

Player-First 10U Squirt Model Gaining Steam

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When a hockey hotbed like East Grand Forks made waves with [its transition to an in-house 10U/Squirt model last year](#), people across the state — and the country — took notice.

And now, Proctor has taken action.

This July, the Proctor Amateur Hockey Association board voted unanimously — 13-0 — to adopt an in-house model similar to what East Grand Forks implemented for its 10U program this coming season with the hopes of enhancing skill development, raising the compete level, increasing retention, mitigating risk and providing a more fun environment for every single kid.

In short, Proctor wants to put its players first.

“I like everything about it,” said Terry Dunbar, board member and player/coach development coordinator for the Proctor Amateur Hockey Association. “The results and feedback have been amazing at East Grand. I’ve talked to some of the parents, and they are raving about it. We are so grateful for the cooperation of the East Grand Forks Association and for Guy Gosselin at USA Hockey being so open with us in how they made this program successful.”

“Everybody feels there are obvious benefits here.”

The Changes

Proctor is projected to have 37 kids at the 10U level this season, about the same as East Grand Forks a year ago.

Those kids will all practice with each other, with a heavy emphasis on stations, small-area games and skill development. They will play half-ice games only against each other until January 1.

At that point, a Squirt A team and two Squirt B teams will then be named to compete in games against other communities, but all of the Squirts will continue to practice together.

External games will be limited to 20 for the Squirts. That is down from 38 (including district playoffs) played at the 10U level last season, but Dunbar says those numbers can be misleading. The external games will be replaced by half-ice, in-house games.

“The major difference is going to be a reduction in games as people have known them in the past,” Dunbar said. “Let’s shift that hour of ice time into giving everybody a chance to have the puck, match that kid up against other kids in the same tier, and do that from top to bottom. Now I think you’re seeing growth with every player.”

Reducing Travel

Traveling at this age is not necessary, says two-time U.S. Olympian and USA Hockey ADM regional manager Guy Gosselin.

“Picking a team to travel and go all over the map and spend a ton of money, in my opinion, is a waste of development time,” said Gosselin, a Rochester native. “We’re trying to develop multi-sport, physically literate kids. We’re trying to have a player-centered approach. There’s actually no reason you need to travel at this point. Development is first and foremost for our players.”

Dunbar believes the benefits extend from ice time to family time.

“Reducing games will reduce travel,” he said. “That means more time on the ice and more practice and skill development. That means more time with your family. Maybe you’ll eat dinner together two or three times a week instead of one.”

Tryout Anxiety

Dunbar also believes this in-house model will alleviate the unnecessary pressures and politics of tryouts at 10U.

“For some of the kids, there’s tryout anxiety,” he said. “It also doesn’t really give kids graduating from Mites the opportunity to get accustomed to the level of play at 10U. Some of them haven’t skated since last March, so with this model, we eliminate that anxiety and just throw it by the wayside. Just go play.”

Gosselin agrees.

“What we have seen is that it’s less abrasive for the kids, and we have seen retention go up,” Gosselin said. “By profiling kids with tryouts at a young age and telling them that they’re worthy of the A team and the B team and the house team. It doesn’t have to come down to labels. Kids will catch up. All of these kids deserve the same touches. They deserve a good experience.”

Culture

Dunbar and Gosselin believe this new model helps set the tone for a stronger culture.

“The kids and the families will be together longer,” Dunbar said. “I think that gives you a stronger sense of community at that level, which is so important in the long run. It’s more fun with their friends at this young age. I think you have a greater chance to make a difference for a kid when they’re 10 versus when they’re 15.”

“I grew up in Minnesota,” added Gosselin. “We had a sense of pride in our neighborhood rink and we had a sense of pride with our town. It’s all about growing up together. I still talk to those guys that I played Squirt C and Squirt B hockey with. That’s part of the experience. You should be proud to be from where you’re from and it should be a really neat experience to play hockey with your buddies.”

Good Enough for the NHL

Both Dunbar and Gosselin are quick to point out the heavy emphasis on small-area games and cross-ice hockey at the pro and college levels.

“If it’s good enough for the NHL, how is that too good for us for 9-year-olds?” Dunbar said.

“The best players in the world have the puck on their stick for a minute and 15 seconds to a minute and 30 seconds during a game,” Gosselin said. “We need to develop our motor skills and repetition at 10U. They don’t get their reps in during games, so practices are where we get reps and a lot of puck touches in small areas. This small-area environment helps our kids navigate those areas, become stable on their skates, learn about puck possession.”

Risk Prevention

One additional benefit of in-house programming this season is it can help mitigate risk related to COVID-19 exposure. Health experts continue to recommend limiting travel so keeping communities tight knit could provide a sense of security for any families with concerns about returning to the rink and provide a safer environment for all participants.

“We don’t know what’s going to happen in four months,” Dunbar said. “But I feel like if everybody shifted to a model like this — and I don’t want to force anybody to do anything, I’m all for freedom — but I think we’d all be good until January if we’re just skating in our own rink.”

While the season is fast approaching, Gosselin encourages associations who have been considering similar changes to make the jump this season.

“If you’re considering doing something like this, there’s no better time than right now,” he said.