

## ***Cross ice Passes the Test: Hockey Eastern Ontario pilot project popular with both players and parents***

Wendy Graves (151022)

---

The smiles tell the story.

Over the past three weeks 180 Novice-age kids have seen a significant jump in their ice times, as they've been part of a Cross Ice 4-on-4 pilot project spearheaded by Hockey Eastern Ontario Minor District 2 and hosted by the Cornwall Minor Hockey Association (CMHA).

In Cross Ice teams play the width of the ice instead of the length, allowing for more chances to pass, shoot and stick-handle and less time spent chasing the puck up and down the entire rink. More time playing – and less time waiting for the next shift – organizers say, will improve players' skill and increase their enjoyment of the game.

“We noticed that our development at the younger ages isn't what it used to be,” says Marc Richer, the chair for HEO Minor District 2. “By having this project the kids are on the ice all the time. Nobody gets to sit down.”

One sheet of ice is temporarily turned into three, with up to 24 kids on the ice at once – eight per game – during each 30-minute playing session. For kids who may be playing their first year of hockey and still getting used to simply skating, it's encouraging for them to constantly be in the middle of the action.

“In a regular hockey game they wouldn't get too far from the face-off circle, but in these games, because it's such a small area, they're always part of the play,” says Pat McLeod, president of the CMHA. “Just yesterday I saw one kid who probably wouldn't touch the puck at all during the game able to stick-handle three or four times before he lost the puck. The smile on that kid's face shows that there is definitely merit to this.”

The pre-season initiative includes all six MHAs in HEO District 2: Cornwall, as well as Akwesasne, Alexandria, Char-Lan, South Stormont and NGS.

A 50-minute session for full-ice hockey usually means about 34 minutes of game time. With between 12 and 15 players typically per team in Cornwall that works out to 10 to 15 minutes of actual playing time per skater.

“For me that isn't optimal for development,” says McLeod. “We decided to have the kids play half-hour games where they're on the ice for the entire half hour. There are no line changes.”

Twelve skaters are split into three teams of four. Cornwall 1, say, plays Char-Lan 1 on Sheet A for nine minutes, then moves to Sheet B to play Char-Lan 2 for nine minutes, then to Sheet C

for its final “period” versus Char-Lan 3. Kids have gone from getting 10 minutes a game to 27 minutes. With the tournament-style scheduling set-up, kids are back on the ice a little later in the day for another 30-minute session.

HEO and CMHA were encouraged to initiate the cross-ice pilot project after seeing studies conducted by USA Hockey that showed the game’s benefits. By creating a playing field more suitable for a player’s size and skill – similar to playing cross-field games in soccer – players engaged in twice as many puck battles and doubled their number of pass attempts, puck touches and times they had to change direction on the ice. Each player also recorded six times as many shots on net and received five times as many passes.

Skaters aren’t the only ones seeing an increase in action; the goalies are also learning more quickly the basics of better body positioning.

“Our goalies are actually exhausted at the end,” says McLeod. “Instead of facing 15 shots they’re facing 20 or 30 shots every nine minutes. It’s just shot after shot after shot at them.”

“We’re hoping to be able to show success in the program and that some of our other districts will jump on board,” says Denis Dumais, president of the HEO Minor Executive Council. “HEO believes this is the way of the future.” Everybody touches the puck, everybody gets more time to develop skills early on and nobody gets left behind before they even have both feet comfortably on the ice.

Both HEO Minor and CMHA would like to bring the program back next season. McLeod says there are no thoughts of replacing full-ice hockey with cross-ice, but they would consider extending the four-on-four time into the opening weeks of the regular season.

“I think we’re in agreement that it will never be a full-season thing,” he says, “but with the development increase, the puck touches increase, the more time on the ice, how long do we want this to go into a season to make sure we’re developing the players the best we can.”