

MINNESOTA PLAYERS **S.K.A.T.E.** THROUGH SCHOOL

Good Grades
Program Grows
From Grass-Roots
To State Level



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MINNESOTA HAS PRODUCED some of the most talented American hockey players in the history of the game, including Phil Housley, Neal Broten and Mike Ramsey.

But it's a fact of hockey life that not every youth player will make it to the NHL, and so the vast majority of the players must prepare to succeed in the world through other means. That means getting an education.

Eleven years ago, the Armstrong Youth Hockey Association in a northwest suburb of Minneapolis created a program to encourage youth hockey players to focus on succeeding in the classroom during the hockey season. The Skaters Keep Achieving Through Education program rewards players who attain at least a 3.0 grade-point average during the hockey season.

The program was launched statewide during the 2001-02 season with 36 associations participating and 4,000 players joining the ranks. This past season, 110 associations participated, which is nearly 70 percent of the associations in Minnesota, and 15,000 players qualified.

But the most important numbers are those that can be seen on the individual level. Michael Morin, a 13-year-old center for the Pee wee A team in the Armstrong association, says S.K.A.T.E. is one of the reasons why his grades have improved over the past three seasons.

"Since I started in S.K.A.T.E., I pretty much became an A student," he says. "But the best part is that it gets kids to think that they have to get good grades to play hockey."

Cyndy Poulton, the S.K.A.T.E. coordinator for one of Minnesota's 12 districts, says she had been pushing for an academic excellence program in her association for quite some time, and felt that S.K.A.T.E. was a perfect fit. But S.K.A.T.E. rewards players beginning at the Squirt level, and Poulton wanted all youth players to feel involved. So her district extended the program to include Mites.

"The sooner the player gets involved, the better chance that he

▲ **University of Minnesota-Duluth forward Nick Anderson, a native of Proctor, Minn., takes time out to read with a local youth hockey player as part of the S.K.A.T.E. program.**



or she has of succeeding," Poulton says. "Hockey is a microcosm of life. When you have contact with a child, you leave an indelible mark. Here, we have a golden opportunity to make an impact – we can give them something more than a love for the game. We need to show them how important it is to excel on and off the ice."

All players who qualify for the program receive an achievement certificate and S.K.A.T.E. merchandise. Many associations give additional incentives to encourage players to qualify.

Players are entered into a statewide sweepstakes where larger prizes are given out. This past season, one player won a stick autographed by the Minnesota Wild, and two others won limited edition prints autographed by Calgary Flame Jordan Leopold, an Armstrong alum who was an original participant in S.K.A.T.E.

The prizes are one incentive for academic achievement, but some players have found that S.K.A.T.E. motivates them in a variety of ways.

"You look stupid if you don't make S.K.A.T.E. and all of your friends did," says 13-year-old Kevin Anderson, who plays left wing for Armstrong Bantam A. "There are also consequences if I don't make it. My parents could take away hockey."

District coordinators for S.K.A.T.E. would like to see the program reach all 160 Minnesota hockey associations. There are also talks of trying to implement the program at the national level.

"The program has grown exponentially," says Mark Jorgensen, executive administrator of Minnesota Hockey. "It's not just about hockey, it's about helping kids with life skills. It re-centers the focus on schoolwork. Hockey is used as a vehicle to make sure they get their work done."

Poulton emphasizes that it isn't difficult to bring S.K.A.T.E. to the local association.

"People have a misconception that they or their association are going to have to take a lot of time to get it going and maintain it," she says. "This is far from the truth. How involved you are is up to the individual association. All the help is there that you need through the coordinators. It's really a no-brainer." ❄️

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HIGH SCHOOLERS DECA-RATED FOR S.K.A.T.E. CAMPAIGN

When it comes to getting the word out about the benefits of the S.K.A.T.E. program, one group of Minnesota high school students has been as tenacious as a bulldog.

In the fall of 2003, five marketing students from Proctor High School were looking for a program for the public relations category at DECA competitions. Three members of the group were hockey players.

They approached Jay Belcastro, the school's marketing teacher and adviser for DECA, an association of marketing students that hosts local, regional and international competitions. It just so happens that Belcastro is also a youth, junior varsity and varsity hockey coach.

The group made fliers, but they needed a bigger way to get the word out about S.K.A.T.E. They met with Bob Nielson, the athletics director at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, and collaborated on a plan to promote education for youth players with the help of the Div. I hockey team at UMD.

The students created public service announcements that featured both UMD Bulldog and youth hockey players discussing the importance of reading. They also created posters that highlighted the involvement of UMD, hoping that the notoriety of the team would bring attention to the program.

"UMD added validity to the program," says Belcastro. "Kids look up to college athletes. They see these players talking about how important reading is, and maybe they think, 'If he did it, maybe that's my route to pro hockey.'"

The group added an Academic All-Star program, with selected players recognized for their academic achievements in between periods at Bulldog games.

The marketing students created a 30-page manual and presented it at DECA competitions. Their efforts earned them a second-place finish in state DECA competition and seventh at the international competition in Nashville.

For everyone involved, the class project proved to be an effective way to push the S.K.A.T.E. program to another level.

"Everyone in hockey has a responsibility to promote academics," Belcastro says.

— Carolyn Simon