

BASIC HOCKEY NUTS & BOLTS:

How long is a hockey game and how does a team win?

A hockey game has 60 minutes of ice time broken up into three 20-minute periods. After each period, the teams switch directions and aim for the opposite goal. There are two intermissions between periods and those are each about 15 minutes long.

A player scores by hitting the puck into the net with their stick. The rule is that the entire puck has to cross the entire line for it to be a goal (unlike American football where the tip of the ball just has to break the plane). Each goal is worth one point, and whoever has the most points at the end of 60 minutes wins.

Can a hockey game end in a tie?

There are no ties in hockey. In the regular season, if the score is tied after three periods, there's a five-minute overtime with a "golden goal"—if a team scores, the game is over and they win, without playing the rest of the five minutes. If no one scores in overtime, the teams have a shootout.

During a shootout, each team gets five chances to make a goal. It's kind of like in soccer—just one skater against the goalie. Whichever team gets the most shots in the goal (out of five) wins the game.

What does a hockey rink look like?

A hockey rink is divided in halves, with a goal near each end. The rink is surrounded by walls called "boards," which are topped with plexiglass barriers called "the glass." Unlike soccer, it's okay to play behind the goal and on the edges by the boards—there's no "out of bounds" on the ice. It makes the action very exciting!

In the middle of the rink is the center line or "red line," which divides each team's territory. There are also two "blue lines," which divide the rink into three zones: the "neutral" zone between the blue lines, and each team's end zone. The end zone a team is trying to score in is called the "attacking zone," and the end zone they're trying to defend is called the "defensive zone."

Note: Once the puck crosses the blue line into an end zone, if it gets hit back into the neutral zone, everyone on the attacking team must skate back into the neutral zone before they can attack again.

Finally, there's a thin red "goal line" spanning the ice by each net. In front of the net is the "crease," a half-circle where no one can encroach on the goalie. The goalie does not have to stay in the crease.

Who's on the ice?

Each team has six people on the ice during normal play, typically a goalie, two defensemen, and three forwards: a center, a left winger, and a right winger. The defensemen mostly focus on preventing goals, and the forwards mostly focus on scoring. There are no requirements for anyone to stick to any certain part of the ice, though—the goalie can leave the net if they want to, for instance.

Hockey is a sprinting sport, so to keep the five skaters as fresh as possible, each team has "lines" that switch out every 60-90 seconds. A few people leave the ice and a few people take their place. This transition has to happen quickly because you can be penalized for having too many people on the ice.

What's a faceoff?

A faceoff is like a basketball tipoff. A person from each team gets face to face, and a ref drops the puck in between them. This happens at the beginning of each period or if the puck stops for any reason (for example, if someone hits it too high and it goes out of play, or if someone commits a penalty).

You'll see there are nine faceoff circles painted on the ice near the four corners, the blue lines, and on the center line. Those are where faceoffs happen. A person wins the faceoff if they catch the puck with their stick and hit it backwards so their teammate can get it and start a play (kind of like rugby).

What's a power play?

If someone commits a penalty, he goes to the penalty box to think about what he's done for two minutes. The opposing team gets a "power play"—they have an advantage because they have five skaters (+ goalie) while the other team only has four skaters for the next two minutes. If either team scores before the penalty is finished, the power play is over and the penalized player comes back out.

The team with four skaters + goalie is called “shorthanded.” During a power play, the shorthanded team doesn’t have to worry about icing the puck (see definition of “icing” in the next question). They can defend the goal and hit the puck as far away as possible. Sometimes the shorthanded team manages to score during the power play, and that’s called a shorthanded goal.

COMMON “WAIT, WHAT HAPPENED?” SCENARIOS:

Why did the ref blow the whistle when the puck went past the goal line?

If someone hits the puck over the red center red line and it goes over the other team’s goal line without anyone touching it, it’s called “icing.” No one gets put into the penalty box for icing, but it’s a foul because people used to use it as a delaying tactic if they were winning, which wasn’t cool. (“Fetch!”)

When icing happens, the ref stops play and carries the puck back to one of the faceoff circles near the offending team’s goal. It’s a punishment because although both teams have a shot to win the faceoff, now the team that iced the puck has to defend their goal instead of being on the offensive.

Note: If they shoot the puck over the center line and it makes it into the goal, it’s not icing—it’s a goal.

Why did the ref blow the whistle when the puck went over the blue line?

This happened because a player was “offsides.” Offsides is when both of a player’s skates completely cross the attacking-zone blue line before the puck completely crosses that same blue line. Basically, this prevents someone lurking near the goal just waiting for a teammate to pass them the puck—the puck needs to get into the attacking zone first.

Offsides is another foul like icing where no one gets sent to the box—they stop play and have a faceoff.

What kind of penalties DO put you in the penalty box?

Common “minor” (two-minute) penalties include:

- Tripping
- Elbowing
- Cross-checking (hitting an opponent with the stick when it is held with two hands and no part of the stick is on the ice)

- Interfering with an official or goaltender
- Hooking (using a stick to impede someone's movement)
- Slashing (swinging a stick at an opponent)
- Charging
- Boarding (hitting someone into the boards from behind)

There are others, and a bunch of “major” penalties as well, but these are a good start.

Note: Ever heard the term “five for fighting?” That’s because players who fight have to sit in the box for five minutes instead of two, so they can cool off. Unlike the other penalties, their teams can still have five skaters (+ goalie) on the ice during a fighting penalty. Also, funnily enough, there are specific rules for fighting—fighting players must immediately drop their sticks and gloves to limit the damage, for example.

A player touched the puck and the ref immediately whistled and sent someone to the penalty box. What happened?

This is called a delayed penalty. If someone commits a penalty but the other team has the puck, the refs will call the penalty but allow play to go on as long as the non-offending team has control of the puck. (It gives the rule-abiding team a bit of a freebie.) As soon as a player on the offending team touches the puck, the ref stops play and enforces the previously-called penalty.

Why did the goalie leave near the end of the game?

When a team is losing and the game is almost over, sometimes they’ll pull the goalie and add a sixth skater for maximum offensive power. That gives them the greatest chance of scoring a much-needed goal to stay in the game, but obviously leaves their own net vulnerable.