
- When you are explaining the drill, the players should be positioned so that each player has a clear view of you.
- Drills should be varied and innovative. Have a series of drills and a variety of drills to accomplish the same purpose (for example, two-on-one, three-on-two).
- With older athletes, you may be able to combine several skills in the same drill (for example, one-on-one combines with a two-on-two backcheck drill).
- You and your assistant coaches should give individual feedback and encouragement to the players during each drill.
- Give each drill a name. After using a drill a number of times, you can save time by quickly putting the players into the drill simply by calling out the name of the drill (without explaining and demonstrating each time).
- You can introduce and explain new drills in the dressing room to save time on the ice, especially for teams with limited practice time.
- Do most drills at a high, gamelike tempo.
- Do the drills correctly. When you observe major errors or a lack of effort, stop the drill and correct the errors for the group. The drill can then be restarted.
- Each drill should have a clearly stated purpose.
- Drills should have a conditioning effect facilitated by intense work followed by rest for each repetition.
- Drills should follow a progression that flows from one skill to the next (for example, two-on-one followed by three-on-one, and so on).
- Drills should be run for an optimal amount of time (usually five to eight minutes). The drills should be long enough for an appropriate number of repetitions, but they should not be too long because the players' attention and intensity will diminish.
- Use all of the ice surface for each drill to maximize participation.
- Evaluate the success of the drills after each practice.
- Be flexible. A drill may not be working because it is too complex or wasn't explained correctly. When this occurs, you might have to change or improvise a drill during the practice.
- If the practice turns out to be too long or too short, you might need to add or remove a drill from the practice plan.

Remember, effective drills should lead to improvement in the players' individual skills and team play. The key to good, well-planned practices is your ability to design and implement effective, progressive, and interesting drills.