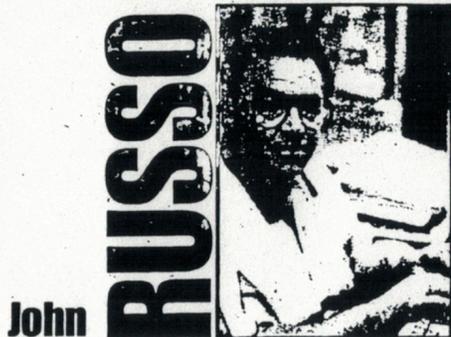


# We need a new approach for youth hockey



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The 1997-98 season has rushed by and it's time to take a look back at the season, then forward to next season.

I recently had an interesting talk with Troy Jutting, Mankato State University Mavericks assistant coach. We were discussing the fact that there are fewer players today that seem to understand the game and that have great skating/stickhandling/shooting skills.

We agreed that there are quite a number of big, straight-ahead-fast players around that, given enough time, can shoot a big, booming slapshot.

However, the shortage seems to be players with the really important skills, such as:

- Great agility, balance and strength on their skates.

- A great understanding of the game — the ability to analyze what is going on and convert a 3-on-2 into a 2-on-1, then to a good scoring chance.

- A great sense of timing — what we often call playmaking ability.

- Great moves with the puck — what we call "hands" or stickhandling.

- Great shooting ability — the quick, hard wrist shot, the backhand shot, the quick snapper, the fast-release moving slapshot.

Players who have great feet and hands and can strategize the game are few and far between. Even at the college level, many players are now grinders.

Over the years I have lamented the lack of use of outdoor ice as the reason that these skills are not showing up so much anymore.

Troy agreed, but he made a good point by saying that it is time we stop complaining about lack of outdoor ice use and find a way to better improve skills and understanding of the game given our current situation (which is not going to change).

After a little thought, I have concluded that Troy is exactly correct. The question is: How do we provide this substitution for literally hundreds of hours of pond or boot hockey?

I don't know that I have the answer at this point. I do know that we have to do things differently than we have been.

I looked back at my own experience this past season with my small high school JV team. As the season progressed, I found myself spending more time in practice with a particular drill that I felt accomplished many things at one time. The drill was a simple "tag up" 3-on-3 scrimmage (both shooting at one goal) in one end.

The drill started out with a couple of easy rules:

- If the puck changed possession, the new possession team has to "tag up" (take the puck) outside the top of circle before being able to attack and shoot.

- The team without the puck can't pursue it outside the top of circle.

- The team with the puck can't shoot from outside the circle.

The drill taught many things about offensive and defensive strategies as well as worked on the various hand skills.

Over a period of time the drill became more progressive by, for example, requiring the "tag up" to be a pass to a single defenseman out at

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the blue line (who then passed the puck back into the possession team). Ultimately it included two defensemen at the blue line. The drill became a great teaching and exercise drill and was also great fun for the players.

I have wondered what kind of development the team members would have if I made this 40-50 percent of every practice (in two different segments) throughout the entire season?

Maybe they would learn the game faster.

This kind of approach may be moving more towards Jutting's feelings about changing our way of coaching to what we might call adapting to current conditions.

I probably would have to add several other similar types of drills to make things work out over an entire season. Actually, I have a couple of others that are 5-on-5 in zone (that the players love) that I will lay out in a future column.

Notice, however, that it does not take the whole ice surface to do these drills-games.

Nearly all of mine are half ice. So this concept also fits well into the idea of overlapping practices or sharing ice with another team.

So, what do we do at the lower levels like mite and squirt?

It is critical, I believe, that the number of games be decreased and practices increased.

However, along with that, we have to be much more creative in practices. We need to find game-drills that teach the strategies of the game as well as teach skills — and constantly involve as many players at a time as possible.

That is the problem with regulation games. In the one-hour time block, the whistles, line changes, rest periods, etc., reduce actual per player on-ice action time to some small number of minutes per hour.

We could, by the way, improve all youth games as far as increasing actual on-ice time by not allowing any line changes at whistles (except icing). All line changes would be on the fly.

There needs to be more thought about this, but there is no doubt in my mind that Troy Jutting is correct. We can no longer practice the same way when the situations are different.

We need to find ways to creatively substitute for the lack of learning that took place on the pond for the head, as well as the feet and the hands.

We need to find a way to make certain that all peewees, for example, can create then take advantage of the various 2-on-1 variations in any game.

Hockey is a game of 2-on-1s. Right now, more high school varsity players have no idea how to properly create then convert a 2-on-1, however.

Let's start moving in the right direction and find some new ways to teach.

Send me your ideas so I can pass them along.