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HEADLINE: A team of equal billing

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Etobicoke's Humber Valley Sharks have no captain, no assistants and everyone on the hockey team gets an equal amount of ice time - even the goalies.

There are no power play or penalty killing units. If it's your time to play, you're on.

Sound Utopian?

Perhaps, but the squad of 11-year-old boys must be doing something right because the players are happy, the parents aren't complaining and the team is one of the best in the GTA.

"We just roll our lines, roll our team, and goalies rotate every other game," explains Stu Fletcher, who is in his first season as the team's head coach. "It's all fun stuff."

Fun and successful. The Sharks have only lost one regular season game - yes, one - in the last three years. The team is vying for its second consecutive Greater Toronto Hockey League city championship, battling North Toronto in the final. Last night they shut out North Toronto 2-0 to take the series lead. In the last four years the Sharks have won more than 20 tournaments, including back-to-back North American Silver Stick championships and last year's Ontario championships at the atom level.

Fletcher believes the team's "family-oriented" approach is a key ingredient of its success.

"I don't make changes, we don't crunch players or take away ice time. There are certain players that are always going to be better, but if their turn (to play) isn't up we don't worry about it."

The issue of playing time is often a touchy one in minor hockey. Players can be afraid of ending up on the bench for an extended time if they mess up a pass. Parents sometimes take out their frustrations on the coach if that happens - or if they think lesser players are getting too much ice time relative to their child.

"I've never once had a parent complain to me, ever," says Fletcher. "It's been the most pleasurable thing as a coach I've ever experienced. I've been in other environments where it's like, 'How come my kid didn't play?'"

The core of the 16-player minor peewee AA Sharks squad has been together since minor novice four years ago. Fletcher says a number of the Sharks are good enough to play AAA but elected to stay in AA for one last season together. Next year most will be moving up.

During games the team's bench is a beehive of activity. At the end of each shift it's rare to see a player sitting down.

"I tell my players it's like a 35-second all out sprint. We have real short shifts," says Fletcher, who believes giving every kid a chance on penalty killing and power plays builds confidence.

Parents like Bernie Tatangelo, whose son Micheal, plays centre for the Sharks, consider the egalitarian approach a breath of fresh air.

"Because there is no captain there's no feeling that any player has special status and all the boys are treated fairly. They roll the lines so whoever is playing at that time plays on the power play. It's a very unselfish team," Tatangelo says.

Kerry McGrath, whose son Matt plays left wing, says when players aren't preoccupied about their performance or what their coach might think they focus better.

"They don't have to worry about keeping track of the score or who is captain or assistant and so forth. They're not thinking about that, so they're

just in
the moment, in the play.

"The boys know who scores goals. They keep that in their heads, but the emphasis isn't on that here."

The players are as happy as the parents.

"If you make a mistake you just forget about it and keep playing," says winger Allan Neal.

Adds winger Landon Fletcher: "It's fun because, like, everybody has an equal amount of (ice) time. ... We don't care if we lose or win."

But don't expect a lot of teams to copy the Sharks.

GTHL president John Gardner, for instance, calls the Sharks' approach "unusual."

"If that's the philosophy they're happy with, we certainly don't have any problem with it. Do we recommend other teams do it? No. The strong majority of teams go with C's and A's."

Hockey Canada regulations don't require that teams have a captain and two alternates, but they're the ones designated to speak to referees during games. With the Sharks, Fletcher talks to the referees, if need be.

The Sharks' program was the brainchild of Mike McCarron, 45, who coached the team for three seasons and is president and owner of the St. Michael's Buzzers, an OHA junior A team.

When he took over the Sharks in 2002 he met with parents and told them about his plan. They were totally onside.

"You can win at any expense, or win by developing players. I believe in winning by developing players."