

How to Play Outdoor Hockey

Introduction

Hockey, or Field Hockey as it is known in some parts of the world, is a stick and ball game with origins dating back thousands of years. It is traditionally played on grass, but more often these days - especially at the top levels and in certain countries - hockey is played on synthetic surfaces.

In hockey, two teams of 11 players compete against each other using their 'hooked' sticks to hit, push, pass and dribble a small, hard, usually white, ball, with one aim in mind - to score by getting the ball into the opponents' goal.

To do that, they have to get the ball past the other team's goalkeeper, who protects the goal, and logically, tries to keep the ball out!

Player positions

As already mentioned, every team must have a goalkeeper. The other 10 players are referred to as 'field players', and are dispersed over the field of play. The field players can be put into three general categories - attackers, defenders and midfielders. While no player (other than the goalkeeper) has an exclusively defined role, the attackers are generally on attack, the defenders are generally on defence, and the midfielders do a bit of both!

Stick handling

An essential skill necessary for playing hockey is the ability to control, pass, push, stop and shoot the ball with your hockey stick. This is known as stick work, or stick handling. It is both beautiful and impressive to watch a player with good stick handling skills control the ball while sprinting the length of the field, or weave through the sticks and legs of defenders to create an open shot.

It is important to know that the head of a hockey stick has a rounded side (the right-hand side) and a flat side (the left-hand side). It is only with the flat, left-hand side of the stick and the edges of that side that you are permitted to play the ball.

No Feet!

It may seem like common sense, but it is worth mentioning that in hockey, field players are not allowed to use their feet (or any other parts of their bodies for that matter) to control the ball. Only the goalkeeper is allowed to use hands, feet, etc. to stop or propel the ball when defending in his or her own circle.

Ball in the Air

In general play the ball must not be raised into the air when hit. It can though be raised by using a scooping or long pushing action of the stick. However, a player will be penalised if they lift the ball in a way which is dangerous to another player.

When the ball is in the air a player must not play it if it is above shoulder height. A defender (including the goalkeeper) can though use their stick at any height to save a shot at goal – because attackers are allowed to raise the ball in the shooting circle. Many shots are raised in one way or another because this is an effective way of scoring goals – so more about goal scoring below.

Scoring

Scoring a goal in hockey is very interesting. There are only certain ways it can be done: from a *Field Goal*, from a *Penalty Corner*, and from a *Penalty Stroke*.

Field Goals

A field goal is a goal scored from open, continuous play. Field goals may only be taken from the '*shooting circle*', a roughly semi-circular area in front of the opponents' goal. If an attacker hits the ball from outside the 'shooting circle' and it goes directly into the goal or is only touched by a defender on the way, it does not count as a score.

Penalty Corners

If a defending team breaks certain rules, the other team may be awarded a '*penalty corner*.' It is awarded when a team breaks a rule while defending in their 'shooting circle'. It can also be awarded when a defender is guilty of a particularly bad foul inside the defending quarter of the field – the area enclosed by a line 23 metres from the end of the field.

To take a penalty corner, play is stopped to allow the teams to take their positions in attack and defence. One attacker stands with the ball on a designated spot on the *back-line*. (It's the line that marks the shorter boundary of the field of play and on which the goal is placed.) This player will 'push out' the ball to other attackers, waiting to take a shot at goal. The other attackers usually wait at the top of the shooting circle to receive the ball. But in any case, all attackers have to be outside the shooting circle until the penalty corner begins.

Up to five defenders (including the goalkeeper) position themselves behind the back-line (either inside or outside of the goal) to defend against the penalty corner. The rest of the defenders must stay behind the centre line until the 'push out' has been taken.

The ball is '*pushed out*' to the attacker waiting to receive it. Before a shot on goal can be taken, the ball must first travel outside the circle. The receiver then usually pushes it back into the circle for the a shot either by her/himself or another attacker.

If the first shot is a hit (as opposed to other types of shots, like a 'flick' or a 'scoop'), the ball must enter the goal at a height of no more than 460mm (or about 18 inches). It is usually pretty easy to tell if the ball is at the right height since the board at the back of the goal is the same height. When a goal is successfully scored, there is a familiar sound of the ball hitting the board, usually followed by players celebrating!

If the first shot is a 'scoop' or a 'flick' - shots that are lifted into the air with a long scooping or pushing action of the stick - then the ball can cross the goal-line at any height, as long as it is not dangerous play.

Once the attacker on the back-line begins to push the ball out, the defenders on the back line may move into the circle, and do their best to stop the other team from scoring.

It's a long explanation, but in practice, it all happens very quickly, and is exciting to watch!

Penalty Strokes

A penalty stroke is a shot taken on goal by a chosen player and defended only by the goalkeeper. (All other players must stand outside the circle, about 23 metres/25 yards away.) A penalty stroke may be awarded for a few reasons, the most common being an offence by a defender in the circle to prevent the probable scoring of a goal. The shot is taken from a spot 6.4 meters (7 yards) directly in front of the goal. Match time is stopped when a penalty stroke is being taken.

Duration of a match

A regulation length hockey match lasts 70 minutes - which is broken into two halves of 35 minutes each. The team with the most goals at the end of the 70 minutes is the winner. It is also possible for a match to end in a draw (or tie). But in some matches - like in a tournament such as the World Cup or Olympics, or in a championship game - there must be a winner. In those cases, a match which is tied at the end of regulation time, then goes into extra time (the first team to score in extra time wins), and if necessary, to a penalty stroke competition.