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Want More Dynamic Practices? Planning is Key!

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by Jim Thompson

In my many years of coaching, I took the trouble to prepare a written practice plan about 75 percent of the time. Whenever I didn't have a written plan, I regretted it. The time seemed to flitter away and, at the end of practice, I felt that we hadn't learned as much as we might have. Having a written plan helps you to stay on task and keep from being buffeted about by the whims of the moment.

What happens when coaches commit themselves to a written plan for every practice? They have to think through what is going to happen in the limited time available for practice. The first benefit of a written plan is that it forces us to come to grips with how little practice time we actually have, compared with how much there is to learn about our sport. We have to prioritize to make sure the most important priorities get done. And we need to recognize that we can't do everything. If a particularly important drill takes 15 minutes for players to benefit from it, then allocating only five minutes is a waste of time.

How kids learn sports

There is another important reason to do the hard work of planning. Kids learn sports best through action, by doing rather than by standing around listening (or, as often is the case, not listening!). Yet in most practices I observe, most of the players are standing around most of the time. When I see a team where most of the players are involved and active, I know I am watching the fruits of a coach who has spent significant time planning practices.

Many times it can be as simple as adding one or two additional steps to a drill. For example, players always love shooting drills. Rather than simply having a line of players waiting to take shots, add a line of passers who start the drill by passing to the shooter. Also, add a line for an outlet pass from the goaltender. If the goaltender makes a save, she passes to the outlet, who passes to the passer, who passes to the shooter. Each player can follow her pass/shot to the next line, so players keep moving. You can have one player behind the goal who feeds passes to the outlet line when shots are not saved by the goaltender.

The spice of practice

As with life, the spice of practice is variety. Mixing up activities makes practice more fun. A team that spends an hour straight on a single activity is going to be less excited about it than a team that spends the same amount of time on the activity but in smaller chunks, and approaching it from different angles. Using a variety of drills to teach the same skill also keeps it interesting for players. Again, it is planning that allows a coach to build variety into and across practices over time.

Why coaches don't plan

In workshops all over the U.S., I have asked coaches if they regularly prepare a written practice plan. Rarely do more than 10 percent of the coaches raise their hands.

If there are so many benefits to planning practice sessions — and there are — then why don't more coaches plan more often? We could say that it's because most youth coaches are volunteers who have lots of other things they have to do. That is true, but the real reason why coaches don't plan

their practices more is because planning is hard work! Planning, for most people, is not fun. Thinking is hard work, and planning is thinking of the highest order. It involves trying to anticipate the future ("I think we can get this conditioning drill done in 10 minutes, which leaves 15 minutes to scrimmage if the defensive drill doesn't take more than 15 minutes …").

If you plan your practices, you have an opportunity to gain a competitive advantage because most coaches don't do enough of it. And there is some good news: Your plan doesn't have to be good to be effective.

A written plan

A written plan, even a bad one, gives you a framework from which to tackle a problem. You can always deviate from your plan, which shouldn't be set in stone. For example, you may have thought you could cover a new skill in 10 minutes, but after the 10 minutes you realize your players haven't gotten the hang of it. You can make an adjustment and allow more time for it (which means something else will not get done). Or you can make a note to cover this skill again at the next practice.

A written plan is a tool a coach can use to make the best use of a very scarce resource — practice time — either by following the plan or by selectively deviating from the plan when it makes sense to do so. Without a written plan to guide your daily practices, your team is simply not going to achieve its potential.

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