

The St. Jude Off-Ice experience as it exists today is the culmination of effort & kindnesses of a whole host of individuals working collectively for the betterment of our kids.

During the 2007/08 season, I had occasion to witness several Michigan teams during a mid season tournament. Specifically the Griffins, Bell Tire, & Honey Baked. These kids were the same age as our kids, drank the same water from Lake Michigan, but were to a man at least fifteen rungs above our athletes. Granted the two latter teams were sponsored teams similar to AAA in Illinois but I couldn't get over the degree of precision & endurance they displayed. During our stay, I engaged several of the respective coaches in conversation with the primary question being "what was the key to their success?". Without exception, the one primary common denominator was off ice conditioning. In addition, they were on the ice six to seven days a week & could afford the ice bills. In a nut shell, I was advised that off ice conditioning could be accomplished without a huge expenditure & is the fundamental basis for the athletic demands required in hockey.

In returning to Chicago, I began to take note of the larger clubs in NIHL & noticed almost every one of them had some sort of an off-ice program to augment the practice sessions. In some venues, the kids had an hour of off-ice before every practice!

Upon coming to St. Jude with a mite & a bantam during the 2008/09 season I realized no such program existed at this club. Due to the lateness of the season & the logistical nightmare necessary to start a club-wide program, the suggestion was deferred for that season. A general "team based" program was attempted during the tiering rounds but upon the onset of inclement weather & early darkness, the outdoor venue fizzled. An attempt to secure an inside venue was hampered by a number of issues, but we kept trying.

During the Spring of 2009, Mt. Carmel High School secured a lease at the current facility & began to train there. They built a lot of the equipment and got the ball rolling. With the onset of Summer, St. Jude ran a "Summer Blast" conditioning camp that lasted for two weeks. Along with utilizing the party room inside the rink for the mites, a deal was struck with Mt. Carmel to use the current facility & their equipment as needed. After the close of the camp, St. Jude entered into negotiations with Mt. Carmel & the building owner in the hopes of building upon the potential the facility next door had to offer in both convenience and training space. An agreement was ultimately achieved and the St. Jude / Mt. Carmel co-op was founded. Subsequent to this agreement, a substantial amount of time, effort, and equipment, not to mention money was put into the facility by both entities to make it habitable, comfortable, and efficient. The community was scoured for any and every donation from soap dispensers to astro -turf, to exercise equipment, to carpeting, lockers, light bulbs, paint, etc. We needed everything (and still could use more).

St. Jude provided materials & Mt. Carmel Father's Club provided trade skills. Working together, we continue to build and expand upon what initially was a dark and humble environment. We have come a million miles since it's inception and continue to boldly forge ahead to make this facet of our club a viable, well designed , maintained, and managed asset striving to "level the playing field" and provide our athletes one more tool to become the best they can be.

Coach Don McGrath