

How to build your season plan

 **THE
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No copy / paste here. Build what YOU believe works for your team



What's in here

Nine sections. Each one is a set of questions you answer for your own team, with the reasoning behind them and links to the masterclasses they came from. Work through it with a pen. The canvas near the end is where it all lands.



INTRO

Start from your philosophy

Before any calendar or any drill, decide what you believe. The plan is downstream of that.

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CANVAS

The season planning canvas

One page to fill in. Print it, or copy it onto paper.



INTRO

Start from your philosophy

Before any calendar or any drill, decide what you believe. The plan is downstream of that.

Most season plans start in the wrong place. They start with a calendar. Sixteen league fixtures, two cup rounds, a mid-winter break, and a coach filling the gaps with sessions borrowed from somewhere else. By November the plan has stopped meaning anything, because it never meant much in the first place. It was a schedule, not a plan.

Shane McLeod (NZL), Olympic gold medal winner as the coach for Belgium, plans the other way round. He starts at the end, with the pinnacle event, and works backwards from it (→ watch our masterclass: [Shane McLeod AMA](#)). Anything you build gets made twice, once in your head and once on the pitch, and getting the first version clear is what stops the second one drifting.

But there is a step before the calendar and before the end point. To work backwards from a picture of your team, you have to know what you actually believe about how hockey is played and how players learn. That belief has to be yours. A borrowed philosophy holds up fine in September and cracks the first time you lose three in a row, because it was never really yours to lean on.

So this section asks four questions. They are not warm-up questions. Your answers decide what the rest of this guide is worth.

What do I want my team to look like by season's end?

Not the league position. What the team looks like on the pitch.

McLeod runs a version of this with an international squad. He asks how the team wants to be seen at the pinnacle event, what the outside world should see, turns that into descriptors of physicality and style of play, and only then builds the programme to deliver it. If "physically impressive" is one of the descriptors, that becomes gym work, running work, and executing skills at speed.

A club coach can run exactly that exercise on any given day. Picture a match in the final month of the season and describe what a spectator would see without being told the score. Are your players receiving on the move and going forward with the first touch? Are they solving a hard press themselves, or waiting for a shout from the sideline? Do they combine into the circle, or does one player carry and hope?

Behaviour is the only thing you can design for. That is the whole argument of our article [Coach less. Teach more.](#): decide what you want to see, then design for it, and if you cannot say the target behaviour in one short sentence, it is too vague to build a session around. "I want to work on attacking" is not a target. "I want my forwards to receive with the first touch going forward" is.



The common mistake is writing a picture that is really a result. "Top four" is not a description of a team, and it is not something you can train on a Tuesday. Aim at what the team does and how well it prepares, because a league position can be taken out of your hands but the quality of the work never is.

Two honesty checks. First, describe the group you have, not the group you wish you had. Adam Com-mens (AUS), who coached Australia and Belgium and then became the high performance director for Belgium, takes the players' own input rather than deciding alone and hoping it lands (→ watch our masterclass with him: [Values based coaching](#)). Second, hold your picture up against last season rather than against your hopes. We all plan from inside our own optimism, and the plan usually assumes a better squad, a fitter squad and a healthier squad than the one that turns up.

And build on what the group already does well. McLeod's route from a good Red Lions side to an exceptional one was turning existing strengths into superpowers, not chasing everything at once.

How do I believe players learn best?

This is the question most coaches have never answered on purpose, and it quietly controls everything else.

There are two honest positions. One says the coach explains, the players try, the coach corrects. The other says the coach designs a situation where the right choice becomes the smartest option available, then gets out of the way. Both work. They do not produce the same players.

Our article [When to stop coaching and let them play](#) sets out the cost of overusing the first one. Feedback given constantly loses its value, players stop taking risks because every mistake gets corrected, and on match day, with nobody shouting, they freeze. Andreu Enrich's test, quoted there, is that feedback should be immediate, specific, and contingent. Anything else is noise.

Our piece on [Coach less. Teach more.](#) gives the mechanism for the second one. Change the pitch, the touches, the numbers, or the way a goal counts, and players work it out without you saying a word.

Here is the distinction worth getting right, though. You are not choosing one of the two, because hockey is not one kind of skill. Open play is a web of fast decisions: reading a press, knowing when to switch, sensing when the space behind a defender opens. That grows through games, exposure and a fairly quiet coach. A drag flick, a stopping technique at a penalty corner, a reverse hit on the run are a different thing entirely. Those want structure, correction and precise repetition, and because they are trained by one player or a small unit rather than by the whole squad, they get a chapter of their own later on. Most coaches pick one style and apply it to everything they do. Match the method to the skill instead, and say out loud which of your priorities belongs in which category.

There is also a hard limit on how much you can say. Henk Verschuur describes coaching in the quarter break: two minutes, tensions high, players still full of adrenaline and nowhere near calm enough to take in a list. A coach talking fast is heard as one or two words at most. What lands is a short cue that was



already trained, as he explains in our masterclass [Coaching! The cognitive process](#). The same is true across a season. Hand a squad everything you know in August and they absorb almost none of it. Small pieces, in the right order, is not a compromise. It is how it works.

So a cue worth stealing. Name the fix in the same breath as the mistake, keep it to a handful of words, and say "there it is" the moment a player gets it right. Then raise the bar straight away: good, now do it with a defender on your shoulder. And when you are tempted to give the answer, ask instead. Players keep what they worked out for themselves far longer than what they were told.

Age changes the answer. With a U12 group the job is mostly ignition. Make them love it, keep them coming back, and let ball mastery ride along inside games they enjoy. A warm coach who makes a young player want to be there does more for them than a technical expert who corrects everything. With U16s you can be far more deliberate, and the work shifts towards closing the gap between what looks good in a drill and what survives against a real opponent.

What are my two or three non-negotiables?

Two or three. Not eight.

Non-negotiables are what hold when the season goes badly. They are the reason you can still be the same coach in March that you were in September. If winning is what sits at the centre instead, your standards will swing with your results, and the group will feel it.

Commens is blunt about the trap: values that live as words on a wall change nothing. Each one has to be broken down into behaviours you can point at on the pitch and either celebrate or challenge (→ our masterclass: [Values based coaching](#)). "Excellence" is a poster. "Quality first touch, and we arrive prepared" is a standard.

A simple test: write each one as something a stranger could spot from the sideline. If it cannot be seen, it cannot be held.

The common mistake is choosing them alone in your kitchen. Standards the players helped write get owned. Standards handed down get tolerated, and they are no use to you in the one week you actually need to lean on them.

Not every non-negotiable has to be technical. McLeod borrows from the All Blacks and treats the shirt as something to be left in a better place, marked by an older player handing it to a younger one with a story attached. His point is that this is what gives meaning to training hard in the cold, because standing on a podium lasts ten or fifteen minutes and the journey is everything else (→ our masterclass: [Shane McLeod AMA](#)). Nobody owns the shirt. You are the body in it for a while.



Keep the list short for three reasons. Our article [Coach less. Teach more.](#) warns that layering rules produces players trying to remember rules instead of playing hockey. And in our panel talk [Developing elite hockey players](#), Mark Bateman reflects that he was trying to do too much, and that less content revisited at greater depth served his players better. And piling on rules stiffens a team up until it stops thinking for itself.

One more reason to choose carefully. Habits are far easier to build than to undo. Whatever you groove this season, in technique and in behaviour, is what you will be living with next season.

Am I planning for results, development, or both?

Most coaches say both, then plan for one.

Commens offers a simple test. Draw a cross. On one axis, how much of a team talk is about tactics, structure and getting the win. On the other, how much is about effort, behaviour, and what the team wants to represent. Mark where your half-time talk actually sits. Most coaches find themselves almost entirely on the results axis, and they measure themselves the same way: win and it was a ten, lose and it was a one (→ our masterclass: [Values based coaching](#)).

McLeod puts the same tension in squad terms. If you only play your strongest eleven, you are only looking at results. If you want your bench to get better, you play your bench, and you preset the minutes so those players know what is coming and train accordingly. His verdict is short: coaches often get too caught up with results (→ our masterclass: [Shane McLeod AMA](#)). It is worth remembering that the state of the squad after you leave says as much about your coaching as the table did while you were there.

Development-only is its own trap, though. Jon Bleby is candid that his programme was once guilty of talking about development and not enough about winning. His colleague Mark Bateman puts the practical case alongside it: part of the job is teaching players how to win, so that a semi-final is not the first semi-final they have ever played, as they both explain in our panel talk [Developing elite hockey players](#).

So both is a legitimate answer. It is only useful if you say where the balance sits and when. Which blocks of the season are for building, and can absorb ugly results, and which weeks you expect the team to peak. That single decision drives most of your scheduling later in this guide.

Then protect the decision from the scoreline. McLeod's discipline is not to let the result dictate how you feel, because plenty of matches misrepresent how they actually went. If your team is creating chances and playing well, do not change. Extreme performances, brilliant or awful, tend to be followed by ordinary ones, whatever story you build to explain them. One heavy defeat is rarely a signal. A pattern is.

And with youth teams, check against the right things. Whether the players are developing and still enjoying it tells you more about your plan than the table does.



Before you turn the page

Four answers, in your own words, on one page. Write it down or record it. Just thinking about it will not accomplish anything.

1. What your team looks like in the final month of the season, described as behaviour rather than position.
2. How you believe your players learn, and which of your priorities need games and which need structured reps.
3. Two or three non-negotiables, each written as something visible from the sideline.
4. Where the balance sits between results and development, and in which weeks.

Nothing in this guide replaces those four answers. Everything in it depends on them.

GO DEEPER

- Article: [Coach less. Teach more.](#)
- Article: [When to stop coaching and let them play](#)
- Masterclass: [Values based coaching](#)
- Masterclass: [Coaching! The cognitive process](#)
- Panel talk: [Developing Elite Hockey Players: Insights from England & GB U21 and U18 Coaches](#)



Map your season

See the shape of the year before you fill it in. Where it starts hard, where it flattens, and which weeks actually decide how you feel in April.

You have your four answers from the intro. Now comes the temptation to open a calendar and start filling in session topics.

Don't. Not yet.

Before you decide what happens on the third Tuesday in October, you need to see the shape of the season. Where it starts hard, where it flattens out, where the breaks fall, and which weeks actually decide how you feel in April. Most club plans fail here. Not because the sessions were bad, but because the coach never looked at the year as a whole and so kept treating every week as if it were the same week.

A season has four kinds of time in it. Pre-season, when you build. Competition, the long middle, when you maintain and sharpen. The moments that matter, when you need the team at its best. And transition, the breaks, the holidays, the gaps that you either use or lose.

Four questions get you the map.

When are the moments that matter?

Open the fixture list and mark three or four dates. Not more.

These are the games or tournaments where you want your team at its best. A derby, a cup round, the two fixtures against the sides you are realistically competing with, the last four weeks of a promotion or relegation run. Once they are marked, you can work backwards from them, exactly as you worked backwards from your end-of-season picture in the intro.

The common mistake is marking everything. If every fixture is critical, none of them are, and you will coach all thirty weeks at the same emotional pitch until both you and the squad are flat by February. A season that has no peaks also has no shape.

The second mistake is assuming you will get the fixture list you were given. You won't. Games get postponed, pitches freeze, cup rounds appear, opponents fold. Build the map knowing that some of it will move, and it survives contact. Build it to the week and it breaks in October.

So mark your dates, then note what has to be true in the weeks before each one. Not a session plan. Just a line: fit, healthy, sharp on the outlet, nobody carrying a knock. That line is what the block before it has to deliver.



How many sessions do I realistically get?

Do the arithmetic honestly, because the honest number is always smaller than the one in your head.

Start with the obvious: two sessions a week across roughly thirty weeks gives you sixty. Now subtract. Frozen or waterlogged pitches. The Christmas break. Half-term. Exam season, which takes your students out at exactly the point the run-in starts. Then subtract again for the sessions that happen but with eleven players and a goalkeeper, which is a different session from the one you planned.

What you are left with is your real budget for the year. It is probably around forty usable sessions. That number should frighten you into choosing.

Then count the second number, which almost nobody counts. Not how many sessions you run, but how many sessions the average player attends. If two thirds of the squad turn up on a given night, no individual player gets your whole plan. They get about two thirds of it, and a different two thirds from the player next to them. Which means anything you teach once is effectively taught to nobody. Themes have to come round again. That is not repetition for its own sake, it is the only way a part-time squad ever actually owns something.

And count specialist and unit slots separately from team sessions. A goalkeeper session or a twenty-minute corner slot is not a team session, and pretending otherwise is how both end up not happening. If you intend to run a third slot, it goes on the calendar in July or it does not exist.

In our masterclass [Pre-season training](#), Russell Coates works with two ninety-minute sessions a week and treats the rest day between them as part of the design, not as a gap. His reason is worth borrowing whatever your schedule looks like: two sessions guarantees a rest day between them, and if you add a third, at least one of them has to drop in intensity.

He also plans individually for anyone joining late off a holiday or an injury, rather than dropping them into the full session and hoping. At club level that is not a luxury, it is the cheapest injury prevention available to you.

One more thing to count. Two sessions a week is not two separate trainings. Treat them as one system: one night leaning technical or principle-led, one night leaning game context, both serving the same theme (→ our article: [Periodisation for club coaches](#)). And plan the week from the match. The weekend is your highest-intensity session, your best diagnostic and your weekly test, all at once. If you treat it only as the thing that ends the week, you have wasted the most valuable ninety minutes you get.

A cue that saves a lot of Saturdays: do not run your hardest physical session forty-eight hours before a match. The session furthest from the game is where load belongs. The one closest to it is for sharpness, decisions and set pieces, at lower volume.



Where are the natural blocks and breaks?

Your season already has joints in it. The winter break, school holidays, a fortnight without fixtures, the gap between the league finishing and the cup starting. Find them, because they tell you where your blocks begin and end.

A block is three or four weeks committed to one in-possession theme and one out-of-possession theme, with the last week used to consolidate rather than to introduce something new (→ our article: [Periodisation for club coaches](#)). Three or four themes per half-season. That is all you get, and it is more than most club teams ever properly own.

The great enemy of this is the Saturday just gone. Every match exposes a new problem, and the instinct is to coach it on Tuesday. Do that every week and your players never move from knowing something to owning it, because you keep changing the subject. Let the weekend inform small adjustments inside the block. Do not let it rewrite the block.

Russell Coates puts it plainly: pre-season is about getting better without draining the players physically, and it is not necessarily about getting fitter (→ our masterclass: [Smart pre-season planning](#)). Which comes down to fewer choices, better made. What you leave out matters as much as what you add. The same holds for every block of the year. Before a block starts, write down the thing you are choosing not to coach for the next four weeks. If you cannot name it, you have not chosen.

In our masterclass [Practice session design](#), Fede Tanuscio nests the whole thing: a session sits inside a week, inside a month, inside a year, and if it doesn't, you are training to train. His weekly split is simple and easy to copy: across the week, one focus with the ball and one focus without the ball. And if set pieces matter in your league, give penalty corners a slot of their own rather than five tired minutes at the end of a session.

Breaks deserve as much thought as blocks. A three-week gap is not dead time. It is either where you rebuild something the league has worn down, or where you let bodies recover before a run of hard fixtures. Decide which, in advance, rather than arriving at it and improvising.

What does "peak" mean for this team?

Be precise here, because the word gets used loosely.

For a club side, peaking is rarely a mystical form curve. It usually means something very ordinary: on the dates you marked, your best eleven are available, healthy, and able to play the way you described in the intro. That is it. Availability and freshness will decide more of your season than any tactical refinement.

There is a real distinction underneath the word, though, and it changes your plan. If your season builds to a knockout weekend or a tournament, you can genuinely peak, and the last month is about sharpening while shedding volume. If you play a long league where every weekend carries the same three points, peaking is the wrong idea altogether. What you want is the fewest dips. Consistency, not a summit. Most club coaches are in the second situation and plan as though they were in the first.



Either way, the late-season pattern is the same. Volume falls, intensity stays high, themes narrow to the one or two you know move the needle (→ our piece: [Periodisation for club coaches](#)).

Getting to the start line in shape is its own skill. Coates wants the squad physically ready when the first match arrives, building intensity gradually across pre-season so it peaks at the right moment (→ our masterclass: [Pre-season training](#)). His pre-season shape is a good default: the first weeks lean technical, with rhythm, ball feel and coordination after a long break, then game context and friendlies, then near-match intensity in the final week (→ our masterclass: [Smart pre-season planning](#)).

You do not need testing equipment to monitor any of this. Ask the squad how hard that felt. Listen to whether they can still talk between reps. Two questions and a pair of ears will tell you most of what a spreadsheet would.

And give your peak weeks some protection. Do not judge the map on one bad afternoon. A heavy defeat in a peak week feels like proof the plan was wrong, and it usually isn't. Extreme results, good or bad, tend to be followed by ordinary ones. Change the plan for a pattern, not for a scoreline.

U16

One peak, not three. A county or regional finals weekend, or the last month of the league, is plenty for this age.

Plan around school first. Exam blocks are not negotiable and they will take players out of your most important weeks, so find out the dates before you build the map, not after.

Blocks can be a little longer here, four to six weeks, because you are building capability rather than reacting to a league table. Growth spurts are the other thing to watch: through this age players get taller faster than they get stronger, so keep load rising gently and steadily, not in jumps.

U12

No hard peaks at all. The season is one long runway for skills, and the fixture list is where they get tested, not where they get judged.

Map the year around school terms and holidays, and expect attendance to move with them. Assume you will teach the same things several times over. That is normal and it is not wasted work.

The measures that matter at this age are whether they are still coming back and whether they can do more with the ball in April than they could in September. If both are true, the plan worked, whatever the results say.

Keep areas small and defined. Young players focus far better inside a clear, bounded space than on an open half pitch.



Your map, on one page

Before you go on, sketch this out. A page is enough. Write it down or record it, because turning it over in your head will not get it done.

1. The three or four dates that matter, and one line each on what has to be true beforehand.
2. Your honest session count for the year, and your best guess at average attendance.
3. The blocks, three or four weeks each, with the breaks marked between them.
4. What "peak" means for this team: a summit, or the fewest dips.

That is the shape. The next five chapters fill it in, one layer at a time.

GO DEEPER

- [Periodisation for Club Coaches](#)
- [Smart Pre-Season Planning for Field Hockey Coaches: Drills, Themes & Managing Numbers](#)
- [Pre-Season Training](#)

The physical layer

Not a volume problem. Fitness is built by consistency, most of it fits in ten minutes, and the biggest gain available to you is an available squad.

Most season plans treat the physical side as a volume problem. The team faded in the last quarter, so next year there will be more running. It is the most common fix in club hockey and one of the least reliable.

The coaches in this chapter work across the whole range, from a Tuesday night club side to an Olympic final, and they keep arriving at the same three points. Fitness is built by consistency rather than by intensity. Most of what a club team needs can be done in the ten minutes before the session starts. And the biggest physical gain available to almost every club coach is not a fitter squad, it is an available one.

So the questions below are not about programmes. They are about what you are actually trying to change, and what you are willing to leave out in order to change it.

What is my physical gap, really?

In our masterclass [Pre-season Physical Programme](#), Phil Moreland begins every pre-season with one question, and it is not "what shall we do first". It is: where did we finish last season, and why did we finish there?

That question is harder than it looks, because "we need to be fitter" is not a gap. It is a category. Underneath it sit at least four different things that all get called fitness:

- **Aerobic base.** Can they run, and recover between efforts?
- **Repeat sprint ability.** Can they do the hard thing again, and then again?
- **Strength and robustness.** Can their bodies absorb the season?
- **Work rate in the game.** Do they express any of the above when it counts?

These are not the same problem, and they do not have the same solution. Moreland found a squad that could produce a high work rate in game one of a series and could not repeat it in game three. Their gap was not capacity. It was repeatability. More running would not have touched it.

He also found the reverse, which is more common at club level than coaches admit: players who tested well and played tired. A good test score is not the goal. As he puts it, we do not train to get better at tests. If the training is right, the tests look after themselves.



So be specific. Watch three games and write down what actually goes wrong. Is it the first fifteen minutes after half time? Is it one line? Is it that they cover the ground but arrive late to the second and third action? A vague gap produces a vague pre-season.

What am I willing to leave out?

In our masterclass [Pre-Season Training](#), Russell Coates is blunt about the purpose of pre-season: it is about getting better without draining the players, and it is not necessarily about getting fitter. His framing is worth stealing whole. Pre-season is not what you add. It is what you leave out.

That matters because the arithmetic is unforgiving. Coates works to a rule of thumb his physios gave him: fitness improves by something like five to ten per cent a week, and pushing past that raises the injury risk sharply. Starting a squad at sixty per cent of the workload you eventually want and building from there is not being cautious, it is the only route that arrives with everyone still standing. And the target is not to be fit by the end of pre-season. It is to be match fit when the first match starts, which is a different date.

Glenn Turner makes the same argument from the other end in our masterclass [Hockey conditioning made simple](#). Consistency beats perfection. Ten minutes of body weight work before every session, all season, will do more for a club team than any six week block of heroics. Two minutes of press ups, two of squats, two of lunges, something for the lower back. Nobody dreads it, so nobody skips it, so it actually happens.

He is equally clear about what not to add. If your team already trains twice a week with small games and shuttles, they are getting that stimulus. Do not send them home with more of it. Send them home with an easy run instead, and do not time it. One run a week, at a pace where they could hold a conversation, is the single cheapest physical intervention in club hockey.

What belongs inside the session, and what has to sit outside it?

This is the question most club coaches never separate out, and it decides whether the work lands.

In our masterclass [Physically game ready](#), Mick Beunen builds everything on strength, but never strength on its own. Movements rather than muscles. Strength always coupled with speed. Agility always carrying a decision, because a player who has to choose left or right before moving is training the thing the game asks for. Most of the physical work is folded into the hockey session itself: small games above a target intensity, with the rest intervals controlled rather than accidental.

But some things cannot be folded in. Turner is direct about it: if you run, you cannot hide. Put a stick in a player's hand and a hard session becomes a session where the tired player drifts to the edge of the drill. True sprinting, easy aerobic running and strength work need their own slot, however short.



A workable split for a two-session club week:

- **Integrate:** repeat efforts, agility with a decision attached, work above match intensity, deceleration inside small games.
- **Separate:** one maximal sprint exposure, one strength block of ten minutes, one easy run done in the players' own time.

Two jobs in your squad carry a load profile the team plan does not describe. A goalkeeper's work is short, repeated explosive effort in heavy kit, and it fatigues concentration faster than it fatigues legs. Drag flick repetitions load the spine and the hips hard, and they sit on top of whatever the squad plan already asked for that week. Both belong inside the load budget rather than alongside it. Chapter 6 covers how to plan those sessions; this chapter only insists that you count them.

Beunen's other habit is worth borrowing even without any technology. He varies the week deliberately. No two weeks are the same, and after roughly three weeks of building he takes one week back down so the body can absorb the work. Three up, one down. You do not need a heart rate monitor to run that pattern, only the discipline to plan the easier week before you need it.

What am I protecting?

Matthew Eyles reframes the whole chapter in one move in our piece [Injury Reduction Training Methods](#). The physical block is not primarily about performance. It is about availability. A brilliant plan delivered to a squad missing four players every week is not a brilliant plan.

The injuries that decide club seasons are mostly soft tissue: hamstrings, groins, calves. They behave differently, and that difference is useful.

Hamstrings tend to go in one moment, at high speed. Groins tend to build. Weeks of acceleration and deceleration load accumulate, and the first sign is usually not pain, it is a quiet drop in a player's sharpness on the turn. By the time someone mentions it, it has been developing for a while. If a player who used to win the first two metres has stopped winning them, ask about the groin before you question the attitude.

The protection is exposure, applied on purpose:

- **Sprint once a week, properly.** Fast running is not sprinting. Sub-maximal running does not give the hamstring the exposure it needs. Thirty to forty metres, fully warm, genuine intent, a handful of efforts. That is the whole dose.
- **Change direction hard once a week.** Including stopping dead on a command, which is the moment most knee and quad problems come from and the one almost nobody trains.
- **Work through all three phases of a movement.** Lowering, holding, lifting. Club training is heavy on the fast and explosive and almost empty of the slow lowering and the hold, which are exactly the phases a player uses when they plant a foot to cut.



- **Two exercises worth being stubborn about.** A knee-dominant eccentric hamstring exercise and a side plank variation for the adductors. Neither needs a gym.

The warm up is where all of this fits. Fifteen minutes, well planned, with the last three to five minutes spent sprinting or changing direction, gets the job done without costing you a minute of hockey. If the pitch is not free, do it on the grass beside it.

One warning that runs against instinct. Avoid the spikes, but avoid the holes too. Giving a squad a completely free week mid-season, around a bye or a break, tends to cost more than it returns. Reduce the load, drop a session, keep something ticking. Training load you take away is training load you will not get back.

And know what else your players are carrying. A teenager may have school, a rep side and your team. An adult may lay bricks all day. Moreland audits that before writing anything, and it is the one piece of elite practice that costs nothing to copy.

How will I know it is working, with no technology at all?

Four signals, all free.

Watch the mistakes, not the faces. Turner's point is the sharpest observation in this chapter. Fatigue shows up as skill errors long before it shows up as a player bent over. The pass missed by a meter, the chop not made, the extra step not taken. The player gasping at the side of the pitch is often one of your fitter ones.

Score the session. Ask each player how hard that was out of ten, and multiply by the minutes. Ninety minutes at seven is 630. Do it for a few weeks and you will see who is finding your training far harder than everyone else, which is usually the player about to break.

Ask instead of measuring. Coates asks rather than measures. How hard did that feel, out of ten, and was that the number you intended? Listening works too: can they speak in full sentences at this point in the session, and should they be able to?

Watch for the what next. Moreland's game-facing marker. Are players getting to the position the next phase demands, or admiring the pass they just made? That is partly habit and partly conditioning, and you can usually tell which.

IN-SEASON CHECK

If legs are heavy in the last fifteen minutes, adjust the load. Do not just add more.

U16

This is the age where enthusiasm does the damage. A sixteen year old can be carrying club, school, a rep side and your team, and every one of those coaches thinks their sessions are the reasonable ones. Shin splints, back stress fractures and hip problems at this age are almost always accumulation, not bad luck. Body weight only, movement quality before load, and the useful conversation is usually about subtracting a session somewhere rather than adding one of yours. Give them the easy run and the ten minute routine, never the extra shuttles.

U12

No conditioning programme. None. At this age fitness is a by-product of a session where everyone touches the ball constantly and nobody queues. If you want to build strength, build it as play: partner press ups, lunges in the warm up, jumping and landing, a race. Keep it short and keep it fun, and that is the whole method. The goal is a child who moves well and still wants to come back.

Your physical plan on one page

Four answers, in your own words, on one page. Write it down or record it. Just thinking about it will not accomplish anything.

1. **The gap, named specifically.** Not "fitter". The actual thing that went wrong, in the actual minutes it went wrong.
2. **What you will do every week without fail.** Ten minutes before each session, one sprint exposure, one easy run set as homework. That is the floor, and the floor matters more than the ceiling.
3. **What you have chosen not to do.** Write it down, so you do not quietly add it back in October.
4. **How you will notice.** One or two signals you will actually watch, and the week you have already planned to ease off.

GO DEEPER

- Hockey conditioning made simple
- Injury Reduction Training Methods
- Pre-season Physical Programme
- Physically game ready



The technical layer

Not the beginner layer. The layer that decides whether the rest of your plan is even possible.

This is the layer most club coaches quietly stop planning.

Not because they think skills don't matter. Because somewhere around U16 an unspoken assumption takes hold: they can already do this, so we can move on to shape and structure. Then in April you watch a player receive the ball with fifteen metres of open grass in front of them, and they turn back and recycle it.

Ask why and the honest answer is almost never tactical. They did not trust the skill in that half second, so they took the safe option. In our masterclass [Why your best players still need to train basic skills](#), Tsoanelo Pholo puts the responsibility for that moment somewhere most of us would rather not look: your job was to fill the toolbox, and in that moment they did not have the tool.

So the technical layer is not the beginner layer. It is the layer that decides whether the rest of your plan is even possible. If your players cannot hit, slap or throw an aerial with quality, the fast direct game you sketched in the intro is fiction, and you will have to change the tactics rather than keep hoping.

Four questions.

What can my players actually do, right now?

Start with reality, not with the goal. You cannot decide where to take a group until you know where it is standing.

The fastest way to find out costs you ten minutes. Put on a 3v3 in generous space. Not a 1v1, which has too few options to reveal anything, and not an 11v11, where a player can hide behind the shape. A 3v3 forces a genuine choice every few seconds: carry into space, pass to one of two options, or take someone on. Watch which choice never gets made. That is your gap.

Lisa Letchford makes the same point from the other direction. Before you set a goal you need the reality, because a session is about moving a group from A to B, and you cannot plan the route without knowing A (→ our masterclass: [Basic skills through small sided games](#)).

One warning about what you will find. Club squads are mixed, and the mix is wider than you think. You will have someone who has played for fifteen years next to someone in their second season. Tin Matkovic's answer to that is worth stealing because it costs nothing: run the same exercise at every station, then let each group run it at their own level (→ our masterclass: [Balancing skill gaps](#)). Everyone



does the same thing, everyone hears the same coaching point, and nobody has been publicly sorted into the good group and the other group. The stronger players simply do it faster and cleaner, and you add or remove a rotation where you need to.

Which skills am I choosing, and which am I leaving out?

It helps to break the individual game into six buckets: carrying, elimination, passing, receiving, shooting and defending.

Read that list and be honest about which two you have under-served. For most club teams the answer is the same two: elimination, and individual defending. Carrying and passing get all the attention because they are easy to run and easy to see. Beating a player, and stopping a player beating you, quietly slide down the list every season.

Those six are the outfield game. The goalkeeper's technical work is a different craft, trained in a different size of session, and it has its own chapter later in this guide.

You cannot fix all six. You have three or four blocks per half season, from Chapter 1. So pick one technical priority per block and let it live alongside the in-possession and out-of-possession themes you already chose. Three technical priorities across a season, properly owned, beats eight that were mentioned once.

And write down what you are not coaching. If you have chosen receiving under pressure for this block, then the aerial is not getting time until January, and you should be able to say so out loud.

How do I teach it so it survives Saturday?

There is a sequence here, and most of us rush the first step.

Explore, then adjust, then integrate, then let it be. The hard part is exploring. You cannot tell a player this is the way to do it before they have felt the skill in their own hands, and if there is no single correct model among the best players in the world, there is no reason to impose one on a fifteen year old (→ our piece: [Why your best players still need to train basic skills](#)). When you do adjust, coach with questions rather than corrections. Does that feel better than the other one? What changed when your hand moved? You are handing the player the job of noticing, which is exactly what they will have to do alone on Saturday.

Then build pressure deliberately, in layers, rather than jumping from a static rep straight into a full game and wondering why it fell apart. Four dials: time, space, numbers and restrictions. Thirty balls through that gate in ninety seconds. Shrink the area. Three against five. Two touches only. Each one forces a faster decision and a faster execution, and speed of execution after the decision is what separates the good from the very good.



Small sided games do a lot of this work for you, but only if the game is designed for the skill (→ our piece: [Basic skills through small sided games](#)). Long passing needs a long pitch. Ball protection needs a small one and an underload. If you want hitting to show up, you need enough space and an incentive, so make a goal count triple when it follows three hits.

The common mistake here is talking about everything. Pick the one skill you are watching this session and watch only that. A player who is given fifty coaching points receives none of them.

What do I keep checking that I never planned to check?

The grip.

It sounds like a beginner topic and it is not. Bad habits creep into fundamentals at every level, and the best players in other sports still have someone watching their hands (→ our masterclass: [Essential grip skills](#)).

Three things worth looking for, none of which takes more than a glance:

- **Carrying.** Left hand knuckles to the sky, right hand up the stick. That pushes the ball away from the feet and lifts the head, which is where most vision problems actually come from.
- **Receiving.** The left hand stays in the hammer grip, knuckles up, hands apart, low and strong. That is the base a clean trap comes from.
- **Transitions.** Channelling and blocking need different grips, and most players are far too slow switching between them. Train the two together rather than separately.

One more, from our own experience rather than the masterclass. With younger players, insist on two hands on the stick when defending. One-handed tackling breeds lunging, lazy feet and impatience long before it breeds range.

Be direct about it. Framing a grip correction as routine maintenance rather than criticism takes the ego out of the conversation, even with your most experienced player.

How will I know it is working?

Not from the drill. From the choices.

The signal that technical work has landed is behavioural: the player who used to turn back now goes forward. The defender who never used the backhand tries it. Confidence is what you are really building, and courage on Saturday is just Tuesday's repetitions being cashed in.

So watch for the attempt, not only the outcome. And when you see the thing you have been coaching, stop the session and say so loudly. Positive reinforcement is the cheapest coaching tool you own, and it teaches the other fifteen players what you are looking for without you having to explain it again.



One more check that costs nothing. At the end of the session, ask the squad what we worked on today. If they cannot tell you, the problem is not their attention. It is your focus.

IN-SEASON CHECK

If the same technical error keeps deciding your Saturdays, it belongs in your next block, not in a five minute rant after the game.

U16

Keep the toolbox wide. This is exactly the age where players get locked into a position and stop being allowed to try anything else, usually because someone is chasing results. Rotate them, and let the defender throw the aerial and the striker make the tackle. Bodies are changing fast here, so a technique that worked in September may not fit the player in March, which means revisiting grip and body position is normal rather than remedial.

U12

Three skills carry this age: carrying, scoring and tackling. Passing arrives later than most coaches expect, and what looks like a pass is usually a smash in roughly the right direction. Keep the space small and clearly bounded, keep the games short, and reward what you want to see rather than punishing what you don't. Expect to teach the same thing several times over. That is not wasted work, it is how it sticks.

Your technical plan on one page

Four answers, in your own words, on one page. Write it down or record it. Just thinking about it will not accomplish anything.

1. The one 3v3 you will run in week one to find out where the group actually is.
2. Your three technical priorities for the season, one per block, and the skills you are choosing to leave out.
3. Your pressure ladder for each priority: how you will use time, space, numbers and restrictions to build it up.
4. The grip checks you will run every session, whatever the theme.

Next comes the tactical layer, which only works if this one is honest.



GO DEEPER

- [Why Your Best Players Still Need to Train Basic Skills](#)
- [Essential Grip Skills](#)
- [Basic Skills through Small Sided Games](#)
- [Balancing Skill Gaps](#)
- [Small Sided Games by Andreu Enrich](#)



The tactical layer

You do not have time to install a system. You do have time to install four or five principles and repeat them until the players use the words with each other.

Most club tactical plans fail in the same way. Not because the idea was wrong, but because it was a pattern rather than a principle.

A pattern is a picture on a whiteboard. It works beautifully until the opposition does something slightly different, which they will, roughly forty seconds into the first quarter. A principle survives that, because it tells a player what to do when the picture changes.

In our masterclass [Closing and tackling in a zone defence](#), Danny Kerry made this the centre of how he coached defending: principles exist to help players make good decisions under pressure, in the moment, rather than being told do this, do that.

That is the whole tactical layer in one line. You are not writing a script. You are giving your players a small number of rules that hold when it gets messy.

And here is why this chapter is short on diagrams. As a club coach with two sessions a week, you do not have the time to install a system. You do have the time to install four or five principles, name them, and repeat them until the players use the words with each other.

Five questions.

How do we want to play, in one sentence?

This comes straight out of the intro. If you decided you believe in a fast, direct game, that is the sentence. If you decided you believe in keeping the ball and making the opposition move, that is the sentence.

Write it down and test it against something honest: can your slowest thinker on the pitch repeat it on Saturday morning? If not, it is a paragraph, not a principle.

Everything below hangs off that sentence. If your principles contradict it, the players will feel the contradiction long before they can name it.

Set pieces sit inside that sentence too. They are part of the game model, not a separate hobby, and the way you defend a corner should look like the way you defend everything else. Penalty corner attack and defence still get a chapter of their own, and that is because they need a different size of session, not because they are a different game.



What are our principles when we have the ball?

There are two halves to this, and most club sessions only coach one of them.

On the ball. These are the defaults a player falls back on when time disappears. Three are worth more than the rest (→ our article: [On ball principles](#)):

- **Scan to answer a question, not as a ritual.** Where is the nearest pressure, where is my safe exit, where is my damaging exit. A shoulder check that answers nothing is a habit, not a skill.
- **The first touch buys something.** Time, space or protection. If the touch buys nothing, it is control that loses the ball a second later.
- **Tempo is a choice.** Not always fast. Speed up when the picture is good, slow down when speed would just donate possession.

The common mistake here is coaching the technique and skipping the picture. A player whose receiving looks inconsistent usually has a perception problem, not a hands problem.

Off the ball. This is where the season is actually won, and it is the layer most club coaches never plan. Ben Bishop's figure is worth keeping in front of you: roughly 97% of the game is off-ball action (→ our article: [Off ball principles](#)). Positioning, movement and communication. Where am I in relation to the ball, my teammates and the goal. How do I move to create or deny. What do I say.

One practical consequence: start praising off-ball work out loud. Praise the lead that did not get the ball. Praise the run that dragged a defender out. If you only celebrate the goal, your players will learn that only the goal counts, and your off-ball principles will stay theoretical for the whole season.

What are our principles when we don't?

Borrow Kerry's four words. They are the most useful defensive shorthand in the library, and they scale from U12 to Olympic finals (→ our piece: [Closing and tackling in a zone defence](#)).

Deny. Stop them penetrating. Usually that means taking away the middle. Every defensive system we publish agrees on that much, because the middle is the quickest route to your goal and offers the best shooting angles.

Dictate. Send them where you want them, which is nearly always into small spaces where you have numbers.

Disrupt. Take the options away once they are there.

Dispossess. Win it.

A player can move through all four in two seconds, and back again. That is fine. The value is that you can stop a session and ask: which mode are you in right now, and what did you see that made you choose it? That question teaches more than any positional instruction.



Two details that decide whether it works.

Stand in the lane, not on the player. Kerry's point is that a defender in the passing lane has already taken an option away. One player can hold two by standing where the ball would have to travel, close enough to influence the choice and far enough to react. That is what stops your whole shape collapsing towards the ball every time they overload one side.

Decide who tackles. When two of your players arrive together and both expect the other to go, nobody goes, the carrier wriggles out and you are now defending two players short. The default that works: the player goal side holds up, the player arriving from the side, or recovering from the attacking side, makes the tackle, because that defender has the better angle to the ball. Say it out loud in training until it is automatic.

One more thing worth naming for a club squad. Your players almost certainly do not value defending, because nobody posts a clip of somebody positioning well. That is a culture problem, not a tactical one, and it is yours to fix. The best defenders often do very little tackling because their positioning already removed the threat.

What happens in the seconds after the ball changes hands?

This is the highest-value tactical work available to a club coach, and it costs nothing to install.

When possession turns over, the opposition's shape is broken for a few seconds and then it is not. What your players do in that window decides a surprising number of results.

Give them a decision tree rather than an instruction. Andreu Enrich's version, in our masterclass [Mastering transitions in field hockey](#), is the cleanest:

1. Is there a pass forward? Play it.
2. No? Can I run forward? Carry.
3. No? Is there a short lateral pass that re-opens a forward option? Play it.
4. None of that? Protect the ball and go back.

Forward first, then carry, then short lateral, then reset. It takes ten seconds to explain and it removes panic, which is what makes players either force a ball that was never on or slow down until the moment dies.

The same tree applies to every free hit and sideline your team gets. Treat the whistle as a trigger rather than a pause, and you collect small advantages all afternoon.

And one correction that saves a lot of wasted training: playing fast is not running fast. Speed of play comes from decision speed, ball speed and the timing of runs. If your transitions look frantic but produce nothing, do not add fitness. Coach earlier decisions and a faster first pass (→ our article: [Building a team that plays fast](#)).



Leave someone behind the ball, what Enrich calls the guard role. That guard is what gives everyone else permission to be brave.

How do I train it so it shows up on Saturday?

Players play what your sessions pay for. If safe sideways possession scores the same as a sharp forward break, you will get safe sideways possession, and it will be your fault rather than theirs.

So build the principle into the scoring, not into your voice.

- Want the forward option taken? A pass that breaks a line is worth two, a carry into a gate is worth one.
- Want fast restarts? Give a bonus point when the ball is moving forward within two seconds of the whistle.
- Want players to defend as a unit? Award the defending team a point for forcing three consecutive sideways passes.

Then say less. With a group that already knows the words, constraints teach faster than instructions do.

One theme per session, with different entry points for different players, beats splitting your squad into two sessions you do not have the staff to run. Same game, same language, different task: safe exit for the developing player, damaging exit for the experienced one.

IN-SEASON CHECK

If you cannot hear your principles being used by players talking to each other on the pitch, they are not principles yet. They are still your vocabulary.

U16

This is the right age to introduce defending as a unit rather than as eleven individual duels, and the four modes give them language for it. Keep the shape simple, a traditional structure with clear small boxes inside it, and coach the boxes rather than the whole system. Expect the transition question to be the hard one: when do I follow my player through, and when do I hold my space? Give them a feel-based rule rather than a diagram, and accept that they will get it wrong for a few weeks.

U12

No systems. Two ideas are enough: when we have the ball, spread out and find space, and when we don't, get between your player and the goal. Small sided games do the teaching for you, so use conditions rather than talks, and let them work out why width helps by playing a game where a wide pass counts double. Their tactical understanding grows from playing, not from listening to you at the whiteboard.

Your tactical plan on one page

Five answers, in your own words, on one page. Write it down or record it. Just thinking about it will not accomplish anything.

1. Your one-sentence description of how you want to play.
2. Two principles in possession, one on the ball and one off it.
3. Two principles out of possession, plus your rule for who tackles in a double team.
4. Your transition decision tree, in four steps, in the players' words.
5. The scoring conditions you will use to train each one.

That is five lines. If you cannot fit it on a page, your players will not fit it in their heads on Saturday.

Next comes the mental layer, which is the one that decides whether any of this holds up when you go two down.

GO DEEPER

- On Ball Principles
- Off Ball Principles
- Building a Team That Plays Fast
- Closing & Tackling in a Zone Defence
- Mastering Transitions in Field Hockey



The mental layer

Under pressure, you fall back to your foundations. You do not rise to your ambitions. This is the layer the other three sit on.

There is a line from a Belgian special forces team leader in our masterclass **Team. Trust. Culture.** that belongs on every coach's fridge: under pressure, you fall back to your foundations, you do not rise to your ambitions.

That is why this chapter exists, and why it is not a chapter about motivational speeches.

Everything in your season plan so far, the physical work, the skills, the principles, assumes players who can think clearly when it matters. On a good day they can. On the day you go two down away from home in the rain, they revert to whatever you actually built, not to whatever you said in the team talk.

So the mental layer is not the soft bit you add if there is time left. It is the foundation the other three sit on. And unlike the others, most of it is built in ordinary moments rather than in special sessions.

Six questions.

What is my team going to fall back on?

Start here, because it reframes everything else. You are not building a mindset for the good days. You are building the thing that holds when it goes wrong.

Cedric De Vlieger, that special forces team leader from the opening quote, opens his work with teams by asking a question worth stealing word for word at your first session: are we here to survive, or are we here to build something? The answer shapes everything that follows, and it is much better asked out loud in August than assumed in February.

The second thing he does is name fear honestly. Fear is what stops players speaking up, and it is almost always a story rather than a fact. I am not good enough. They will think I am stupid. His instruction is blunt: look at the facts, not the fear.

Where does my team's confidence come from?

Ask your players where their confidence comes from and most will say results. Pause on that, because it means their belief is built on the one thing they do not control.



Katie Warriner, senior performance psychologist for GB hockey, who has worked across three Olympic cycles in several sports, takes the whole thing apart in a way that is genuinely useful for a club coach in our masterclass **Confidence: a choice and a skill**. Her starting point is that confidence is not a feeling. Feelings come and go, and you cannot control them, so the moment you treat confidence as a feeling you have handed it to the weather.

Her working definition is much simpler. Confidence is the answer to one question: can I do it? Which makes the important word "it". Confidence is contextual, not a general quality a player either has or lacks, and that is why it lurches about during a season.

That gives you two practical moves.

The first is an exercise that takes ten minutes. Ask each player to list five things their confidence rests on, then mark which of those are inside their control. Results, selection, whether they scored last week, whether you praised them: all outside. Preparation, attitude, effort, living up to their own standards: all inside. Then help them shift their weight onto the second list. That is the whole argument for defining success in ways a player can control, and it is not softness. A squad that is obsessed with winning makes worse decisions, because some of your players will always know, somewhere at the back of the brain, that winning is not entirely up to them.

The second is to treat confidence as a behaviour rather than a state. Ask a player what we would see if they were confident. Walking onto the pitch, in the huddle, off the ball, first two minutes. Then let them choose those behaviours whether or not the feeling has arrived. The feelings often follow. They are not required.

Two details worth stealing outright.

Give players a refocus routine for the moment after a mistake. The one Warriner gives players is deliberately small: grip the stick, count from five back to one. Nobody watching knows it is happening, it takes a few seconds, and it buys enough time for the thinking part of the brain to come back online before the next play. Without something like that, one error becomes three.

And bank the work where players can see it. Crista Cullen, an Olympic medallist and drag flicker for GB, tracked her conversion percentages by target area through every extra session, printed the spreadsheets, and kept them beside her bed at the Olympic Games. Her line is the one to hand your players: the confidence comes from the work you have done before.

One caution. Doubt is not the opposite of confidence. The best players in the world carry it, and a player who is waiting to feel certain before they commit will wait forever. And confidence is not a job you finish. Warriner compares it to brushing your teeth. Doing it once in August does not cover you in March.

Two things deserve naming before we move on. The goalkeeper's position in a squad is unlike anyone else's: every mistake is a goal, the role is isolated by design, and everything above about controllable sources of confidence and a refocus routine applies with a sharper edge. And when one or two players get coaching time the rest do not, the squad reads it. Say why it is happening, say what everyone else gets in return, and hold those players to the standards exactly as firmly as you hold everyone else.



Who owns each player's development?

Shea McAleese has the sharpest line on this in the whole library: coachability is not a personality trait, it is a decision a player makes about who is responsible for their development (→ our masterclass: [Coachability](#)).

That matters for your season plan because it changes what you are actually trying to produce. You are not trying to find the coachable players. You are trying to build an environment where players choose it.

His warning about the alternative is worth hearing. If you tell a player exactly what to do in every situation, you put them in a bubble, and the moment real pressure arrives, that bubble pops, because you are not out there to tell them what to do.

There is an uncomfortable question hiding in there. If your players do not take ownership, how much of that is who they are, and how much is a dependence you trained into them without meaning to?

Two habits change this faster than anything else, and neither costs a minute of pitch time.

Stop asking "does everyone understand?" You will get a wall of yeses, because nobody wants to be the one who says no, and then the drill falls apart. Ask instead: tell me what we just talked about. Explain it back to the group. With a player you do not know well, go two or three layers down. With one you know, go five.

Sit in the silence. Seven seconds. Most of us rescue the room after two, and a senior player fills the gap. Silence is often thinking, and if you keep filling it, the quiet players never learn to speak.

How honest are we willing to be with each other?

This is the one most club teams quietly avoid, and it is the difference between a squad and a group of people who share a changing room.

De Vlieger calls it radical honesty, and the test he offers is direct: when did you last have a genuinely honest conversation with a player, rather than a pleasant one?

Two mechanics make it survivable. The first is a three minute rule after a match: three minutes to swear, kick a bag, be furious, and then it stops. Emotion gets its slot rather than leaking into everything else. The second is that ranks and names disappear at the door of the review, so a seventeen-year-old can question the club captain and get thanked for it. If that is unthinkable in your team, you have your honest answer about your culture.

And the coach goes first, every time, until the group believes it is safe.

One caution, because this is where coaches get it wrong with young players. Honest is not the same as harsh. McAleese would swap the word hard for honest, and separate the message from the reasons. Tell a player they are not selected, then stop. They have not heard a word after that sentence anyway. Have the why conversation a few days later, when the heart rate has come down.



Warriner's version of the same principle is that clear is kind. Tough feedback lands when the player already knows you believe in their potential, and it needs a repair afterwards: go back and find out what your words actually did. Relationships are strengthened by the rupture and the repair, not by avoiding the rupture. That matters most for the feedback you do not give, the sharp word from a senior player to a seventeen-year-old in the third quarter. If the relationships underneath are strong, that survives. If they are not, it costs you a player for a month.

What do my players actually need from each other?

Adam Commens, reflecting on two gold medal campaigns, put connection ahead of culture and both ahead of tactics (→ our article: [Connections before tactics](#)). Tactics did not make his top three.

Before you dismiss that as a luxury for professional squads, look at what he means by connection. Not friendship. Not a team dinner. Understanding. Knowing where a player comes from, what drives them, how they respond when it goes wrong.

The practical consequence is that identical treatment is not fair treatment. One player wants it straight in the face, ten seconds, done. Another needs an arm round the shoulder and two sentences. Give both the same delivery and you lose one of them, every time.

So build one line into your plan: by the end of pre-season, I will know how each player wants to receive feedback. Not a personality test. Just ask them.

And build connection on the pitch rather than only around it. A game where every outfield player must touch the ball before you can score does more for communication than a barbecue does, because it forces players to find the teammate who is hiding.

How much do I decide, and how much do they?

Here is the diagnostic that tends to land hardest. In your last three matches, how many times did a player make an independent tactical decision without looking at the bench?

If the answer is close to zero, that is information about you, not about them.

The fix is what De Vlieger calls mission command. You paint the vision, set the framework and the intent, and then you go quiet. What they do inside that framework is theirs. And when players will not act on their own, it is because one of three things is missing:

- **Competence.** They do not feel prepared enough to decide.
- **Involvement.** They had no say in the plan, so it is your plan, not theirs.
- **Autonomy.** They believe you will override them anyway.

Diagnose which one before you change anything. Involvement is usually the cheapest to fix: put your plan on the table and ask the squad to blow holes in it.



The last piece is deliberate discomfort. McAleese calls it training in the jungle, a phrase he borrows from his team's sports psychologist: build sessions where things go wrong on purpose. Bad refereeing decisions. A two goal lead with five minutes left. A rule change halfway through. If the only chaos your players ever meet is on a Saturday, they will look to the bench when it arrives.

IN-SEASON CHECK

After a bad loss, does your team look for reasons or for solutions? Ownership is binary. Excuses or solutions.

U16

This is the age where honesty either becomes normal or becomes impossible, so it is worth investing in deliberately. Brief in small groups and let the youngest player report back to the squad, so speaking up gets practised somewhere safe first. Expect resistance to feedback and read it correctly: a player who pushes back is engaged, not disrespectful. Watch confidence especially closely in girls' teams, because Warriner points to studies with over a million participants showing that it drops sharply between eight and fourteen, sometimes by as much as thirty per cent, and tends to stay lower after that, which makes controllable measures of success more important here, not less. Ask what they would do differently rather than telling them, and be patient, because a group that has been instructed for years will not start deciding for itself in a fortnight.

U12

Nothing formal. What you praise is the whole mental programme at this age, so praise effort, honesty and recovery after a mistake far more loudly than you praise goals. End every session with thirty seconds in pairs: what did you learn today, tell your partner. Then ask one child what their partner said. That is self-reflection being trained without a single word about mindset, and it works from about six years old.



Your mental plan on one page

Six answers, in your own words, on one page. Write it down or record it. Just thinking about it will not accomplish anything.

1. The question you will ask the squad in week one, and the answer you get.
2. Your rule for how the team debriefs, including who is allowed to say what to whom.
3. One thing you will stop doing as the fixer this season.
4. How each player wants to receive feedback.
5. One controllable source of confidence per player, written down somewhere they will see it.
6. Where the deliberate chaos goes in your training week.

None of it takes extra sessions. All of it takes consistency, which is harder.

That is the four layers done, for the group. Next comes the training that never happens with the whole squad in front of you.

GO DEEPER

- Confidence: a choice and a skill
- Coachability
- Team. Trust. Culture.
- Connections Before Tactics
- Values Based Coaching



The other two sessions

There are three sizes of session in a season, not one. Most club plans only contain the third, which is why the goalkeeper goes uncoached and penalty corners feel like a lottery.

The five chapters before this one built a plan for the group. This one is about the training that cannot happen with the whole squad in front of you.

There are three sizes of session in a season, not one. The individual, which is one player working alone or with a coach. The unit, four to seven players training one job together. And the team. Most club plans only contain the third, then wonder in February why the keeper still cannot organise a defence and why penalty corners feel like a lottery.

Here is the part that catches most clubs out. Not every team has a real drag flick specialist. Every team attacks and defends penalty corners. So this is not a chapter for clubs with a star flicker. It is a chapter about the two moments in the game that are fully scripted, fully rehearsable, and almost never rehearsed with a fresh squad. Most clubs give penalty corners the last ten minutes of a Thursday, when everyone is cooked and the light is going.

And if you are tempted to skip it because your flicker is nothing special, look at it from the other end. The penalty corner is the only moment in hockey where you know in advance exactly where every player will be standing. That is also why it repays study. Lex Tump's honest observation is that first runner success massively influences a team's penalty corner defence, and that it is the part of it almost nobody looks at (→ our masterclass: [Inside the stats of the penalty corner](#)).

Who in my squad needs time the team session cannot give them?

Answer for the goalkeeper first. Every club has one, and almost none of them get coached.

Picture the usual Tuesday. The outfield players are deep in a possession game at the far end, and the keeper has had two touches in twenty minutes. Then on Saturday that same player is asked to organise the whole defence under a corner. Leadership does not arrive on the weekend if it was never rehearsed midweek (→ our article: [No GK coach? No problem!](#)).

Then ask the flicker question honestly. Does anyone in this squad actually have a flick worth building the season around, or is the more useful specialist a reliable stopper, a brave first runner, or an injector who can put the ball on the same spot every time? A flicker is not a soloist. Without an injector and a stopper there is no shot at all, and the unit is thin without the variation runners and the tip-in players (→ our masterclass: [PCA variations – Tin Matkovic](#)). Ask the same of the goalkeeper's world: individual time on base position, footwork and hands, then unit time on rebounds, tip-ins, and above all penalty corner defence.



One more name belongs on the list, and it is usually missing. The player who takes your long corners, and the two or three who defend them. Same logic, far less glamour.

Where do penalty corners live in my plan, rather than in the leftover minutes?

Decide which block introduces them, how often they come back, and what the pre-season version looks like against the January version.

Pre-season is for roles and reads. Who is closing which half of the goal, who echoes the call, who is the safety, what the shared vocabulary is. A walk-through at half pace with every player saying their job out loud is worth more here than live flicks, and if a player cannot say their role, they do not know it. Fede Tanuscio's starting point on defending corners is that there is no single correct structure. You set it up against the opponent in front of you, not just around your own preferences, and you want players actively reading the routine rather than passively waiting for it. That only works if everyone knows their own responsibility before the whistle (→ our piece: [PCD – Fede Tanuscio](#)).

January is for pressure and variation. The same unit under fatigue, against a routine they have not been told about, on a cold pitch with a heavy ball.

There is no correct number of minutes, and any number you read somewhere was written for a squad that trains more than yours. What there is, is a correct habit: corners come back on a rhythm you decided in July, not on the Thursday after you conceded two.

How do I run a specialist session with no specialist coach?

Cheaply, and mostly by refusing to leave the specialist alone.

A coach who never played in goal can still coach a base position. Hands at mid height, weight forward, genuinely still before the ball moves, calm reset afterwards. As Blaak puts it, standing still sounds really easy, and standing still is hard. That is visible from the halfway line. Tennis balls do more for a young keeper's hands and courage than a queue of players hitting hard from the top of the circle, which mostly teaches a flinch. Work from realistic distances and realistic angles instead (→ our masterclass: [How to train your goalkeeper – Pirmin Blaak](#)).

What to outsource: the spectacular stuff, aerial saves, diving mechanics, elite flick technique. Bring in a keeper from another team in the club for one evening. Pair your keepers so they coach each other. Use video, including video of your own player rather than only the internationals. Give the keeper ownership of their own warm-up, then ask what they saw after a defensive rep instead of telling them.

For the flicker, the honest coaching points are simple and repeatable. A measured, consistent run-up, marked out the same way every time. A controlled approach with the explosion saved for the release. Left foot roughly in line with the ball, stick face slightly open, and the drag in a straight line before the wrist decides where the ball goes. Deception comes later, and only once the pickup is reliable (→ our masterclass: [Coaching points for the drag flick – Justin Reid Ross](#)).



What does the extra time actually cost?

Answer in three currencies, and answer out loud.

Minutes. Is this a third slot, twenty minutes before the team session, or does it eat team time? If it eats team time, name what the rest of the squad is doing that genuinely needs no coach.

Load. A drag flick session loads the spine and the hips hard, something Justin Reid Ross talks about from experience rather than theory. A goalkeeper session is short explosive work in heavy kit, and it fatigues concentration faster than it fatigues legs. Both sit on top of whatever the physical plan already asked for that week, so put the specialist block early in the session, not after a hard game-based block.

Fairness. Giving two players extra attention is a culture decision, and the squad notices. Say why it is happening, say what the rest of the squad gets in return, and make the specialist visibly part of the team rather than a private project.

What does a realistic club week look like?

Twenty minutes carved out of one team session, with the rest of the squad running something that needs no coach, plus a short specialist block before the other session. The units overlap on purpose: the same players are usually in both the attacking and the defending corner unit.

Which points at the cheapest option available to a thin staff. Train attacking corners against defending corners, and both get rehearsed at once.

Two honest caveats. Live corners against your own keeper carry real risk, so set the rules first, cap the number of live flicks, and use blocked or soft-ball reps for the reads. And on a scripted moment, half the value sits in the second phase, so let the shot be saved deliberately and train what happens next.

IN-SEASON CHECK

When a corner costs you a game, was it a routine problem or a rehearsal problem? If you cannot tell, you are not training it often enough to know.

U16

Rotate keepers rather than appointing one for life. A fourteen-year-old who volunteers once should not be locked in for five seasons. A first corner unit with two simple options is plenty, and clarity beats creativity every time. Be careful with drag flick volume, because the spinal and hip load on a growing body is real. Technique before repetitions, and ten good flicks beat fifty tired ones.

U12

Nobody is "the keeper". Everyone takes a turn in the kit, and enjoying it matters more than stopping the ball. No drag flick at this age. Teach carrying the ball on the stick and the push pass instead, which they will use for the rest of their playing lives. Depending on your match format there may be no penalty corner at all, in which case the honest answer is that this chapter is not for you yet.

Your specialist plan on one page

Five answers, in your own words, on one page. Write it down or record it. Just thinking about it will not accomplish anything.

1. The one or two players who need time the team session cannot give them, named, including the goalkeeper.
2. Which block introduces attacking and defending corners, and how often they come back after that.
3. Where the unit slot and the individual slot sit in your week, and what the rest of the squad does while they run.
4. Who runs each of them, and what you are outsourcing rather than pretending to coach.
5. What you tell the squad about why two players get extra time.

Which leaves the last planning problem: fitting all of it, the four layers and the specialists and the units, into one week. That is the next chapter.

GO DEEPER

- No GK coach? No problem!
- How to train your goalkeeper
- Coaching points for the drag flick
- PCA Variations
- PCD
- Inside the Stats of the Penalty Corner



Weave it together

The four layers get taught separately and coached simultaneously. This is where they become one page that tells you what Tuesday is for.

Seven chapters in, you have a lot of answers and no plan.

That is the right order. You know what you want your team to look like, you know the shape of your season, you have made decisions about physical, technical, tactical and mental, and you have decided who in the squad needs time the team session cannot give them. What you do not have yet is one page that tells you what Tuesday is for.

Here is the honest problem with the way this guide is built, and with the way most coaching education is built. The four blocks get taught separately and coached simultaneously. Nobody runs a physical session, then a technical session, then a tactical one. You run a session on a Tuesday night in February with fourteen players, one of whom has just come from work without eating, and all four blocks are happening at once whether you planned them or not.

So this chapter is about the weave. Not four parallel tracks running at equal width from August to May, but one thread that changes colour depending on where you are in the season.

How do the four layers overlap across the phases?

The simplest useful frame is that pre-season builds capacity, in-season maintains and refines, and late season trims, sharpens and protects energy for the moments that matter (→ our article: [Periodisation for Club Coaches](#)).

Applied to the four layers, that means one of them leads at a time and the others hold station.

In pre-season, physical leads. It is the only window in the year where you genuinely get to build a base rather than maintain one, and it is the window Phil Moreland and Matthew Eyles both want you to use for screening and injury risk before you load. Technical runs heavy alongside it, because contacts are cheap when nobody is worrying about Saturday. Tactical stays at the level of principles only, no structure yet. And mental is doing more work in these weeks than at any other point in the year, because this is when the culture gets set, whether you set it deliberately or let it set itself.

In the long middle of the season, tactical leads. The game model gets layered, one block at a time. Technical drops to maintenance plus one individual gap per player. Physical is maintenance, which is not the same as nothing. Mental shifts from setting the culture to handing over ownership.



In the last weeks, the mental layer leads and everything else narrows. Tactical trims to the two things you actually do well. Technical becomes set pieces and one gap. Physical drops volume and keeps intensity. Mick Beunen treats recovery as part of the load rather than a break from it, and Coates's insistence on getting better without draining players points the same way (→ our article: [Periodisation for Club Coaches](#)). At club level that is compounded by jobs, exams and tired legs.

If you take one thing from that, take this: a layer that is not leading is not absent. It is being maintained. Maintenance is cheap. Rebuilding is not.

Where do they compete for time, and how do I choose?

They compete every single week, and you choose by planning the week from the match rather than despite it.

This is the piece most club plans miss. You have two sessions and a game. The game is not the thing that ends your week, it is the highest-intensity, highest-fidelity training stimulus you get, and it is free. It runs your players through decisions under pressure, transitions, set pieces and emotional load that no Tuesday can replicate.

So the week has a natural shape. The session further from the match is your harder one: technical foundations, principles, more reps, more load. The session closer to the match is game context, set pieces, decisions under pressure, lower volume, sharper finish. Flipping those two is one of the most common club mistakes there is. Hammer them forty-eight hours before a game and Saturday pays for it.

Within that, Fede Tanuscio's rule of thumb is worth stealing outright: one focus with the ball, one focus without the ball, across the week (→ our masterclass: [Practice Session Design](#)). Both stitched to the same theme.

And the theme comes from the match. Watch the weekend back, pick one in-possession problem and one out-of-possession problem, and those are your themes. Game, review, adapt, retest. Next Saturday tells you whether it worked.

How long do you hold a theme? Beunen periodises the Red Lions in three-week overload phases followed by a deload week. You cannot copy that volume, but the shape travels perfectly: run blocks of three to four weeks with one possession theme and one defensive theme, and use the last week of the block to consolidate rather than introduce anything new.

The hard part is not building this. The hard part is restraint. Tanuscio's own design logic is a day nested inside a week, nested inside a month, nested inside a year, with every session built from what the match exposed. If your Tuesday and Thursday do not talk to each other, you do not have periodisation, you have two sessions.



Coates's own line is that pre-season is about getting better without draining the players physically, and that it is not necessarily about getting fitter. The filter that follows from it is blunter: fewer choices, better made, and what you leave out matters as much as what you add. The session-level version of that question is blunt. Does this exercise serve our current theme, or is it filling time? If it is filling time, cut it. On two sessions a week you cannot afford to coach against your own plan.

Cover less, own more.

IN-SEASON CHECK

Look at your last three sessions. Could a player tell you what the theme was without being prompted? If not, you have a plan on paper and no plan on the pitch.

Where do the specialist and unit sessions sit?

The same weekly logic decides this, so do not bolt them on the side.

Unit work belongs in the session closer to the match. A penalty corner block is rehearsal under something close to match conditions, which is exactly what that session is for, and it is low volume by nature.

Individual technique work belongs in the session further from the match. Flick repetitions and goalkeeper footwork are correction and load rather than sharpening, and they want legs that are not being saved for Saturday.

If it is a third slot rather than time carved out of a session you already run, it is extra load and the physical plan has to know about it. Twenty minutes in full goalkeeping kit is not a rest day.

Chapter 6 covers how to run those sessions. This chapter only decides where they go.

What do I do with the winter break?

Most European leagues stop for several weeks in midwinter. In Belgium and the Netherlands the outdoor season splits in two around Christmas, in Germany it disappears into the indoor season entirely, and in the colder countries the gap can run to three months or more. Whatever the length, it is the single biggest structural feature of your season and most club plans treat it as a hole in the calendar rather than a phase with a job.

There are three ways coaches handle it and two of them cost you.

The first is to treat it as nothing and pick up in January where you left off in November. You will not. Aerobic base and strength fade over weeks, and touch and timing go with them. Russell Coates is direct about the consequence: players coming back from time away should not be swept straight into full drills, and the way back in is dynamic technical work that rebuilds rhythm, ball feel and coordination before anything else (→ our masterclass: [Smart Pre-Season Planning](#)). The five to ten per cent a week discipline



from Chapter 2 applies again in January, because players return sharp in the head and blunt in the legs. Keepers need reintroducing just as deliberately, and a corner unit that has not trained together since November is not a unit in January.

The second is to treat it as a second pre-season and hammer them the moment they walk back in. That is the same mistake in the opposite direction, and it is the one that produces hamstring issues in February.

The third is the useful one. **Treat the break as a second pre-season in structure, but not in volume.**

Structurally that means the same sequence you used in August, compressed. Screen before you load, in the light version Phil Moreland and Matthew Eyles would recognise, because whatever a player did or did not do over Christmas, you do not know it until you look. Then one to two weeks of ramp before the first match back, with physical leading, technical running at high volume because contacts are cheap again, and tactical revisiting the model you already have rather than adding anything new to it. January is not the month to introduce a new press.

A few practical decisions to make before the break rather than during it.

The last week before the break consolidates, it does not introduce. Whatever you teach in the final session, they will not touch for a month. Spend that week making the current theme stick instead.

Give them one honest thing to own. Not a programme. A programme you email out in December is a programme nobody opens. Glenn Turner's ten minutes of bodyweight work, two or three times a week, done consistently, will do more for a club player than an ambitious plan they abandon on the fourth of January. Make it small enough that doing it is easier than explaining why they did not.

Know who is playing indoor and who is not. Indoor is not lost time. Quick hands, tight spaces, receiving under pressure and constant decisions are exactly the technical qualities you want, and players often come back sharper on the ball than they left. But it is a different load pattern with far more games and far less running, so your squad returns as two distinct groups. The indoor players need volume rebuilt. The players who did nothing need everything rebuilt, gently. Planning one session for both of them is how you injure one and bore the other.

Use the break yourself. Mick Beunen builds deload weeks into a three-week overload cycle because recovery is part of the load, and the coach is in the load too. The break is also the only unhurried window you get for a proper look at the plan, which is what the next chapter is about. The same filter applies with more force in January than in August: fewer choices, better made. You have half a season left and less time than you think.

IN-SEASON CHECK

By the end of the break, can you say in one sentence what the second half of the season is for? If the answer is "the same as the first half, but better", you have not used the break, you have just survived it.



Worked example: a U16 team

Two sessions a week, one match, a squad of sixteen with mixed availability around school.

Philosophy: we want to be the team that keeps the ball moving forward when the pressure comes on.

Non-negotiables: everyone defends, and nobody blames a teammate out loud.

Shape: three pre-season weeks, twenty-two league weekends, a two-week exam break in December and another in April. Roughly forty sessions for the whole year, which is less than the coach assumed before counting.

Peak: by February we can play out from the back against a high press without hitting it long.

Blocks: pre-season builds aerobic base and ball contacts with one principle, keep the ball. Block one is outletting under pressure and pressing triggers. Block two is third-man combinations and defensive shape in the middle third. Block three, over the exam break, trims to two sessions of set pieces and small-sided games because half the squad is revising.

Weekly rhythm: Tuesday is principle-led and physically harder. Thursday is phase play and set pieces at lower volume. Mental emphasis moves from culture in August to player-led warm-ups by November.

Specialist and unit work: the club's two keepers pair up for twenty minutes before Tuesday, and the corner units train against each other for twenty minutes on Thursday while the rest play a small-sided game that needs no coach.

Left out: individual defending one against one. It matters, but not this year.

Worked example: a U12 team

One session a week, matches most Saturdays, twenty players and a wide spread of physical maturity.

Philosophy: they should leave every session wanting to come back.

Non-negotiables: everyone gets a lot of touches, and everyone plays.

Shape: no pre-season as such, just a soft start. Plan around school terms, not the fixture list. Enjoyment is a planning constraint, not a nice extra.

Peak: there isn't one, and inventing one would be a mistake. The goal is that by May they can receive on the move and find a free player without being told to.

Blocks: six-week blocks, one skill theme each, always taught through games rather than lines. Receiving on the move. Eliminating an opponent. Finding width. Defending as a pair.

Weekly rhythm: one session, so no split. Fifteen minutes of ball mastery, thirty minutes of decision-rich small games built around the theme, fifteen minutes of a game they choose. The physical layer is movement, coordination and fun, not conditioning.



Specialist and unit work: none, deliberately. Nobody here is "the keeper" yet, the match format has no penalty corner, and the one session a week belongs to all twenty of them.

Left out: almost everything. Structure, systems, positional discipline, set-piece routines. There is a longer runway here than anyone thinks, and the temptation to shorten it is the single biggest error in youth planning.

A final note on both examples. Neither of them survived contact with the season unchanged, and neither was supposed to.

Which is where the last chapter comes in.

GO DEEPER

→ [Periodisation for Club Coaches](#)

→ [Practice Session Design](#)

Adapt as the season unfolds

The plan you just filled in is already wrong. That is not a failure of planning — it is the season doing what seasons do.

The plan you filled in last chapter is already wrong.

Not badly wrong, and not because you built it badly. Wrong in the ordinary way every plan is wrong: three players will leave, one will get injured in September, the club will lose a pitch slot, and some team you were supposed to beat will turn you over in October and make you question the whole thing.

That is not a failure of planning. That is the season doing what seasons do. A season plan is not a script you wrote in July and then perform until May. It is a loop you keep going round.

The loop has four parts, and it is worth naming them, because naming them is what stops you from skipping the two that matter most.

Plan. Done. That is the canvas.

Do. Run it. Deliver the sessions, play the games, hold the blocks.

Check. Read what actually happened, honestly, on a rhythm rather than on impulse.

Adapt. Decide what changes and what holds, then feed it back into the plan and go round again.

Most club coaches are excellent at Do. They are patchy at Check and they confuse Adapt with panic. So this chapter is mostly about the second half of the loop.

Do: run it long enough to learn something

The first discipline is not adapting.

A block is three or four weeks for a reason. If you change your theme every time a match exposes a new gap, your players never move from "we know this" to "we own this", and you spend the season sanding the same rough edges without ever finishing one. Alignment of message matters more than novelty.

So Do means holding the line for the length of the block, delivering with intent, and resisting the urge to react to Saturday on Sunday morning. Which is much harder than it sounds when you have just lost 4-1.

Check: what signals tell me the plan needs changing?

Here is the practical distinction. **A bad result is noise. A pattern is signal.**



Jamilon Mülders, who has coached at the top of international hockey in three countries, has a rhythm for this that translates straight into club life: come back to your results every two or three weeks and treat them as data points rather than verdicts (→ our masterclass: **Result vs Process**). The question is not did we win or lose, it is what does this tell us about where we are in the process. And the review itself should be quick, short and on time. Not a long post-mortem that reopens every wound.

That cadence does two things at once. It stops you lurching between elation and despair, and it means when you do change something, you are changing it on evidence rather than on Saturday's mood.

Todd Williams, who took over a Premier League side sitting bottom with three points and kept them up, starts his whole approach with a word that gets used loosely in coaching and rarely meant (→ our masterclass: **Winning the relegation battle**). Honesty. Not as a virtue, as a planning tool. You have to properly assess where you are before you can plan, and that includes forecasting the bad patches. Look at the fixture list and say out loud: those three games in a row are going to be hard, so here is how we will manage confidence and expectation through them. The same forecast should cover the congested run into the winter break and the flat weeks straight after it, because both are predictable and neither is a verdict on your plan. That is not defeatism. Williams is emphatic on this point, and he is right. The worst thing you can carry into a season is an unrealistic expectation, because every result then arrives as a shock.

Two more things worth stealing from him.

Document everything. Write it down during the game instead of shouting it. Williams started writing notes rather than yelling at umpires and players, partly to control his own emotions and partly because it gave him something accurate to reflect on later. He admits some of the notes are hysterical when you read them back the next morning. That is rather the point.

Separate result from process, in both directions. You can win one-nil having survived twenty-seven corners against you, and it would be a mistake to look at that and conclude the plan is working. You can also lose a game where every process marker you care about was better than last month. The scoreboard is one measure. It is not the measure.

And then there are the five in-season checks from the layer chapters, which are on your canvas for exactly this moment. Heavy legs in the last fifteen minutes. Skills that hold up in drills but not under match pressure. A game model that only exists on the whiteboard. A group whose energy has gone flat. And a corner that cost you a game, where you cannot say whether it was the routine or the rehearsal. Those five are your early warning system, and unlike the league table they tell you *what* to change, not just that something is wrong.

IN-SEASON CHECK

When you last changed something, was it because of a pattern you could name, or because of how you felt on Saturday evening? If you cannot answer that, you are not adapting, you are reacting.



Adapt: when do I hold, and when do I adjust?

Williams has the best line on this, and he got it from outside hockey: fall in love with the idea of planning, not with the plan.

The distinction is everything. Loving the plan makes you rigid, and then defensive, and then eventually you throw the whole thing out in one dramatic gesture in January. Loving the act of planning makes you nimble. You expect to revise, so revising costs you nothing emotionally.

He calls the goal being shock-proof. His example: at a different club, mid-season and near the bottom, his captain announced he was leaving for another club just after they had won their first game. They replaced the captain, kept working towards the same plan, and went on an unbeaten run to finish second. The plan absorbed the shock because the plan was never the captain.

A usable rule for club coaches: **hold the block, adjust the session.**

If the signal is genuinely a pattern, change the theme at the block boundary, not on Tuesday. If it is a one-off, fix it inside a session and let the block continue. And if something structural has broken, a run of injuries, half the squad revising for exams, a group that has stopped enjoying it, then change the plan properly and say out loud that you are doing it.

The loop applies to the individual plan too, and that check is the uncomfortable one. Is the specialist actually improving, or just playing every week? A goalkeeper who has played thirty games and been coached twice has not had a season. They have had thirty afternoons.

How do I run a mid-season reset without throwing it all out?

If you coach in a European league, the answer to "when" is usually already sitting on your calendar. The winter break is the only point in the year where you can review properly, decide on a change, and rehearse that change before a result tests it. Outside that window a reset has to be run while the fixtures keep coming, which is why most of them amount to one emotional team meeting and no actual change. If something needs to shift, aim it at the break.

Wherever it lands, four moves, in order.

Change the conversation. Williams's example is a clean trap next to a foot that the umpire calls the other way, and you concede. You can spend the week on the umpire, or you can spend it on trapping. His question is the whole reset in one line: do you want better umpires next week, or do you want to be able to trap? You are not denying the bad luck. You are refusing to build a season on it.

Find the positives inside the negatives. Even three down at quarter time there is something you can control. Circle entries. Corners won. Tackles made. When the conversation you are having is not working for the team, you change it to a different one, and you do that deliberately rather than hoping the mood lifts.

Simplify. Simple expectations, simple messaging, simple delivery. Three hours of video is not the answer. When a group is struggling, the plan should get smaller, not bigger.



Hand something over. Williams builds a leadership group chosen to cover every corner of the squad rather than to reward the best players, and uses it to get honest information flowing back up. Shane McLeod's version, across two Olympic cycles, is to build on players' strengths rather than fix their weaknesses, so that people feel valued for what they actually are and start leading without being asked (→ our article: [Success and failure are both impostors](#)). A reset that only you carry is not a reset. It is you working harder.

One warning about the matches either side of a long break. The last game before it is usually played by a group already mentally on holiday, and the first two back are almost always scrappy. Neither is signal. Timing goes, connections go, and a team that has trained together for two weeks after six apart will look worse than it is. Judge whatever you changed from the third game onwards, and say so to the players in advance, so that they judge it the same way rather than concluding in week one that the new idea does not work.

How do in-game decisions feed back into the plan?

Half time is not a speech. Jennifer Wright's research on what actually happens in that break found that once you subtract everything else, a coach is realistically working with about four and a half minutes, and that players preferred short, clear messages over information overload (→ our masterclass: [Halftime Research, Realities, and Coaching Best Practices](#)). One player's description of the alternative is the one to remember: sometimes I just tune out, it needs to be short and sweet. The coach Wright studied worked hard at being the calm voice in the chaos. Pick one or two things, say them calmly, and stop.

The closing minutes are the same discipline under more pressure. Under stress the brain responds by reflex rather than reflection, which means whatever you have grooved in training is what comes out at 4-3 with three minutes left. So decide the roles before the moment. The player you send on to protect a lead is not the same profile as the player you send on to chase one, and their brief should be explicit. Improvising that under pressure is how tight games slip away (→ our article: [Those final 5 minutes in the game](#)).

And this is where the loop closes. **Whatever you found yourself shouting on Saturday is your candidate theme for Tuesday.** If you had to shout it, they did not own it. That is not a criticism of your players. It is the most reliable piece of feedback the plan gets all week.



U16 AND U12: CHECK AGAINST THE RIGHT THINGS

With youth teams the league table is the least useful signal you have, because it is mostly telling you about birth months and who happened to move into the area. Check instead against development and enjoyment. Are players doing things in March they could not do in October? Is attendance holding? Are they still choosing to stay behind afterwards? A U12 group that finished bottom and cannot wait for next season has had a better year than one that won everything and lost four players to another sport. If you adapt a youth plan on the basis of results, you will make it narrower, more structured and less fun, which is precisely the wrong direction.

Back to where we started

Eight chapters ago, before any calendar or any drill, you answered a question: what do I believe about how hockey is played and how players learn?

Everything since then has been downstream of that answer. The shape of the season, the physical base, the skills you chose and the ones you let go, the game model, the culture, the canvas, and now the loop that keeps it honest. None of it was a template, and none of it would work as well in someone else's hands, which is the point.

So one last time round. Plan, do, check, adapt. And when you get back to the top of the loop, ask the philosophy question again, because your answer will have moved. It should have.

That is not the plan failing. That is you coaching.

GO DEEPER

- [Winning the relegation battle](#)
- [Halftime Research, Realities, and Coaching Best Practices](#)
- [Those final 5 minutes in the game](#)
- [Success and failure are both impostors](#)
- [Result vs Process](#)



The season planning canvas

One page. Fill it in with a pen or record it as a voice note, put it somewhere you will see it, and expect to change it. Just thinking it through will not accomplish anything — nothing here is a template, and every box is an answer only you can give.

1 Philosophy, in one sentence

The line you wrote in the Intro. Everything below has to serve it, and anything that does not gets cut.

2 My two or three non-negotiables

The things that hold whether we are winning or losing. Each one visible from the sideline.

3 The shape of the season

Pre-season weeks available

Total sessions I realistically get, allowing for weather, holidays and exams

The three or four moments that actually matter

The winter break — how many weeks, and what it is for

Other natural breaks (exams, holidays, tours)

4 What peak means for this team

Written as a description of how the team plays and feels, not as a league position.

5 The blocks

Four to six blocks of three to four weeks. For each one — in-possession theme, out-of-possession theme, physical emphasis (build / maintain / trim), mental emphasis, and what you consolidate in the final week.

BLOCK	IN POSSESSION	OUT OF POSSESSION	PHYSICAL	MENTAL	CONSOLIDATE

6 The weekly rhythm

Session A (further from the match) leans

Session B (closer to the match) leans

The match — what it is teaching me this week

Specialist and unit slots — who, when, who runs them

7 Weekly non-negotiables

The small things that run every week regardless of theme. Ten minutes of bodyweight work. Your set-piece slot. Your reflection slot.

8 My five in-season checks

The signal from each layer chapter that tells me to adjust rather than push on.

Physical

Technical

Tactical

Mental

Set pieces

9 What I am deliberately leaving out this season

The most important box on the page, and the one every coach leaves blank.



One more thing

This pack is free and it stays free. No email required, and you are welcome to send it to anyone who might use it.

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Ernst Baart

