



HOCKEY CALGARY

INFORMATION BULLETIN

U9 Format Explained: Rationale & Hockey Canada Data

Companion Bulletin #2602. The full rationale, data, and Hockey Canada research behind the new format.

The Rule Change and Hockey Calgary's Response

Hockey Canada's national playing rules now permit U9 teams to play full-ice games after December 26, 2026. This is the only structural rule change affecting U9 this season. In response, Hockey Calgary's Development Team, working with our Member Clubs have built a season structure that balances three realities: the continued growth of hockey in Calgary, the limited ice resources available across the city, and Hockey Canada's own research on how young players develop best.

Phase Breakdown

Phase 1 – Half-Ice (start of season to Dec 26, 2026). U9 opens in the half-ice, split-squad format, where two mini-games run simultaneously on each half of the rink. This is a Hockey Canada requirement for the first four months of the season.

Phase 2 – ¾-Ice/Cross-Ice (Dec 26 onward, all league games). League games move to the Three-Quarter Cross-Ice format: 5-on-5 play across three-quarters of the rink extending to the ringette line, plus 3-on-3 cross-ice play in tighter space to continue developing in a small area. This keeps ice time maximized citywide while stepping players up gradually toward a full-size surface.

Phase 3 – Optional Full Ice (Dec 26 onward, exhibition/tournament only). Per Hockey Canada's rules, teams that want to schedule full-ice exhibition games or enter full-ice tournaments after December 26 may do so. Hockey Calgary will not schedule full-ice league games. This is up to each individual team to schedule.



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The Data Behind the Half-Ice Format

Hockey Canada's U9 Player Pathway research compares half-ice and full-ice formats across several key metrics. For a typical U9 player, the half-ice format delivers:

- 3x more puck touches
- 4x more shot attempts
- 4x more shots on goal
- 2x more ice time
- 2x more pass attempts
- 5x more passes received

In practical terms: U9 rosters in Calgary run 17–20 players. In the current split-squad half-ice format, every player gets a minimum of 24 minutes of ice time per game. In a full-ice format, that same player's ice time drops by roughly 42%, to about 14 minutes per game. More touches, more shots, and more ice time mean more development reps for every player, every game.

How This Fits Hockey Canada's Player Development Model

Hockey Canada's Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) model identifies U7 and U9 as the **Fundamentals** stage (ages 5–8), where the priority is building the movement skills, coordination, and physical literacy everything else is built on. **Learn to Play** (ages 9–10, roughly U11) is where fine motor and individual technical skills begin translating into team tactics.

Hockey Canada's Skills Pyramid places U9 squarely in Technical Skills and Individual Skills, with only limited, introductory exposure to team tactics such as a 2-on-1. Full-ice game structure and formal team tactics are designed to be introduced at U11. Practices, not formal full-ice games, are the more effective setting for building these skills at the U9 stage. Hockey Calgary's phased structure is built to match this guidance.



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Setting Graduating U9 Players Up for U11

Hockey Calgary and its member clubs already provide four practice/skills sessions before U11 evaluations begin each year, and this remains the primary bridge for U9 players moving up. Hockey Canada specifically notes that "basic positional play and rules can be introduced at the end of the season or prior to the start of the U11 regular season," including concepts like defensive-zone positioning, offside, and icing.

Hockey Calgary is committed to working with member clubs to build a formal plan for these four prep skates, plus a practice-based transition plan U9 teams can run in March to help players step confidently into U11.

Related Policies & Documents available here:

hockeycalgary.ca