

Adult Hockey League - A Novice Idea

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Sherwood Ice Arena has expanded its adult hockey program with a refreshing philosophy:
No experience necessary.

By Patrick Sherman

When Sherwood Ice Arena began operations in July 2000 outside Portland, Ore., it established "B" and "C" leagues that attracted typical adult hockey players - skaters with years of experience as youngsters or in school.

"Hockey is a very difficult sport to pick up later in life," explains Bob Knoerl, the rink's general manager, "especially for an absolute beginner going up against more experienced players." In spite of that fact, a core group of novice adult skaters with a passion for hockey began to coalesce at SIA.

"We're not the kind of rink that sits back and waits for things to come to us," says Knoerl. "When we begin to recognize a market, we go for it."

With the help of his staff, Knoerl engineered a fundamental change in the arena's hockey program.

"Our hockey director at the time was a gifted instructor named Matt Greenlaw," Knoerl says. "He played an important role in putting the program together." Under the new regime, the "B" and "C" designations were eliminated and a three-tiered system was introduced, using bronze, silver and gold to reflect the capabilities of the players participating. Gold-level skaters are the equivalent of "B" league players elsewhere, and Silver play is analogous to "C" league hockey.

The real innovation was the Bronze League, created to give true novice adult hockey players the opportunity to compete against people at their own skill level.

"When you watch Bronze League players on the ice, they're like mini-mites in adult bodies. Most of these people have never played the game before, and some have never even skated," Knoerl notes.

From the initial handful of beginners eager for a league of their own, Bronze-level hockey blossomed to four teams with 10 players each by the time the first puck was dropped.

"We had people coming out of the woodwork - women and men, people who are 50, 60 years old - it blew me away," Knoerl recalls.

Experienced players were recruited to serve as coaches for the Bronze league teams, and to teach the new players the fundamentals of the game.

"Some of these folks didn't even understand the offsides rule, let alone positional hockey," says Greenlaw. "Finding the right people to serve as coaches was critical for the success of the Bronze league."

In order to keep all three leagues competitive, Knoerl and the SIA staff constantly monitor the development of each player, advancing them to the next level of play when their skills warrant it.

Biz Zorrick, who took over from Greenlaw as hockey director shortly after the Bronze League was

established, described what he looks for when deciding which players are ready to "graduate" to the Silver league play.

"More than any one skill, like skating or stick handling, we look at people's confidence, their comfort level on the ice. When we see everything start coming together, it's time for them to move up," says Zorrick.

"We always want the Bronze League to be a place where somebody who is fresh and new to the sport can fit in," Knoerl says. "We never want there to be too big a spread between the rookies and the most seasoned players. If that means some people can't play in the Bronze League, that's OK with us."

Knoerl adds, "The integrity of the league is more important than the one player who wants to skate with his best buddy."

The rate of player retention following promotion to Silver-level play has been excellent, which has allowed SIA to expand participation in its traditional adult hockey program. Eventually, the Silver League grew to include 16 teams, but a widening gap between the skill levels on the different teams forced the arena to innovate once again.

"Ultimately, what we decided to do was to divide the Silver League into an upper and a lower division," explains Zorrick. "So we now have Silver A and Silver B, with eight teams apiece." The league was divided mid-season, with the standings being used to determine each team's new division.

Meanwhile, the Bronze League has continued to thrive, owing to a steady stream of new adult hockey players finding their way to the arena.

"One big source of new players are the hockey moms and hockey dads who are already spending hours here each week," says Knoerl. "It used to be that parents would bring their children in to play hockey, but now that's been turned upside-down. For example, at the start of this most recent season, we had seven or eight new Bronze League skaters sign up because their kids play."

A partnership with Portland's major junior hockey team, the Winter Hawks, has been another source for new novice players. In addition to setting up a booth on the concourse to talk to fans about playing hockey, Bronze League skaters have played exhibition games between periods.

"People come up to the booth after every exhibition, and they say, 'Hey, I think I could do that,'" Zorrick says.

"It's really worked out well for the arena and the Winter Hawks both," adds Knoerl. "Of course, the fans love to see the little guys out on the ice, but youth hockey doesn't get started in Portland until a month after the Winter Hawk season begins. The Bronze league plays year round, so our skaters are available from day one, and besides, it's a real thrill for them."

The rink's other programs, such as adult learn-to-skate classes, also provide recruits for the Bronze League.

"I wonder how many people sign up for adult skating lessons who have no idea that they will eventually be playing hockey," notes Lisa Mizonick, skating director at SIA. "It is something they have never even considered, but then they start meeting people and forming relationships that lead them into the sport."

Developing the Bronze League has been a huge success for SIA, but it has been an even bigger success for the Bronze League players themselves - it has given dozens of people who otherwise would likely have never participated in organized ice hockey the opportunity to play and compete,

to make new friends and to push themselves to the limit.

"There are people in the Bronze League who will play at that level for their entire careers - and that's great," says Knoerl. "It's all about having fun and doing the best you can."

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