



## **How You Practice Might Determine Your Improvement More Than What You Practice**

By Jack Blatherwick

To be a successful coach, it is important to list skills and concepts you want to cover in a season — fundamentals like shooting, passing, skating and defensive skills — or competitive drills that teach rink sense, creativity, anticipation, poise and toughness.

Systems, team philosophy and conditioning are all very important.

In other words, what we practice is essential — but how we practice may be an even higher priority for successful coaching. Consider this example. I sat down to watch a Bantam practice a couple of years ago in which the coaches had planned a very challenging 1-on-1 drill.

Starting on one end, the forwards and D were involved in a shooting drill until the coaches gave an outlet pass to the forward. This started the 1-on-1 going toward the other end.

All three coaches were busy at the start, and no one coached the 1-on-1 competition; so as we might expect, forwards gave up when they lost the puck or after their first shot. There was no second effort to get a rebound.

The D gave up when the forward made a good move and faked them out. They didn't double their effort after a mistake, and in many cases they could have prevented a goal. They just skated to the next line.

The net affect of this 40 minute drill was to teach the lesson, "It's OK to quit." Over and over, the same message was repeated, "If things don't go smoothly, it's OK to give up."

In other words, this team would have been better off not practicing at all.

It's a shame, really, because the coaches had obviously taken time to plan a very creative practice. The drill was fun and challenging at the start. All that was needed was coaching at the end.

Forwards should have gone hard to the net for their rebound and competed until there was a whistle.

This would have forced the defender and goalie to make a second effort. But the planning was obviously focused on what to practice and not on how.

The same thing could happen on any drill designed to teach a skill or competitive concept. There is no improvement — only formation of bad habits — if players aren't focused on correct execution and second effort when things don't go smoothly.

It is the job of every coach to teach kids their mind must be as committed to improvement as their body.

Rarely would we see a skating drill done poorly, because without pucks, most players will make 100 percent effort. But when difficult skills are involved, when passing and receiving become complicated at a higher speed — or when spontaneous decisions are needed, it is easy for players to become frustrated and lose focus.

This is precisely the moment when great coaching can teach the most important competitive habits.

It's not a simple skill for three players to skate up and down the ice at full speed, completing passes and finishing with good shots.

This is true at every level if the coach requires uncomfortably fast speed while passing and shooting.

Even NHLers will miss some passes when the pace is out of their comfort zone. If this momentary frustration causes a lack of focus, and if players are allowed to give up in practice, how can we expect them to make a second effort in games?

Think of the number of missed passes in every Bantam or high school game — the number of things that don't go smoothly on each shift.

A good practice plan should prepare players for this frustration, because in a high-tempo playoff game, when the opposition is competing like their life depends on it, there will be more broken plays than highlight ones.

It's not easy to teach players to be tenacious, because it's not comfortable to practice when things don't go well.

Herb Brooks would often say, "You must incorporate drills that require a second effort, that incorporate some frustration. If every drill has a simple skating pattern and an easy shot — and if the players can just finish by skating over to the next line, you have not taught them to make a second effort when it's difficult."

"What could be more important?" Brooks would ask. "The key is the way you practice, not what you practice."

If players fall while skating corners at high speed, they should be applauded for their effort — but they must also be taught to get up and finish at 100 percent.

If they miss passes on a flow drill, they should be encouraged to make up a good “Plan B” of their own creative thinking. To be successful in games this is what must happen every shift, so we better prepare for it. When your first plan doesn’t work, switch to plan B.

But never, never, never give up.

Jack Blatherwick has a Ph.D. in physiology from the University of Minnesota. He is a physiologist for the Washington Capitals, and has held the same post for the Calgary Flames, New Jersey Devils, New York Rangers and Minnesota North Stars. He was also a coach/physiologist on the U.S. Olympic hockey teams in 1980, '84 '88, '92 and '94. Check out Cardiac Jack’s website at <http://www.overspeed.info/>.