

Using half-ice, fewer games and more practise time a plus for kids, says developmental guru George Kingston

Jason Gregor, Edmonton Journal (2013)

George Kingston started his coaching career going on 50 years ago — in 1968 at the University of Calgary — but the man considered one of Canada’s best developmental coaches still keeps giving back to hockey at age 74.

One thing the hockey man with the long resume and career is - a proponent of on the ice and keeping things short — particularly with developing and coaching young hockey players.

“When I went over to Europe to study the game, I noticed right away that the Europeans were developing much more skill into their players simply because they practice more,” said Kingston, who was part of Hockey Canada for more than a decade and had different roles with the 1980, 1984, 1988 and 1994 Olympic teams.

“But their practices were more like small period games, and mini games and mini challenges, competitions to get faster, to be better with the puck, to be able to shoot faster, to be more accurate, all of those things were done in practice. They spent no time on systems.

“Their practice ratio for kids was up to five practices with no games, and maybe an occasional game. They didn’t really need games because what they did in practice emulated a game, in fact it was much better because the kids touched the puck more often.”

Hockey Edmonton announced early this year that the majority of pre-novice and novice practices will be on half ice. Atom teams will have eleven practices on half-ice while peewee teams will have seven. I was amazed at how many parents felt this would hamper their child’s development.

Why should kids between the ages of 5-10 be playing and practicing on the same sized ice surface as pro hockey players? It makes little sense to me. If we want our kids to improve their skills they need to practice more often. According to Kingston, Canada is starting to realize this.

“In 1971, Canada’s model was basically that there would be three games for every practice,” said Kingston, the San Jose Sharks’ first head coach and a former assistant coach with the Minnesota North Stars and the Calgary Flames. “Hockey Canada now recommends, thankfully, through the long term player development plan, basically one game to every one practice.

“We’re still behind the Europeans in the sense that they do a lot of shrinking the game, changing the game to a lot of small area games to help kids develop their skills quicker. We

have to meet kids on their terms and their development level much more readily than we have in the past.”

One of the biggest complaints I’ve heard about half-ice practices is that they will hamper a young player’s skating abilities. Once again, Kingston was quick to shoot down that theory.

“When you do skate competitions you are really most interested in acceleration and agility skating,” he said. “The flat-out use of maximum skating in the game of hockey, it simply doesn’t happen very often. What does happen is that you have to be adjusting, changing, going forward, backward, lateral, always turning and moving toward the puck; that’s agility skating. Practices in smaller areas generate more stops, starts, turns and, most importantly, more puck touches.”

The most important aspects of hockey are skating and puck control. Kingston outlined how practicing and playing games on a smaller surface will improve young player’s skating, but also their puck-handling skills.

It is crazy how infrequently kids actually touch the puck in a game, Kingston informed me.

“In the late 1970s, while at the U of C, we did a study on entry-level players all the way up to the Calgary Cowboys (the former WHA team),” Kingston said. “The average time that a Cowboys player had possession of the puck to stick handle, to pass, to shoot, or even touching the puck when they were trying to get possession was only 47 seconds a game.

“For kids eight years of age and younger, who played on the full-sized rink, they had between 15.3 to 20.7 seconds of actual contact with the puck or puck possessions.”

That means the average player would need to play 60 games just to handle the puck for twenty minutes.

Hockey Edmonton made a great decision implementing half-ice practices. Kids will touch the puck more often, and their skating; stops, starts and turns should improve, if coaches implement proper drills.

According to Kingston, the best drill coaches can use is a simple one: keep-away.

“Play keep-away for 20-30 seconds,” he said. “Blow the whistle and let the other player start with the puck. It is the basics of hockey. You have the puck, or I have the puck.”