

# 5 Myths of Practice Planning

By Andrew Trimble

Entering now my 15th year of being a Head Coach, I've come to find what works and what doesn't work on the ice during practice. A lot of your success in practice depends on not only the level you are coaching, but also the day of the week, type of practice you are attempting to run, and the message you are trying to send to your players. Practice success and drill selection are often another method of coach to player communication, and effective practices can not only prepare your team for success and develop your athletes, but can hardwire the identity of your team.

With this article I'll debunk some of the common myths I've seen and experienced with Practice Planning and Practice coaching. I hope it informs you and gives you that little extra level of motivation to spend just a few more minutes in preparing to prepare your players.

## MYTH #1- Practice ?

*We're sitting in here, and I'm supposed to be the franchise player, and we in here talking about practice. I mean, listen, we're talking about practice, not a game, not a game, not a game, we talking about practice. Not a game. Not, not... Not the game that I go out there and die for and play every game like it's my last. Not the game, but we're talking about practice, man. I mean, how silly is that?.. And we talking about practice. I know I supposed to be there. I know I'm supposed to lead by example... I know that... And I'm not... I'm not shoving it aside, you know, like it don't mean anything. I know it's important, I do. I honestly do... But we're talking about practice man. What are we talking about? Practice? We're talking about practice, man.-*

***Allen Iverson***

Hockey practice is important. Your week, at any level, should have an idea in mind of how you want it to move, flow, and progress. A progressive week builds from day to day and leads towards the games at the conclusion of the week.

Here are some ideas:

- Using the calendar to determine difficulty- Unless I am rewarding the team for a job well done, I will make the furthest practice away from our next game the most difficult. Battle Days, I will focus on 1 on 1's, 2 on 2's, 3 on 2's, and Defensive Zone concepts. In my opinion this is where everything starts, and you should layer concepts on top of this foundation.
- Progressing Skills within a practice- The warmup will lead into the heart of the practice with the payoff being a challenge or fun completion of the practice. I will progress the difficulty of drills up throughout the course of the practice session.
- Uptempo Days- These days occur after the Battle day or days, and attempt to ramp up the speed to game-like conditions. Drills will include a lot of combination passing, breakouts, zone entry and regrouping.
- Detail Days- Focusing on Power Play, Penalty Kill and Systems work, the day right before a game, to me, are "detail" days that attempt to drill down into the systemic problems we may be having or highlighting areas that we can exploit in our opponents. They'll push off the gas pedal a little bit so that players can minimize injuries and be rested, but also prepared for their games.

- Meetings & Film- Meetings should also flow through this pattern and each meeting should have a desired outcome, and in my experience the more direct the better. Kids get off topic easily, so keeping these short and to the point have traditionally had the best results for me. It's better to have 2- 5 minute meetings about 2 unrelated topics than try to cram both topics into one meeting, as kids usually won't take away multiple topics. Additionally, I am a big proponent of film study, and find better results are achieved by doing it this way as well. Instead of watching a whole game, I'll take clips of just our d-zone faceoff or clips of just our forecheck, and focus a meeting on those items. This may take a little longer, but a team will have a deeper understanding of the system in the long run.

## **MYTH #2 Sticking to the Plan**

*Pat would constantly switch up the lines to get the team going. I could start a game playing with Dave Andreychuk and Glenn Anderson and end it playing with Wendel Clark and Nik Borschevsky. Pat was always thinking, always adjusting. He was on top of every period, evaluating us, what was working and what wasn't. He'd sit in his office between periods studying systems. Then he'd come into the dressing room and say: "Okay, this is what we're going to do now." NHL Hall of Famer Doug Gilmour talking about Pat Burns*

[https://www.thestar.com/sports/leafs/2014/11/14/hallbound\\_pat\\_burns\\_inspired\\_belief\\_gilmour.html](https://www.thestar.com/sports/leafs/2014/11/14/hallbound_pat_burns_inspired_belief_gilmour.html)

Every week starts with a plan. Every day starts with a plan. But nobody plans on stepping in dogshit. Or plans on getting a flat tire. People have to be willing to make adjustments when the inevitable changes occur around them.

The same goes for practice planning. If something isn't going right, coaches need to have the courage to stop and correct, to make adjustments on the fly. If players aren't competing at the desired level and executing perhaps because of a lack of focus or interest, coaches should be willing to stop the practice, change the drill and try something different. A basic 1 on 1 drill executed with players competing at 100% effort, is much better than a more complex drill that no one understands and the players poorly execute.

Take an example from the business world, Marvel Comics.

*Who would ever believe that Marvel – home of Spiderman, Iron Man and the Avengers – at one point faced critical crashing when, in the 90s, the comic book market headed for serious downfall. In fact, when the crash happened, Marvel Comics had lost almost everything – and there was no amount of kryptonite that would bring them out of their downward spiral – except for 1 thing. They switched their focus.*

*Changing their strategy from print to movie was probably one of the most successful turnaround strategies in history, as the team said goodbye to the industry that had made them a household name, and turned their focus wholeheartedly onto one that was so big, and so influential – Cinema. It worked – and today, many of their franchises are billion-dollar success stories.*

<https://cfproventures.com/3-business-turnaround-examples-youve-forgotten-about/>

Everything is perfect on paper. Execution is almost always short. Players each have different personalities, and each day encounter different hurdles. No one day is the same and no two days are the same in succession. Be willing to change and alter what you are doing to get the most out of your athletes.

### **MYTH #3 Negative Reinforcement**

In behavioral psychology, reinforcement is a consequence applied that will strengthen an organism's future behavior whenever that behavior is preceded by a specific antecedent stimulus

However, there is also negative reinforcement, which is characterized by taking away an undesirable stimulus. Changing someone's job might serve as a negative reinforcer to someone who suffers from back problems, i.e. Changing from a labourers job to an office position for instance. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reinforcement>

Far too often coaching solely focuses on Positive Reinforcement. Positive Reinforcement is a great tool for character building, self-esteem, team building, confidence and much more. Identifying good traits or behaviors and singling those traits out for praise. In our culture, however, many coaches are scared of using negative reinforcement as a tool to correct errors.

A generation ago, negative reinforcement was common. Such is revealed many times in the bestselling book, the Junction Boys (2001, by Jim Hunt). The Junction Boys is the story of the “survivors” of Texas A&M Aggies football coach Paul “Bear” Bryant’s 10-day summer camp in Junction, Texas, beginning September 1, 1954. The camp has achieved legendary status, partly due to the conditions of the camp, the fact 2 players died, and roughly one third of the team quit. It was made into an ESPN movie as well.

Negative reinforcement in the 1950’s, 60’s, and 70’s was more aligned with bullying and abuse than any true definition of the word. As you can see from the above quote, Negative Reinforcement is more about taking something away. It is not browbeating or demeaning. It simply means taking away the reward that players thought they were getting.

Coaches have to be willing to “Give” something, though, in order to take it away. A game, playing time, an after practice party, a workout, a guest speaker, tape/skate sharpenings, etc.

When you have practices that finish with fun or a game, oftentimes, removing this and replacing it with something more demanding sends a stronger message than any tongue-lashing will do. Moreover, it earns respect more than bullying and abuse ever could.

Ask any Comedian.... They will tell you that they learn as much from bombing, as they do from laughing.

### **MYTH #4- The Goalie Needs a Warmup**

First reality.... Everyone needs a warm up

First Question: On Game Days, do you wait till they drop the puck to start your warmup, or do you warmup off the ice prior?

Next Question: When do you begin your mental preparation? During the game or before the game?

With a new team and new faces, the New England Patriots as well as coaching staffs across the NFL have made 2020 a very unique year and are working to make up for the lack of in-person activities during the offseason and the absence of gameday tests for their roster. Minicamps, OTAs and preseason games all were canceled this year due to COVID-19, so the staff of the Patriots had this to say:

*“We want to make practice harder than the game,” defensive line coach DeMarcus Covington said. “So that way when the game time comes it’s actually easy. ... Throughout practice, you’ve got to get more reps and run and everything than you would during a normal game, and we’re going to strain you and make you work hard during practice so when you get to a game it’s going to be a lot easier.”*

<https://www.masslive.com/patriots/2020/08/with-no-preseason-patriots-coaches-want-to-make-practice-harder-than-the-game-even-when-it-feels-like-groundhog-day.html>

Oftentimes throughout the week of practice, I will bypass a traditional skating/ shooting/ goalie warmup and immediately move into a competitive cross ice game or 1 v 1 battle drill. What I’ve found is that it does 3 things:

- 1) It immediately sends a message that players have to enter the ice prepared to compete.
- 2) It bypasses any standing around that occurs often at the beginning of practice.
- 3) It keeps players mentally sharper not knowing what is going to happen at the start of practice.

As a consequence I have found that teams that embrace this mentality start off the first periods of hockey games with a slight advantage, generally outscoring their opponents in period 1. Moreover, it is easier to reign them in if they lack focus over the course of certain parts of practice, and lastly, they have a greater understanding of accountability (I generally make the losing team in the cross ice game or battle game sprint). Character reveals itself when tested. With this method you will certainly see who is ready and who competes to win.

*I play to win, whether during practice or a real game. – Michael Jordan*

## **MYTH #5 All Practices are the Same**

Over the course of my time coaching, it’s been incredibly fun to experiment and try new things. I would encourage all young coaches to let their personalities shine through and for your players and athletes to get to know you and your personality. Believe me... they don’t always work, and they don’t always have the desired effect, but that is part of the process. Learn and find out who you are, what works, how you can improve, and what makes your team tick. Don’t be a robot, and don’t ever try to be someone you’re not.

Here are some things I have tried (to varying degrees of success) that you might want to include in your practices:

- 1) **MUSIC**- Whether it be a team anthem played during conditioning, or a song that signals it's time for a specific part of practice, musical cues are a great way to differentiate yourself and create a team identity. With iTunes and digital music this has never been easier.
- 2) **3 V 3 TOURNAMENTS**- Break up the monotony of a week or reward your team with a 3 v 3 cross ice tournament. Have players pick teams, create a bracket and have them compete for a trophy. Sometimes these days can be your most competitive practices all season
- 3) **COMPETITIONS FOR AWARDS**- End a practice with an opportunity to earn individual recognition. I've had a "Yellow Sock Game" with my Laconia JR teams that was a modified shootout competition. The winner got to wear the "coveted" yellow socks for the full week of practice after winning the competition. The reward for wearing the yellow socks was an opportunity to do a solo "Hot Lap" around the rink with music (James Brown's Hot Pants was always a favorite or Glenn Frey's The Heat is On).
- 4) **GUEST COACHES**- As a break to the routine have someone else run your practice. An Assistant Coach, a Coach at a higher level, or a Skills Coach. Breakup the routine, and provide a different perspective to your kids.
- 5) **CREATE CHAOS**- This might not be the best idea for a youth practice or with parents in the building, but sometimes I think it is very effective to do something that completely alters the course of the practice, and makes the players come together. Examples would include:
  - After a win streak, have a really hard practice that they don't expect. Maybe lose your cool on someone (who you know can probably handle it) and push them to do more and be better.
  - During Battle Drills or 2 v 2's or 3 v 3's, group kids that don't like each other on the same team.
  - Kick the team off the ice, and make them start over.
  - After a loss... treat the kids to bagels and coffee before practice the next day. Reward them for their effort.

These are methods that have worked for me in the past and may work for you. ALWAYS have a purpose for why you are doing something, and do it with heart, passion and attention. Coaching is teaching, and where I have never been an actual teacher, it has been with great pride to see kids learn something in a practice setting, apply it, and then execute it in a game.

Practices in your organization should at minimum outnumber your games 2 or 3 to 1. This is where you do most of your coaching. If you find yourself constantly on the dry erase board during a game... you probably need to reevaluate what you are doing in practices. Additionally, sometimes it's the smallest conversations that have the biggest impact. The conversation between the conversation. The one where you subtly pull a kid aside and tell them a different way to do it in 3-5 seconds. Show the kids that you care about more than the X's and O's. If you care about them... they'll care about you.

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