

# Navigating the Frozen Waters

## Tier I AAA level offers competitive play and exposure

**Editor's Note:** The following article is the fifth installment of our "Navigating the Frozen Waters" educational series aimed at helping both new and veteran players and parents understand the different levels and pathways of hockey available in Michigan and across the United States. Michigan Hockey will explore high school and other levels of youth hockey in future issues.

We invite you to share your questions and concerns regarding Navigating the Waters by e-mailing us at: [mh@michiganhockeyonline.com](mailto:mh@michiganhockeyonline.com).

BY TIM WILSON

Sorting through the many levels of youth hockey can be confusing – and even more so for a player or parent that doesn't have a background in the sport.

Once a child learns to skate a number of options become available regarding both where to play and at what level. There are "House" teams, and also "Travel" teams at the A, AA or AAA level. With each level the time commitment, cost and travel can vary greatly.

For experienced, skilled and serious players, often the choice is to play AAA ("Triple A" and called Tier I by USA Hockey), the highest level available at the squirt through midget levels. Go through any college or pro roster and chances are that a lot of those players competed at the AAA level at some point in their career.

"There's no set way to make it to college or the NHL," said Little Caesars' director of amateur hockey and Tier I midget major (Under 18) boys head coach Bill Ciraulo. "But playing AAA means you're playing against great competition every day."

Little Caesar's, along with Belle Tire, Compuware, Honeybaked and Victory Honda, are the five Detroit area organizations in the Tier I Elite Hockey League, regarded as one of the best amateur hockey leagues in the United States.

The TOEHL includes the five Detroit area teams along with four from Chicago and one from Cleveland from the Squirt Major through Bantam Major Divisions. Squirt Minor is made up the Detroit teams along with the Cleveland Barons. At the Midget Under 16 level there are four divisions: Chicago, Detroit, Mid-Am and West. The Midget Under 18 level includes these four divisions as well as the East division. Each division includes five teams.

"Each member organization of the TOEHL has the bandwidth of teams from Squirt Major to Midget Major and includes a footprint of play at both the midget levels on a national basis," said Compuware Director of Hockey, Randy Paquette.

At the Midget Major level, TOEHL teams play regular season games within the division and meet the other divisions throughout the year at various

showcases. Each division plays five showcases at home and five away allowing all teams to play each other during the season, according to TOEHL commissioner Larry Johnson. The league makes an effort to plan showcases around holiday weekends in order to minimize the amount of school players miss, he said.

"Its kids that have talent and desire that move on to AAA," said Johnson. "Some kids thrive on it because they have to play better and some don't because they aren't the star player anymore."

Johnson believes that playing AAA is a good way for talented players to develop because "you don't want to be the best kid on the ice in every game."

"The biggest reason to play AAA at the Midget Major level is exposure," said Ciraulo. "It's the highest level you can play in the best league in the United States. At a local game we might get 15 scouts and at a showcase we might have more than 100. Every kid from last year's team (Little Caesar's U18) went to junior this season and about 80 percent of our players end up at the Division I college level."

Below the midget level, there are plenty of reasons to play AAA as well according to Paquette.

"Kids that develop their skills to a higher level have the desire to compete and challenge others with similar skills," he said. "That's not to say that all players aspire to AAA or that all AAA kids are the very best players, but the skill level and their will to compete seem to go hand in hand."

Many of the Detroit area midget teams attract players from across the country that move in order to further their development. This season's Little Caesar's 18U team has seven out of state players, according to Ciraulo.

"We usually have local kids on the team, but this year out of 100 at tryouts, 55 were from out of state. The economy is causing fewer Michigan kids to try out."

Victory Honda 16U head coach Tony Maci has also seen fewer kids vying for a spot on his team due to the economy, instead seeing some players opt for AA or high school hockey. While AA hockey can often cost as much as AAA, AAA programs have worked to lessen expenses through fundraisers and reduced travel.

"Teams are trying to stay closer to home for tournaments because of the cost," said Maci.

Although costs can vary from team to team, a AAA parent is likely to spend somewhere in the area of \$4,000 to \$6,000 per season for ice time and travel. "Most teams plan fundraisers that can reduce costs either individually or as a team," said Paquette. "We have teams that are greatly able to reduce costs depending on how the parents can pull together and organize events that draw outside donations. Many are able to reduce their ice bill by as much as 50%, which is a huge benefit to all families at this time at any level."

Travel is hard enough for teams in the more populated areas of the state but it's even more difficult when you are located

in Marquette in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where 100 miles separates you from your nearest competitor.

As a longtime staple in Midget Major AAA hockey, the Marquette Electricians continue to produce high-level players by competing in two circuits, the Northern Lakes Hockey League and the North American Prospects Hockey League.

The NLHL includes six members with teams based in Sault St. Marie, Houghton and Lansing, Faribault (Minnesota) and Thunder Bay, Ontario in addition to Marquette. Each team plays a 20-game schedule within the league.

The NAPHL is made up of 24 organizations from across the country and includes 20 teams at the Midget Major level (18 and Under) and 14 teams at the Midget Minor level (16 and Under). Michigan organizations in the NAPHL include the Electricians, Lansing Capitals and Kalamazoo-based S2. The Detroit Falcons and Motor City Metal Jackets are in the 16 and Under AAA division.

The NAPHL plays five USA Hockey-sanctioned showcase events throughout the year, including one coming up at the Ann Arbor Ice Cube, January 15-18, 2010.

"For us it's more expensive to play in both leagues, but with our geographic location it's the only option we have," said Tim McIntosh, who sits on the Board of Directors for the Electricians. "But the total cost to play here is still probably one of the least expensive in the country at \$4,500. That includes ice, hotels, transportation and coach's fees. The only thing it doesn't include is the cost of the flight to San Jose for one of the showcases."

Because of the extensive travel involved, Marquette provides the team with their own bus.

The Electricians draw most of their roster from the Upper Peninsula but often have a player or two from out of state or downstate Michigan that move to Marquette to join the organization. In those cases, the team has a billeting system set up similar to junior hockey where the player stays with a local family at a cost of around \$300 per month.

In Marquette, as with most AAA teams, tryouts are held in the spring with the team picked late in the spring or early summer.

Contrary to what some parents and players may think, teams are not always predetermined and the tryouts do offer outside kids a chance at the next level, according to Victory Honda's Maci.

"If a player is good enough he'll make the team. We're looking for the best of the best," he said. "My first year I had five kids return from the previous team, the following year I had three kids and this year I had three kids return. There is a high amount of turnover."

And while AAA isn't going to be an option for every young player, Johnson encourages anyone that is considering it to come out and watch a game and see if they think they can play at the AAA level.

"Basically the whole program is to improve the kids and move them to the next level," he said. "Our goal is to get you to college to play hockey and enjoy it and get an education."

