

Natick Comets – Practice Scheduling FAQ

Michael Byrum for the 2024-25 Season

The **Natick Comets - Practice Scheduling Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)** document has information for the upcoming 2022-23 season based on our experiences from previous seasons. Each **Question (Q)** has a short **Answer (A)** with more details below it. Also, any specific information on the 2023-24 season is **highlighted**.

There are three sections:

- [GENERAL](#)
- [PRACTICES](#)
- [GAMES](#)

Any questions can be sent to the Practice Scheduler team at scheduler@natickcomets.com .

GENERAL SECTION

Q: How many rinks do we have?

A: In the 2024-25 season, we are slated to have four rinks across the season.

In the 2024-25 season, we have the same four rinks as we had last season:

- William Chase Arena, Natick
- Babson Skating Center, Wellesley
- Rivers School, Weston
- Northstar Ice Arena, Westborough

In early December around the start of the high school season, we lose ice time at Chase to high school hockey – about a 1/3rd of our weeknight ice. We do gain some weekend ice at Rivers to help offset that loss but we will not get the weeknight ice back until late February.

Q: How long is the season?

A: In 2024-25, the program will start in mid-August and run until early-April.

In 2024-25, we continued with the addition of “pre-season” practices in mid-August until the season starts the first full week of September. Midget teams in the VHL have their playoffs in late November before the high school season started. Select U16 & U18, as well as the Girls U19 do not have playoffs. The rest of the teams’ playoffs occur at the end of the season in mid-to-late March through early April depending on their success (depending on the league, playoffs are not guaranteed).

Q: What is the “parity round”?

A: The “parity round” runs in the first part of the season to determine which teams should be in which divisions.

The idea is to group together teams that have similar skills, so the games are competitive. Sometimes adjustments will be made by the leagues throughout the year with the teams usually settling into their

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final divisions by the end of the calendar year (but sometimes later). Parity occurs for the older teams too even for their shortened season (except for the Select league which does not have parity).

Q: What happens when High School hockey starts?

A: We lose about a 1/3rd of our ice times during the weeknights at Chase.

It starts at the end of November. Historically, it is the Monday after Thanksgiving weekend. High School hockey tryouts start on a Monday and last all week. We lose about a 1/3rd of the ice times we had at the start of our season until they finish in late February / early March.

Q: How do I enter an event or game in Crossbar for my team?

A: It can only be done from a web browser, not the app currently but it's not hard. Reach out for help.

Why do you need to do this? It could be for a lot of reasons: you are having a team-building event (on or off-ice), you setup a scrimmage with another team, tournament games must be manually entered. Again, we can help you with this.

Why do this at all? It allows you to track attendance for your event or game in Crossbar which is easier than doing it manually. You can also enter in location information as well as other details.

And for regular games & practices, you don't have to do it at all as that is handled by the leagues (games) or by us (practices). If there are issues with the league schedule synchronization, we will work to mitigate them as best as we can.

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PRACTICES SECTION

Q: Why don't we have consistent practice times for the full season?

A: Since we don't own our own rink, we don't get priority on the ice times throughout the season (like some club teams do).

FMC is the lessee of Chase (the town owns it), and they have their own classes they run during our season, but the biggest impact is when the high school teams start their season in December through February (sometimes into March with playoffs). They will take up about a 1/3rd of our weekday ice times during their season.

Other things can take away from our practice times too, like League makeup games, State Playdown games, special skills sessions from outside companies (arranged & paid for by the Comets), special requests from the high school coaches, etc.

Q: Why can't we get the practice schedule for the entire season including weekends?

A: League games are not scheduled for the entire season so we must wait to get their schedules to finalize our practice times.

In addition to the high school season starting in December and taking a 1/3rd of our ice times, we must wait for the league game schedules (Valley Hockey League aka VHL and Massachusetts Yankee Conference Girl's Hockey League aka MYCGL) which comes out in chunks at different times and different amounts (because of the parity round and team division movement). There are times in the season where we didn't have league games scheduled until a few days before the weekend.

In the 2024-25 season, we put out the weeknight schedules from September to March (similar to what we did last year for the first time). We still lose our ice in December so we have to fill in with ad hoc practices on the weekends and some available weeknights. We track the times to make sure that teams are getting an equal share of ice time over the course of the season.

Q: How many practice times do we have each week?

A: We average around 32-40 hours of ice time between all the rinks depending on the time of year.

In 2024-25, our ice time is similar to last season. We have around 20 hours during the week (Monday to Friday) at Chase & Babson and on the weekends to start the season. That reduces to about 15-17 hours when the high school season was running. On the weekends, we have around 5 hours for practices after you deduct the league usage of our ice (internal ones like Learn To Play, Jr. House & House and travel leagues like VHL, MYCGL & Select for games). During the high school season, we added more hours at Rivers on Saturdays.

This ice time must cover 24 teams at the start of that season. That number reduces to 20 teams after the high school season started (Midget/U16/U18/U19 teams play a shortened season due to high school

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– though we do have a Winter Midget team that runs until the end of the season, running concurrently with the high school season).

Q: How many teams practice at one time?

A: Usually two teams practice per each ice sheet but for Mites/U8, it can be more.

Depends on a couple of things: what kind of practice is it - Skills or Team practice? & what is the team level?

Mites/U8 can have up to 3-4 teams on the ice for a Skills practice and up to 3 teams for a team practice (dividing the ice into 3 sections). All other teams can have up to 2-3 teams on the ice for Skills and up to 2 teams for team practices (dividing the ice in half).

On occasion, a team will have a full ice practice but this is only because we did not have another team to share the ice with them. We do not have enough available ice to have full ice practices on a regular basis for our teams. Though there are many rinks around us, there are so many teams (town, club, etc) that need the ice, it is hard to find any available ice year-round. Head Coaches are notified when their team's have full ice practice in advance so they can plan for the full ice (vs. half ice).

Q: How often do teams practice each week?

A: Across the 2023-24 season, we averaged around 2 practices per team each week.

In the early part of the season (up to the high school hockey start), we can get teams up to 2-3 practices in a week depending on their game schedules. At least two practices per week but after high school starts, it drops to 1-2 practices a week.

We track the total practices for every team throughout the season to try to achieve some equity in the number of practices for each team. For that reason, there might be times in the season where a team has more or less practices to try to level out the team's totals.

And since the ice times are different, we use minutes as a metric to try to be equitable among the teams, not practices. There are some older teams want the longer sheets so they only practice one time during the weeknights. We will supplement that weeknight practice with some additional practices to make sure we end up with the same amount of minutes by the end of their season as the other teams who practice on shorter sheets more times a week. We track all of this as the season progresses to ensure fairness.

Q: How long are the practice times?

A: They vary by rink and by day. Check the Crossbar app for each practice.

Most of our practices are 50-minutes long with a 10-minute resurfacing time to refresh the ice (i.e., the Zamboni run). That fits into an hour ice time. However, we have some ice times that are full hour blocks + 10 more minutes for the Zamboni. And in 2024-25, we have three special ice times each week:

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Monday, Wednesday & Thursday's late ice sheet at Chase runs for 80 minutes. They start after 8pm so they are used primarily by the older teams (U14/BTM or U16/U18/U19/Midget).

Bottomline - Always check Crossbar for the start and stop times for your practices. Don't assume that the times are the same each day of the week at the same rink. If there is a change that makes for a very unusual start/stop time, we will make sure to notify the coaches so they can notify their teams.

Q: Why do the younger teams have the early practices and the older teams have the late ones?

A: It's traditionally how practices are scheduled: the younger players get the earlier times so they are not out so late.

When the VHL season starts, the Mites/U8 games are almost always early on the weekends too. The older teams (Midgets/U19 or Bantams/U14) will have the latest practice times (8pm or 9pm starts) because the younger players (up to Pee Wee/U12) shouldn't have consistent late practice times like 8pm or 9pm since they typically have early games. When scheduling practices, game times are taken into consideration so a team isn't getting off the ice at 10pm and then having a game early the next morning.

And remember the Midgets/U16/U18/U19 have short seasons that end by December which means that the Bantams/U14 teams will move into the late slots then. We have those ice times for the full season so they must be used for our teams to get practices each week.

As mentioned previously, there is not a lot of available ice in our area so we have to go with some ice times that are early & late. We try to rotate the teams in those slots to be fair but games and availability of the coaches also play into the rotation. We do track these things to watch for any major inequity. It might seem like your team is getting a lot of early or late practices (and that might be true) but the other teams are getting them too.

Q: Why do the older teams practice on Fridays when many players have other high school sport conflicts?

A: Friday nights are part of the available ice time we can get from our rinks. In fact, it is the weeknight when we have the MOST available ice times.

This is a tough one in general as there is no simple solution (see the last paragraph in the previous Q&A). The decision to prioritize other activities is always a personal one but last season we tried to rotate the teams that have the later practices on Fridays and we will continue to do that this season. This won't eliminate Friday night practices for the older teams but hopefully we will not have the same teams practicing at the latest times each week.

Q: Can a parent request a practice time change?

A: No, it can only be requested by the head coach of the team.

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We have around 350 players in the Comets travel programs for the 2024-25 season so we cannot adjust based on individual players. We do try to accommodate the head coach availability conflicts if possible since they are volunteering to coach the teams on their own free time.

Q: What other things can take up our practice times?

A: Things like makeup games, special skills sessions, emergency requests, mother nature (losing a day's worth of practices when a rink closes due to a snowstorm), etc.

Comets always come first but as mentioned above, we do get other requests for our ice for League makeup games, State Playdown games, special skills sessions from outside companies (arranged & paid for by the Comets), emergency requests from the high school coaches, etc. Where possible, we look for opportunities to trade ice times with those organizations (like the high school teams).

Q: Why don't we have the same teams practicing together?

A: We generally try to keep the same teams together for practices when possible but there are many things that can prevent us from doing this consistently (ex: Coach availability, tryouts, playoffs, scrimmages, picture days, etc).

A few things that can affect practice pairings and scheduling:

- Some head coaches have days of the week where they cannot practice so our practice pairings might be affected by this.
- Skills taught by external vendors can create a reason to change pairings to fit within the times that skills are being delivered.
- At the end of the season as we get into the playoffs and tryouts for the next season, the practice pairings and schedule will be different. As teams exit the playoffs, some of their practice times might be moved to teams that are still competing.
- Coaches can arrange scrimmages with other teams. They can also request to practice with other teams during the year.
- The picture days occur usually in December/January which run for a few weeks so teams might get different practice pairings or times to get all of our teams into a slot for pictures.
- Some coaches ask to practice with specific teams if possible.

We try not to put teams together that have large differences in the skill levels but sometimes it still happens as mentioned in the bullets above. When it does, we try to limit it as much as possible.

Q: Why do we have Halloween practices?

A: Because we forgot that kids like candy?...

No, we haven't but we have a contract for the entire season that was established when the town negotiated with FMC to run Chase and October 31st is just one of the days where we are required to purchase ice. We can't drop it off (we asked) so we schedule our practices as they normally fall.

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BUT this does not mean you have to attend practice on Halloween. It is only once a year and there is plenty of hockey practices in a season. In fact, some teams just end up cancelling their practices that night. If we can find other ways to use the ice, we will but forcing kids to miss out on candy is not one of them.

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GAMES SECTION

Q: Do we schedule the games too?

A: No, games are scheduled by the Leagues.

The Leagues will use some of our ice times each week (almost always on the weekend) which takes away from our available practice times throughout the year but they do all the scheduling of their games, not us.

Q: How does a coach cancel a game?

A: The methods to cancel games vary by the League but a more important question is SHOULD we cancel the game.

It costs us more money to cancel a game than play it (see next Q&A below) so we should only cancel games as a last resort. Talk to the Director of Coaches, Director of Girls Hockey/MYCGL Liaison, VHL Liaison or reach out to the Scheduling Team for questions/help before you cancel a game.

If you have a legit reason to cancel it, then we can make sure you know how to cancel the games properly following the league processes. Please do not reach out to the league directly without talking to one of the Comets Board team listed above.

Q: Do we pay for games we cancel?

A: Yes, we take a major hit for any game we cancel. The team that cancels pays for the full ice time vs. half of the ice which is split with our opponent. AND then if we make up the game, we pay for the makeup game ice (see next Q&A below).

Reasons for cancellations can vary but things we can control should be done. For example, coaches will try to call-up players from lower level teams if we are shorthanded. And they might have their Assistant Coaches do the games if the Head Coach is not available.

Q: Is a cancelled game a forfeit?

A: Depends on the league and circumstance but if we cancel a game, it generally goes on the league site as a forfeit.

If we play the makeup and report the final score back to the league, they usually will update the forfeit with the actual results.

Q: Why are the cancelled games still showing up on our schedule?

A: This is something we cannot control. It has to do with the game schedule as it is fed into Crossbar. Different leagues have different processes so some leagues will remove the cancelled game and others will not.

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For example, the VHL does not always remove a cancelled game. It will mark a game as a ‘forfeit’ on their website for whichever team takes the loss but it may still show up as an active game for both teams. And if you delete it in Crossbar, it will just come back again once the game schedule syncs up. You can’t even edit the game info because the sync from the league will overwrite it. You must make sure that the parents & team knows that the game is cancelled.

Q: Who schedules makeup games?

A: It depends on the reason the game was canceled.

If the Comets were the team that caused the game to be game to be cancelled, then it is the responsibility of the coach of the Comets team to reschedule it working with us (details below).

Note: The Leagues do not re-schedule the games UNLESS they are the ones who cancel or postpone them (like for a snow emergency).

Q: How to schedule a makeup game?

A: Either ask another coach or reach out to us for guidance on how to do this properly.

Comets coaches should contact the coach of the opposing team when a game is going to be cancelled as a courtesy. The coaches can also decide if they want to reschedule the game. If a team is cancelling, it is usually a forfeit, but the game result can be replaced if a makeup game is played.

If the Comets team is hosting the makeup game, contact us to get some ice times where the game can potentially be held at one of our rinks.

These times will be practices that will likely already be scheduled with other Comets teams. Those coaches will be notified if their time is going to be used for a makeup game. Sometimes coaches arranging the makeup game will give up one of their own practice times to the Comets team that is losing their ice/practice time to the makeup game.

Note - The coach that arranges the ice time should also arrange to get a timekeeper and referees. We will provide contact information if the makeup game is at one of our rinks as it will be our head coach’s responsibility to secure the refs & timekeeper, as well as pay them.

Q: Do Mites/U8 have makeup games?

A: No.

All Mites/U8 games are played as half-ice games in the VHL. We do not give up a full ice sheet for a half-ice makeup game. Our rinks also do not have the hard dividers required for half-ice games.

Q: Can teams have scrimmages?

A: Yes, but they must be arranged by the head coach.

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Comets teams can scrimmage another Comets team in a 2-team practice. If the coaches want to set that up outside of their normal schedule, they just need to contact us.

If a team wants to schedule a scrimmage with an external team, that can be done like a makeup game but unlike those makeup games, a scrimmage can be truncated to fit into the 50-minute ice time and does not require a timekeeper or referees. As mentioned above, coaches arranging the scrimmage can give up one of their other practice times to the Comets team that is losing their ice/practice time for it.

Q: What is the State Tournament Playdown games?

A: In 2021-22, the State Tournament required that we schedule playdown games between other “Large” programs in our district during our practice times at each team’s local rink. This happened last season so we expect the same for the 2023-24 season.

The State Tournament is played each season pitting teams from town programs across the state against each other. To qualify for the Tournament, there are playdown games required for larger districts. Natick is in District 8 and is one of the larger teams (usually along with Framingham and sometimes another program). Since we are in the same district, there can be only one “Large” team representative for the Tournament.

This requires that “Large” programs play a ‘playdown game’ to determine who goes to the State Tournament. And this must happen at all team levels and is split up between the boys & girls’ programs too. It takes around 15+ games to get this accomplished before the Tournament began.

We also have to check if there might be a third Large program (ex: Nashoba’s U14 team for the last two years) in our district in case they might need to be involved. It changes year-to-year based on the amount of players they have at each level.

Honestly it’s as painful as it sounds.

Q: Why do we have so few home games at Chase?

A: We only allocate some of our weekend hours at Chase for the leagues to use for games. Out of the 18 hours of weekend ice at Chase, about 7-8 hours are for games.

We have 24 teams in 2024-25. If you remove the Mites/U8 teams (they do half-ice games and Chase does not have the walls for half-ice games), it drops to 18 teams that could have games at Chase. So you only have enough ice for a third of our travel teams for a home game each weekend.

As mentioned above, the leagues schedule their games and they utilize many rinks to do this. There is no guarantee that Chase ice will be used for our team games too. Lastly, there are 3 leagues we allocate some of our ice at Chase for games so we have to split it up among those leagues too. Fortunately we are reimbursed for most of those games by the leagues.