

Season Practice Planning

By Greg Siller – www.ProLearning.com

Creating a Season Practice Plan is an essential element for your teams' success. The Season Practice Plan is a strategic roadmap to help take your team through the entire practice season—from pre-season to mid-season to the end-of-season, and then hopefully into the playoffs. It is a blueprint that defines what you want to accomplish with your team during the season, who is involved in your practices, when you plan to teach specific skills, tactics, and strategies, and how you plan to accomplish your overall practice objectives.

What happens if you don't have a plan? You will not be able to maximize the opportunities to teach your players the fundamental and advanced skills, tactics, and strategies of the game. In addition, you *will* waste precious practice time, both on and off the rink. If you don't have a plan, you may get lucky and some of your practices may turn out well, however, over an entire season, this will not consistently occur.

The Season Practice Plan should evolve and be shaped by the information and your answers to the questions listed in the 5 planning levels on the following pages.

- Level 1 – Season Practice Plan Framework
- Level 2 – Team Information
- Level 3 – Skills, Tactics and Strategies
- Level 4 – Game-Like Learning
- Level 5 – Season Practice Plan Feedback

Level 1 – Season Practice Plan Framework. The Season Practice Plan Framework is a key element of practice planning. In my book entitled *The Hockey Practice Playbook*, I define this concept utilizing the Siller Practice Planning Pyramid™. The Pyramid™ is built on four framework elements – the Primary Practice Objective, Individual/Team Principle, Five Key Practice Goals, and the Practice Plan Credo.

1. ***Primary Practice Objective.*** Practices need to be designed to enable the development and improvement of your team's *potential* for *consistently* playing their best in a *competitive* environment.
2. ***Individual/Team Principle.*** Individual players' win or lose individual positional battles. Team's win or loses games.
3. ***Five Key Practice Goals.*** These include (a) teaching and learning, (b) communicating and sharing information, (c) having some fun, (d) using your resources effectively, and (e) channeling your players' emotional energy.
4. ***Practice Plan Credo.*** Practices should be designed to allow players and coaches to succeed or fail in a safe environment. By succeeding or failing, players and coaches can learn what works and what doesn't in a particular context of play, and can then apply this knowledge to similar situations in future practices and games. In both cases, the potential to learn and improve can be realized.

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Level 2 – Team Information. There are several pieces of information that you will need to gather from the coaching staff, players, parents, and the league to get your team prepared for the season. Eight areas to focus on include:

1. ***What are the experience levels of the coaches?*** Coaches need to provide an assessment of their experience and hockey knowledge. The answer to this question should provide you with input on how detailed your practice planning can be as well as your realistic expectations for being able to fully implement your Season Practice Plan. If you are a new coach, begin by using fundamental information to help guide your practice planning. You should also consider enlisting a more experienced coach to help mentor you with your teams practice planning process, or reference material such as *The Hockey Practice Playbook* for help. If you are experienced, you should be able to effectively utilize both fundamental and advanced practice planning techniques to help with your season practice planning; in addition to using your own hockey experience, knowledge, and that of your peers.
2. ***What are the experience levels of the players?*** If you have coached your players before, you should know what areas they are proficient in, the areas that need improvement, and the advanced areas that can be taught during your practices. If you have not coached your players before, then a player questionnaire or discussion is needed to gauge the experience level of each of them. The type of information you should collect can include: Whether they have had actual hockey playing experience (ice, roller, etc) and at what position(s). If they have played before, what competitive levels have they played at? Are they familiar with the game (have they watched games)? What other sports have they participated in? Use this information to fine-tune your planning process.
3. ***What are the Ability, Age, Physical, and Mental Development (AAPMD) levels of the players?*** The AAPMD level determines the stage of hockey aptitude and maturity for a specific player and the team and at what level and pace skills should be taught.
4. ***What is the competitive level of the team/league?*** There are many stages of play that define the competitive level that a team plays in- beginner, recreational, advanced, travel, and tournament are primary classifications. Understanding the competitive level you are playing at will help determine what skills, tactics, and strategies your team will need to focus on.
5. ***How will the coaches work with players to determine appropriate positions?*** In some cases, you are going to have experienced players who are already proficient at their position. In other cases, you may be coaching a team that has new players, who may not know what position they want to play. Two methods can be used to help with this question—asking players and assessing players. Use a questionnaire or survey for players/parents to fill out; asking what positions they are interested in/not interested in playing. Find out what positions they have played before, if any. What other sports have they participated in and at what positions? Use player assessments to help you determine possible positions. Based on their ability in certain individual drills and positional scenarios, you can determine the initial aptitude of a player for a particular position and use this information for position selection and recommendations.

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6. ***How will you effectively utilize your resources during practices?*** Practice time is a limited commodity. Getting the team together for each practice requires commitment, dedication, time, facilities, and money from coaches, players, parents, sponsors, and rink owners/league. To get the most out of the limited available rink time, you need to ensure that your practice time is used effectively. Three resource areas that need to be addressed include:
- ***Time management.*** By planning your practices, providing non-rink-time information before or after practice, and anticipating situations, you will give yourself the opportunity to achieve your practice goals in a cost-effective manner. The way to manage your practice time is to use a flexible practice agenda and a clock or stop-watch. The practice agenda (see example at www.prolearning.com/Hockey/Practice%20Agenda.pdf) provides coaches with the fundamental areas of focus, associated drills, and a time estimate to complete the drills in.
 - ***People management.*** Coaches need to ensure that they include assistant coaches, managers, and consider parent volunteers as part of the practice execution. The coaching staff should go over the practice plan prior to the actual practice so that each person understands his or her role. They should have specific duties to work on and be active in providing appropriate feedback to the players. The assistant coach can direct the conditioning part of the practices as well as run specific drills. Parents and players can also play a role in supporting practices as well.
 - ***Rink management.*** Once you and your team are on the rink, you need to use the space you have to its fullest. Use one area of the rink to gather your team to discuss the drills you plan to execute. Once the explanation is over, move your players into groups, if possible, and run the drill in two or three areas at once. With the help of all members of the coaching staff, you will be able to keep more players moving, learning, thinking, improving, and engaged in the drills; using the maximum space available.
7. ***How will the coaches, players (and parents) address injuries?*** While you may not be a doctor or EMT, knowing CPR or medical first aid will go a long way toward preparing for eventual injuries. If you are not familiar with these techniques, you should know who to contact to get appropriate help. In addition, you should have access to players' home and emergency phone numbers (if the parents or emergency guardians are not at practice). A first aid kit, either provided by the rink or by the coach—with at least bandages, gauze, tape, smelling salts, and ice packs—should suffice for the more common minor injuries.
8. ***What information will the coaching staff communicate with the team and how will it be shared?*** If you want your team to act as a team, both on and off the rink, then it is important that solid communication takes place. To keep the communication lines open with your players, coaches should talk to each player at least once per practice and game. Take the time to ensure that the coaches and players are communicating and in alignment, and if not, adjust your communication model to get the alignment needed. Examples of information that are typically shared with teams can be found in my Player and Parent Information Packet located at www.prolearning.com/Hockey/Sample%20%20Player%20and%20Parent%20Information%20Packet.pdf.

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Level 3 – Skills, Tactics and Strategies. Hockey skills, tactics, and strategies provide the technical foundation for the game of hockey. Once players learn the basic technical side of the game, they can combine these skills with their ability to read, react, and anticipate. Players will then apply and adapt that knowledge to any situation on the rink, whether in a defensive or offensive capacity to defeat an opponent.

1. ***Individual Skills to Teach:*** These include the four elements of Skating and Conditioning, Passing and Receiving, Stickhandling and Puck Control, and Shooting and Scoring. More detailed information can be found at www.ProLearning.com/Hockey/Individual%20Skills%20Checklist.pdf.
2. ***Positional Tactics to Teach:*** These apply to the positions of Defense, Forward, and Goaltender. Examples of these tactics include teaching 1-on-1, 2-on-1, 1-on-2, containing opponents, protecting the puck, and proper positioning. More detailed information can be found at www.ProLearning.com/Hockey/Positional%20Tactics%20Checklist.pdf.
3. ***Team Strategies to Teach:*** Team strategies teach players to apply their individual and positional talents, in the defensive, neutral, and offensive zones, to create scoring opportunities as well as defend these zones as a team. In a defensive capacity, these strategies should focus on covering and containing opponents anywhere on the playing surface, physically challenging your opponents in an attempt to take control of the puck, forcing them to pass or shoot the puck, block shots and passes, or have your goaltender make saves in order to get a face-off (which provides an opportunity to gain control of the puck). In an offensive capacity, these strategies should focus on moving the puck into your offensive zone, setting your team up for high quality shots on net, shooting, getting rebounds, and eventually scoring. This involves taking advantage of your teams' offensive strengths and well as your opponent's weaknesses and opportunities. More information can be found at www.ProLearning.com/Hockey/Team%20Strategies%20Checklist.pdf.
4. ***Reading, Reacting, and Anticipating.*** *Reading and reacting* are mental skills used by individual players, in both an individual and positional context. Players perceive (read) the play of both teammates and opponents around them and respond (react) to this perception. *Anticipation* is the player's ability to read a play, predict (anticipate) a teammates' or opponents' probable course of action, and execute (react to) the most appropriate option available. Effective reading, reacting, and anticipating don't just come from planning, but from plenty of practice and experience. Given the speed at which the game of hockey is played, the number of players on the playing surface, and the necessity of almost instantly integrating all of the situational elements for that moment, these are indispensable skills to master.

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5. ***When should the skills be taught?*** According to *The Hockey Practice Playbook*, a typical hockey season can be divided into three time frames: pre-season, first game to mid-season, and mid-season through playoffs. During these time frames, different percentages of time should be allocated to the three player development phases, as shown in the figure below. Use this information to help guide your practice planning at any point during the season.

Player Development Phases	Pre-Season	First Game thru Mid-Season	Mid-Season thru Playoffs
Individual Skills	60%	35%	20%
Positional Tactics	30%	40%	40%
Team Strategies	10%	25%	40%
TOTALS	100%	100%	100%

6. ***Will you perform player assessments?*** Assessments are an excellent tool for coaches to determine the current hockey aptitude of their players. It is also a good tool to use to objectively provide feedback to players and to establish future practice goals. Assessments can be used as a single event (an assessment snapshot) or combined with the outcomes from multiple assessments to provide player or team trend information. Initial player assessments are valuable during team tryouts or during pre-season/first practices to get an early look at a player’s hockey abilities. Subsequent assessments should be considered prior to the middle of the season and, again, toward the end of the season to review and fine-tune player/coach expectations and practice plans. For more information on player assessments, you can review the assessment information on my website at www.prolearning.com/Hockey/Players%20Assessments.pdf.

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Level 4 – Game-Like Learning. In order for teams to get the most out of their practices (and games), practice planning and execution should involve elements that enable you to prepare your players (and coaching staff) with scenarios that introduce game-like learning; while having some fun along the way. Seven game-like teaching elements include:

1. ***How will you ensure that your practices provide for learning in a variety of ways?*** Players learn in different ways and this factor needs to be taken into account when teaching hockey skills, tactics, and strategies. Some of us learn best from seeing (visual demonstration); some from hearing (listening to the coach describe a drill); while others learn best from moving/doing (executing a drill). By using a combination of visual and auditory teaching styles, the coach can effectively reach 85% of the players. The resourceful coach should determine which learning styles the individual players are receptive to and organize practices accordingly. In addition to learning styles, the coach should be aware that an athlete's learning capacity is most effective during the first 20 to 25 minutes of a practice. This is because athletic learning requires a large portion of both physical and mental energy. An experienced coach will notice that as the players' energy level and enthusiasm decreases, so does their attention span, motivation, and ability to learn. Accordingly, new drills, tactics, and strategies should be taught during the first half of the practice, when players are fresh and most ready to learn.
2. ***Expose your players to game-like situations.*** For players to gain the experience and confidence required to effectively compete, they need to know what to expect during a game and how to read, react to, and anticipate specific situations that are likely to occur. These situations include teaching players how to deal with conservative or aggressive defenders, knowing when to commit offensively and when to maintain a defensive posture, handling specific face-off situations, and addressing specific power-play/penalty killing scenarios. This is where practicing comes in. Plan to use drills that incorporate: (1) Competitive elements involving 2-4 players to gain experience reading, reacting to, and anticipating. Examples of this involve 1-on-1 and 2-on-1 drills. (2) Drills that are executed at game tempo to simulate appropriate pace and intensity. (3) Play that results in a winner and a loser. Drills that involve timing, 1-on-1 competition, and accuracy tests are good examples. (4) Performing team drills as they would be executed during a game--such as face-off scenarios and breakout plays, will all promote game-like learning.
3. ***Will you plan to teach the rules?*** Rules are defined by the sanctioning organization and league under which each team plays. The rules are designed to provide teams with a consistent framework for what is required to play the game. Rules should not be designed to impede the game, but to define it. By teaching the rules, your players can better understand the boundaries of the game. Give the players a rule book at the beginning of the season. Once per practice, go over a rule or two. Another option is to invite a referee into your practices for a few minutes to lead the teaching and demonstration of various rules. This can be done before, during, or after your practices. It will go a long way toward teaching your players how to more effectively play within the game.

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4. ***How will you positively channel your players' emotional energy?*** Emotional energy is a huge part of the game of hockey. Players and teams rise and fall to new levels through their emotions. Emotions are mental attributes that have the ability to affect the physical attributes (and vice versa). Emotional energy shows up through the physical actions of individual players as well as teams in both positive and negative ways. Using positive emotional energy, your team can rise to defeat a team that, on-paper, appears superior. With negative emotional energy, on the other hand, your team might coast through practices and games without enthusiasm or passion for themselves, their line mates, or their team. They will do this at a level, at best, equal to their physical abilities. There are at least four steps that coaches can perform during practices to help channel emotional energy.
 - Talk with your players (and parents) to get an initial reading on the players' personality.
 - Observe your players' *behavior* during each practice and game.
 - Provide feedback to your players.
 - Help teach your players how to transform negative emotional energy from a destructive impact to a constructive one.
5. ***How will you challenge your players to perform at and above expectations?*** By challenging your players, coaches and the player(s) will receive information on how they might react during tough or close games. It will also allow players the opportunity to see themselves performing at a higher level than before. This can be done by challenging them during drills to skate faster, work harder in the corners to get control of the puck, or contain a tough opponent in front of the net.
6. ***How will the coaches (and team) help to foster life lessons within the players?*** Practice time should be more than just about hockey. It should also include teaching life lessons as well. Coaches should plan to instill the qualities of confidence, teamwork, sportsmanship, and respect by demonstrating these values during practices and games (and having players do the same) and discussing this topic with players and parents during practices, games, and team meetings.
7. ***How will you ensure that your team has some level of fun during each practice?*** Hockey practices should focus on getting results, but they sometimes do so at the cost of undue pressure on the players, coaches, parents, and team. This undue pressure has a price—decreasing player's learning potential and creating an environment that has the practice being more of a chore than a journey. By incorporating some fun into your practice planning and associated practices, your team will have the opportunity to realize that all the effort that is being put into each practice has a purpose and that the team can have some enjoyment along the way in achieving their practice results. As a coach, you should have an idea of what kinds of fun you can incorporate into your practices—I'm sure your player's do...just ask them! Adding fun to your practices generally comes from three main areas; (1) using a favorite drill, (2) timed and accuracy events (such as races, shootouts, shooting and passing accuracy tests, etc), and (3) incorporating competitive positional and team drills (such as 1-on-1 or 2-on-1 challenges, breakaway drills, 2 player drills that challenge players to compete physically, or scrimmages). Find out what fun means to your players and incorporate appropriate elements into your practice planning.

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Level 5 – Season Practice Plan Feedback. Feedback on any process is an essential element to controlling the outcome of that process. Your hockey season should not be any different. Two elements of feedback that should be considered in your practice planning are:

1. ***How often should you refine your Season Practice Plan?*** You should review your Season Practice Plan often during the season and update it based on such items as overall season goals, feedback from practices, games, player assessments, observations from coaches, parents, and players, scouting reports, and through the use of statistics. I would recommend that you reference your Season Practice Plan on a weekly basis and update it *at least* 3 times during your season; pre-season, early in the season, and as part of a mid-season review.
2. ***How will you know that you have achieved your practice goals?*** This factor is important because it also brings the element of feedback into your practice planning process. By setting goals, you know *what* you want to achieve. By having a plan, you know *how* you want to achieve those goals. The feedback that you gain from your practices and games (and other areas as well) will show you *whether* you have achieved your goals during the course of the season. If your goals have not been achieved appropriately, then you will need to make some adjustments to your plan—either adjust your goals, your practice planning and execution approach, or make adjustments to your players, line combinations, or coaching methodology.

Use your own coaching and hockey knowledge, the knowledge within your league or organization, your creativity and that of your coaching partners to tailor the practice planning process for your specific purposes. Refer to your Season Practice Plan several times during the season. Share it with your coaching staff, players, parents, and even consider other coaches within your league (to help improve the overall quality of your league). It is an essential and invaluable tool to set in motion each of your great hockey practices.