



How Much is Enough or too Much?

As we are quickly approaching a new season the question of how much ice time is enough is one that will be debated and argued at hockey board meetings, in the stands at games and at district board meetings. Everybody, including The Minnesota Hockey Board of Directors has an opinion and all feel they are right. There is really no right answer because the issues are complex for the following reasons.

- 1) Youth Hockey in Minnesota is a recreational activity that often includes the entire family as game spectators not a development program. This leads to far more games than the recommended levels for development and far too few training/practice sessions.
- 2) There is a prevailing belief that more games is better for development. This is not true but still remains a widely held and argued position.
- 3) The board of Directors at Minnesota Hockey believes that the one size fits all (travel hockey) is the only program we need in Minnesota. We continue to ignore all of the research and real world results that other countries have completed and shared. There are clearly a variety of interest levels in our membership that are not being addressed, including the elite level committed players and the true recreational players.
- 4) Travel Hockey requires varied time commitments as determined by individual team coaches. Many Squirt teams skate 6 or 7 days a week for 5 months each winter. Some bantam teams have only 2 days off all winter.
- 5) Parents believe that if they object to “24/7” hockey their child will get side tracked and fall behind. So the “Arms Race” continues year after year.
- 6) As an organization many in Minnesota Hockey believe that way too much time is spent on the upper end players and not enough time, energy and development opportunities are provided to C and B level players. In reality, as an organization, Minnesota Hockey

spends the same amount of time and energy on all players in the winter. Minnesota Hockey also does not offer any development programs in the off season for any players under 15 years old. The Advanced 15 program is a USA Hockey Select/Minnesota Hockey program that culminates after a week long camp for 102 players in identifying 20-25 players to advance to the USA Hockey National 15 Festival.

With all of the competing opinions and anxieties among parents it is no wonder that we have escalating game counts into the 60s for pee wees and the 80 plus for many bantam programs. On the other hand, with our current system of “travel only” hockey it really is a natural outcome. Since only 10% of the boys in each age class will play on their high school team in the medium and large programs there is not harm in a game oriented format in the youth programs because the majority of our players have quit by age 16.

The players that are not being served in the current model are the true recreational players who only want to play a couple times a week and do not need or want four out of town tournaments each winter. We used to have “house leagues” which then became C leagues which soon become full travel teams. We lose players as a result.

The other group that is underserved is the upper end players who are committed to developing into top end athletes. This is difficult because kids change as they grow but currently we do not offer proven sound development opportunities to this group.

Perhaps Minnesota Hockey should address the underserved players but change is difficult to mandate. Effective change can only be driven at the local level by parents and local board members who have the vision and welfare of all the players in mind to start discussing how we can better meet the needs of all players.

A great example of this is the Armstrong/Cooper association moving to a modified mite program that has won over many area programs and now is spreading across the state. They had the courage to rethink what the program should look for kids that age and then they proceeded to implement it. Many were skeptical in the first year but the results speak for them self.

What can your program do to meet the many needs in your community? Recreational hockey programs (2 nights a week) will increase registration numbers. How about 3-4 days a week for squirts to prevent burnout (player and parent)? Maybe pee wees max at 5 days and bantams at 6 days? When I coached bantams our team rule was that the kids had to be home by dinner two school nights a week. That made decisions pretty easy and did not hurt the future prospects of the players.

Unfortunately there are no easy answers to the current situation and likely not much agreement on the topics. From the email I receive on a regular basis there is quite a bit of frustration on the part of many parents mostly centered on the more,more more syndrome.

I would encourage each association to look at these issues and start taking some steps towards meeting the needs of their own players and families. Parents need to communicate with their local youth hockey board and take action locally and not rely on the state board to take action. We are talking about your kids and what is best for them.

Comments and suggestions can be directed to halt@minnesotahockey.org

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