

Split-Ice Practices – For the Better or Worse?

We get plenty of faxes, e-mails and letters from coaches and even from organizational leaders and ice schedulers with questions on split-ice practices, with many different questions, ranging from why it is done and how it should be done, to what can be done.

The “why” part is very simple. Throughout the 90’s more and more kids have taken up the game, for a variety of reasons, but in many instances fueled by kids making the transition from inline hockey. As more and more inline facilities go up and as the game becomes more organized, it is only natural that kids will want to make the transition to the ice eventually, if they can afford it. It has really become a great feeder system for ice hockey. As more and more kids play, organizations need to work harder to make a schedule that is fair for all and gives each player and team the proper amount of ice time needed each week for practices and games.

The second part of the “why” is cost. As more and more arenas have gone up to try to accommodate the new players, so have costs. It is not cheap to build an arena, and certainly not cheap to operate one. Utility costs and liability insurance costs are constantly on the rise, and both of those are needed greatly in an ice arena. There are only a certain number of hours each in each day, each week and each year that an ice arena can even be used, especially by the main user group, school-aged kids. Unfortunately for arena operators, the costs to run the building are there all 24 hours of every day. So ice rental time, not cheap now in many places, will continue to go up. The more kids on the ice to share that cost, the better, which in many places, and for many age groups, means split or shared-ice practices.

At the mini-mite and mite level, it has been the standard for years in most organizations to split ice time, and now it is becoming more common at the levels above that as well.

Sharing practice is not uncommon in other sports. Soccer, for example, is a sport where shared-field practices are the standard, at almost every age and playing level, even for “select” and “premier” levels. But soccer is also a sport where at the younger ages, the size of the field, the number of players on the field, and sometimes even the size of the goals are adjusted to fit the age and ability levels of the players. In hockey, we expect our six year olds to play on the same size ice surface and under the same rules as the pros do, which really doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.

If you have ever watched a junior, college or professional practice you might have noticed the number of players on the ice. Depth is very important to teams at the upper levels, and is needed in case of injuries and player movement, and to create competition for playing time. Many teams carry five or more lines of forwards, eight defensemen and three goaltenders, with typically 25-28 players on the ice for practices. And these guys aren’t standing around, they are moving at top speed.

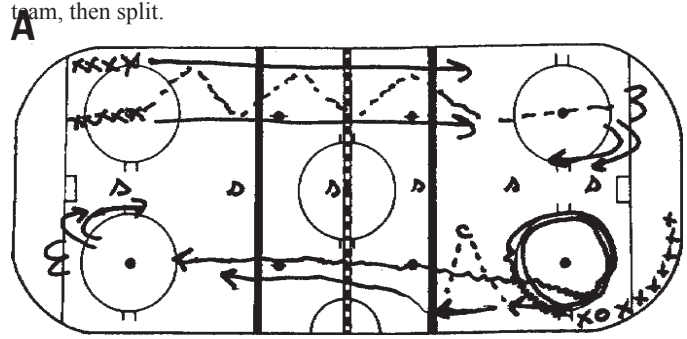
The ice has no problem accommodating them, and certainly shouldn’t have any problem accommodating 28-30 squirt, pee wee, bantam or even midget players. It is all in how it is used, and that comes down to coaching. Coaches need to be prepared to utilize the ice to the best of its ability, adjusting drills and communication methods as needed, and being flexible and willing to work with the other group on the ice at the same time. The bottom line is that by sharing practices, more kids get more ice time, which can only help them to get better.

The following are some ways to make split-ice practices more effective.

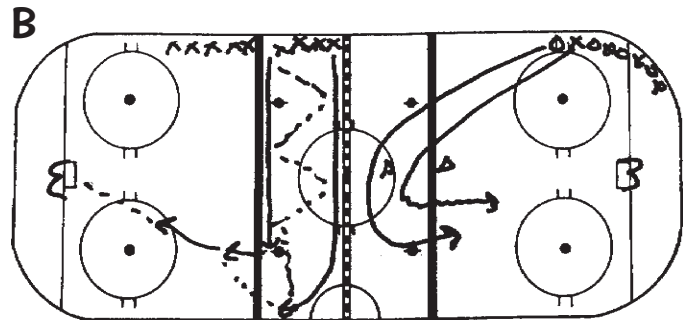
Plan ice utilization with the other coach

Speak to the coach of the other team, preferably well in advance of practice, so that you can have some ideas of what drills you will be running in practice, based on your ice usage. The ice can be split in half length-wise down the middle to run “full speed, full length of the ice” drills, or it can be split in half at the red line to run “in-zone” or “attacking the zone/defending the zone” drills. For a fifty minute

practice, you might want to split it 25 minutes each way, or even use the first 5-10 minutes to warm-up and stretch together with the other team, then split.



Full ice length-wise split down the middle in Fig A. Full-speed drills can be done half-ice “width-wise” with players returning to line along the cones up the middle of the ice. One team is doing a partner passing drill, while the other is doing a full-ice one on one



Full-ice width-wise split at center ice in Fig B. Drills should be structured to be done maximizing the use of the width of the ice. The full-ice passing drill and the one on one drill have been changed to a half-ice “width-wise” format.

Use four nets

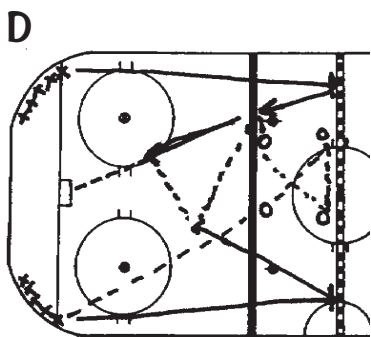
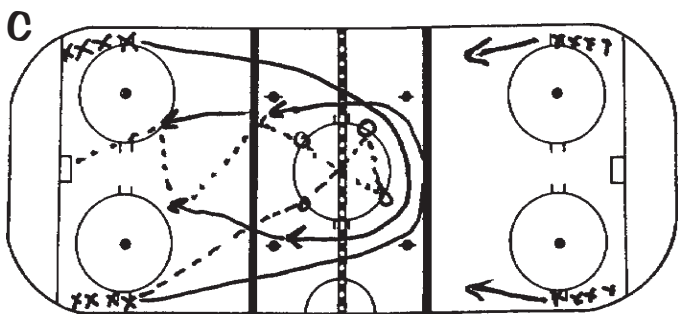
Virtually every arena has extra nets. And if they don’t, ask them to get some. But be sure to use them, even if your team only has one goalie. Having an extra net allows you to adjust drills to have two players shooting at a time, rather than just one, and it also gives the players something to shoot for (especially if you have shooter tutor), not to mention it is much quieter than the puck hitting the boards. If you are using a net along the “side boards” be sure that you put it in an area where there is “high glass” behind it so that you are not losing pucks over the boards, or risking injuries to people.

Coordinate communication with the other team

A whistle is a useful tool, but only if it is used properly. Sometimes it can be more confusing for players than helpful. Make plans with the other coaching staff on how you will be communicating with your players. One team could use a whistle to begin drills, while the other could use voice commands. If you are using voice commands, be sure to tell your kids to ignore the whistles. It doesn’t take long for them to adjust, and is actually a way to get them to be more focused and intent on your practice.

Revise your drills

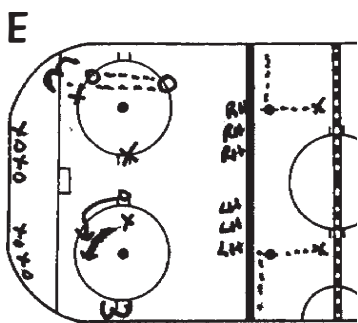
Structure your drills to get the most usage out of the ice that you have. Virtually every drill can be revised to be used full-ice, half-ice or even on a quarter of the ice. All you need to do is look at the objective of the drill. Why are you doing it? If it is being done to work on touch passing it can be revised as shown for full-ice lengthwise and for half-ice purposes. The objective is still the same, to improve touch passing skills and one-time shooting skills.



Any full-ice drill can be changed to use the available ice. A full-ice drill in Fig C has been adjusted to a half-ice drill with the same objective in Fig D.

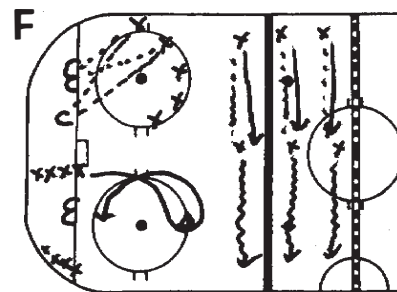
Use stations

Use your assistant coaches and use the ice wisely. Split your team into two or three groups and have them rotate from station to station – working on a different skill or concept at each station. Not only is it a great way to cover plenty of different areas that might need work, it makes practice interesting and fun for the players because they know that their drill will end shortly and they will be moving on to something else.



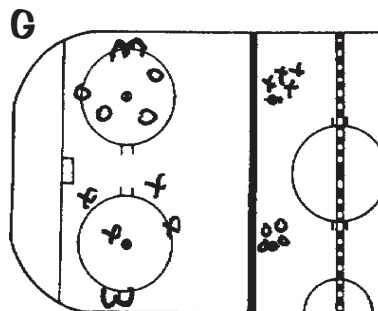
In a half-ice format, players have been split into three groups, in one corner working on one on one play with X defending and O attacking. In the other corner a two on two with X and O in front of the net battling for a puck, and upon getting possession, passing it back to their teammate for a one-time shot, then they battle for the rebound and repeat as the drill continues. Outside the blue line players are working on one-time shooting against the boards off of a pass.

In a half-ice format, players have been split into three groups. In one corner, players are working on tight turns and driving to the net for a shot. In the other corner, players are working on one-time shooting off a pass from a coach. Outside the blue line, players are working on moving partner passing, skating both backward and forward.

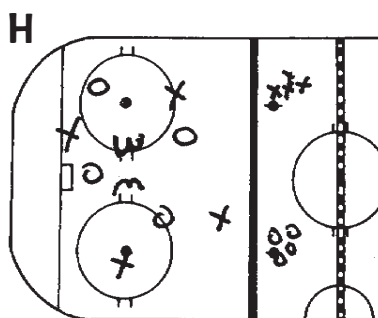


Scrimmage creatively

Not all scrimmages have to be full-ice with all the rules. Your players will get more out of scrimmages in terms of developing their skating and puck skills if you scrimmage in smaller areas or confined spaces. They will need to learn to do things more quickly than when they have more time and space.



A half-ice cross-ice scrimmage with players not involved, ready outside the blue line for their turn. Players participating play cross-ice with an emphasis on developing quick stickhandling, passing, playmaking and one-time shooting skills.



A half-ice cross-ice scrimmage with the nets back to back in the middle of the ice (simulating play being behind the net – if it is in front of the net at one side, it is essentially behind the net for the other side). Emphasis is on playing without the puck and puck support, both offensively and defensively.