

CROSS-ICE HOCKEY AND SMALL-AREA GAMES



Cross-ice hockey or small-area games, simply defined are technical and game-like competitive drills and games that use a playing surface that has been reduced in size and allows players to practice their hockey skills. Small-area hockey actually has been around for as long as the game has been played. When players played on a pond did they use an ice surface 200 x 85? No, they played in a small area that developed and sharpened their skills without the rules of off-sides, icing, penalties, face-offs, etc. Somehow coaches have moved away from this idea of practicing and playing in an environment with little control or structure, to

one with greater control.

Many of the greatest hockey players to ever play the game will attribute their success to growing up playing on the ponds and not in highly controlled practices!

When the playing surface is reduced in size, young players are being correctly prepared for the speed and quickness they will encounter as they grow older. Can you imagine a child eight and under playing basketball using a ten foot basket? Cross-ice develops a positive environment, increases puck handling, and teaches puck protection by forcing players to play in smaller, confined areas.

The key playing benefits of cross ice are that it promotes creativity, creates an environment for self-learning hockey, increased player participation, speeds up the learning process, improves decision making skills so the player reads and acts quicker, maximizes skill learning and development, increases tempo, creates a positive environment and a passion to play.

In small-area games, players control the puck in tight situations and will typically have more shots on goal than in any normal drills – all while competing at game pace and having fun!

At any level of play, an average player may only have control of the puck for a few seconds during the course of a game. In a cross-ice game, that same player may have over a minute of puck-possession time over 6-7 shifts in one 10 minute game. One cross-ice game can have the development benefits of 10 -12 full ice games because of the closeness of the players to the puck and constant action.

A study of hockey games played on the full-ice surface by George Kingston found:

- In a sixty minute running time hockey game between 6-8 year old children, the average player had possession of the puck for 20.7 seconds
- Top professional players were also timed and no player exceeded 85 seconds of puck possession time
- Youth players had an average of less than 0.5 shots per game and professional players only 1.5 shots
- In a sixty-minute children's game the actual playing time of the game was 20 minutes and 38 seconds
- Individual players are on the ice every third or fourth shift resulting in even less ice time

The study concluded that:

- For young players in the "full-ice game model" of development, the youngest players would require between 180 games to have 60 minutes of actual puck possession time to execute their stick handling, passing, pass receiving and shooting skills
- Professional players would require 60 games to ensure 60 minutes of puck control skill development
- Many youth players never touched the puck in the game

If we can utilize the cross-ice model correctly, we can increase the amount of ice-touches, puck-touches, and player involvement dramatically. In the end it is about developing the skills of each player which ultimately makes the game more enjoyable for them.