

'Cross-Ice Program' Works Well In Michigan

by John Raffel

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Kentwood has been known for many years to be the hockey hotbed of the Grand Rapids area in Michigan. And local hockey promoters are continually taking steps to upgrade the Kentwood hockey program on various levels.

Kentwood Hockey and Skating Association president Steve Stapleton is especially excited with a new "cross-ice program," which the KHSA will be starting next year.

"I believe we're the only association in west Michigan which will do it the way USA Hockey is promoting it," Stapleton said. "It will be set up for mini-mites and mite kids, eight and under. There's about eight to 10 kids per team.

"It gives them more ice time and a chance to work on more skills. The kids will go up and down the ice from one end to the other and the other kids will follow them. You have a child four to six years old skating the same length as a professional with the same puck and same net.

"Research shows the average kid touches the puck 30 seconds a game. In the cross-ice program, we're hoping to have them handle the puck even more. We'll still have learn-to-play programs. Materials from USA Hockey have been very helpful. We have all the resources and volunteers in place. We need to implement and maintain it. We will hope to have from 40 to 60 kids. We'd be very happy with that."

John Alonso, commissioner of the hockey association, said the cross-ice program will allow three games to take place on the same ice surface.

"Kids 8 and under are a little too young to cover the whole rink," Alonso said. "If you make three ice surfaces, you cut it by two thirds.

"Five years old is awfully young to have a child on a full-ice program. It doesn't give you much time to teach the game to the child."

The cross-ice program, Alonso said, seems to be working effectively.

"We've gotten some good response from people we have talked with," he said. "It's going to allow the kids to play on small surfaces and learn skills so they will gain more confidence.

"It's a great program. It will develop hockey players and let them have more fun at the same time."

The East Kentwood High School hockey program has been recognized as being among the best in west Michigan over the years and long-time coach Ron Baum attributes some of that success to his local junior hockey association.

"Our association does a good job in creating opportunities," Baum said. "We're probably one of the most inexpensive associations in terms of registration fees. We do a good job in getting the kids started in the sport."

The 1,200-seat Kentwood Ice Arena presents the junior association with a unique home. It was built in 1984 by the association and then eventually taken over by the school district.

"This provides kids in Kentwood a chance to skate in a local rink at a very inexpensive price compared to other programs in the state," Baum said.

"What the district wants to do, since we're a school and we're not trying to make money, is make just enough to support ourselves," said arena manager Brett Baker. "We're one of the most inexpensive rinks around."

"It's hard to tell you all the advantages we've had with our school's ice arena because we've taken most of those for granted," Stapleton said. "It's so convenient that other teams may not have the opportunity to practice as much as our teams do. We're able to accommodate a lot more practice time and keep the ice costs down."

A few other Grand Rapids area school districts' hockey programs also call the Kentwood rink home.

"The cost for ice is \$155 an hour," Stapleton said. "Anywhere else, it costs about \$200 an hour. The arena is a not-for profit entity since it's owned by the school district. If you want to play hockey, it's an expensive sport but it would be even more expensive if we didn't have a rink like this."

And the association takes advantage of the facility to the tune of four hours a night for practice and practically all available hours on Saturday and Sunday.

"Until recently, our main hockey association did not focus on developing upper-level talent, so players with skills in our program spent several years here and would then leave for Double-A and Triple-A," Baum said. "Most of those would then come back and try out for the high school varsity. The objective of most of the kids in our (junior) programs is to play for the high school varsity team."

Baum and his assistant coach Todd Bell have taken over the responsibility of developing a higher level travel program to work with the Kentwood hockey program.

"That's not only to enhance the program," Baum said, "but to also allow those players in Kentwood to stay here and not to play on some other Double-A and Triple-A travel team in order to advance their skills. We're trying to keep them all here. We need to offer them high-quality coaching. We want to get them playing in the same systems the varsity team uses."

"For our first year, it's been very successful and we have plans for it to be even better next year. I'm very excited over its potential. The program will continue to build. We've been fortunate to be competitive here in at East Kentwood for many years. We're trying to keep Kentwood kids playing here in Kentwood instead of leaving our association and going all over the place to get travel hockey experience."

The association presently has 320 youngsters playing from ages 3 up to the high school junior varsity-midget level.

"That's compared to 217 last year," Stapleton said. "I think that is attributed to the great job Ron and Todd are doing through the travel program. It brought a lot of travel team players back to our program."

The development of Kentwood's hockey program, from mini-mites through high school level, is very important for Baum, who is coaching his 30th season at East Kentwood.

The veteran high school hockey coach entered this year having won one state title during his three decades at Kentwood plus and two runner-up finishes, 17 O-K Conference titles and 20 regional crowns, plus 10 trips to the Final Four state tournament.

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