



The Great Transition:

Squirt to Pee Wee Hockey;
Passing, Checking, Puck
Protection and Team Play.

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1. Introduction and Purpose

Many players, parents and coaches have experienced the frustration that comes when they move from Squirts to Pee Wees for many this is a “Great Transition.” Hockey is a game which requires the development of multiple skills in order to enjoy the game at its fullest potential. Many coaching manuals and materials support and encourage the development of individual skills exclusively. The Squirt Player can exhibit wide differences in skill and capability, even those who are participating within competitive programs will demonstrate great differences in skating, shooting, stick handling, and passing.

These differences create an environment within our games for non team play, and single player domination on the ice. Many coaches and parents whose focus is on winning rather than development at the Mite and Squirt levels support this environment. This idea and type of hockey ideology is counter productive to learning all aspects of the game. Players transitioning from Squirt to Pee Wee experience tremendous frustration due to lack of key skills and many leave hockey due to this frustration. Passing is one of the skills that is overlooked by many who hold to more traditional hockey coaching and the result is that many players are not developed passers when they reach the Pee Wee level. Squirt and Mite teams compensate with single player dominant play and thus have great difficulty making the transition to the Pee Wee hockey skill level.

The purpose of this thesis is to propose that team play elements should be introduced into the Squirt development for second year Squirts and the introduction of team play drills using small games to encourage the creation of 2 on 1 and 3 on 2 situations within the offensive zone within actual games. In addition, practice plans and or clinics for physical play should be introduced to first year Pee Wees involving the correct way to apply and accept checks, and the true purpose of checking within the game of hockey, (creating time and space for other teammates.)

It is critical that all of these skills other than checking, be introduced prior to Pee Wee game play, and skills such as team play, puck protection, positioning and passing receive a major focus in order that practice time is not wasted during the first year of Pee Wee play. Too many coaches who have played youth or high school hockey continue to use the patterns that they learned 10 to 20 years ago in skill progression, which is the old North American style of skills training and they do not follow the current recommended USA Hockey guidelines for skill introduction.

The added elements to hockey in the transition from Squirts to Pee Wee are the following: body checking and the slap shot; **only two new elements to the game.** It is surprising that these additional elements would have such an impact on the game; the best comparison in another sport that I can make is football. If all football was taught and played in the flag football format, speed would become the complete emphasis for the coaches, because physical “one on one” battles would no longer be important. Football would soon be transformed into soccer where physical contact is discouraged. The players and those who excelled in the game would change. All players would look and perform like wide receivers.

But Pee Wee hockey and beyond is not like soccer or flag football. It is very different, and checking creates the environment where physical dominance does have a major affect. We do not introduce checking until Pee Wees due to safety concerns. Checking is a major element in the game of hockey and where physical battles exist, size, strength and SPEED will matter.

The comparison of flag football still does apply, when we teach and train at the Mite and Squirt levels, it is necessary that the elements which are supported by checking later as Pee Wee skills are taught and reinforced within the game. Doing this creates a much better transition for the new Pee Wee player.

How We Teach Kids to Play Hockey

The skill requirements listed for Squirts and Mites are as follows:

1. Skating
2. Passing
3. Catching
4. Shooting
5. Offense
6. Defense
7. Goaltending

Skating is obviously the first skill of hockey. The better the skating ability of the player the more fun the player has in the game. With other sports running is taken for granted, and parents don't have to spend hundred's of dollars and hundred's of hours teaching

their kids to run in order to participate in sports, but in hockey this is not the case and the focus from the very beginning is skating. With Mites it is the principle focus and Coaches labor to teach skating while at the same time providing for the fun that is necessary for five and six year olds.

The theme that parents as well as coaches should remember is that children all develop at INDIVIDUAL rates that are specific to their genetics. Most children all end up at the same place physically as they reach adulthood, but each child has a unique path. The Super Star Mite isn't always the Super Star Midget, or Division One player.

2. Squirt Hockey the Reality

The challenge in every hockey program is the battle between the parent who wants to win and coaches who want to teach. From the parent's perspective, Hockey is like every sport and activity, and winning is the focus. Whether it is T-Ball, Basketball, Football or Soccer, winning is the focus, because winning means that we are successful in that sport. But, as most NHL Head coaches will tell parents, Ken Hitchcock, specifically, "only NHL Coaches and players, and those who play at the Junior and College levels are paid to win." "Winning is their goal, and you lose your job if you don't win." Hockey as a sport is all together different when compared with other sports. The reason it is different is that it takes years of development and skills training to be good at the game. What takes months to learn in other sports, takes years in hockey. Exceptional athletes rise to excellence routinely in other sports like basketball, soccer and football, some being to introduced to the sport in their last year of high school. This could never happen with hockey. Most, if not all high-level players within the game have history's that span years of development and years of training.

Transition and skill development must be staged and layered to support all hockey skill acquisition by the Mite and Squirt players within your association. The new skill sequence and recommendation by USA Hockey will accelerate development of skills and create the significant environment for learning that will allow players to thrive within the game.

In Squirts we see over and over again, player “one” passes to player “two”, player “two” out skates everyone and goes in for the shot, if the opposing team has their own player “two” the same pattern will continue, with players skating the length of the ice going in for the shot. Parents are elated especially if they win, and player two is a good shot. The better teams have more player “two’s”. The elite teams have faster player “two’s”, the more player two’s the more successful the team. Without physical contact within the game of hockey, strategies and success are different from full contact check hockey. Thus, the learning progression of “old school” hockey as taught today, is actually teaching two separate games, which slows skill development and supports bad habits within the game.

3. The Development Curve

Hockey Skills are the reason that Hockey as a sport differs from any other sport. Basketball, Baseball, Football and Soccer are sports in which player can become skillful in months. Hockey Skills require years for mature development. The number of skills necessary to play hockey when compared to other sports could be measured as three to four times more than any major sport. In addition, hockey requires every player to

participate fully. In other sports there are skilled positions, and unskilled positions, i.e. offensive lineman, vs. a quarterback or wide receiver in football. There is no end of the batting order in hockey.

With so many skills to teach and learn, the key for coaches is to remember that all children develop differently. The skillful Mite or Squirt may fall behind later in development at Pee Wee and Bantam levels. The goal of every coach should be to strengthen the weaknesses of every player and continuously support the idea of confidence in their players. Players who have developed skills through progression from Mite to Bantam can place more focus on hockey sense, they have a superior foundation to learn team play and system play.

The key to the success of a coach for a team and individual players for skill progression is to establish goals: Team Goals and Player Goals. It is tremendous work, but it will be the difference in your teams overall success. When we reach, we attain and achieve beyond average and find untapped resources from within ourselves.

Hockey is a team sport, and the weakest line mate will affect a team's success, therefore the more successful teams have players where every player has mastered the basic hockey skills.

The developmental curve is a path, and progression on that curve related directly to hard work, education and practice. The unique aspect of hockey is the number of skills that are set on the path, and are required in order to play the game well. Coaches should find

ways to incorporate the development of multiple hockey skills while they continue to emphasize the foundational hockey skill of skating.

4. Hockey, so many skills, so little time.

Hockey at one time was a game learned on a pond, or a backyard rink. Hours and hours of ice time to polish hand eye coordination, and transition skating. Pucks had to be controlled or lost in some snow bank until spring. Pond hockey and backyard rinks with limited ice size prevented full ice skating and forced players to focus on stick skills.

With the creation of more and more official sized rinks, player's time to free skate and develop individual skills has lessened dramatically. Ice practices as a result have become more structured and organized. Hockey is a game of skill and creativity. With only one-hour, blocks of ice-time to practice, individuality is eliminated and skill development is reduced to long lines and regulated effort.

In addition, coaches in general are relying on previous experiences in their coaching and playing. What worked 10 years ago, will not be competitive today. Full ice drills of the past, don't teach the main aspects of the game, puck control, fast stops and starts, stick handling in traffic and passing; one dimensional drills won't allow players to progress at a competitive rate. In order to accelerate skill development coaches should look for drills that provide multi-skill development within each drill.

Most coaches can skate pretty well, and so we see practices where we skate and skate with no pucks, no puck control, skating end to end, and these coaches have forgotten that

their skating skills came from their practices as youth and their stick skills as youth came from the pond or the backyard.

We must create the pond and backyard environment within our practices to get the stick skills back into the developmental curve of our hockey-training program. The solution to these methods is to introduce multiple small ice practice zones.

Small Ice Practice Zone Ingredients for Success:

1. Small Games Trained Coaches, Head and Assistants.
 - a. Four coaches in each practice.
 - b. Coaches must understand and require high effort by players.
2. High intensity drills timed by coaches.
 - a. **Timed drills, force effort and increase intensity.**
3. Drills should build upon each other, supporting skill development.
4. **Inject competition into every drill.**
5. Drill understanding, and drill goals must be understood.
6. Team skill level will dictate time requirements for small ice zones.

Using the small ice zone practice program will accelerate skill development, why?

The environment for development of skills is very similar to pond hockey with the added advantage of coaching, and drill goals for skill development. The key to small ice zone drills is to use organized ice time more efficiently. Long lines and full ice skating promote holding back and reinforce slower play, and provide the environment for less discipline and greater mediocrity.

The key to the success of this process is the understanding of the coaching staff of what the objectives are in small ice multiple skill practices. The layered progression of multiple skills with added discipline of an up-tempo rigorous activity coupled with clear objectives will create acceleration in skill development. In addition to accelerated skill development being accomplished, it will allow the players to inject their own creativity into game situations. "Great hockey, is great skills, coupled with athletics' and great creativity."

5. Skill Development and Star Player Play.

In the younger hockey levels, players all develop differently and many times an elite player that may have unique physical attributes at these levels can and do exist. The key as a coach is not to allow these players to dominate play in the skill development portions of the team's practices. A common occurrence is for the team to lean on these players, which then will slow the team's development. Coaches need to find ways to use the talent of the elite youth player as the standard for the rest of the team. Remember the first four skills that should be developed:

1. Skating
2. Passing
3. Catching
4. Shooting

Small games again come into play; coaches can create individual challenges with small games to challenge all players within the team. Two on one situations and special circumstances will allow the coach to push every player to the next level. The focus in practice is to accelerate the speed of the drills to push the players individually beyond

their comfort zones and the elite youth player can assist the coach in accomplishing this goal.

Expect mistakes, if players are not making mistakes they are not taking chances and are not improving. The important metric is to have a standard for a level of play and constantly drive beyond that standard for the age group that you are coaching. The Elite Youth Player is an advantage for your team not only in winning, but also in skill development if you use them correctly to build skill upon skill.

6. The Transition!

First year Pee Wee's all experience the same challenges, team play and physical contact.

Introduce checking immediately, because using the proper technique will eliminate the high potential for injury. Squirt play can be dominated by individual play and with the introduction of physical contact, passing and catching now become equal to skating at the Pee Wee level and drills that support those skills must be the focus for the Pee Wee coach.

There are thousands of drills, but coaches should look for drills that support team play and multiple passes before scoring. Small games, and dry land drills with that focus on hand eye coordination will accelerate the development of the first year Pee Wee.

System play will also be helpful when teaching attack triangle offense approaches, providing players a better understanding of offensive use of ice. However, as with all things in hockey sequential skill development will incorporate systems and

offensive/defensive concepts, supported again by multiple skills built into the training process in learning these systems.

The key to success in this transition is to understand your team's strengths and build upon them appropriately. It is very helpful to measure each player and support the development each player. USA Hockey provides excellent tools in measuring skills of individual players, and measuring with the proper setting of goals will support the acceleration process of skill development. Everyone tends to practice those skills that we do well, the kid with the strong slap shot, will be seen hitting slap shots, while ignoring stick skills. Coaches should provide the assessment to each player to eliminate their weaknesses.

With all of this to consider, the focus should remain on fun for the players. Many parents depending on level of play will have the dream of future success for their child in hockey. Seeing their child checking using a slap shot and playing full contact hockey can cause unnecessary pressure from the parent to the child. Many studies have shown that Pee Wee's is the highest level of participation within USA Hockey and that many players leave the game because parents and coaches ruin the experience for their children. Pee Wee's are just beginning to enter into the process of puberty. Their actual adult size, strength, height and speed are still very much a mystery. Coaches or parents who measure children within this age group negatively are being unfair and do not have the hockey player's best interest at heart. What did Chris Pronger, Darian Hatcher, or Brett Hull look like at 12-13 years of age? Some were chubby, and some were thin. What mattered most is that they loved hockey and they continued to love it through puberty and beyond. Our jobs as coaches and parents are not to end the love of the game or promote

the destruction of a kid's self-image. Fun should always be the focus; Pee Wee's is still very much a developmental level of hockey.

7. Squirt to Pee Wee

A. SIZE DOES MATTER

With checking and direct body contact, strength and size will make a difference. Speed and quickness is a necessary requirement, but with the age of Pee Wee player, some may be well on their way into puberty. Puberty creates extra weight, strength and speed. The challenge for some kids is that they may be late bloomers. For the coach at the Pee Wee level, they have to consider the safety of the game play. Pee Wee players could range approximately from 60 lbs to 170 or more lbs. The level of Pee Wee play should take into consideration the sizes of the player in order to prevent injuries. We have weight limits in developmental football, and with no restriction in hockey, coaches should consider and safety of players at various levels of competition.

B. ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT AND PROPER EXPECTATIONS.

With the tremendous size differential at the Pee Wee age, coaches must set proper expectations for kids. Adolescent development is variable, and can range from 11 years to 14 years. This time for most children, boys in particular, this is one of the more difficult periods in their life. Many will grow 12 to 18 inches in height and will gain 30 to 50 lbs in body weight during this period. This is not the time to allow discouragement or a lack of confidence to take a player out of hockey. **Players, who have spent most of their lives learning to skate, stick handle and shoot will for the first time experience what there true potential is as youth players**

C. SUPPORT FOR ALL BODY TYPES.

It is critical for coaches to encourage continued participation in hockey through this difficult phase of childhood to adolescent development. Sports in general can be a very positive tool to help assist a youth player to transition through this very difficult time in life.

Those who are slow get faster, and those who are small get bigger. Encouragement should be the theme at this time for the Pee Wee player. Our number one goal as coaches as other than skill development should be confidence in each of the players. Confidence in all aspects of life comes from self-discipline and to adhering to morals or standards and the accomplishment of goals. Regardless of the athlete's ability, the ingredients for life's success can be applied and supported by how we coach.

8. New Elements to the game: Checking and Systems.

The process of development in hockey is the separation of players based on age and skill level: Mites, Squirts, Pee Wees, Bantams and Midgets. We recognize the developmental limits of each age group, and the move from Squirts to Pee Wees is a major step. As discussed earlier the focus in the Mite and Squirt levels is primarily skating and puck control. An acceleration of skill development is accomplished when coaches' use drills which require the use of multiple hockey skills in the drill and use the "Small Game" concept with skill objectives set within each drill.

At the Pee Wee level, all elements of hockey are introduced, and all required skills can and should be developed. The youth player, who began at the Mite level, should now experience greater satisfaction and enjoyment within the game.

Hockey is a game of time and space. Players are constantly trying to develop situations where they have the space and time to make a play; checking can create this space and time. In addition, checking provides an element of intimidation on the ice. Whereas in non-checking programs, size and strength are minimized, checking introduces one on one battle's where strength, size and speed will make a difference within those battles.

Checking creates a new element in the game, "2 second wrestling matches", and the one with the puck at the end of the "2 second match" wins. This element alone, is why size should be a consideration when selecting teams and playing levels. Many associations have larger skilled players play at an A level, with the smaller equally skilled players playing at a B level. It is important to remember that Pee Wee is still a developmental level and that we as coaches are trying to build confidence and an opportunity for learning. Kids want to be able compete, and being demoralized will push kids out of programs to other sports.

System play brings a higher level to the Pee Wee player. Creativity is one of the beautiful elements in hockey, but creativity must have an outcome in mind; scoring goals, and protecting your own net. Systems provide the organization to the team in situations. The more spontaneous the organization with a system, the greater the threat to the opposing team, like in every sport, everyone is given assignments, however in hockey

each assignment carries both the responsibility and the opportunity to create a play. Team play is a requirement in hockey; all of hockey's Greats credit their line mates. No one player can dominate a game, but systems can give a team the method and organization to exploit their better player's skills. Drop passes, dump and chase, picks, power plays, break outs, penalty kills, traps, cycling and face offs can all be part of systems that bring creativity, spontaneity with organization to a team.

9. Team Play, overcoming the Star Player Mentality.

Checking, team defense, and systems eliminate the impact player and lessen their overall dominance within a game. Many Squirt players may have played on a team where one player may have been the focus; the Pee Wee level of play diminishes this dominant player mentality. Systems with neutral zone traps, and box and one defense quickly eliminate the single player threat that may have been the overall system of the former Squirt.

Parents who don't understand the level progression may become frustrated as they no longer see the single player rushes up the ice, and coaches must be prepared to explain how the Pee Wee level changes the effectiveness of a single star player.

Goalie skills are now much more effective, "good goalies stop 100% of the shots they see and 80% of the shots they don't!" Hobey Baker Winner, Rob Stauber. Squirt Coaches who used to win games shooting 30 shots per games are now losing games with 30 shots. Pee Wee Goalies with better skills, will require better shot selection, and the motto of "two shots to score" will be the requirement for success at this new Pee Wee level.

The solution is to incorporate passing into 50% of your core practice. Quick passes with movement, in tight spaces. Deflection drills, with rebound control the focus. The implementation of the “three second” rule; no one holds the puck for longer than three seconds, a rule which will change for Bantams and Midgets both having less time to react. The level of play will usually be determined by the speed, frequency, and type of the pass and the passes accuracy.

“Team play” will be required for success at the Pee Wee level and every level in the future. Small games, 3 on 2’s combinations and Russian Wheels are used to increase the intensity and frequency of passing within our practices. This is great opportunity for coaches to experiment and create complex situations for players to solve. Making mistakes is one of the best ways to learn. The goal should be to push your team beyond their current comfort zones, both team and individual.

10. The problem, lack of balance with skill development and team play, skills without team building drills.

There still is conflict for many coaches within USA Hockey. Many still rely on their experience from 10 to 15 years ago. They were good High School, Junior and maybe even College level players and rather than delve into coaching with humility they bring with them arrogance. Playing and coaching are entirely different; only NHL and College Players are exempt and only for level one and level two certifications, they are still required to complete their level three (3) certification in order to be a head coach at the Pee Wee level.

Their athleticism and the coaching that they receive will determine the success of the US players. Hockey is a sport that is predominately played in Canada, it is a Canadian's "National Pastime" but the European countries have caught on quickly with currently more Europeans playing in the NHL than US players. The question is asked, why the dominance by the European players when compared to US players, it is not facilities, equipment or access? In fact, when compared to Europe, the US players have more facilities, better equipment, and even better access. **The key difference is hockey curriculum and coaching.** It has been USA Hockey's focus to change how US coaches think and how they coach. Nevertheless, that is changing a culture, and that always takes time. The materials are available to the coaches, the new "level three" coaching materials are outstanding and incorporate the latest in coaching concept, using both the best from North American coaches, and European concepts from those who have coached and learned from the European system.

Hockey skill development should be incorporated into skating development, but we minimize the skill development and place most of the focus on skating. It is very common to see Pee Wee's who can skate like the wind, but cannot catch a pass or make a snap shot effectively. European systems emphasize combinations of hand-eye coordination development in addition to skating. The implementation of small games systems in practice will force the learning of multiple skills.



Suggestion: when we play other sports like basketball, football or baseball, we have daily practices throughout the week. In hockey, our emphasis is always on the ice and in the rink. Establish a new pattern with your team by scheduling daily practices for hockey during the week, just like other sports; **(Follow USA Hockey Guidelines.)** Have hockey

practice daily, with equal focus on Ice and Field Practices, and rather than using the term Dry land, rename your practices and as Ice and Field Practices. Field Practice will be where coordination, fitness and systems are introduced and learned, along with fun of course. Create a Field Practice drill book, and plan your Field practices with specific goals in mind for each session. Skill development will accelerate on your team, and the Team's overall performance development will accelerate.

Using this program will bring the balance of skill development with skating development without sacrificing valuable ice time and the program works; the European's have been doing it for years.



11. The Solution, skills development with team development at Mite and Squirt levels of play.

As previously discussed, Field practices as part of on Ice practices will allow for an acceleration of skill development. Passing and catching are taught in a gym setting versus using expensive ice time. If we only use our ice times for skill development, we will be limiting our players' progress.

Face offs, defensive and offensive systems can be taught in the field, with footballs, instead of pucks, break outs, and regroup and zone entry can all be taught with footballs, or soccer balls. Weighted "Fly Pucks" can be used for stick handling and the teaching of the deak. Nike Hockey, www.nikehockey.com recently has introduced an entirely new product line of Field practice tools for Hockey training. All of the training tools and concepts have been developed, (see Twist Conditioning) www.sportsconditioning.com.

Expensive commercial programs are offered for elite players as off-season programs, applying these techniques.

What has to change is the understanding and tradition of our everyday hockey coach. Two ice practices a week with weekend games is not enough for players to develop at an acceptable pace.

The First Step:

Establish and schedule daily one-hour practices times, (include ice practices).

1. Develop a Field Hockey practice plan.
 - a. Skill Focus, hand eye coordination.
 - b. Passing and catching.
 - c. Team basic systems at Field practices.
 - d. Train sprinters, hockey is a sprinting sport, and have fun!
2. Get educated, learn from others, and search the web for resources, then do it!

Bring off ice conditioning into your practice plan and make it a standard process for your team.

IT IS A LONG SEASON:

Hockey seasons are long, September to March in most areas, so daily practices may only be necessary for part of the season. Depending on the level of play, limit these practices to the first half or third of the season. Bantams and Midgets may have the endurance to go daily for the whole season. Use common sense and assess your teams fatigue

throughout the season; puberty will make a major difference in the physical strength of your players.

SMALL CHANGES CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE!

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Off Day	Ice Practice	Off Day	Ice Practice	Ice Practice	Game Day	Game Day
Face Offs and Break Outs		Conditioning, relays, and team work.				
Field Practice	Ice Practice	Field Practice	Ice Practice	Ice Practice	Game Day	Game Day

This additional time provides for more effective use of ice time, and greater overall fitness for the team and best of all, more fun for the youth players. Learning is the progression of a foundation of ideas, reinforced repeatedly. Adding these additional practices will allow you to incorporate greater team system and skill development during your season: **(Again, use USA Hockey Guidelines for your age level.)**

12. Conclusion.

The transition from Squirts and Pee Wees is tremendous in many different ways. Checking, Physical Size, Team Concepts, Offensive and Defensive and accelerated skill development all put tremendous pressure on the new Pee Wee player. This is a great opportunity for coaches to provide the correct training and support to transition the first year Pee Wee into a position of confidence, skill and fun. Remember and understand that as the players learn more about the game of hockey and develop better hockey skills, their enjoyment and fun in the game increases.

The key is for coaches to keep a proper perspective of where **Pee Wee hockey sits in the developmental curve of a hockey player; “the midway point of development.”**

Pee Wee’s are half way through the developmental process. We can accelerate the development of our players by engaging proven USA Hockey training programs, and adding Field practices into our programs. The new materials offered by USA Hockey, i.e. (Level Three Manual 2005) are great resources, presenting both new European hockey on ice and off ice training programs. We have the resources and the tools for the success of our players, coaches now need to organize and implement new traditions in hockey training at the youth level.

Special Thanks:

I would like to acknowledge those who have taught me a great deal about the game of hockey and have shaped my vision of the game and inspired me in my desire to coach. Lou Vairo, an inspiration anytime you can hear him speak about coaching and hockey, Mike Sullivan, who went from coaching the Junior Coyotes Squirt A’s to the Pro’s in one short year, Jimmy Johnson, who exemplifies the dignity within coaching and provides an example for each one of us who look to achieve greatness at any level, Bobby Smith, who showed that it is always about the kids and who has time for even the novice players. Benoit Allaire, who sees greatness in all goaltenders Mites to Midgets and beyond, thank you for your unique perspective, and Barry Smith who can always find time to teach Youth Coaches at all levels.

They are all part of the reason the hockey is the greatest sport, the people who are involved in the game. They have all had a major role in providing me the understanding and knowledge that motivates me to strive for excellence in coaching. Being able to attend their classes and clinics provided me with a level of education, which is nothing less than magical.

In addition, the entire cast of coaches NHL, College and Junior levels that presented at the Grand Rapids 2005 National Coaches Symposium was priceless to anyone who attended, thank you USA Hockey.

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