



Learning to Love or Hate the Game

Hockey can be the greatest game on earth and those of us with passion for the game would argue late into the night with anybody who disagreed. Parents and coaches are very passionate and ambitious when it comes to hockey. There are however many who are not yet as passionate as the adults; the players. In our haste to develop future hockey scholarship children we forgot to let them develop a passion for the game. It is time now at the beginning of the season to take a hard look at this important issue.

As adults those of us who played hockey from a young age know the excitement of the games and the fun we had with our friends while growing up and playing hockey. We played with our teams a few times a week and played rink rat hockey with our friends. We loved to play and still do. Most rinks in the state are busy after 10:00 pm with the "old timers" who still love to play. But shame on us for assuming our children share our passion and love for the game without giving them the same opportunities to learn about the game and to become passionate.

I recently heard from a father of an 8 year old girl who is starting to play hockey this year. He was excited that she wanted to play but when he found out that the team skated 4 times a week he was a bit dismayed. He told me "she doesn't do anything four times a week". He went on to say that several of her classmates who played hockey last year as 7 year olds were quitting because of the time commitment not to mention the cost.

Another recent conversation with a friend that recently returned to Minnesota from a six year stint overseas was also quite revealing. His granddaughter is beginning to play hockey and having coached in past years he volunteered to help out. He was amazed that mite teams had full ice practice and only one team of 12 skaters on the ice. There was no plan, no curriculum for skill development, and no real sense of what to do with the kids. He has volunteered to organize the program and make it work for the kids.

An email last month asked that Minnesota Hockey address the issue of "short benches" at the mite and squirt levels. The author claims it is a problem in his program and he is concerned about the impact on the kids as the adults seek to win more games.

Often I am told by parents of players on B teams they are so thankful their child did not make the A team, especially at Bantams. They cite undue pressure to win (short benches),

late night practices and games, overly ambitious parents and coaches, and excessive cost as negatives.

When in this process of escalating ice time commitments, travel, tournaments, and thousands of dollars spent is a child supposed to learn to love the game? After all the game is supposed to be for them but without passion they will never reach their full potential.

Today most children think that hockey involves adults yelling at them most of the time and trying to “coach” them to do better and their parents offering helpful advice from the stands during games like “skate” or “shoot”. The kids “love the new jerseys, warm up suits, hats, personalized team equipment bags and stick bags, \$150 sweatshirts with their names in 8 inch double tackle twill that match their \$120 team jackets with their name and number for all to see. These are all nice but they have nothing to do with playing hockey.

This fall two high profile Canadian players who are destined for the NHL quit playing at ages 19 and 20. One because he had been injured the previous season and learned that there was more to life than hockey. The other quit stating that “There has been too much pressure for too long. It is not fun any longer”. Both shocked the hockey world. I know several former players that I coached years ago and more recently from my son’s youth teams that chose to leave the game for the same reasons. Too much time commitment at early ages chases players out of the game.

Minnesota Hockey only offers competitive hockey programs and leaves program design in the hands of the local associations and districts. It really is up to the parents in each association to insure that their program fits what is best for kids at each age level. Here are some ideas that might be useful for each association to consider.

8 and Under: limit organized events to 3 times a week- offer one time a week for open hockey for those who want the extra session. Do not subsidize the costs. Find ways to make it affordable with multiple teams on ice, outside ice, and less expensive equipment.

Squirts/U10: limit formal practices and games to 4 days a week. Add one unstructured session for the kids to play pond hockey. Game limit of 35.

Pee wees/U12: Limit formal practices and games to 5 times per week. Make one or two practices a month “optional” Game Limit of 45.

Bantam/U14: Maximum 6 days a week. Kids home for dinner two school nights a week (not out late at the rink). Two or three optional attendance practices a month. Players run practice once a month. Limit tournaments to four. Game limit of 55.

Recreational teams: Offer the opportunity for kids to play hockey a couple times a week so they can do other things also. Maybe two shorter seasons during the winter and for larger associations in house teams.

The issue at stake is really the future of the game in Minnesota. If we do not give our children a chance to develop a love for the game on their terms many of them will simply

hate the game and quit at an early age. It happens every day. Youth sports has spiraled into a huge industry at the expense of kids youth and parents pocket books. The only way to reclaim their childhood and let them love the game is to set boundaries and remember that they are just kids.

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October 2008