AGES 12 AND UNDER
Small Area Games
The players are the ones that need to learn to play the game, learn to be in the right place at the right time. When we have the players practice skills in game-like situations over all parts of the ice they will gain the ability to read and react in creative ways.

- Paraphrased from Finnish coach Juhani Wahlsten

Why use small area games?

- Small area games inspire creativity and experimentation while accelerating development. Traditional drills often have pre-determined outcomes that don’t present as much of a challenge.
- A variety of teaching and learning scenarios will be presented to both coaches and players.
- As these games are played at a high pace with intensity, they eliminate the need for traditional conditioning. Players should train in the manner in which they play. Hockey players take short shifts (usually 30-40 seconds) that feature explosive, short bursts of power. Short shifts are usually followed by rest periods that are two to three times as long as a shift. Small area games put players in a situation where they are receiving intense training while maintaining the proper work to rest ratio. They also turn conditioning into a fun and competitive game.
- Small area games imitate various game-like situations as players are confined to tight areas and must make quick decisions. Games played in small areas make it much easier for more players to be involved.
- Development is maximized in both the offensive and defensive areas of the ice. In addition, many games feature many quick transitions from offense to defense and vice versa.
- Small area games will keep more players moving. Drills often involve a few players while the rest stand in a corner or wait in line. Hockey is not played one player at a time and small games will maximize puck touches and keep more players active.
- Decision-making and anticipation skills (the development of hockey sense) will be greatly enhanced as players will be more familiar with various hockey situations.
- Players will improve regardless of ability levels. Players will be challenged but not overwhelmed with the use of small-area games that keep players moving. If necessary, the coach can group players by ability. The more skilled player will flourish as he or she will be in competitive situations against other highly skilled players. The confined spaces of small-area games enable the weaker players to be more involved in the play and develop their skills at a faster rate.
- Players will have fun, thus increasing their love and passion for the game.
- Players will have more energy with which to improve their skills when they are skating the shorter distance across the ice surface instead of the longer length of the ice.
- With smaller group sizes, learning and teaching become more effective.
- It is much easier to design activities according to the varying skill levels of the players within the group.
- More repetition / frequency in drills in each ice session.
- Decision-making skills are greatly enhanced. Players will make more decisions more frequently at a higher tempo.
- Goaltenders will be forced to read the play and react as game situations change often. Goaltenders will see more shots and make more saves.
• The games are full of continuously changing scenarios. This exposes players to transition hockey at the youngest ages.
• The speed of the game increases, forcing players to make quicker mental and physical reactions.
• There are no unnecessary breaks in the game.

**Skill Work & Small Area Games**

In addition to the traditional methods of teaching skills, small area games will provide the coach with additional opportunities to develop players in a fun and competitive setting. Small area games give players the opportunity to learn by playing the game.

**Skating** – Small area games will involve every type of skating maneuver including stops & starts, tight turns, crossovers, forward stride, etc. both with and without the puck. Players will enhance agility, balance and coordination while changing directions with body control.

**Puck-Handling** – Players will have many opportunities to handle the puck in confined spaces. Puck battles are a consistent focus in small area games and the player will always be under pressure while handling the puck, giving the game a realistic tone.

**Puck Protection** – The confined spaces of small area games put an emphasis on puck protection skills. Players will have to use their bodies to protect the puck and create scoring opportunities both along the boards and in open ice.
Passing – Almost every small area game has passing as a key component. Many games have conditions that dictate a certain number of passes or have a certain player designated as support who must move the puck to teammates. Players will have multiple repetitions when it comes to passing and receiving the puck.

Shooting – Small area games allow players to take many shots under pressure in competitive situations. While using creativity and deception skills, players will have the opportunities to take wrist shots, snap & slap shots, backhand and one-time shots. Confined spaces will encourage players to battle in front of the net where there are opportunities for tip-ins and rebounds. As is common in regular games, players will often find themselves (in small area games) in tight to the net trying to use quick hands and moves to beat the goaltender.

Transitioning – A defining characteristic of small area games are the constant transitions from offense to defense and defense to offense. Every player, regardless of position, will have to make quick decisions in order to create time and space and make plays.

Puck Support – With the many transitions in small area games, players will be trained to anticipate turnovers and support the puck. Playing in a confined space will encourage players to move quickly to get open (and communicate) and find open lanes in order to receive a pass.

Hockey Sense – Traditional activities are too often scripted where the players do not have to think and make decisions. The development of hockey sense is all but eliminated. Small area games give players extensive experience and repetition with hockey sense development. Players will have the freedom to learn by playing in a competitive environment without pre-determined outcomes.

Breakouts – The coach can save valuable practice time by incorporating breakout situations into small area games. Instead of using traditional drills, small area games can add an element of competition and pressure to breakout situations where more players can be involved more often.

Power Plays – Many games provide odd-man situations that closely resemble power play alignments such as the umbrella and the overload. Rules and conditions (such as number of players and positioning) can be implemented to meet specific needs.

2002 Puck Possession Study

In 2002, USA Hockey commissioned a comprehensive study to calculate how much time the best players in the world had the puck on their sticks at the Olympic Winter Games in Salt Lake City. During each game of the tournament, three players who were expected to be key performers for their teams were chosen for the study. The coaches calculated the length of each player’s shift, how long they had the puck on their stick, how many passes they made, how many passes they received and how many shots on goal they attempted. The coaches also kept track of the number of un-timed touches; those when the puck hit their stick if only for a brief second.

Canada’s Joe Sakic dominated play in the gold-medal game, registering two goals and two assists along with four shots on net. However, during that game he only touched the puck for 1 minute, 19 seconds. During the women’s gold-medal game, Team USA’s Cammi Granato led all players with 1 minute, 2 seconds of puck possession time.

The purpose of the study was to determine the best method to develop puck possession skills with young players. To follow up the Olympic study, USA Hockey volunteers conducted the same study at the 2002 Youth Hockey Tier I National Championships. Although the skill levels varied, the results were very similar. Even the best players at the youth tournament didn’t handle the puck that much.
What conclusions can we draw?

- The numbers show that stick and puck skills can’t be developed in games.
- You can accomplish a lot more with the puck in practices compared to games.
- Players get so few opportunities with the puck in games that they must be proficient when they do get it.
- Small-area games in practice provide players the necessary touches to develop stick and puck skills.

Coaching Points

- Communicate with the players to make sure they understand the rules and purpose of the game.
- Monitor the games to encourage players while ensuring (when applicable) that players of like abilities are matched. The coach should watch to see that the particular regulations of each game are followed.
- Keep the length of games and shifts in mind. While playing one game for 20 minutes is probably too long, 2 minutes is too short. In general, game length of 8 – 12 minutes should be sufficient to provide each player a high number of quality repetitions. Shifts should be 30 – 40 seconds in order to emulate game circumstances as closely as possible.
- Allow players the latitude to exercise their creativity. Players should feel comfortable enough to make mistakes and try again. Allow for failure.
- Be detail oriented.
- Consider how often you are going to stop play in order to highlight teaching points. Point out the positives in addition to improvements to be made.
- Just as players should embrace creativity, the coach should add progressions and variations to activities and small-area games that will promote development and fun.

Special Conditions

There are many special conditions that can be used in small area games. The coach should use creativity when implementing guidelines and use these games to capture teaching moments.

- Confine players to a specific area of the ice. This allows you to create numerical advantages (3 on 2, 2 on 1, etc.) and create transition opportunities.
- Require some or all players to touch the puck before a shot. This forces movement, puck support, quick thinking, quick passes, etc.
- Create support players — these players can’t be pressured and play on offense all the time.
- Restrictions on passing — such as backhand passes only, no give and go passes, use only one touch passes, etc.
- Don’t allow dump ins — players will have to use puck protection and deception skills, use screens, offensive creativity and quickness, etc.
- Place conditions on how a goal must be scored — plays must start from a corner or behind the net, only the defensemen can score, etc.
- Play with more than one puck, increasing the amount of activity.
- Allow players to score on any net or restrict teams to attacking and defending a designated net or nets.
12U Recommendations

- When playing small area games, allow the decision making and creativity of the players to flourish without too many interruptions.
- Players should have a fairly high level of skills that allows them to experiment with more complex games. In general, complex games mask more of the situations they will face in games.
- More complex concepts such as support transition come into play.
Games from USA Hockey’s Small Area Competitive Game’s Handbook

1. **Rebound Game** – Place five or more players around the net and crease area and one player at the top (between the hash marks and the top of the circles). The player at the top is the shooter. The shooter tries to score while the others try to score on the rebound, if any. The game is played to 10. If the goalie covers the puck or the puck goes wide and past the goal line, the goalie gets a point. Each time the goalie earns a point, the players rotate around the crease area.
   * Fun way to end practice at one or both ends.

2. **Crossover Relay Race** – Designate two teams. On the whistle, a player from each team skates using crossovers around the circle one complete time and race for the open puck. The first player to the puck tries to score. The other player back checks, trying to prevent a score. Whichever team scores five times first wins. A new puck is placed in the middle each time.
   * Develops crossovers at a high tempo.
3. **Decision Maker** – Playing 3-on-3 at one end, the coach is responsible for constantly changing the game. The first game requires that teams must complete two passes before shooting. In the next game, teams can only make backhand passes and backhand shots. The third game requires that teams can only make indirect off the boards passes, etc. Be creative with game requirements. Also alternate the number of players.

   * Develops quick thinking and anticipation skills.

4. **1-on-1 Sweep the Porch** – Place a handful of pucks in front of the net. The defenseman turns his / her stick over so the butt end is on the ice. The forward tries to shoot the pucks into the net one at a time while the defenseman tries to stop him. The game ends when all the pucks have been used.

   * Develops solid 1-on-1 play.
5. **Cross-Ice Board Scrimmage** – Using the neutral zone, divide the players into 2 teams of 3, 4 or 5. The boards between blue lines are the goals. The players must complete three passes before scoring. The only way to score is to have the blade of the stick holding the puck against the boards. Players cannot shoot.
* Good option while players are doing other drills at each end of the ice.

6. **Baseball** – Using three cones and the hash marks at one end, set up a baseball diamond. Divide the players into two teams. The batter takes the puck and shoots it down to the far end. The outfielders have to make three passes and shoot into the open net before the hitter rounds all three bases and passes over the home plate hash marks for an out. Change sides after three outs.
* Creates fun and teamwork
7. **Odd / Even Game** – Start the drill as a 1-on-1. Then add a player to make it a 2-on-1. Continue adding one player at a time, alternately giving each team the player advantage. Continue the drill until you have reached 5-on-5.
   * Develops vision when passing.

8. **Rover Transition Game** – Each team starts with one designated defensive and offensive player who must remain on their respective side of the center line. (Use cones to mark the center line). The third player on each team is a rover who can play on either side of the center line. The game is a continuous 2-on-2. Create a variation by taking out one rover and creating a 2-on-1 allowing the remaining rover to play on offense for both teams.
   * Develops quick transition and thinking skills.
9. **2-on-2 / 3-on-3 Game** – Place the nets in corner face-off area. Players play 2-on-2 and/or 3-on-3. Players not actively in the game surround the nets and keep the puck in play. Keep the shifts 30-40 seconds just like a real game. After a while change the rules and allow both teams to score on either net.
* Creates quick thinking and quick plays.

10. **2-on-1 Corner Drill** – Using both corners play a 2-on-1. The players not actively in the game surround the nets and keep the puck in play. The coach dumps a new puck in when the original puck is either shot in the net or goes out of play. The forwards try to score as many times as they can in the time allowed while the defensemen tries to stop them. Change every 30-40 seconds.
* Develops close, quick passing
11. **4 Corner Support Drill** – Place two players from each team, one at the blue line and one in the opposite corner. Start the game playing 2-on-2. Players must pass to one support player before they can go on offense. After awhile play 3-on-3 or 4-on-4. Change the players every 30-40 seconds. The players can pass to either support player at any time. As a variation, let the players pass to any support player and get it back.
* Develops passing lanes and quick thinking.

12. **Between the Circles 3-on-2** – Place the net in its regular crease area. Place three offensive players between the circles and two defensemen. The offensive players try to score with quick puck movement while the defenders try to stop them. After a goal or a puck clearing a new puck is passed in by the coach to the offensive players. Change players after five pucks have been used.
* Develops close, quick passing
13. **High / Low 2-on-2 Tip-Ins** – Divide the players into two teams and place one player per team at the blue line. Using two nets, players play a 2-on-2 in front. When the top player has the puck, they wait for a teammate to get in front for a tip-in. Goals only count if they are tipped in. After each goal, the team that scores keeps possession of the puck. Players hustle from side to side playing offense or defense depending which point player has the puck. Change every 40 seconds.

* Teaches deflections under game conditions.

14. **1-on-1 Empty Net Game** – Place four cones on the ice. Four forwards line up across the blue line with a puck. 10 feet away and facing them are four defensemen. The object is to get to the cones before you can shoot on the empty net while being defended. The fist puck in the net gets the point. The game is over when a forward score three points. Everyone changes positions after three goals so they each work on both offensive and defensive plays.

* A fun way to teach 1-on-1 play.
15. **Breakaway Relay Game** – Place two nets in the neutral zone. Two teams are divided up and placed on the boards. The first player in line goes on the whistle. The second player can’t go until the first player scores and skates back past the front of the line. After saves, goalies can shoot the puck anywhere they want. The game ends when one team’s players have all scored. The losing team does three laps around the nets.

* Develops scoring intensity around the net.

16. **Breakaway Build-Up Relay** – Place two nets in the neutral zone. Two teams are divided up and placed on the boards. The first player in line goes on the whistle. He / She must go until he / she scores. After the player gets back to the line two players go, when they score, three players go. After three players have scored, start back with one player. The game ends when one team uses up all its players and has scored. The losing team does three laps around the nets.

* A competitive and fun drill to end practice with.
17. **Red Baron Game** – Use five players to start the game – two players on each team and a player who is designated as the Red Baron. The Red Baron is always on offense and can skate anywhere and score for the team that has possession of the puck. This creates a continuous 3-on-2. Create variations of the game by making the Red Baron stationary and requiring the puck to be passed to him/her after transition before the other team can go on offense. The third variation allows the Red Baron to move laterally across the blue line and requiring the puck be passed to him/her after transition before the other team can go on offense.

* Improves transition awareness

18. **2-on-1 Transition Game** – Set up a 2-on-1 at both ends. The defending player must try to get the puck to the other side while the two forwards are trying to score. The players must stay on their own end and can’t get involved with the play until the defender on the other side passes the puck to them. Continue the drill for 30-40 seconds and then change.

* Fun drill that teaches transition and puck movement.
Resources

Paul Cannatta. The Value of Small-Area Games in Ice Hockey Development. 
USA Hockey (www.usahockey.com)

Delano, MN; 2003; Willett International, LLC 
Paulwillett.com/Small_Area_Games.htm
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