Developing and Operating a Successful High School Hockey Program

by Ron Baum
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Schools cannot award school letters to community teams in sports under MHSAA jurisdiction. They cannot include these activities in school recognition events.

And finally, schools must attempt to prohibit the use of the school's name, nickname, mascot, and colors by outside groups and the media.

Some people might want a status between interscholastic and community programs where the school can be somewhat involved. They like to call this a club team. However, MHSAA Handbook Interpretation No. 147 is explicit: "Schools cannot conduct, support, or recognize club teams in any sport under MHSAA jurisdiction. A team shall not be defined as a club team simply because it is funded with other than school finances."

There are too many differences between school clubs and so-called club sports teams to equate the two and give them similar recognition. School clubs are normally limited to students of one school, have a school faculty member as an advisor, meet at the school, and are subject to control of the school administration. So-called club sports teams usually have none of these features. They are community teams.

In earlier days, prior to the 1970s, the normal path for a sport was from the physical education program to an intramural program to the interscholastic level. Today, the normal path for new sports in our schools is from the community straight to the interscholastic level with no stops in between. This is a bigger jump than in the old days. It is a jump from totally outside school control to totally within school control.

**Everything in the interscholastic program must be under school authority.** The coach is under school authority, even if the coach is not a faculty member of the school. The funding is under the school authority: funding might come from sources outside the school, but it must be spent by the school. All interscholastic events are under the authority of the school: even if they are at different venues, they must remain under school supervision.

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INTERSchOLASTIC "CLUB" TEAMS NOT PERMITTED

From the MHSAA

There are only two ways a member school may be involved with a sport under MHSAA jurisdiction, which is any sports that concludes in an MHSAA-sponsored tournament (baseball, basketball, competitive cheer, cross country, football, golf, gymnastics, ice hockey, skiing, soccer, softball, swimming and diving, tennis, track and field, volleyball and wrestling).

First, a school might sponsor an intramural program. These are programs under school supervision for students of that school only to compete against each other, and not against students from other schools, except as provided by MHSAA Handbook Interpretation No. 146, which states: "A school may have three (3) contests or days of competition for boys and three (3) for girls per season which are an outgrowth of an intramural program. These need not follow eligibility regulations but no one participating in such activities is eligible to represent the school in that sport on an interscholastic team that season."

The second way for a member school to be involved with a sport under MHSAA jurisdiction is to sponsor it on an interscholastic basis. These are programs on the freshman, junior varsity or varsity level which have been authorized by the board of education, regardless of how the activity is funded, to compete against students from other schools. These teams are subject to all MHSAA rules and regulations.

There are no other ways that MHSAA member schools may be involved in sports under MHSAA jurisdiction.

There are other ways that students of a school may be involved in a sport, but these ways can have no school involvement. These are community teams.

Regarding community teams, schools can't supervise coaches, facilities or transportation. Schools can't schedule meetings, practices or contests. Schools can't contract for contests, officials or facilities. Schools can't support community teams with direct or indirect financial assistance for personnel, uniforms, facilities, equipment, transportation, or insurance.

Schools cannot recognize a community team like a school activity. Recognition should not be provided in yearbooks, over the public address system, in school newspapers, or on the school bulletin boards, unless the same coverage is provided to other community groups that are not school sponsored.

PREFACE

The need for information contained in the following pages grew out of a meeting on April 28, 1999, at the offices of the Michigan High School Athletic Association in East Lansing, Michigan. The focus of this meeting was to address the unacceptable number of behavioral problems that were occurring in the sport of interscholastic ice hockey. Realizing that ice hockey is the fastest growing high school sport in Michigan at this time, it was felt that an information booklet needed to be developed and made available to schools sponsoring this sport, especially for emerging programs and those recently in existence. It is anticipated that implementing the guidelines outlined in this booklet will help to eliminate a number of issues that continue to surface each hockey season.

During my more than thirty years of coaching in three different sports, I have grown to realize the importance of communication. To a large extent, most of the problems I have had to deal with, especially while coaching hockey, have resulted because of some type of communication breakdown. Thus, as you read through the following pages, the majority of my comments will center around communication in one form or another.

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the following high school hockey coaches who have given their time and experience while critiquing this document. Todd Bell, East Kentwood; Jeff Hatley, Livonia Churchill; Art Missias, Portage Northern, and Ken Sherman, Sault Ste. Marie.

Finally, a few comments about the word "successful", used in the title. Most students, alumni and the general public as well, view a successful sports team as the one having the most league, tournament, or state playoff championships. While we should not underestimate the importance of winning, it should never become an end unto itself, especially in high school athletics. When winning at all costs becomes the primary objective, we have failed to understand the true value and purpose of interscholastic programs. While this has become increasingly more difficult to do, as head coaches we must continue to stay focused on our main goals in education and athletics. In addition, we also need to help the large number of individuals we interact with while coaching this great sport understand and accept these goals as well.
INTRODUCTION

This booklet is for administrators, coaches, and community members involved, or about to be involved, in sponsoring interscholastic ice hockey. It can also be used as a sort of check list for schools that presently field an ice hockey team. The booklet will hopefully answer the following five questions:

1. What is the first thing that should be developed in order to institute and operate a successful high school hockey program?
2. What are some of the unique characteristics that the sport of ice hockey brings to the prep scene?
3. What are the most important non-player relationships that need to be established and maintained for smooth operation?
4. What are some scenarios that must be avoided if a high school hockey program is to grow and be successful?
5. Who can be contacted to answer specific questions regarding the implementation or operation of a high school ice hockey team in Michigan?

FIRST THINGS FIRST!

Before a high school hockey team can begin, the coach(s) and athletic director must develop a well thought out Mission Statement. Generally, what is the purpose of your program? Initially, it may be easier to write down all of the major goals you want the program to accomplish, then work from there to develop an overall statement. It may be helpful to consult existing Mission Statements from your athletic department, high school, and school district. In that way, the main goals of the hockey program will reflect the rest of the school district. Keep your writing general and to the point. However, your Mission Statement needs to identify the most important aspect(s) of the program. If a Mission Statement is not developed at the beginning, your program will have no clear focus and its coaches, players, and parents will be fragmented in terms of expected conduct and outcomes. Once written and approved by building level administration, the new Mission Statement should be distributed and discussed with all players and parents at a joint meeting prior to every season. Writing a Mission Statement and discussing it with those who will function under it are two of the most important, initial responsibilities of every head coach. Program success and measurement are only possible when a hockey Mission Statement is in place.

3. No mandatory preseason meeting between the coaches, parents, and players outlining goals, objectives, responsibilities, and coaching philosophies.
4. Lack of understanding the unique aspects of ice hockey by the coach, school administration, parents and players, and how all parties involved can help to minimize unacceptable behaviors that some of this uniqueness may encourage.
5. Do not allow hockey booster club members to have input into team selection, operating rules, player assignments, team discipline or player-coach meetings.
6. Little or poor relationship between the hockey coaching staff and ANY individual or organization outlined in “Characteristics Unique to Ice Hockey.”
7. Compromising in any way the school’s Athletic Code or Team Rules by not following their respective procedures for discipline for the sake of winning a game(s).

RESOURCE PEOPLE

The single most important resource available to all schools in Michigan is the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA), located in East Lansing, Michigan (517-332-5046).

If any member of your school district would like to gain further information on the subject of interscholastic ice hockey, people at the MHSAA offices are willing to offer assistance and provide you with a current list of hockey-knowledgeable resource people and their phone number.

Any comments or recommendations to the author regarding this booklet can be sent via E-Mail to: HSC.Iserv.Net

IN CONCLUSION

At the present time, ice hockey is the fastest growing high school sport in Michigan. While it is always exciting and encouraging to see more high school students get involved in their school’s athletic programs, care must first be taken to insure that those involved in the sport - the administration, the coaches, the parents, the players, and the fans - understand that certain responsibilities and guidelines must be followed to ensure the spirit and integrity of interscholastic competition.

It is the hope of this author, and high school hockey coaches across the State, that ice hockey will continue to grow and provide all of its participants with positive, lifelong experiences that center around sportsmanship, fair play, and the pursuit of excellence.
ers and their parents what high school athletics exemplifies.

Local Media — Most school districts gain media coverage through their athletic teams. It is, therefore, important that the school's hockey coach and the hockey coaching staff promote their team by initiating contact with individuals within their community that work for newspapers, radio, or television. And don't forget the high school newspaper. The better informed the media is about your program and the more coverage the team is likely to receive. It is recommended that the coach develop a list of all media phone numbers, the best time to call in a story, and the type of stories each media person is looking to cover.

Hockey Parents — Of all the support groups covered above, the parents from your hockey team are the most important individuals to take care of. After all, they are trusting you with their most precious possession — their child. From the beginning of the season to the end, constant communication is vital. Information sheets including rules, social function schedules, team phone list – including parents first and last names – and information on important tournaments and games are only a few ways that head coaches can maintain solid communications and relationships with team parents.

The second issue regarding the development of parent relationships centers on the head coach's availability and willingness to discuss issues involving their child. And remember, NEVER discuss or compare a player's strengths, weaknesses, or problems with another parent. This will only serve to undermine the coaches credibility and will undoubtedly get back to the parent(s) of the player you are talking about. Also, at the beginning of each year, send home a list of the criteria, in priority, on how you will base your tryout selection process and how the tryouts will be run. It is also advised that a "cut list" never be used to notify players of who made the team and who did not. Instead, hand out, after the tryout is over, a form letter to each player explaining their status. As was said in the beginning of this chapter pertaining to communicating with Athletic Directors, it is better to provide parents with too much information than not enough. They will appreciate it.

AVOIDING POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

The following is a partial list of key situations that must be avoided if a high school hockey program is to be successful. This is by no means intended to be an all-inclusive list nor are these items listed in any particular order of importance.

1. Lack of written and distributed Mission Statement and Program Goals by the head coach.
2. Lack of sufficient educating by the Athletic Director to any new hockey coach on the subject of educational athletics.

DEFINING GOALS & RESPONSIBILITIES: MAKING YOUR JOB EASIER

Once the Mission Statement is complete, it is now time to list, in more detail, specific program goals you want to accomplish. This list might have been somewhat constructed during the Mission Statement process. In addition to the goals, the following areas of responsibility need to be carefully thought out and defined: (1) Responsibilities of the Coach to the Parents; (2) Responsibilities of the Coach to the Players; (3) Responsibilities of the Players to the Coach; (4) Responsibilities of the Players to the Parents; (5) Responsibilities of the Parents to the Players; and finally (6) Responsibilities of the Parents to the Coach. With the above documents in place, the hockey coach is organized and armed with critical information. Obviously, the Mission Statement, Team Goals & Responsibilities pieces need to be handed out and discussed with all three groups present, including the assistant coaches. Going over this information with ALL parents and players should be MANDATORY. After discussion, it is advised that parents and players both sign a short document verifying that they have read and understood these important "blueprints for success". Remember, the individuals that may miss this discussion are usually the ones who will create the biggest problems down the road!

CHARACTERISTICS UNIQUE TO THE SPORT OF ICE HOCKEY

When a school district commits to sponsoring interscholastic ice hockey, they need to understand that this sport brings to the scene a number of highly unique characteristics. While these characteristics are not all necessarily bad, if not recognized and understood, they could become a source of potential problems. Discussion of these characteristics will also help provide non-hockey people with a better understanding and appreciation of the sport. The characteristics identified below are not listed in any particular order.

Hockey's Playing Environment — In all other high school sports, every effort is made to eliminate physical items that could be dangerous to the athlete. Walls too close to playing surfaces need to be padded as well as padding the steel football, volleyball and basketball posts. Solid footing for track, soccer, football, and basketball players is enhanced by using cleated shoes and properly maintaining gym floors and athletic fields.

In ice hockey, however, almost the opposite is true. The playing surface is surrounded by hard walls that are bolted and frozen in
place. Above the boards plexiglass and steel stanchions are needed to keep the puck in and protect spectators. The goals, made of heavy, steel posts and a crossbar are two other sources of potential injury to a player moving at speeds higher than any person could ever run. Finally, the aspect of using razor-sharp knives attached to steel-toed boots to propel oneself around a smooth, surface adds another element of "suspense" to the game.

For the spectator watching this sport, the "suspense" that these aspects provide often contribute to a more intense and emotionally charged atmosphere. Because of the design of the playing surface and the potential for injury, spectator anxiety levels will rise and may reach heights that are not evident when these same individuals watch other sports. This phenomena also happens when we watch a video that is full of suspense.

Close To the Action — Another aspect of the game of hockey that can contribute to increased levels of spectator anxiety and involvement has to do with how close fans are to the play. In most other high school sports, fans watch from a greater distance. In hockey, the spectator can actually be only a few inches away, separated by a mere one inch piece of glass. Fans feel more apart of the game because they are right on top of the action. They can see player expressions, hear on-ice talking, and be close to high speed body contact. This aspect of ice hockey is another major reason why fans can become more emotionally involved than when they attend other high school athletic activities.

Style Of Activity — Hockey is more than a contact sport, it is a collision sport. It is a game of high speed, finesse, physical strength and grace. In addition, players skate with a stick in their hands that is designed to not only propel a hard rubber disk at speeds up to 100 mph, but may at times be legally used on another player. Because the rules of the game allow for player substitution while play is going on, the speed of the action is sustained and continuous. For the spectator, this style of activity provides excitement. It is very difficult to simply sit and watch a hockey game. These are some of the things that make the sport so appealing to many people. On the other hand, the potential dangers and the player’s continually high energy level can easily move fan behavior beyond acceptability, especially at the high school level.

Amateur, Junior, & Pro Team Conduct — Players that become a part of a high school hockey team usually have come through an amateur hockey program. Here in Michigan the governing body for amateur hockey is the Michigan Amateur Hockey Association (MAHA) which is affiliated with USA Hockey, the national organization. Some of the rules of conduct, particularly pertaining to taunting and fighting, are different in "little league" when compared to interscholastic hockey. Although neither fighting or taunting are supported or encouraged during MAHA games, penalty time for either infraction is not as severely administered when the same infraction occurs on the high school level. Fighting, for example, is a five minute major penalty under MAHA rules, but in high school, a player is removed from that contest and at least one other. Some schools...
Teaching & Counseling Staff — A group of people who can be a great asset to any sports team are the high school teachers and counselors. The academic and citizenship performance by athletes will be under hourly evaluation by their teachers. The opinions developed by the high school staff regarding the sport of hockey will largely come from their observations of the athletes involved in the sport. If teachers and counselors see a program where positive things are happening, the coaching staff is easily approachable and consistently interested in the academic performance of their athletes, then they, in turn, will be more willing to support the team around school and in the community. More importantly, teachers and counselors will be more inclined to contact the coach when one of his/her athletes is failing to meet their classroom responsibilities or is dealing with a personal problem. The head coach will also need to work closely with the guidance department at various times during the year for a variety of reasons.

Athletic Trainer — School districts that have a full or part time trainer on staff realize how important this individual can be for the entire athletic program. In the high contact sport of hockey, the trainer can become the second most important individual on staff. He/she can help keep players going when they would otherwise be sidelined. In addition, they can set up complete rehab programs to get an injured player quickly back into action, assist in weight training and plyometric workouts, and provide on-site medical assistance at games and/or practice sessions. If your school has an athletic trainer, the head coach must get to know this individual as quickly as possible. He/she must also see that the parents and players meet the trainer and outline his/her role. Ultimate respect and confidence must be given to the athletic trainer at all times.

Ice Arena Management — In most situations in Michigan, high school hockey teams schedule and rent ice from a city or private facility. Being courteous and respectful toward the arena management and its secretarial and maintenance staff is imperative. It is the head coach's responsibility to understand the rules of the players, and their parents on how to treat all arena personnel. Proper conduct, language, building care, driving in and out of the parking areas, and locker room clean up must be addressed throughout the season with all individuals associated with the team. In addition, arena management must be the first to be contacted if schedule changes need to be made. A solid working relationship with arena owners and/or managers is highly important. Always make sure that contracted ice times (including practices), game responsibilities, clean-up, damage, scoreboard and P.A. user fees, minor officials, security, etc. are thoroughly understood and written out in advance of using said facility. Constant communication is absolutely necessary. A monthly meeting with arena management, the athletic director, and coach is highly recommended. If a varsity hockey booster club is in existence, then a representative should also be present at these sessions.

will suspend a player for up to four additional games for fighting. Unfortunately for high school coaches and administrators, these rule differences can create a real problem for some athletes, especially the more aggressive ones who have played years of amateur hockey under less stringent expectations. They bring with them a different mental set than what can typically be tolerated on their high school team. Schools need to know that certain negative characteristics can be brought from most/not all amateur programs, as far as accepted behavior of players, parents, and fans. These must be addressed/communicated (face-to-face), not just written and handed out at a team meeting.

The second issue in this section addresses player conduct at the Junior (20 years old and under) divisions as well as all levels of Professional hockey. Quite obviously, not only is fighting at these two levels tolerated more than in the amateur programs, but in some situations, it is encouraged and/or expected. The same can be said about abusive language, taunting, and unsportsmanlike conduct in general. The image portrayed at the upper levels of this sport does more to hurt its further development at the youth and high school levels than the media exposure it generates. While the governing boards of hockey at the upper levels have, in recent years, worked to tighten their rules, they have a long way to go toward improving sportsmanship and image. The mental set they portray to younger players has a lot to do with the attitude high school hockey players bring with them when they participate on a school team.

Non-School Coaching Staff — At the present time in Michigan, very few high school hockey coaches teach or work in their school district. Most coaches have a full time career outside education. As a result, a large number of these individuals usually have not received college training in education courses, child development, or the philosophies and goals for education, especially educational-athletics. In addition, most of the state's high school hockey coaches began their coaching career in the amateur system. With the existing rules and philosophies of amateur hockey (as outlined above), the new high school coach can arrive at his/her position with a different set of goals than what may be expected by the district. Because the media exposure at the prep level is usually greater than in amateur sports, the new coach may also be influenced and feel pressure to win. Unless the athletic director spends a reasonable amount of time "educating" the new coach on the main objectives of their school district and athletic program, it could spell trouble down the road.

Parental Perspective — As in all high school sports, parents can be positive supporters, constant complainers or anywhere in between. Hockey parents usually bring a unique mindset to their child's high school team for a couple of very good reasons. Since most high school players have been involved in amateur hockey, their parents have also traveled the same road. If the environment and sportsmanship expectations at the amateur level are below that of the high school’s, then it is easily understood why some parents can also think and operate in the same manner. Parents need to be
instructed that they may have to put into practice a different set of rules and take on a slightly different role now that their child is playing high school sports.

Finally, school personnel must understand that typical long-term hockey parents, especially those involved in travel hockey, have for many years invested a tremendous amount of time, money, and effort in their child’s skill development. They, as well as other siblings within their family, have made significant personal sacrifices. Very few parents, if any, in other high school sports come close to hockey parents on this issue. Like anything else, the more we have invested in something the more we are concerned about its outcome. Thus, at times, times, many hockey parents can be over-zealous and have too high of expectations of the coach and the program in general. It is extremely helpful to understand where hockey parents have been and why they may, at times, seem too intense in the support of their child.

**Officiating the Game** — Ice hockey officials have a very challenging job. Because there are not enough to meet the demand, they are called on to officiate many different levels of play, often on the same day. On weekends, many begin refereeing at 6 or 7 a.m. with 8-10-year-olds in non-checking leagues, then do several other games during the day, and conclude with a junior or high school game in the evening. Sunday nights you can find many referees officiating no-check adult league games until midnight! At times it is difficult for many referees to make game-by-game adjustments in the rule changes that govern each level and the extent in which certain judgement calls are enforced. Sometimes, the differences in enforcement of certain rules — or lack thereof — can cause players, coaches, and/or administrators frustrations and problems. A great deal of understanding and appreciation must be exercised toward ice hockey officials. They generally do an outstanding job, especially considering their ever-changing roles and responsibilities.

**Non-School Building Rental** — Private arenas are in business to make money and are not necessarily set up to support educational athletics. Two sided seating, one for each team’s fans, are almost non-existent. This forces the student bodies and opposition parents to sit near each other during the contest. Late evening games are often difficult to administrate and should be avoided, especially between schools who have long-standing rivalries in other sports.

**Non-School Security Personnel** — At most high school sporting events, the athletic department does the hiring of event security and minor officials. These individuals often work in another capacity within the school district. They are experienced in working with young adults and have at least a general understanding of the purposes and goals of educational athletics.

Since ice hockey games are held mostly at private or community ice arenas, arena management is typically responsible for these individuals. Occasionally, the people he/she hires can become more of a problem than a solution when problems arise. The athletic department has less control of what is being tolerated in terms of school rules, and less say in who is enforcing arena policies. This issue can become a real headache for school administration if not monitored carefully.

Utilizing school staff, who tend to be mature, accepted authority figures to students and adult fans, can help control or more importantly avoid problems. These individuals must be placed in key locations (between competing team fans when seating arrangements demand, exits, loitering areas, bathroom lobbies, etc.). Providing them and their families with free passes to the game(s) is an easy enticement to get their assistance.

**NON-PLAYER RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**

Many problems occur when the head coach fails to establish and/or maintain a positive relationship with those individuals that support his/her team. While this takes extra time, the effort, both long and short term, can serve to minimize a great deal of frustration and misunderstanding. A hockey program has the best chance for success when the head coach makes time to develop a report with those individuals who impact the players and the team in general. Following are 10 primary individuals (or groups) that serve this purpose.

**Athletic Director’s Office** — The Athletic Director is the coach’s boss. It is the head coaches responsibility to keep the AD informed on team organization, selection criteria and process, financial needs and expenditures, discipline problems, transportation issues, parent concerns, fundraising, and any other major situation that involves the team. Just like anyone else, athletic directors do not like surprises! It is always best to inform the AD first of any situation that he/she may be called on to address at a later date. This is especially true of concerns involving athletes or parents of athletes. If the head coach errors in this regard, it should always be on the side of too much communication as opposed to not enough.

In addition, the head coach must maintain a very positive working relationship with the AD’s secretary, for he/she can be a big asset to any coach.

**Building Level Administration** — The principal is the head of the entire high school operation, and often this includes the Athletic Department. The head coach will spend more time, however, communicating with the assistant principal(s). The two largest areas of contact will occur when one of the coach’s athletes does not follow a school rule and is disciplined. The other is at home games where an administrator is required to be in attendance. It is very important, therefore, that the head coach take the initiative to introduce him/herself to the building administrators that will become a part of the overall hockey program.