



Chill Out and Have Fun

By Hal Tearse, Minnesota Hockey Head Coach

Mite hockey is about having fun, no more and no less. Ages 5-9 years old is hopefully when the youngsters develop basic skills and develop a love for the game. In recent weeks I have heard several stories of well meaning mite coaches and program administrators that have lost site of perhaps the most important aspect of the game, Having Fun.

I will paraphrase a few of these comments as these individuals tell the story better than I can.

“I had my boy sign up for mite hockey at age 8. He had just started skating. I was told that because of his age and size he would catch on quickly, so we will put him in our top group. I requested that he be put into the lowest group so that he could learn to skate first. My request was ignored by the “experts in our program”. My sons first year was very demeaning as he could not skate anywhere nearly as well as the other kids in his group. This parent has an extensive background as a player at the college level and referee for many years yet his own experience was ignored when it came to his son.

This note arrived in my email last week. “My son has played hockey for three years. Last year he did not have much fun as all we did in our association most of the season was skate. There was very little puck handling and instead of playing cross ice games we played half ice with 10 players per side. There was still little opportunity for most kids to handle the puck. In many associations they are getting the message of 3-1 practice to game ratios but at least in our association the practices were not fun. My son is now 9 and feels that he wants to quit. The pressure to perform is already affecting him and he has not enjoyed the practice sessions. “

While these comments are only part of the story there are a couple common issues.

- 1) Mite hockey sessions need to include some basic skill instruction and then plenty of fun activities in which to practice those new skills.
- 2) Players need to be grouped by ability not age, grade or other factor. Yes they will learn fast and some faster than others depending on where they are in their physical development. As they improve players can be regrouped by ability.
- 3) The coaches/instructors need to be aware that when the players are getting bored it is time to throw away the practice plan and play some 3 on 3 cross ice and have fun. Usually when the kids are lying prone on the ice it is a good sign that they are bored. Take immediate action and yell “Scrimmage”. Then proceed to set up several cross ice games.

Mite hockey should not be training camp and mite hockey players need to be kids. Off ice training programs, off season leagues, and specialty skills camps will not accomplish



much in the long run. Yes, they may advance some kids somewhat compared to the other kids but eventually it all equalizes as the players mature.

The research in Dr. Smoll's book, *Children and Youth in Sport*, concludes in chapter six (*At What Age Are Children Ready to Compete?*, by Michael W. Passer) "The issue of readiness is complicated by the differences that exist in the rate of children's psychological development and in the kinds of competitive sports environment to which they are exposed. Nevertheless, I recommend that children younger than 7 or 8 be discouraged from participating in organized youth sports. By this age most children have a general motivational readiness for competition and cognitive abilities sufficient for a basic understanding of the competition process. Even so, the competitive emphasis of sport should be phased in gradually as children get older and it is essential that coaches and parents of youth sport participants-especially 7-9 year olds- be made aware of the ways in which children cognitive capacities differ from those of adults. This educational goal should be the key component of coach and parent training programs."

Since there is little evidence that highly structured programs for mite age children have any correlation to the eventual competency of mature athletes, it makes sense to have programs that focus primarily on having fun. That does not mean that basic skills like stopping, starting, and turning should not be taught but only that they be taught in a fashion that is really fun for the kids. Sort of like they are learning while they are playing some sort of activity.

Minnesota Hockey to the rescue! Pat Westrum, former collegiate all star and coaching Director for Dist 6 and Apple Valley Hockey Association, has provided us with a great video called "Fun Games on Ice". It has several non traditional activities that you can use with the 9 and under group. Once you see and experience these games your own imagination will take over and you can create games of your own. The best part is that the kids will love coming to the rink and so will you! The video is available only from your District Coach in Chief. He will have several copies for each hockey association in his district. To locate your District Coach in Chief look at www.minnesotahockey.org and click on coaches and then District Coaching Personnel. We will be distributing free of charge several thousand copies of this DVD. It will also include two presentations for coaches who want to teach skating, one on small area games, and a new feature entitled "If it is going to be, it is up to me".

As we begin a new season let's all work hard to make sure our youngest skaters, the future of this great game, learn to love it as much as we do. See you at the rink.

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