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HEADLINE: GTHL tough on tryouts

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The Greater Toronto Hockey League is cracking down on sham "birthday skates" and other improper team tryout and recruiting sessions.

To enforce the new rules the league has set up a "snitch" line and says it is sending anonymous inspectors to rinks.

And, for the first time, penalties will apply not only to coaches but to the players as well.

If a player informally tries out for a 2006-07 team before this year's official tryout period begins on April 17, he'll be suspended until Nov. 15 and will not be allowed to join the offending team.

A coach faces an automatic one-year suspension, while an organization gets fined \$1,000.

"I don't want to see a kid pay a price for the stupidity of adults," said GTHL president John Gardner. "Birthday skates, get-in-shape tryouts, hiring a skating instructor - whatever they call it - it's a fancy moniker for an illegal tryout."

The rules say that, "a player under age 13, cannot even be contacted by a new team". Until his current team has completed all playoffs and tournaments. Those 13 and older must have a permission-to-skate form or a proper release.

The improper tryouts take many forms.

A coach will send players to an established hockey school where he "happens" to show up. They'll hire outside professionals to run private practices or they'll get parents to book ice under the pretence of a birthday party for a player's friends.

Glen McCurdie, director of insurance for Hockey Canada, also points out that neither coaches nor players are covered by Hockey Canada insurance for these events because they are not sanctioned.

Brampton Battalion coach Stan Butler says improper tryouts are a bigger problem now than when he was coaching minor hockey almost 20 years ago. "When you have a system based on recruiting and not coaching these problems exist," said Butler. "It is our system that encourages people to recruit early. ... People find loopholes."

North Toronto general manager Kathy Grant has warned her coaches about the crackdown. "We tell our coaches up front not to have these skates," said Paul. "If they do it, they are no longer coaching with us." Butler added that parents are definitely part of the problem.

"Parents want to ensure their (son or daughter) has a spot on a team and don't want to wait until tryouts," he said. Gardner said the solution is simple. "If all the parents said 'no' and waited until tryouts start, we wouldn't have this problem."