



ARTICLE OF THE MONTH

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Taking it One Stride at a Time



By Lyle Phair
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STATE OF THE GAME

They are cute and adorable and it is hilarious watching them play. This sentence could be used to describe a) a litter of kittens chasing around a rolled up sock b) a group of puppies playing with a ball c) a mini mite hockey game d) all of the above.

Clearly the answer is d) all of the above. There isn't much difference in how these groups play, except in the case of mini mite hockey, we adults feel the need to keep score, enforce rules, and keep standings. I, for one, have never really figured out why. If you have ever watched a mini mite hockey game, you know what I mean. Every kid on the ice is at the same time chasing the puck, falling down, rolling over, getting up and going after it again. I doubt that most of them can even keep track of the score, and have no idea what the standings mean. They might, however, be able to tell you what the best post-game snack is if you care to ask them.

Also in mini mite hockey, we adults feel the need to interrupt their play about every 30 seconds or so, to apply some rule that they are not capable of understanding yet, then take another 30 seconds to line them up in their face-off positions before we drop the puck and watch them all get drawn to it again like it was a magnet. At the same time, we have 2/3 of each team sitting, to rest, watch and learn, on a bench that is not high enough to enable them to see the action on the ice, even if they wanted to and were able to focus their attention that way for more than 5-10 seconds at a time.

I am sure that mini mite hockey started "for the right reason". I am sure that some well-meaning coaches or administrators thought that it would be a good thing to put 5 and 6 year olds kids on teams and have them play games. I am sure they thought it would be fun for them. And I am sure that it is fun for them. But being a parent, I also know that it is also fun for kids to play in the mud, jump in water puddles and climb trees. Anything can be fun when you are 5 or 6. So I am sure that they would have just as much fun, if not more, and get much more out of it, if it was done in a different, and more productive way.

Ironically in hockey, a game that encourages on-ice creativity from its players, we have been sorely lacking in that area off the ice. For some reason, we expect players, whether they are world-class professionals, or five year olds just starting out, to play on the same size surface, with the same number of players, the same puck and with virtually the same set of rules. A very complex set of rules at that. Rules that most adults, especially those new to the game, do not completely understand. Yet we expect our 5,6,7 and 8 year-old children to understand them, and play by them.

We could do very well to learn from other sports. In soccer, they utilize smaller balls, smaller goals, and smaller fields for younger age groups and they adapt the number of players participating on the field at a time

to the age group playing. It might not look exactly like the soccer the professionals play, but I can assure you that the hockey our kids play bears little resemblance to the game the pros play as well. It is important to make that distinction, and more importantly, to make decisions based on that distinction. The game needs to be adapted to be the most fun, and the most productive to the players playing at each level.

What is the proper age to begin games and rules? USA Hockey and MAHA do not recognize “competitive” hockey until the squirt age group, where players are 9 and 10 years old, and rightly so. Prior to that time, the emphasis is supposed to be, and should be on developing skating and puck skills, and creating a fun environment to build confidence and self-esteem, and foster a passion for the game.

But somewhere down the line, we have gotten away from that, with competitive games, leagues, championships, and tournaments for mites, ages 7 and 8, and even as young as mini mites, ages 5 and 6. Where does it end?

The proper structure is in place. We just need to, as adults, be patient and let our kid’s progress through it. Learn to Skate programs are an excellent and inexpensive first step to see if kids enjoy skating and to learn the basic fundamentals necessary to begin to move around the ice. At the Initiation or Clinic level, adding hockey equipment, a stick and puck is a huge next step. If you don’t think so, try putting the stuff on and going out there yourself. You will see in a hurry. From there it requires plenty of practice and repetition, more importantly, FUN practice and repetition to develop skating and puckhandling skills.

To provide an intermediary program between the Initiation Program and the full-ice program for 8 & under players, USA Hockey has developed a Cross-Ice Development Program. Over the past two seasons, several “pilot programs” have been conducted in different areas of the country. It is an outstanding program that encourages a non-competitive environment where players can learn the basic skills without the distractions often associated with an emphasis on winning. Its objectives include modifying the playing environment to meet the needs for this specific age group, increased opportunities for players to touch and handle the puck, stressing participation, fun and skill development, providing a positive environment for learning fundamental skills and improving the utilization of ice time.

It involves dividing the ice into thirds, playing cross-ice games, using lightweight pucks, and practicing 3 times for every cross-ice game that is played. No one keeps track of the score and no standings are kept. Coaches provide guidance and structure in terms of positive reinforcement, teaching respect for teammates and opponents, allowing the players to have fun and teach them to play for the love of the game, and enforcing discipline and penalties for inappropriate behavior.

In speaking with USA Hockey officials about the program, I was amazed, yet at the same time not surprised, to hear that the initial feedback from many of the associations using it was that the parents did not like it, although they eventually came around. The kids loved it from the start, and they showed great improvement. Sometimes it pays to listen to our kids.