

8 Days A Week

When It Comes To Playing Games, How Much Is Too Much?

By Harry Thompson

The Niagara Junior Purple Eagles Tier II Peewee team plays a very full and competitive schedule. From the end of August through the middle of March, and hopefully into early April, the Purple Eagles laced up the skates to the tune of 72 games last season.

Throw in a few weekly practices, and the 11- and 12-year-old players are on the ice close to 200 times during the season. Their quest to win a USA Hockey National Championship came up just short, falling in the quarterfinals to the San Jose Jr. Sharks at the Amherst Pepsi Center.

Down the road, the Buffalo Sabres skate from September until early April, and hopefully well into May and June if they catch a wave that will take them all the way to the Stanley Cup finals.

With six preseason games, 82 regular season contests and a playoff run that added an additional 16 games to their 2006-07 season, the Sabres quest for the Cup also came up just short, falling in the Eastern Conference finals to the Ottawa Senators.

The difference between these two groups of dedicated athletes? The Sabres are paid professionals. The Junior Purple Eagles are on the cusp of puberty.

The Junior Purple Eagles are by no means alone when it comes to playing an ambitious schedule. Their season is rivaled by teams of all ages around the country. Some programs play even more games, well into the 80- to 90-game range by the time the horn sounds at season's end. Then oftentimes the next season picks right up with tryouts a day or two later, followed by spring and summer leagues.

More Of Everything

When it comes to youth hockey, and youth sports in general, there is a growing concern over the length of a season, the commitment in terms of both time and money a family must give to compete at the upper levels of the game, and the toll it's taking on America's youth.

To be clear, hockey does not hold a monopoly over these issues. Sports from tennis to gymnastics to basketball are all asking more from their players and parents in what many perceive is the pursuit of excellence.

Adam Naylor is a sport psychologist at Boston University who conducts workshops for athletes, sport associations, coaches and parents on mental, emotional, education and developmental needs of athletes. Throughout his career he has worked with youth through professional athletes in team sports, such as hockey, as well as serving as a consultant to USA Hockey's Coaching Education Program.

The issue of how much is too much is a central theme of many of the lectures he gives and papers he writes.

"It's something that goes across the board of all youth sports. There's no sport you can't play year round," Naylor says.

But just because children can play a sport, like hockey, year round, the question remains, is it in their best interest? While the vast majority of those interviewed by USA Hockey Magazine are against it, they add that there is currently little scientific data to support their strong convictions.



***"It's about finding a way to
make our sport more attractive
not only with kids but also with
parents."***

***– Chris Zimmerman CEO,
Nike/Bauer***

Difficult To Swallow

Jim Johnson, a 13-year NHL veteran and current youth hockey coach in Phoenix, doesn't need scientific data to back up his beliefs. He need only reflect on his own path to the pros.

"I remember growing up and playing football, baseball and soccer," says the New Hope, Minn., native.

"You were able to play other sports because the hockey season started in November. Now hockey season is starting in August.

"In fact a lot of kids are still playing right now in camps and prospect tournaments and global scouting. It's almost a non-stop preparation, which is difficult for me to swallow."

Johnson is not alone. According to a recent survey conducted by Serving the American Rinks, the two most likely reasons given why players and parents drop out of hockey is cost and time commitment.

When many travel programs require a seven-day-a-week commitment and cost upwards of \$10,000 for a season of topnotch competition, many hockey experts, including members of USA Hockey's youth council, wonder if hockey families are being priced out of the sport.

"The parents and the players are telling us that the cost issues and the time commitment are two of the main reasons why they're leaving the game," says National Coach-in-Chief Al Bloomer. "So obviously when you ask how much is too much, is the longer season costing more and taking up too much time?"

"Maybe we should evaluate ways to reduce costs, setting cost limits on various classifications, and maybe we ought to consider putting in season lengths to help with the time."

Arms Race In Youth Sports

Like the weather, people throughout the USA Hockey family talk about this growing problem, but doing something about it is another matter entirely.

For one, there are forces within the game that seem content with the way things are, starting with players and their parents.

Rink managers and hockey directors are simply trying to create programs to keep kids on the ice, especially during the lull of the summer months.

Still, concerned parties want to know how much is too much when it comes to the number of games that are being crammed into a youth hockey schedule.

Larry Lauer is the director of coaching education and development for the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. Its mission is the study of the benefits and detriments of youth and high school sports on its participants.

In addition to holding a doctorate in exercise and sport science, specifically in sport psychology, Lauer is a former hockey director in North Carolina and works extensively with Michigan Amateur Hockey and its coaching education programs.

"I call it an arms race in youth sports where everybody is trying to do more than the next guy to get the best opportunities and advantages. But eventually it's got to stop somewhere," Lauer says.

Training the NTDP way helped James vanRiemsdyk become the No. 2 selection in the 2007 NHL Entry Draft.



The NTDP Way

When the National Team Development Program in Ann Arbor, Mich., was getting off the ground 10 years ago, the coaching staff believed that players needed to play a pro-type schedule to help prepare them for the rigors of college and pro hockey. It wasn't long before a change of heart took root.

"By the end of that year, our kids were burnt out and needed a rest, so we gave up some quality training time to give it to them," recalls Ken Martel, a former coach with the program.

To create a more effective training program that incorporated the four key elements of training – practice, game competition, physical training and rest and recovery – the NTDP coaches reduced the number of games played in a season to 55, including international competition.

"The idea behind the program is to create players who are significantly better at the end of the season than they were at the beginning of it," says Martel.

"This modified schedule has its peaks and valleys to offer more practice time to make significant gains in their performance."

"By playing that many games, they're missing out on three of the four key elements of development."

—Ken Martel, former NTDP coach

So if such a schedule is good enough for the best 16- and 17-year-old players in the country, why wouldn't youth hockey programs follow the same model?

"It bothers me to see youth teams playing upwards of 90 to 100 games," says Martel. "I believe they haven't done what's best for these kids. If an elite 16-year-old can't do it, a 9-year-old sure can't.

"By playing that many games, they're missing out on three of the four key elements of development."

Do The Math

With teams playing so many games, something has to give, and often it's practices that fall by the wayside. USA Hockey has established guidelines that recommend a 3-to-1 practice-to-game ratio. The NTDP maintains that training schedule, while colleges practice four days a week and play two games, usually on Friday and Saturday nights.

"Just do the math," implores Bloomer. "If you consider the season at [approximately] 250 days long, from September to April, and you play 80 games. There's not room for the recommended 3-to-1 practice-to-game ratio for skill development."

Too often coaches take the easy way out to satisfy the whims of their players and parents and load up the schedule with games.

"If I'm a kid and you tell me that I can play this number of games, I'm probably going to do it because I'd rather play a game than practice. And I'm sure that parents would rather watch a game than practice," says Naylor.

And that leads to a drop off in the basic skills that players will need to succeed at the highest levels of the game.

"Kids in our country are playing way too many games," Johnson says. "I look at kids' overall development, and think we have a lot of kids that can play but their overall fundamental skills are below what they need to be at the level that they're playing at. And the only way to get them better is to get the practice-to-game ratio closer to the 3-to-1."

Six Ways To Keep Kids Going Strong

The following guidelines are suggested to prevent overtraining/burnout:

- Don't get hung up on your child making it to a professional league or the Olympics. Fewer than 1 percent of high school athletes reach the big leagues.

- Practices should be designed with age-appropriate games and training to keep practice fun.

- Young athletes need time to recover psychologically and physically from a sport. They should take sufficient time off each week from competition, training and scrimmaging.

- Focus on wellness and teaching athletes to be in tune with their bodies to look for cues to slow down or alter their training methods.

- If children play several sports that use the same body parts, make sure they take a break between seasons to avoid overuse injuries.

- Young athletes should join only one team each season and should take two to three months off from a specific sport.

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Johnson is not only a proponent of maintaining a strict practice-to-game ratio; he also advocates the use of small area games to improve individual skills in a competitive environment.

“If you can create that intensity and that speed using small area games during practices, the kids are going to get a lot more development and a lot more [puck] touches and be able to work on their core fundamentals,” he says.

Well-Rounded Athletes

Along the lines of the shortened schedule, coaches like Johnson also yearn for the days of the multi-sport athlete.

“We may be building great hockey players, but I don’t believe we’re building great athletes,” says Johnson. “You take a kid who plays hockey year round and give him a baseball and he doesn’t have the athleticism to throw it.”

While most agree there will come a time when an athlete may need to focus his or her energies on a single sport, sport psychologists like Naylor and Lauer tell parents not to rush it. Studies indicate the sooner a child specializes in a sport, the sooner he or she is likely to reach the peak of his or her potential.

“Be careful what you wish for,” warns Naylor. “Do you want the best looking 10-year-old on the ice or do you want the best-looking 20-year-old on the ice?”

Conversely, data seems to indicate that continuing to play multiple sports and taking time off every once in a while will help a player peak at the age of 20 or 21.

“I look at that and ask, ‘isn’t that when you want to start peaking?’ ” says Naylor.

“I know here at BU that [head hockey coach] Jack Parker doesn’t want a kid who doesn’t get any better over the four years. The goal is to keep improving. So like anything, the more you play early, the more likely you are to peak or burn out.”

Taking a break from hockey during the year allows players to return to the game refreshed and ready to give it their all once they hit the ice after a layoff.

“I’d rather have a kid who’s focused and intense for seven or eight months than a kid who’s going through the motions for 12 months,” says Lauer. “They’re going to develop a lot faster.”

Rock And A Hard Place

So what’s a parent to do? Who can they turn to for sage advice? Today’s players and parents are constantly bombarded with mixed messages from various factions around the hockey world. More than one coach has threatened a kid that if he didn’t play for a specific team during the spring and summer, or didn’t attend a certain camp, he would find himself behind the proverbial eight ball when the fall hockey season rolled around.

“There’s a lot of pressure on a parent to feel like they’ve done everything possible for their kid. They think their kid will get behind if they don’t do X, Y and Z,” says Naylor.

“I always tell parents that if you hear a coach give a definitive statement, such as ‘if your kid does not do this camp or play on this team he will not get to where he wants to go,’ that should be a huge red flag because the one thing we do know is that there are a million different ways to achieve excellence.”

“It’s something that goes across the board of all youth sports. “There’s no sport you can’t play year round.”

—Adam Naylor, sport psychologist

USA Hockey has created a series of program recommendations for various age groups (see graph) that offer suggestions for how many games should be played at various levels.

Some local affiliates take it a step further by mandating the number of games a team can play in the season. For example, the Michigan Amateur Hockey Association bylaws state that all teams and players playing (all youth) classifications are restricted to a maximum of 75 games per season.

While many coaches may feel that is still way too many games for a season, there are programs in Michigan that step over those boundaries.

“I think part of the question, when you’re looking at certain areas of the country is how often do you need good competition?” says Lauer.

“Some of it has to do with a coach being responsible, thoughtful and creative in how he sets up a practice or how he sends a kid into a game.”

At What Cost?

When it comes to specialization and over-doing it, the costs go way beyond skill development. There are mental and emotional tolls on the young athlete.

“It is alarming for several reasons,” says Lauer. “One is the emotional, psychological toll it takes to play that many games. You just can’t keep coming with that same emotion and intensity night after night. And if you factor in practices, if kids are burning out it wouldn’t be a surprise.”

In addition to the psycho, social and emotional ramifications of playing so many games, there is also a huge concern on the physical aspects of such a grueling schedule at such a young age.

“I played 13 years, and at the end of every NHL season I spent the first three to four weeks right at the end of the season rehabbing injuries – trying to build my body back up from the depletion of the grind,” recalls Johnson.



“My question would be how much wear and tear there is to a kid who’s playing that many games. I think they’re starting to see it in other sports of kids who don’t take time off and let the body recover.”

If it’s a grind at the NHL level, how about for a 12-year-old, with school and other things on his or her plate?

Dr. Michael Stuart is not only the chief medical officer for USA Hockey, he is also a hockey dad who has three sons playing pro hockey. He supports more practices than games, not only to promote skill development, but to avoid the risk of injury.

He points to a recent study he conducted that found Junior hockey players are 25 times more likely to suffer an injury in a game than in a practice. At all levels of youth hockey, the risk is consistently greater to be injured in a game than in a practice.

“From a medical standpoint, my advice would be that parents should avoid overuse injuries in their kids by proper rest, and decrease the risk of injury by maintaining a proper practice-to-game ratio,” says Stuart.

A Juggling Act

One area that receives little attention is the effect it all has on the family. If hockey is a seven-day-a-week proposition, what does that do to traditional family life? If Thanksgiving is a time for tournaments, what does that do to dinner at grandmother’s house? Christmas, birthdays and family vacations also take on a new feel.

“There has to be a lot of sacrifices for these kids when they’re playing that many games,” says Lauer. “And it has to take its toll on the family if they’re traveling on every holiday and aren’t able to have that family downtime to be around family and enjoy the holidays.”

One thing’s for sure, it’s a juggling act. While taking off for holiday tournaments may disrupt the traditional family outings, it helps cut down on the number of school days a player misses during the season.

When it comes to missing school, many coaches have become sensitive to the number of days a player misses since schools often tie grades in with attendance. Still, a player who is playing or practicing seven days a week has to develop study and time-management skills that rival any of their on-ice skills.

“I tell my kids that it’s more important that they are doing well in their academics because if they’re not there’s no sense in them playing at a high level Tier I AAA hockey because they don’t have a future in the game beyond that level,” says Johnson, who perfected his game over four years at the University of Minnesota-Duluth.

Checks And Balances

In the end, there are no easy ways for a parent to map out what is best for their son or daughter. It’s a balancing act at best.

“When I talk to coaches and parents, I tell them that you’re still in control. You have a choice. You choose to go to those tournaments. If parents would say we’re not doing this tournament, then the coach is going to eventually listen,” Lauer says.

“It’s tough because it goes back to the pressure that parents feel that they have to give their child every opportunity possible. “More of a balance is needed. In the end, that’s what we’re talking about here.”