Bolstered by a desire to do what’s best for kids, the Pacific Northwest Amateur Hockey Association took a bold step in 2015-16, transitioning its Metropolitan Hockey League to half-ice play in the 10U age classification. The results were so encouraging that the entire state of Washington is now moving toward 10U half-ice hockey at both the house and travel levels, with a final vote coming this summer.

The inaugural season wasn’t without its challenges, like a sudden need for mass quantities of hard-board ice dividers, nor was it free of skeptics, but with a committed effort, PNAHA leadership overcame the former and calmed the latter, providing some 250 players with a powerful boost in skill development and fun.

Ian Armstrong helped lead the charge, marshalling funds and soliciting proposals from hard-board manufacturers nationwide. The Seattle Junior Hockey League director and 14U girls hockey coach said the half-ice 10U initiative is still evolving, but there’s no doubt it was a success in Year 1, not to mention a solid foundation for statewide implementation next season.

“We’re still learning, but on the ice, the scoring and action has been great,” said Armstrong. “And the goalies love it because they don’t spend three-quarters of the game just standing there. More kids want to play goalie now.

“The biggest thing for people is the game-day experience and figuring out the logistics of the benches. Those little things are important to the moms and dads, less so to the kids, but they still matter, so we’ve continued working on those aspects to bring them up to the quality of what’s happening on the ice.”

For PNAHA, the motivation to go half-ice for 10U was rooted in a simple philosophy.

“We’ve always set out to do what’s best for kids,” said Armstrong. “It’s our duty. And we try to be as progressive as we can be in the development of our players. The reality is that a 9- or 10-year-old isn’t all that different from a 7- or 8-year-old in terms of their skill development windows and priorities. They’re all young children. The benefits of playing hockey on a smaller surface apply to both age classifications. Ultimately, we decided that the kids’ experience, the fun factor and skill development should come first.”

Along the way, they realized that every player benefited. Half-ice play challenged advanced players more while better engaging the less advanced players. Rob Kaufman, PNAHA coaching director, called it a natural progression for 10U players.

“It’s designed to give kids more opportunity for skill development,” said Kaufman, whose grandson plays in the league. “I’ve been coaching for 25 years and I can embrace the idea of doing what’s best for the greatest amount of kids. They get more puck touches, more skating changes of direction, more puck-possession situations and more shots for the goalies.

“Half-ice at 10U is more fun for more kids. Everybody has more opportunity. And what’s really impressive is how much a first-or second-year player can develop in a single season when they’re given the right opportunities to develop. Listen to what all these upper-level coaches say about what young players need. It’s always skill development.”

Armstrong agrees, and he also has an eye to the future as it relates to the role of cross- and half-ice hockey in player development.

“The real benefit will be in the long term,” he said. “With the cross-ice 8U and half-ice 10U, by the time these kids are 12U players and beyond, they’re going to display a lot more skill development and it won’t only be the top one or two players, it’ll be *every* player.”

As for the skeptics, Armstrong does his best to address their concerns.

“Some people thought it wasn’t ‘real hockey’ because it wasn’t played on an adult-sized sheet, but we addressed that by comparing it to other youth sports. Baseball is huge here, but youth baseball doesn’t put 10-year-olds on the mound at Safeco Field. They aren’t roaming that outfield or running those 90-foot bases. The game would be awful and the skill development would be minimal. That’s not what we want for our kids. For the people who want to listen and think it through, it doesn’t take long for it to make sense.”

A part of that conversation usually involves questions about how kids will learn rules, like icing and offside, and for that, there are numerous answers, including several small-area games and also ice markers for drawing lines. The oft-vilified screen time can also be an ally, as many 10-year-olds already understand icing and offside thanks to their PlayStation or Xbox. For those who don’t, Armstrong and his fellow coaches can assuredly teach them in about 10 minutes on the ice, which is a miniscule price to pay in exchange for the dramatic gains in skill development and engagement afforded by small-ice hockey.

“I feel like the game lost some of its spirit of fun; it’s spirit of playing for the right reasons,” said Armstrong. “This half-ice 10U initiative, we’re doing it for the right reasons. We’re not doing this because we were told we have to do it. We’re doing it because it makes total sense. We’re doing it for the kids.”