

## Kansas City Stars Hockey Director Spring 2014 Update

To: KC Stars House and Travel Families

From: Tom Tilley, Hockey Director

The 2013-14 hockey Season has ended and as the Stars spring hockey season starts I wanted to reach out to our families to re-cap the past season, share some information on what we have planned for the summer and next fall. I also want to thank a few people who have been instrumental in the success of our organization and to make a few announcements.

Thank you to all coaches, team managers and other volunteers who made the 2013-14 Stars season possible. Without these volunteers the Kansas City Stars would not exist. Thank you also to the parents of our players. The sacrifices you make with your time and money gives your children the opportunity to play the great game of hockey. The time goes by quickly and as my own son heads into high school I realize how important the game of hockey has been for our father-son relationship. That is what the game is all about. The relationships the players build with teammates and the parents build with other families will last far beyond the time spent with the Kansas City Stars. I appreciate all of the friends I have made as a member of the Stars organization over the past 10 years and look forward to meeting more families in the future!

Also, a very special thank you goes to our Stars administrator, Mary Helmick. Mary works tirelessly at the house, travel and regional affiliate levels to make certain that our organization provides the best hockey experience possible for our players and families. Another person that I want to truly thank is Dean Nelson. Dean is not only the rink manager at KCIC but also one of our Stars travel hockey coaches and the greatest ambassador to hockey that Kansas City has ever seen. Dean's passion for the game and caring about all of our children is beyond words. At the end of every season I take a step back to think about what we can do to make our organization better. And one thing became clear to me is that Dean is the face of hockey at KCIC and because of this I've asked him to become Co-hockey Director of the Kansas City Stars with me. People count on Dean's advice every day at the rink and I feel that having me, Mary and Dean as a team will be better for communication to our families and we will be able to respond to our family's needs more quickly as well. I am very excited to have Dean join the Stars in an even more meaningful way and look forward to working with him more closely!

There were some new programs the Stars launched this year including a Mini-Mite program and expanding the USA Hockey "Try Hockey For Free" program. The challenge with hockey is that it can be an expensive proposition of buying equipment and paying a registration fee just to see if a child even likes or wants to play the game. So we started a "Learn to play hockey" program two years ago and split it from the "Learn to skate" program. "Learn to play hockey" currently has nearly 80 players which is the largest group we've ever had. In the last year we also enhanced our hockey offerings by hosting 2 USA Hockey endorsed "Try Hockey For Free" across America days at KCIC. In the fall event we had 58 potential hockey players on the ice and in the spring we had 81 kids participate. It was one of the most fulfilling experiences I have had on the ice watching kids who could barely skate who end up passing me pucks within one hour of being on the ice. The smiles on these kid's faces said it all and the parents watching had as much fun as the kids! Mary, Dean and a group of volunteers and coaches made this a great experience for all who participated. **This springs THFF event ranked**

**in the top 5 in the country** for the number of new, never before registered kids with USA Hockey. As a result hockey equipment manufacturer CCM donated 20 helmets and 20 sets of gloves to the Stars program which will help future THFF participants. Thank you to all of the volunteers who made this event happen and who made it a huge success.

Our new Mini-Mite program creates another bridge to our U8 program that allows younger players play a more limited and inexpensive schedule to determine if they want to play hockey. We had 4 teams with 24 players participating in our first-ever mini-mite program. These programs have led to a record number of families participating with the Stars in 2013-14. We surpassed 400 players in the 2013-14 season which is an all-time high! The next frontier for us is on working to start a city-wide girls program at the younger levels. More to come on that...

**Spring hockey:** We changed our format and plan this spring and the response has been overwhelming! At Dean Nelson's suggestion we decided to go to a 4 on 4, no checking format with less structure to make the focus more on fun and creativity than wins and losses. We went from 130 players participating last spring to 260 players signed up this spring. This format has been successful in more traditional hockey markets and we look forward to getting feedback from our families as the spring season progresses. I believe we have gotten from a position of fixing things within the Stars organization to a thought process of continuous improvement year after year and this is hopefully another step in that direction.

**U8 Hockey:** Once again our U8 coaches did such a great job this past season and the U8 program has progressed to the point that we had teams travel to St. Louis to play more competitive games. This gave our more advanced players an opportunity to play at a higher level. This also helped alleviate the challenge we had of limited local competition in this age group. We continue to see the benefits of implementing and continuing to utilize the USA Hockey ADM model. The foundation has been set for these players to compete at a higher level for years to come. The progression at U8 and squirt has been impressive and I believe over time you will see more and more Stars players in the Junior and College ranks. This is not what our overall goal is but it speaks to the great planning and coaching we have at all levels and creating as many options and goals for players and families as possible.

**House Hockey:** Our teams had a great season and 90% of our teams finished in the top 5 at their respective levels. Our Bantam #1 team won the championship and we had teams in the semi-finals or finals in every division. In house select our Squirt team and Peewee White teams won the Midwest League Championship. I attribute this to additional ice-time and the implementation of Coach in Chiefs at all levels 2 years ago. This past season was the second year that we have designated a coach-in-chief ("CIC") at each house level. We feel it is important to have a leader at each level for consistency in practices and skills being taught. We will be having a CIC meeting soon to evaluate this past season and identify needs and objectives for next season. Through this increased communication, we are creating more consistency in teaching the game. We are developing players that are better prepared for the next level. The improved playing experience for our players and families resulting from the CIC program has been readily apparent. Thank you to Bobby Collier, Eric Schmitz, Kevin Downey and Jeff Grega for their great work as our CIC's! This year was a season with the fewest complaints I have had since I became the hockey director and a lot of that is because of the CIC's

helping to communicate with parents at their respective levels and address issues before they became problems.

We will continue to focus on age-appropriate skills and drills based upon the ADM model and other USA Hockey recommended curriculums for all age groups. Our goal is to provide the best, well-educated and informed coaches in the city at all levels. This approach is the right one, as reflected in the success of house teams in local competition and our house select teams in Midwest League play. Congratulations to those teams, coaches and players on a great season!

**High School Hockey:** This was an age group that we have had some challenges in the past in terms of player behavior, expectations and inconsistent participation. I had a meeting with the parents prior to the season to discuss past issues and to set expectations and with the parent's buy-in and the help of Mike Kaufhold as Coach in Chief as well as the leadership from coaches Wes Hoskins and Jake Mitchell with the Varsity and Junior Varsity I believe our families experience was much better. Our goal this past season was to create high school teams that are well structured, fun and competitive with players that are committed to representing a quality program living up to the Stars standards and expectations. Great job by everyone in making that happen.

**House Evaluations:** House evaluations will be after Labor Day with dates to be determined and posted in the near future.

**Travel Hockey:** Our travel hockey program also had a great season. Our teams competed in the MoHockey (St. Louis) league and the Midwest Hockey League (MHL). Our third year in the MoHockey league was a success. Our Peewee AA team won the Missouri State Championship tournament and it couldn't have happened to a greater group of players and parents, many who are close friends of mine. I appreciate the loyalty and patience of these families. This group had been placed in challenging situations for a couple of years when slotted in the St. Louis league. They stuck together and the hard work and patience paid off in the 2013-14 season. Year 3 in the St. Louis league had more and more teams coming to Kansas City from St. Louis to play in league games and tournaments which helps keep travel costs down for our families. The St. Louis families love the outdoor Pavilion rink and the hospitality we provide. Stars parent Jeff Janofsky took the reins this year on organizing Winter Classic tournaments and with his leadership we had multiple successful sold out tournaments at KCIC. The comments I've received regionally we're unbelievable. Thanks Jeff for your great work on these events!

Our travel practice format utilizing combined 90 minute sessions continues to pay dividends. We were able to provide significantly more practice ice time through a more effective and efficient use of our available ice. We continue to see steady improvement in individual skills and team play as a result.

**Jets High School Hockey:** It was another exceptional year for Jets hockey. Coach Gary Emmons guided the Junior Varsity team to the Championship in the state championship and the Varsity team finished second.

The Jets are an extension of the Stars program competing in the Midwest High School Hockey League, comprised of the best local high school players throughout the Tri-State area. The Jets program is designed to

allow local high school players to play competitive hockey. Ultimately, some graduates will participate in the junior and college hockey ranks, including Tier II and III Juniors, NCAA Div. III and ACHA Div. 1 College Hockey.

**Travel Coaches:** Our travel coaches for the upcoming 2014-15 season will be announced in the next few months. There will be some changes but most coaches will be back for the upcoming season.

We have not made specific team assignments yet because I want to let the coaches enjoy a few months of an off-season after a fairly long season. Returning non-parent coaches will likely be coaching the same levels as in the past. We will know more specifics in August. That said, our travel coaches have all played at a high level with over 50 years of combined college and professional hockey experience. Each coach is firmly committed to coaching and developing young athletes in a positive environment built on skill development and strength of character.

**Goalie program:** I want to thank Annette Dyer for helping institute, organize and implement our goaltender training program. With a limited budget and creativity Annette has ensured that our goaltenders got some great training from Clint Elberts. Goalies are often forgotten but very integral to a team's success and I greatly appreciate her help with this program. Our older goalies are now volunteering to help the younger ones to help teach them while keeping costs down. Great job Annette!

**Travel Tryouts:** Travel team tryouts for Squirrels, PeeWees and Bantams are currently scheduled for August 15-17. Jets High School tryouts will be held August 19-21. Midget AA tryouts will be August 26-28. All tryouts will be held at KCIC.

**Summer Programs:** Off-season practices, clinics, and summer camps will be posted on the Stars website ([www.kcstarshockey.com](http://www.kcstarshockey.com)). We will be providing a wide range of skill development and conditioning opportunities leading up to next season.

Unfortunately over time we have great families that leave Kansas City. A great Stars hockey family that has had a huge positive impact on the Stars is the Antonenko family. Paul was critical a few years ago in helping implement the USA Hockey ADM program. As I was trying to understand the program and facing a lot of pushback from hockey people around the city regarding the implementation it was Paul who guided my thinking and helped get the program started. The ADM program has been critical to the success of the Stars, particularly at the younger age groups and I owe Paul a big thank you for that. We wish them the best and appreciate the guidance and support during their time in KC!

Thank you everyone again for a great season. I'm sure I have missed a few people on saying thank you because there are so many people who help make the Stars a great organization. We are really excited about next year as our Stars program continues to grow, evolve and improve. Please contact me or Mary Helmick if you have any questions or needs. Our contact information is on the Stars website. Enjoy your spring and summer!

Tom Tilley

Kansas City Stars Hockey Director