

Small games, big gains at 10U

11/17/2016, 3:15pm MST

By Dave Pond - Special to USAHockey.com

Go small or go home.

When it comes to making young players better, small-area games are the best way to deliver more engagement, more puck touches and more opportunities to sharpen all of their hockey skills.

“Every kid develops in different ways, so you have to be cognizant of skill development,” said Derek Schooley, who coaches three youth teams while serving as head coach for the NCAA Division I men’s team at Robert Morris University. “Small-area games give players the chance to try out what their coaches are teaching them, in tightly focused game situations.”

Skill development for all ages

Small-area games work so well that Schooley incorporates them into his youth practices and those he leads at Robert Morris, too.

“Small-area games give me an opportunity, as a coach, to simulate any number of situations in small areas, instead of using the full ice,” Schooley said. “And, it’s not just us – it goes all the way up to the NHL.”

More involvement and engagement

By incorporating small-area games into practices, you’ll be able to get more players involved at the same time, too.

“It’s not just five skating, while everyone else is watching,” he said. “There’s a little more pressure, and a little more competition and, from that, players develop so much more quickly.

“When you’re doing small-area games or station-based work, you’re really doing things,” Schooley continued. “Our players are on the ice a lot more than they would be if we spent all our times playing games and scrimmages.”

Practice-to-game ratio

Studies have shown that one properly run practice provides the equivalent of 11 games worth of skill repetitions for players. That’s part of the reason why one of Schooley’s biggest pet peeves is seeing youth teams with 50- to 60-game schedules.

“They should be cutting that down tremendously,” he said. “If gameplay becomes your primary focus, your kids won’t get to do as much as they need to improve the wide array of skills they need to succeed in hockey.

“It’s essential that they touch the puck, handle the puck, and shoot the puck, so that they’ll be able to compete and play well in games,” Schooley said. “Those are the things that teach you to be ready.”

Building the foundation

Finally, for parents and coaches of 8U, 10U, and 12U players, now’s the time to build that foundation.

“Your kids are still developing and fine-tuning their motor skills, their skating stride and their shots,” Schooley said. “So, the more that you can work on skill development now, the better they’ll be as they get older.

“My hope is that coaches work so much on skill development when players are young, so when those players get to the junior, college or pro level, they’re just refining those skills.”

Here are three small-area drills that will help your players benefit from big jumps in skill development:

Corner Battle

This small-area game simulates tight battles in the corners.

- Turn the net at the dot, so it’s facing the corner of the ice.
- Divide players into two groups (Xs and Os), and have them line up to create barriers on each side of the net.
- Use one player from each side to create a one-on-one scenario, start a 30-second timer, and dump the puck into the corner.
- Play until someone scores and repeat until all players have had a chance to play. Should the puck go past lined-up players, drop a new puck.

Note: this drill can also be played two-on-two or three-on-three.

Net Front Battle

This small-area game simulates tight battles in front of the net.

- Keep the net in its normal position on the ice.
- Divide players into two groups (Xs and Os), and have them line up to create barriers from each post back toward centre ice.
- The two players at the top of the line step into a one-on-one scenario
- Dump the puck, and play within 20-30 second shifts until someone scores. Should the puck go past lined players, dump a new puck and repeat.

Two-on-Two Net Middle Battle

This small-area game decreases the size of the playing surface to concentrate gameplay

- Bring nets forward to each blue line.
- Divide players into two groups (Xs and Os), and have them line up to create barriers from each post back toward centre ice.
- Take two players from each side to create the initial two-on-two scenario and dump the puck from the opposite end of the ice.
- Skaters should use players in line for support/passing (creating give-and-go situations)
- Play within 20-30 second shifts until someone scores. Should the puck go past either the lined players or the blue line, dump a new puck and repeat.