



Additional Ideas to Supplement Coach-Development

A Basis for Excellence

Our fundamental mission is to maximize efficiency of skill development within the realities of a Mite Hockey experience. This series of slides outlines theories behind our player development program.

We also intend to ensure that players love hockey more at the end than at the beginning of the Hockey season.

Major Issues Addressed in This Handbook

- Coaches Expectations
- Fine Challenge Adjustment – More Than Just “Quality Repetitions”
- The Effect of Fun
- Practice Procedures

Coaches Expectations

There are many expectations for coaches which are either common sense, covered by USA Hockey training, or both. Here we add a few that may still be common sense, but are still worth saying.

The following are the most important expectations that we have for our coaches.

- **Coaches will preserve and enhance a culture of development with fun as a fundamental principal.**
- **Coaches will attend at least 60% of practices (head coaches – 80%) and will communicate when they will miss.**
- **Coaches will make sure they are informed about the practice plan before the start of practice.**

Fine Challenge Adjustment

“Quality Repetitions” is an oversimplified phrase used to describe a method for learning hockey or any other human skill. Quality repetitions of the same simple skill will lead to mastery of that skill, but you better know darn well that you are practicing a skill that will be useful to you. If the skill is complex or multifaceted (requiring multitasking as the majority of hockey indeed requires), you must build up sub-skills before you can even approach a “quality repetition”. Skating while puckhandling is a fine example. But, why stop at a complex skill. Our philosophy is to keep pushing the challenge level to constantly develop improvisational multitasking ability (in hockey you must not only multitask but to do it while thinking strategically about the game and your next move).

We prefer to focus not on developing a few discreet skills as in the quality repetitions mindset, and instead continuously adjust to ensure the proper challenge level across many skills and types. “Fine Challenge Adjustment” is a term that we created as a label for this mindset. Through adjustment of the level and type of challenge that we ask players to respond to, our goal is to progress to the skills that are the essence of hockey dominance... multitasking skills... then build them to excellence with even more skill adjustment and variety.

When asked to perform a task that challenges a person’s capability, that person will adapt and grow into the void. Once this has happened, adjusting or raising the challenge will cause them to adapt and progress toward the new challenge. Fine challenge adjustment is about repeatedly adjusting the challenge to ensure constant growth. Through this process, those first basic challenges that other programs may repeat until mastery are mere stepping stones to practicing skills that will actually show utility in the game. In short, we will progress forward when a skill is acquired... not when it is mastered.



Challenge Levels and Types

We adjust the challenge level across many skills and types. Among one skill we can demand different levels of challenge. A good example of this comes from Crossover Flywheel training where we change the speed and angle of the flywheel to manipulate the challenge that the player will experience.

But one skill can have several types of challenges and we must understand this as well. The Knee-Heel Touch stridework drill is about posture, kneebend, and extension. We can ask the player to focus on any of those three details or focus on all three... all of which are different challenge types. Add a puck and we have increased the challenge level and changed the whole skill (it is now a multitasking skill).

Creating Progressions

Know your performance goal

- It is critical to know what skill we are trying to achieve when a progression is done. For example, simple stickhandling back-and-forth does lead to improved performance on that drill, but in a game situation, puck-control is a multitasking issue. Back-and-forth stickhandling repetition is a step toward that goal, but in order to create our progression, we must keep the big goal in mind and progress appropriately.

Multiple paths to the same goal

- Hockey is a generalist's sport. The best Speed Skaters in the world cannot compete at a professional hockey level despite their skating excellence. This is because hockey requires players to manage many challenges at once in addition to just skating. When progressing toward the capability to execute, it is valuable to separately attack the many specific parts of a multitasking challenge, or to attack it in a few different ways. These different paths support each other and ultimately lead to more rapid acquisition of elite skill (e.g. practice stickhandling and skating separately, then work on them together).

Ultimate Goals vs. Near-term Goals

- Is the progression ever truly done? No. The near-term goal of skill development must be constantly revised to create a long-term progression toward excellence. The ultimate goal is the result of all the near-term goals and, as there is no perfect player, can never actually be reached.

Type of Challenge

This is obvious, but in order to use our time efficiently, we must work on skills that will be useful in the area that the skills will be used. We don't practice the pole vault in order to improve at hockey (this is not to disparage the value of cross training, but hockey practice is going to be hockey specific).

But, when manipulating the challenges that we put our players under, the type of challenge should be manipulated down to specific details. These details are all about creating habits that promote hockey excellence. A good example of this is our consistency of hammering a deep knee bend in virtually all skating drills. Manipulating the challenge in this way causes players to, over time, add speed by developing the habit of skating with a deeper knee bend. Asking these details from players represents the way we use the type of challenge to ensure improvement that will show on the ice.

Degree of Challenge

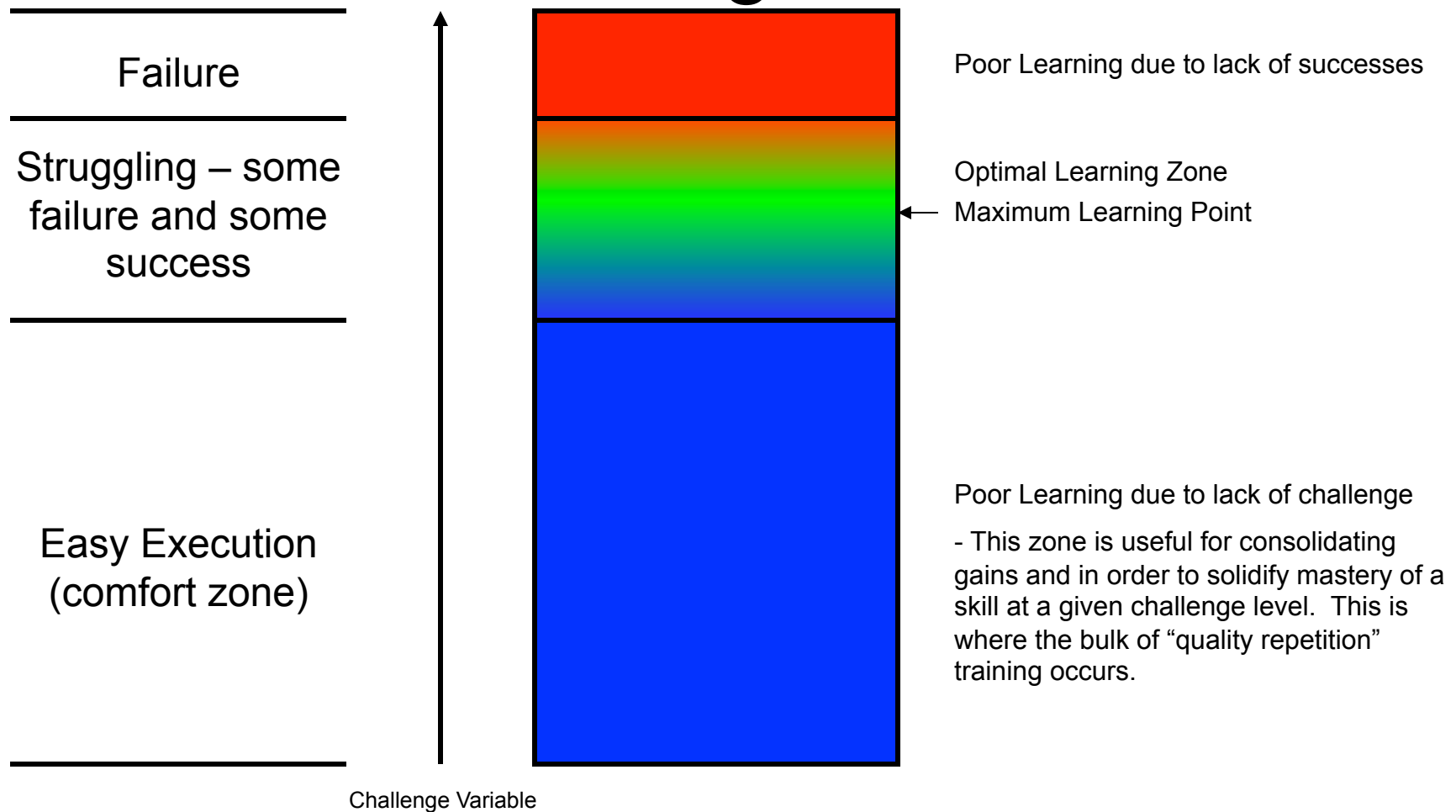
Where do we see the most rapid acquisition of new skills?

The brain, especially the young brain, is designed to absorb skills so that the person can thrive in their environment. If you want a person to learn a new skill, introduce a demand into the environment that requires that skill.

But the brain also needs feedback in order to learn. If a person is struggling with a challenge the feedback will include both what works (successes) and what does not (failures). A level of challenge that allows a person some success and some failure leads to the fastest learning. We call this the struggle zone.



The Struggle Zone – The optimal learning zone



Often, keeping players in the struggle zone means demanding full effort from them as un-pushed players will stay in the comfort zone and work within their existing habits. Because players are constantly learning, keeping players near the struggle zone requires frequent adjustment (increase) of the challenge level.

The Benefits of Fun

Engagement – A player who is having fun is not thinking about anywhere else they can be or something else they can be doing. This has a huge effect on rate of development.

Motivation – A lack of fun will sour any player’s motivation for practice or training. The desire to get better is a first step as the human mind will actively try to “figure out” how to be better when employed in this way.

This represents another reason to think beyond quality repetitions because constant repetition of the same skill is boring and can eliminate the Engagement and Motivation that we need.



Engagement / Motivation -> Acceleration of Results

Through the process of starting and growing the Competitive Edge program, we noticed that some kids “figure it out”. What we mean by this is they realize the purpose of practice (to improve) and that they want to get better so they have more success in games. All of a sudden they start taking practice seriously and they take off as players.

Our mission is to ensure players do not lose sight of this by making the practice experience one that is enjoyable. That being the case, their desire to make the most of practice will not come in conflict with boredom, etc.



Structure and Consequences

It is often said that kids actually crave structure. They want some boundaries within which they can feel protected and even supervised. Within that structure, they feel free to perform.

We try to create a structure that **promotes** good practice behaviors and **punishes** behaviors that we do not like. This requires the enforcement of consequences. We will counter disruptive behaviors with endurance skating or other punishments. But, we will avoid making these punishments “personal”, their purpose is simply to reinforce the structure that leads to the optimal practice environment and not to pick on any specific players.

Whenever possible, once the punishment has been paid, no consequences (especially emotional) will remain. If, after the punishment, they understand what they did wrong, they should feel like they have a clean slate.

Structure / Classical Conditioning

The following two statements represent our general approach to the boundaries and structure we will create in the practice and training environment.

- When behaviors are good the experience will be fun (even informal at times)
- When behaviors are bad the experience will not be fun

Through classical conditioning this structure actually succeeds in training players to utilize productive behaviors in practice and training.

For classical conditioning to work, there must be “rewards” to reinforce behaviors that are to be encouraged. The reward of a fun experience above speaks to the whole team. For individuals or groups, if a coach has gained the respect of the players, there may be no better reward than positive attention (the louder the better). As coaches, we should be diligently looking for opportunities to reinforce positives through this type of reward.

Practice Procedures

There are a few primary drill types (formats) we will use in our practices including, stations, line drills, and full ice drills. In all cases the qualities we exhibit to make our drills very effective are **detail orientation** and **accountability**.



Detail Orientation - Coaches must emphasize the importance of the details of each drill that lead to development of broader positive hockey habits.

Accountability - All coaches must hold players accountable to these details during these drills. Stop the drill if necessary.

General Progression

Over the long term (well beyond Mites) we see the following three major stages through which players will progress in their “physical” skills.

Technical Mobility – This first stage is skating focused. We create speed and agility through the development of technical skating skill, balance, and edge-control. When players can execute with good skating habits (knee bend, upper body posture, full extension, full recovery, and proper footwork) we move to the next stage.

Technical Mobility with Multitasking – The next stage is all about adding the puck and puckhandling challenges to the player’s “technical mobility”. At this stage it is critical to preserve the habits of the technical mobility stage while developing good puckhandling habits (puck protection, heads-up control, quickness, and specific move sequences).

Improvisational Multitasking – The final stage involves taking our good habits to game situations (in the practice setting). Now players must not only develop excellence in the two stages and nine habits described above, but also to do all that while reading, reacting, and thinking strategically about the game.



Edgework / Stridework Line Drills

Details are Critical

- Edgework is all about creating a few capabilities that act as a source from which the rest of skating technique flows (balance and edge-control) as well as the habit of knee bend. We have to demand specific body positions from players in order to get the full effect (in some cases, any effect) of the drill.
- Stridework is designed to retrain skating habits. If the drill is about full extension, full recovery, knee bend, or posture, we must repeatedly demand these things to keep kids focused on them instead of reverting to “going through the motions”.

Line Drill Player and Coach Formation

In Line Drills we will have 6 lines. One coach (not necessarily the head coach) will stand in the center area of the ice, demonstrate and describe the drills, and will do on-the-fly coaching as the players start the drill for the middle two lines. One other coach will give on-the-fly coaching for the two lines on the far left and another will handle the two lines on the far right. Any other coaches on the ice will either be setting up for later drills or will watch **all** the lines and identify players to work with as they execute the line drills. In this way, all lines are covered and there will be a few coaches to tackle the biggest problem areas wherever they are.

Stations

As in all other drills we do, in our station-type drills we need players to execute down to fine details in order to control the challenge type and level. Coaches must demand the details in order to get the desired result from the drill.

In coaching in drill stations, all coaches first task will be to make sure all players understand the structure of the drill. Once this has been completed, they will work into the area where the players are performing the drill and remind players of the details of the drill as needed (typically players who haven't been on the ice with us a ton will first need to be reminded to skate hard through the whole).



Full Rink Drills

When we use a full rink drill, there are three key differences to consider in contrast to a station-type drill.

- In a full rink drill, it is much easier to get the players moving at a high speed.
- In a full rink drill, there is room for long passes or long rushes pitting defense against offense in transition (not commonly used at mites).
- In a full rink drill it is hard to get as many players moving at the same time as in a station based set up and it is hard to get all coaches involved.

Because of these differences, we must carefully choose when to use stations and when to use full rink drills. Regardless of these differences, the importance of detail orientation and all fundamental procedures remain the same. In our practice plans at this point, we have more full rink drills or half rink drills than small station set-ups.

Progressions / Adjustments

Small Scale Progressions are training designs that we use over the course of a half-hour or less. They are designed to retrain the skater's technique. They involve create new habits and developing the ability within each player to “feel” the positions and movement involved in the correct technique.

When making adjustments to drills we like to keep the drill structure very similar and make small adjustments every 3 to 6 minutes in order to efficiently create variety. Adjustments may include changes in the challenge type, challenge level, or even slight adjustments to the drill structure. In the next practice we may do a similar or slightly more advanced adjustment sequence through similar skill challenges but with a different drill structure.

Progressions are different from adjustment sequences in that progressions specifically relate one drill type to the next in a way that teaches technique, feel, posture, etc. and build on one another to illuminate the ultimate skill. Adjustment sequences simply allow us to use different skill challenges within roughly the same drill structure.

Movement

During downtime between drills we will avoid having players standing around for any significant period of time. A simple way to do this is to just have them skate laps around the perimeter of the rink. Another way is to give them one of the offensive zones in which to stickhandle around.

On drills that involved lines in which players stand, we will try to start players as close as we can to one another without having them run into each other in order to get as many moving at once as we can (unless their rest time begins to get too low and they are getting too tired.)

In any case, we try to eliminate standing around time as much as possible.



Rink Space, Time, and Whistles

When coaches are well versed in the language of the practice plans and understand different drills well we will try to be efficient in changing between drills. At the end of one set of drills a few of the coaches will, ideally, be getting cones, barriers, pucks, etc. ready for the next drill set. This is not always possible, but we will do this when it is.

During most practice time we like to use 1 whistle as a signal for kids to freeze and await instruction and 3 whistles as a signal for players to drop what they are doing and come to the head coach.