



## Development or Recreational

Youth athletics in the United States have trouble deciding what the long term goal is for the players. All of the NGOs claim they want to develop players and provide them with opportunities to play at the highest level they can achieve. In ice hockey the developmental models that have been proven over many years with experts from many fields of child development and sport development however they are largely ignored in favor of our current system of game based instant gratification and recognition opportunities. Let's face it, games are more fun to watch than practices and youth hockey has evolved into a family entertainment program.

I have written several times about the proper way to develop players with age appropriate opportunities for the youngsters to participate and develop on a track that is best for them long term. In one sentence it can be summed up as "far fewer games and many more training/practice/unsupervised sessions at the younger ages and more games as the players reach their mid to late teens." There is no argument in the current body of data and research that disagrees with this summary. Yet we persist in operating our programs in direct conflict with what is best for the players who happen to be our own children.

Several years ago I was discussing this situation with the program director of a very large hockey program in Minnesota and wondering why we had so much trouble with the coaches as they were routinely scheduling scrimmage games on their practice ice and reluctantly attended sessions to help them learn how to better teach skills. His response to me was " *the coaches are not interested in player development; they are only interested in winning as many games as possible, especially at the B level*". I replied that many of the B level players will eventually join the A players when they reach high school and development of all the players was important. He restated his opinion that " *they have no interest in the high school program and winning games was the primary objective*". One of our B level pee wee coaches told me just three years ago with a straight face that " *our players have all the skills they need except that they do not know how to win.*" In the ensuing years we have seen bantam team schedules approach the 80-90 game and pee wees in the 60-70 game range. Then when the season is over in early to mid March everybody takes a shallow breath and the spring game leagues commence in the for-profit leagues until early May. July is reserved for hockey camps at the local high school program and mid August resumes the pre-season leagues that then dovetail into the regular season in early October. It is quite common for a pee wee or bantam age player to

log in over 120 games per year. If playing games made players better our players would dominate all of the college and professional leagues.

If our goal is to develop skilled creative players and well rounded athletes, which we say it is, then why do we persist in a failing model? Why do we ignore all of the research and knowledge regarding the development of young people? It is hard to comprehend.

In Minnesota we have travel programs. Every youngster must play on an A, B or C travel team. There are no other choices. We are organized around a community based model that has served us well for the past 50 years and will serve us well for the next several decades. However in our race to win meaningless titles we have lost one important program loosely defined as recreational hockey and we continue to shortchange our more talented players. The winter season is essentially a five month recreational program focused on leagues, invitational tournaments, and season ending play offs towards state titles.

Is there a better way to structure what we do? In terms of developing better skilled and creative players the answer is yes. Are we willing to offer recreational only programs and elite development programs to those players who fit each category? So far the answer is no.

Should we offer recreational programs with only one or two sessions a week? Should we offer some type of alternative programs for the top players? Maybe it does not matter since less than 1% of our players move on to play Division 1 college hockey and far fewer to the professional leagues. Maybe all of this talk about player development is simply like teaching a pig to sing (no offense intended to the pig).

I would be interested in hearing your opinions on these ideas.

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July 2008