



Teaching Game Related Skills

By Hal Tearse, Minnesota Hockey Head Coach

In the game of hockey the game performance is the summation of all the acquired skills of the individual players. The ability of the players is determined by their grouping of all the acquired skills and being able to use them as the situation requires. As coaches we try to simulate game situations in practice in the theory that this will improve the team's performance. In order to become better coaches and to better prepare our players for games, it is important to understand the fundamental principals of skill acquisition and the relationship of skills to skating.

As with skating or other skills it is essential to break down the over all skill into smaller pieces and practice the elements in "game related" scenarios. The game related skill structure expresses the technical/repeatability and game like continuity of f skills. The consistency of techniques in concatenated skills and the couplings of movements of body segments are performance indicators. The game related skill structure is an outcome of the specific neuro muscular endowment of the player, cognitive sensitivity and organization of practice sessions. The neuro-muscular machinery of the body controls neuro-motorics. A repetition of different structured motoric stimuli brings about an enhancement and reinforcement of playing habits. Recording and storage of events and their retrieval in specific analogous situations takes place along connecting, central and peripheral neural routes of the body. The motorics of the game thus become automated. In other words, practice must contain or be representative of sections or situations that occur in a game. Another way to think about this is to practice "common reoccurring situations"

The motorics of the game comprises two essential categories of movement;

- Dynamic component- sources imparting movement (strength, speed) made possible by a metabolic nutrition of muscle labor; and
- Motoric component- an outer kinematic component which can be objectively observed. This is brought about by the neuro-muscular machinery of the body, which initiates, associates and couples movements.

The motorics of the game requires acquiring a wide range of associated skills and linked movements. Practice sessions must focus on exercising primary muscle groups which initiate links between skills and skating. The goal is to achieve consistency in the technique of associated skills and skating. The association of game-related skills and skating (the main mover) results in standardized and linked motoric concatenations associated with a particular segment of the game.



The concept of the motorics of the game is based on the kinematic involvement of the segments (legs, arms, and torso) and coupling their movements. To achieve game related skills the player must link skating to other body parts (feinting, dodging, and shooting). The interaction of the above elements regulates and controls somatic dynamic stability. The dynamic body balance implies a movement cooperation pattern and is the basis of technical skills (fast hand- calm footwork- slow hands). Body stability is determined by the following factors:

- Load-bearing central motorics- SKATING
- Connecting or linking actions- INERTIA, TURNS, CHANGES OF DIRECTION, CURVES, in other words INERTIA AND DEXTERITY
- Acute/urgent actions - FEINTING, SHOOTING, PASSING, EVASION, & DODGING

So what does all this mean for a youth hockey coach? Perhaps we need to re think a bit about how we practice if we want our players to develop to their fullest potential. So here are some thoughts about practice design.

- Link game related skills to skating in order to develop standardized responses. Develop and strengthen the neuro-motoric mechanism of the game (skating).
- Create and secure memory entries
- Develop habits of game fluency insofar as puck control is concerned
- Improve and enhance the overall condition of your players
- Develop creativity

The typical exercise to develop game-related skill structure should have the following components;

- Originality of advance routes and localized centers of skating mobility
- Elements of skill skating (transitions, corners, changes of direction)
- Multiple skill parts (stick handling, fakes, fake shots, passes)

Effective individual training for game-related skill structure will focus on the individual or small group of players. The objective is to focus on in-game techniques in a kinematic flow of concatenated and linked skills. Therefore in plain English, practice should focus on the links between skating and puck handling skills. A practice that aims to improve defense related skills will focus on skating (agility and mobility), puck control, and puck turnover skills.

In the course of a game a player draws on the full range of acquired and ingrained skills. Repetitive exercises bring about a step by step fixation and automation of the essential motoric habits. Skating and game-related skills assume a motoric consistency as a result of practicing game-related skill structures.



If you want to teach your players game-related skills you must be creative and be able to put together attractive and novel practice exercises. Your ability to teach means that you should be able to see details and correct mistakes and to communicate the importance and role of the individual player. Your ability to demonstrate, provide accurate comments and feedback, and change the drill on the spot if needed is also important to the learning process of your players.

The common theme is skating and the link to other skills. It is essential that your players learn to skate well. Youth coaches need to focus on these skills as most players receive very little practical skating development. Add other skills to the skating exercises (multi tasking) and you will begin to address the needs of your players. Your practices may consist of 80 percent skill exercises and 20 percent small area games to allow your players to develop read and react skills.

The approach to practice has evolved over the past 25 years to a more game based type of structure involving many full ice flow drills. Perhaps it is time to break that down into smaller pieces and help your players get the instruction and repetition they need in the essential skill elements to achieve their maximum potential.

To implement this approach take a drill like the break out and analyze all of the segments. Then design exercises for each element and practice those separately. This approach may feel strange to you at first but as the player's skills improve so will their game play. It is no surprise that the team with the best skilled players usually wins in the course of a season.

As players improve and the game evolves so must our coaching techniques. Coaches must be receptive to new ideas and concepts that will benefit their players and team. As teachers and instructors we need to continue to learn our craft and be sure we are current in our coaching skills. Simply attending a few clinics is not sufficient if you want your players to achieve their potential. Keep an open mind, learn from others, and question the traditional methods.

The longer I coach the more intrigued I am about finding new ways to help my players develop. As coaches we hope our players have a passion for learning the game. If we have a passion it is a good start and model for our young players.

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