

Working hard for the fun of it

It comes through experience and knowing your team. A coach has to loosen the reins sometimes and inject a little pure, unadulterated fun into workouts.

Here are five fun drills that involve competition between individuals or groups of players. It is up to the coach to devise his/her own reward system for the players who are most successful. Sometimes when you least think you should use them is the time to consider them. They give the players a good workout and make them have fun at the same time.

1. Baseball: Divide your squad into teams of four or five players (depending on how many you have) and have one game going at each end of the ice. The team that is "at bat" has two players in each corner behind the goal line. Batter-A puts the ball (puck) in play with a pass anywhere between the goal line and center ice red line. (Sorry, ground rules call for automatic OUT if the puck is shot or passed over the red line.) After putting the puck into play, Batter-A skates up the ice between the boards and the outside faceoff circle, then cuts across the ice while staying to the outside of the faceoff dots in the neutral zone, and races back to the goal line in the opposite corner from where he started, once again staying in the lane between the boards and the outside edge of the faceoff circle.

The players on the defensive side of the ball (puck), meantime, are spread out, as defenders are on the field in baseball. The defensive players must make two passes and score on the goalie before the batter crosses the goal line in the corner to record an out. The batter is credited with a run if he gets across the goal line before a goal is scored.

2. Three-on-Three Three-Puck Game: This is a great conditioning drill that starts with three players on each team lined up at center ice like forwards on a regular faceoff. Three pucks are placed between the centermen and play begins when the coach blows the whistle. The game is played full-ice with goalies and the three players on each team stay on until all three pucks are scored. To encourage full intensity and effort, you may want to make the first puck scored worth one point, the second puck scored worth two, and the third, three.

3. Pass-the-Stick Relay Race: The team is divided into two groups lined up in a straight line on either edge of the center ice faceoff circle. Player-1 from each team starts on the red line and, carrying his team's stick at the coach's command, skates one full lap at top speed. (Both players who are skating go in the same direction.) Skaters go behind the nets during their lap and as they come around the second net on their lap the next man gets into position for the handoff on the near blueline. The player receiving the stick may start skating at anytime but the handoff must take place between the bluelines. Goalies are included with a winner declared by the first group that completes its rotation of players. This is another good conditioning drill that you can time for between six and eight minutes.

4. Accuracy Shooting After Hard Skate: The team is divided into two groups placed at opposite sides of the ice outside the far blueline. Players on each squad are paired up and, at the coach's whistle, one twosome from each team skates hard to the far boards and back. When they cross the blueline upon

their return, each player gets a puck, turns back and, from the blueline, fires a long shot at the empty net. (If the drill is done right, of course, the puck must travel three-quarters of the length of the ice.) A player is retired from his group when he scores and stands along the boards. The first team to have all of its players score, wins. This is another six to eight minute drill.

5. 4-on-4 Half-Ice, Two-Pass Drill: Divide your skaters into four teams and play a game of four-on-four inside the offensive zone at both ends of the ice. Play is contained inside the blueline and the team with possession of the puck must make two passes before they can score. If possession of the puck changes, two passes are again required before a scoring chance can be attempted. The goaltender calls out the passes. The first team to score five goals wins.

Knowing the skill level of the players on your team, you should be able to divide your team into two groups of roughly comparable talent. (At the youth level where one player really dominates you may want to make his side play 3-on-4 or 3-on-5 in Drill #5 described above.) Keep the same teams matched against one another in all the competitive drills during your practice, and have a parent, trainer or injured player keep track of the points accumulated by each team in each drill. The reward for the overall victorious side might be as simple as free hot chocolate or, working from the other perspective, perhaps the losing side has to stay and clean up the dressing room.

Remember – Have fun, go hard, or go home!

