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HEADLINE: **Non-checking hockey league growing
NAME GAME**

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The Metropolitan Youth Hockey League, which plays "non-checking" hockey, has grown so big so fast, you'd expect Senator George Mitchell to be after it.

And for one team, the Staten Island Selects coached by no-check advocate Randy DeMeno, things have quickly gone from trouble filling its schedule to a full dance card.

"In two years we've gone from looking for games to having to pick what games we want to play," said DeMeno. "I knew that when the idea got around that the league would grow, we'd get maybe 10 to 14 teams, but I didn't expect this. By next season, we're looking at maybe 22 to 30 teams - established teams - that want to be involved."

Even though studies have been done that prove non-check hockey is beneficial for young players, DeMeno met resistance locally when he originally tried to put together a schedule for his non-check team, which was created for kids who wanted something more than an intramural or "house" league (where the same two teams play nearly every week).

He said he was told things like he could not play certain travel teams, the team had to pay a travel fee to play non-check optional games at certain rinks and the team needed new uniforms, of all things.

"The kids love those uniforms," he said. "They're in the Rangers style (in the diagonal wording on the front), but the Devils colors (white, black and red). When you have fans of both on the team, you have to compromise."

(DeMeno and his guys didn't cave, but Tom Palladino of 86th Chevrolet, who donated the original jerseys, is working on getting all the teams new jerseys this year.)

Things have been working out for the Selects' Bantam and Pee Wee teams. And there is even talk of adding a Midget team, because the Bantams are moving up this year, and want a place to play with the same friends with less risk of getting hurt so as to not jeopardize playing for a high school team.

While they haven't played on Staten Island, save for practices at Clove Lakes, they have been "overwhelmingly embraced" by the Bayonne organization, where many Islanders play.

And the move off of the Island has given the kids some pretty cool experiences.

Last year, the Selects played a game at the Central Park outdoor rink, owned by Donald Trump. The game was at night. They quickly drew a crowd.

"It was great," said DeMeno. "There must have been three or four hundred people there watching."

Sounds like shades of the NHL's New Year's Day game this season.

"The kids loved it, playing outdoors with a crowd," he said.

All because they got the word out.

In fact, after the Selects played in a tournament in the Poconos in 2006, the entire Pee Wee division made the switch to non-check in 2007.

Still, DeMeno is the first to admit, he's no great pioneer. It took a lot of cooks to stir this broth.

"We're not the first ones to come up with this. These (no-check) leagues are successful across the country. We were just the first ones that kind of concentrated on this area," he said. "The response has validated what we've done."