



Field Hockey Canada Coach Resource: Competition in Community Sport

Historically, the competition structures in many Canadian youth sports have created a situation where young athletes compete too much and practise too little. There are a variety of reasons why.

Often, it has been the result of the desire of parents and coaches to see “real games” and watch their children compete for trophies and titles. We tend to see children as miniature adults, and we want to watch them play the “real” game and compete like our sports heroes.

Other times it has been due to a simple lack of facility time, so sport groups sacrifice practice and training hours to “get the games played.” Children learn skills best during these early stages. Too often, this window of opportunity is missed because competition shifts the focus from skill development to winning.

Over-competing and undertraining can have significant negative effects on athlete development:

- Athletes develop an increased risk of overuse injuries to muscle and bone structures.
- Athletes face a greater chance of burnout and dropout from activity.
- Athletes reinforce bad habits in skills performance.

To avoid these problems, competition structures and calendars need to be adjusted to meet the needs of athletes, not coaches, clubs, and parents. The challenge is that dysfunctional competition structures can become “tradition” in certain sports and regions. It becomes difficult to introduce changes even if the changes can significantly benefit the playing experience of the children and their long-term development as athletes.

Good Rationale for Competition

Competition structures such as leagues, tournaments, and season calendars need to be backed by a good rationale. We should ask one question: How does the competition format and schedule serve the best development of the athletes?

Research shows that there are optimal training-to-competition ratios that optimize athlete skill development. By scheduling training and competition according to these ratios, competition will foster long-term athlete development and success while reducing the likelihood of burnout and dropout from activity.



At the same time, competitions and competitive events should also be designed and selected according to the quality and level of competition in relation to the developmental needs of the athlete.

Role of Competition

Training and competition schedules need to be adjusted at different LTAD stages to ensure optimal development and performance. At early stages, practising is much more important than competing. At later stages, competing and performing steadily increase in priority.

The table below outlines general recommendations for training-to-competition ratios. In later stages, competition can also include competition-specific training such as practice games, time trials, or other training tools that mimic competition.

LTAD Stage	Recommended Ratio
Active Start	No specific ratios; little or no competition
FUNdamentals (FUNStix)	All activity FUN based
Learn to Train	7 practices to 3 competitions/games
Train to Train	3 practices to 2 competitions/games
Train to Compete	2 practices to 3 competitions/games, including competition-specific training

Source: <http://canadiansportforlife.ca/ten-key-factors/more-about-competition>