



HOCKEY SASKATCHEWAN
UNDER-9 (U9) HALF-ICE
INFORMATION BOOKLET

2023-2024 Season



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REGULATIONS

- In Saskatchewan, **ALL Under-9 (U9) games must be played in a Half-Ice format for the whole duration of the hockey season.**
- **Total Games:** 40-45
- **Start Date for Games:**
 - **Exhibition** - November 15th
 - **Tournaments** - December 1st
 - **League Games** - January 1st
- **League Playoffs** - Must be in tournament-style format over no more than two weekends.

BASIC RULES OF THE GAME

- 3-minute warmup.
- Officials will draw a dot in the middle of the game zone for all face-offs.
- Shifts are 2 minutes.
- A face-off will take place at the start of every shift.
- There are no icing or offside calls.
- Score will be kept; however, goals and assists will NOT be recorded.
- Goalies may not be pulled at any time.
- Line matching must take place. The more advanced players from each team are being matched against the more advanced players from the opposing team.
- The maximum number of goals allowed to be scored by one player in a game can be determined by each community and/or League.

Continuous Play and Change of Possession:

As identified by Hockey Canada as a core element in U9, one of the keys to improving the flow of each game and reducing the stoppages is to create continuous play, particularly on change of possession.

These basic rules apply:

- One coach from each team will assist in moving bumpers/boards at the end of each shift.
- A face-off will take place at the start of every shift.
- There will be no stoppages in play during shifts; continuous play will be used. (Exception: injury)
- **Puck shot out of play:** The official blows whistle, the defending team backs off and the non-offending team gets possession.
- **Goalie freezes puck:** The official blows whistle, the attacking team backs off, and the defending team gets possession.
- **Goal scored:** The official blows whistle, the attacking team backs off, and the defending team gets possession.



SEASONAL STRUCTURE

Season Start:

- *RECOMMENDED* - Mid-September/October

Development Season:

- Eight (8) to Ten (10) weeks consisting of 16-20 practices. Of the 16-20 practices during the Development Season, Hockey Saskatchewan recommends that 8-10 practices be done with a certified skating instructor.
- The remaining 8-12 practices should have an emphasis on individual skills.

Number of Practices for Season:

- Forty-five (45) total, approximately 45-60 minutes each. This is to learn, develop, and refine skills.

ON-ICE OFFICIALS

- The Half-Ice game may be run by two (2) Hockey Saskatchewan-certified officials who will be responsible for face-offs, goal determination, penalties, etc. while working on fundamentals such as skating, positioning, and communication. This will assist young officials in building confidence and experience, reacting "with" the play rather than "to" it, while creating a foundation they can build from. Hockey Saskatchewan will include applicable officials' Half-Ice protocol at all Level 1 officiating clinics, and it will also be circulated to all Minor Hockey Associations. Officials will continue to learn about offside, icing, and other full-ice rules at their clinics.

Penalties

The following guidelines apply to penalties during U9 Half-Ice games:

- Minor penalties are noted, with the official briefly raising their arm to indicate a penalty will be assessed. At the conclusion of the shift, the official notifies the team of the infraction and the number of the offending player.
- If the offending team controls the puck, the official blows the whistle and calls for a change of possession; the non-offending team is given a three-metre cushion.
- The offending player will sit out the next shift, but the team will play even strength.
- Should an infraction occur, that would normally require a player to be ejected from the game (game misconduct, match penalty, gross misconduct), the player will be removed for the remainder of that game. Even under these circumstances, teams will not play shorthanded, and no game incident report will be required.



GAME FORMAT

Allow flexibility on the timing of the game, dependent on the amount of ice that is available:

- If a one-hour timeframe is available, use the model of two twenty-four (24) minute halves with two-minute shifts.
- If a ninety-minute or two-hour timeframe is available, use the model of two thirty (30) minute halves or three twenty (20) minute periods all with two-minute shifts but stop the clock at the end of every two-minute shift.

SCHEDULING

Minor Hockey Associations and Leagues are strongly encouraged to schedule U9 Half-Ice games in succession, whenever possible, to allow for fluid transition between games. Ideally, this group of U9 Half-Ice games would also follow a group of U7 Cross-Ice games to limit the movement of rink dividers.

PRACTICES

To maintain the concepts of Long-Term Athlete Development and modified ice, practices at the U9 level **MUST** be on half-ice all year. This allows for the focus to be on skill development and competitive games in small, modified spaces rather than full-ice flow drills or team tactics.

ROSTERS

Hockey Saskatchewan understands there are challenges in having consistent roster sizes across the province. It is recommended that, whenever possible, team rosters should consist of 10-12 skaters plus one (1) rotating goalie.

This provides the opportunity to increase ice time while utilizing a Skills Zone (Optional). Frequent water breaks may be given at any time to ensure a point of rest. However, this format will work for ANY size team. Hockey Saskatchewan encourages ALL skaters to try different positions.

EQUIPMENT/SET-UP

Hockey Saskatchewan recommends that for the best possible results, two rink dividers are utilized in this format. However, only one rink divider may work as well.

SMALL NETS ARE RECOMMENDED BUT REGULAR SIZE IS ACCEPTABLE

A minimum of two on-ice coaches per team are responsible for assisting in setting up the nets and rink dividers for each U9 Half-Ice game. In addition, they should assist in removing the rink dividers and the nets from the development zone immediately following the game. Trials have proven this only takes two (2) minutes before and after each game.



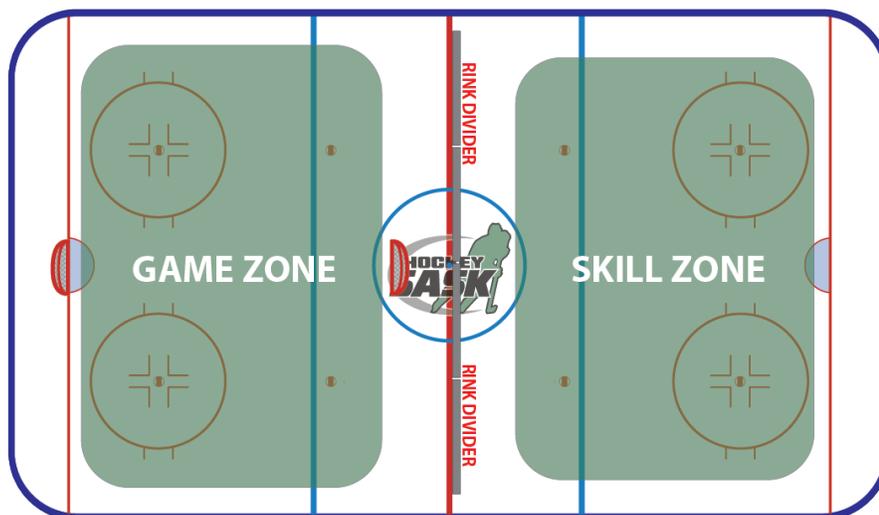
If there is another U9 Half-Ice game after their game, on-ice coaches should rotate and move the rink dividers into the middle section of the ice surface to allow flooding around the boards so the remainder of the ice surface can be flooded. Each Minor Hockey Association and/or community can determine the specific protocol regarding the most efficient movement of equipment.

HALF-ICE LAYOUT

In the Game Zone, one net is to be placed on the goal line (using the crease and markings) and the second net is to be placed just in front of the centre ice red line using the face-off dot as a guide for placement.

The Skills Zone is **OPTIONAL**. When being used, it may consist of stations of small area games, skating, passing, puck handling and shooting.

One set of rink dividers can be placed across the entire width of the ice along the redline. This can easily be accomplished if using the border patrol rink dividers, by simply removing one of the eight sections in each set and centring across the ice surface accordingly. This will leave approximately 3-4 feet of space on each side of the ice surface.





SKILLS ZONE (OPTIONAL)

The purpose of the Skills Zone is to maximize ice usage while providing additional ice time and development opportunities for players. On-ice coaches (1 from each team) will also be able to coach and encourage players, providing additional teaching and instructional opportunities.

THIS ZONE IS OPTIONAL BUT HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.

The Skills Zone will consist of a cross-ice section of the ice surface that extends from the end boards to the nearest blue line, opposite that of the Half-Ice Zone. Players in the Skills Zone will be working on developing their skating, passing and puck skills. Small-area games may also be played in the Skills Zone.

- One coach from each team is required to be on the ice to oversee the Skills Zone.
- On-ice coaches should also assist officials in moving the half-ice divider back into its proper position if moved significantly during the Half-Ice game.
- The number of players in the Skills Zone will vary, depending on each team's numbers.

Despite being from different "teams," on-ice coaches should work together to provide the maximum benefit for all players, while also learning from each other. Each team is encouraged to rotate coaches that will go on the ice from game to game.

ROTATION OF PLAYERS

A crucial component of the success of the U9 Half-Ice structure is the organized rotation of players between shifts. Coaches from each team must meet prior to entering the ice surface to discuss the following: number of players on each team, and therefore, the number to be used during the game portion; line matching; if the Skills Zone is going to be used; which side will players enter and leave the game area.

At the beginning of each game/period, coaches will assign 5 players (depending on the number of total players each team has) for the Half-Ice game, and the remaining players will go to the Skills Zone or players' bench. Once the buzzer sounds, a new group of players from the Skills Zone or players bench will go to the Game Zone.

LINE MATCHING

Line matching is having the same calibre of players playing against each other at the same time and must be employed.

FAIR AND EQUAL ICE TIME

All players should have the same opportunity to contribute, regardless of skill or ability. A coach's responsibility is to develop all players. Shortening the bench to win games is not permitted. All players and goaltenders should receive fair and as close to equal as possible ice time.



HALF-ICE VIEWS FROM JASON STRUDWICK

The following section was written by former NHL defenceman Jason Strudwick.

DEVELOPMENT

The goal of sharing my thoughts is not to change your mind if you do not like the new way U9 is being played. By sharing my thoughts, I simply want to prepare those who are going into the program next Fall and help those who are currently in it. It was new for everyone this year and I wish I knew now what I did not know or understood in September.

I was the head coach of one team and the assistant with another for first-year U9. We were lucky to have a lot of committed parents who became coaches, managers, and volunteers. That makes a huge difference! If your child is involved in any sport and you are not volunteering, take a second to see if you can help in some way. When it falls on one person or a group, it can burn them out and make them rethink their commitment.

So where to start with the first year of Half-Ice U9 hockey as a coach/parent? The format of playing Half-Ice games makes it easy to figure out. There were no winners and losers in the games. Did the kids and parents keep score in their heads? Sure. But there was no website that said which team was winning or losing.

With no winners or losers, I think this should have changed the year-long plan for the coaches. In the past with full-ice games at U9, it was understood that spending time on a breakout or forecheck was needed so there was some order to a game. Learning icing and offside was very important as those rules were called and enforced. Teaching a 7-year-old these concepts could be tricky and very time-consuming. Without the need to address those areas, coaches could change their priorities.

The coaches could now focus 100% on player development, though still slowly introducing the kids to all the different [hockey penalties](#).

This concept of working on skill sets took the pressure of winning away from the coaches and it freed them up to really go after developing players, which is where I believe the focus should be at this age. Now, the coach shouldn't wonder if he is doing the right things for his team to win. He can focus solely on if he is doing the right things to make the players improve. Then the games become the stage for the players to show off their improving skill sets.

The puck touches were great on the half-ice. Shots are frequent and passing is needed. It is difficult to really grab the puck and go through a whole team on half-ice. Players are always around you and able to close the space on you faster than on full ice. This allows the coaches a great opportunity to preach passing. It is not easy, but when you see four passes in a row, it's so beautiful you almost start to cry!

At the end of the day, hockey is about having fun. That is why kids play it and we coach it. We cannot forget about that. Every coach can have their own way to create fun. You need to find yours. I do believe



players have fun when they know they are improving and touching the puck in games. Focus on those skills and smiles will come.

PRACTICE PLANNING

So, where to start with a Half-Ice practice plan?

We had more practices than games. I love that ratio. As a coach, I believe the practices are for the coach and the games are for the players. If we can have organized and well-thought-out practice plans, the players will have success in games. Not the other way around.

I believe there should be a practice template. As coaches, we don't need to reinvent the wheel from practice to practice and come up with new drills all the time. First off, coming up with all new drills for all 30 practices would be impossible. The group of coaches would spend a lot of time teaching the drills. That wasted time means less time to do the drills for the players. The players also need to figure out the drill before they can work on the skill the drill is attempting to improve.

To start the season, all the drills and practice plans will be new to your team. After a while, everyone will get comfortable with the drills, and they will get to understand how you want to run the practice. Coaches don't feel guilty about using the same practice plan for back-to-back practices. The players will get a lot more out of the second skate knowing what to expect and the coaches can now spend more time coaching the skills involved in your drills rather than coaching the drill. As your team gets used to your drills, you can mix in some previous drills in each practice so the players can work on their basic skills. Then introduce new drills with new skills required, one or two at a time, to keep challenging your players. There should be a structure to the practice that the kids come to expect. I believe the players like the structure and thrive under it. Ask a teacher — they are the ones who clued me in. Here is an example of what each practice can look like. The drills can vary from practice to practice, but the template stays the same.

EXAMPLE:

10 mins ... small-area game

10 mins ... skating drills

8 mins ... passing drills

Break into four stations. Each station is 7 mins:

a - skating station

b - stick-handling station

c - passing station

d - puck race station

Any remaining time becomes a puck pirate game.



At this U9 level, I would concentrate on skating and passing. I know, I don't have shooting in there. I didn't spend any time teaching shooting once this season. The kids shoot a ton of pucks when they get on the ice. It is the one skill you don't need to ask them to do. Have you ever seen a kid jump on the ice with pucks around and decide to instead work on their tight turns or Mohawk turns?

I believe if a player can skate and the coaches put a strong emphasis on coaching the skill of passing and preaching for players to pass in games, they will get their chance to shoot on-net. If you spend a lot of time teaching shooting and not enough on skating and passing, they will never get to use that shot. Every drill I come up with finishes with a shot on goal. That gets the kids excited. I don't care about the shot. I care about the four tight turns and two passes they do before they get to take the shot. They work on the skills you want and they still get their shot. Everyone wins!

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. Does my son/daughter regress by having to play Half-Ice again at 8 years old?

No, 8-year-old players need to have this significant portion of the season played Half-Ice to continue to reach their hockey potential. All the benefits of development in Half-Ice hockey are very important for an 8-year-old player.

2. Does my "advanced" player regress by having to play Half-Ice at 7 or 8 years old?

No, advanced players benefit even more by playing Half-Ice. All players benefit from increased puck touches, scoring chances, quick transitions, read & react situations, puck support, and passing plays in Half-Ice hockey. However, research shows that advanced players benefit twice as much as the average player.

3. What about the offside and icings learned in the second half of the 7-year-old season?

Learning and mastering the rules of the game are not important for a 7- or 8-year-old player. Growth and development principles tell us that this age is very important to maximize their long-term development potential, so try not to focus on game rules during this part of the season. Although we all respect the rules of the game, these specific rules can be learned or remembered when they progress to U11.

4. Some 8-year-old players are very big; what about incidental contact and collisions?

Incidental contact and collisions will always be part of the game and are unavoidable anytime you have players around the puck; however, the reduction in the playing area from full-ice to half-ice will force players to accelerate their thought processes and reaction times. It should also be noted that Junior/NHL players, all of whom are much larger than U9 players, spend most of their time in either the defensive or offensive zones (smaller areas than that of our Half-Ice zone), so to think 7 & 8-year-old player development is going to be stunted rather than accelerated by playing on a reduced ice surface is inaccurate.



5. *With the reduction in ice surface, won't this have a negative impact on skating development?*

Quite the opposite. Hockey is no longer a linear game and skating is much more than simply moving in a straight line. The reduction of the ice surface will again help to develop players' complete skating skills which include stops and starts, transitions, turning, pivots, agility, edge work and balance. Good skaters will always be good skaters but playing in a Half-Ice concept will assist in the development of every player's skating acumen rather than primarily relying on or limiting their skating arsenal to full acceleration. In addition, a study conducted by Hockey Alberta found that young players can reach top speeds at a distance of less than half of the ice. Therefore, we are confident that Half-Ice games will improve rather than handicap players' skating skills.

6. *Won't there be increased whistles with the reduction of the ice surface, and pucks shot over the divider(s)?*

With the removal of offsides and icings, our research has shown that there is a decrease in stoppages of play. The result is more continuous, competitive play for all participants during every shift. Trials have shown that the number of pucks shot over the divider(s) is very limited.

RESOURCES

Resources are available to support local Minor Hockey Associations and coaches in the design and delivery of a hockey experience that meets the needs of 7- and 8-year-old players. Coaches should access both the Hockey Canada Network and Drill Hub to ensure they have up-to-date resources to support the U9 program.

Ice-Session/Practice Plans

- Plans are available through the Hockey Canada Network or Drill Hub as part of the Hockey Canada Skills Manual series, mapping out easy-to-follow ice sessions.
- U9 players need to progress throughout the plans to ensure they are exposed to age-appropriate drills and activities that will develop their confidence.
- The goal is to support the development of a sound skill base so young players will enjoy the game. The plans consider the needs of young players building their skills and are designed to serve as a model for on-ice delivery. Local Minor Hockey Associations are not required to follow each ice session exactly as planned. However, coaches should be encouraged to use the fundamentals of the plans, so players are guided through a skill-development program designed specifically for U9.

Hockey Canada Network

- The Hockey Canada Network is an iOS and Android app that contains a wealth of information for coaches and instructors.
- The entire series of Hockey Canada Skills Manuals and the Skills of Gold instructional videos are available on the Network. It includes the entire series of 32 lesson plans designed specifically for the U9 program, available to coaches and instructors at no cost. While there



is a fee for full access, creating an account on the Network provides free access to all U9 resources.

Drill Hub

The Drill Hub also provides coaches of U9 players with access to all ice-session plans for free. Coaches can sign up to have free access to Hockey Canada's growing library of drills. Users can create their own practice plans or use suggested plans, which are easy to print or view on most devices.

Hockey Saskatchewan Skills Licensee

If your Minor Hockey Association is interested in having one of Hockey Saskatchewan's registered Skill Licensees out to work with your players on skating and skill development (please see link below).

CLICK HERE: <https://hockeysask.ca/coaches/skills-licensees>

CONCLUSION

Hockey Saskatchewan sincerely appreciates the efforts of the thousands of volunteers across the province who dedicate their valuable time to our great game.

We understand that change can sometimes be difficult; however, we are confident that these modifications will benefit all U9 players as they grow and develop.

This information has been created to assist all volunteers in the consistent delivery of the U9 Half-Ice format, and ultimately ensure that we work together to provide a positive hockey experience for our players in a safe, sportsmanlike environment.



Shaping Character to Life... More Than a Game.