



RMMHA INITIATION PROGRAM UPDATE 2023/24 SEASON

INTRODUCTION

This season there are a few exciting changes to the Initiation hockey, (formerly U6, U7, U8, and U9) within the Pacific Coast Amateur Hockey Association. Starting this season, PCAHA member associations voted to make changes that bring us into alignment with the Hockey Canada's U7 and U9 Player Pathways.

At the initiation level, it is essential that all players are exposed to hockey in a thoughtful and considered fashion so that they can have the best possible chance to fall in love with hockey. Fun and engagement go hand in hand, and must be considered essential components for young hockey players. On the ice, the primary focus of the U7 and U9 player pathways is to teach the core individual hockey skills of skating, passing, puck control, and shooting; as well as how to apply those skills within the hockey context.

Ultimately, the primary objective of the U7 and U9 player pathways is to provide the athlete an opportunity to develop their passion for the game and to prepare the athlete for the U11 Player Pathway where the player will apply their hard earned skills while learning how to play the formal game of hockey.

These player pathways are part of Hockey Canada's "Long Term Athlete Development" model, where the primary objective is to create life long hockey players that are confident in challenging themselves to play their best, at their own skill level - for life.

WHAT?

What has changed? Associations now have greater flexibility to create programming that best serves the needs of their association by allowing for two year age groups, while grouping players by skill level to improve player experience and development.

What we are not doing, is creating a "rep" or "competitive" division; where winning and losing is the primary concern. Grouping players by skill, is a continuation of what we have been doing at RMMHA for some time. We are grouping players by skill for the sole benefit of all of our athletes so that they can receive the the development they need, at their skill level.

WHY?

Whether your athlete is brand new to the sport, or is hockey crazy and has been on the ice for years; we all want our kids to be competitive and engaged. Players that are playing against

peers with like skill, will have more opportunities to compete, to be successful and to have a greater impact on a game. The more a player has the opportunity to have success, the more the player will be engaged, and the more fun the athlete will have. The more fun the athlete has, the more they are likely to push themselves to achieve more.

Using an extreme example, a first year player would most likely not have the confidence or ability to challenge a player who has played for multiple years and has had countless development opportunities. In this scenario, neither athlete gains anything from competing against one another; and it is this scenario that we need to prevent.

By grouping athletes by skill, and balancing teams within those skill groups, we will be helping our coaches create development plans that are easier to implement. It is near impossible to plan practices that challenge both the new to hockey athlete and the more proficient athlete at the same time. By creating more consistent skill groups our coaches will have an easier time creating impactful practices that will provide the athletes the learning they need, when they need it.

By having teams that are of a more consistent skill group, we expect to see more competition during game play. We expect that by separating the extremes in skill type, each player will be more likely to compete, and find success. Whether it is a proficient skill group, or a developing skill group, we want to see all players competing at the top of their abilities.

HOW?

RMMHA EVALUATION PROCESS

Our evaluation process will essentially remain unchanged from the past few years. From the athlete and parent perspective, it should be immediately recognizable, and except for a few logistical changes, should be indistinguishable from last season.

PHASE 1: RUST OFF SKATES

All players being evaluated will be scheduled for two on ice “Rust Off” skates to get the athletes back in the habit of being on the ice. These ice times will not be evaluated and will be used to make sure kids have a chance to warm up their skills after the summer break. Drill selection will be straightforward and will include lots of game play to make sure athletes have fun. Players will be grouped based on their teams from the prior season, so that each player gets to walk into a room full of friends and coaches they know,

PHASE 2: SKILLS EVALUATION

All players, still in the same groups from Phase 1, will be scheduled for two skills evaluation ice times. All players will have the same practice for each skate, as we strive for consistency during the evaluation process. The first ice time for each athlete will not be evaluated and will be a “teaching” practice, to ensure the athlete understands the drills and can perform at their highest level. During the second ice time, athletes will be evaluated on their core individual hockey skills using Team Genius software by our coaches. This will result in each player receiving a score out of 10 for their individual hockey skills.

Using the player data gathered in this phase, players will be re-grouped for Phase 3.

PHASE 3: GAME PLAY

In this phase, players will be grouped according to skill, based on the results of Phase 2. Players will be placed into balanced skill groups so that we can have 2 ice times where players will be evaluated on their game play. While playing against players within their own skill range, the athlete will be evaluated on their impact on the game. The resulting game play evaluation score will be combined with their individual skill score to create a final data point for each player. Using the Team Genius software, teams will be formed using a “Snake Draft” algorithm to create balanced teams within both the developing and proficient skill groups.

U6 DIVISION

We strongly believe that our youngest athletes are best served by playing with kids that are the same age, as there is an incredible difference in maturity between a child who hasn't yet entered kindergarten, and a grade 1 student. At this young age, learning how to be in an organized group is one of the first skills our athletes need to learn.

We believe that by focusing on creating strong social connections, we are creating an environment where our U6 age athletes can develop a strong love of the game. At this age, player skill level can fluctuate day to day, and separating athletes based on skill isn't the primary factor to consider. Players in this age group will not be evaluated, but will instead be placed on teams that are heavily influenced by the athletes school.

Learning hockey is hard for most of our athletes and for many, having a friend is the only reason hockey is fun in the early years. It is for this reason that all U6 age kids will continue to be placed on teams based on their school. We need kids to love coming to the rink and we believe that this is the best way to achieve that.

As the season progresses, our U6 age teams will have gameplay opportunities by scrimmaging against other RMMHA teams and through RMMHA Jamborees. These teams are not expected to play other teams within PCAHA.

U7 DIVISION

This division will be comprised of U7 age athletes. All athletes will complete the evaluation process and be placed on a team in either the developing or proficient skill group. All teams within each skill group will be balanced to the greatest degree possible. We expect to have half of our teams in each category.

Once teams are formed, they will play amongst other balanced teams in that skill category. Teams will play not only teams from RMMHA, but will play teams within Fraser Valley North (Port Coquitlam, Coquitlam, and Port Moody) after the Christmas break. Prior to the Christmas break, there will be in house game play amongst RMMHA teams.

U7 Teams will have the opportunity to play in tournaments hosted by other PCAHA member associations.

U9 DIVISION

This division will be comprised of both U8 and U9 age athletes. All athletes will complete the evaluation process and be placed on a team in either the developing or proficient skill group. All teams within each skill group will be balanced to the greatest degree possible.

Once teams are formed, they will play amongst other balanced teams in that skill category. Teams will play not only teams from RMMHA, but teams within Fraser Valley North (Port Coquitlam, Coquitlam, and Port Moody) as well.

After January 15th, gameplay will transition to full ice for all U9 Athletes.

All U9 Teams will have the opportunity to play in tournaments within PCAHA as well as other zones with in BC.

MINI-RUSTLER PROGRAM

Another exciting announcement is our brand new Mini-Rustler program. This 18 week program is for U5 age athletes and will be run by members of the RMMHA development team. The Mini-Rustler Program is designed to provide kids the opportunity to learn some basic skills and have lots of fun prior to their official start of minor hockey at U6. For more information, please visit our website at: <https://www.ridgemeanowshockey.com/mini-rustlers-u5/>

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The goal for those of us on the RMMHA Board of Directors is to provide the best possible hockey experience for each and everyone of our athletes. We work hard to make sure that coming to the rink is the highlight of the week for each of our kids (and their families) and that each athlete has the best possible environment to follow their dreams. As an association, we want to be extremely competitive in the older age groups, in both the Rep and House levels. We want our athletes to achieve success while proudly wearing Rustler jerseys. We believe that in order to achieve that goal, we must start by focusing on skill development, creating strong athlete engagement, and fostering a competitive culture at the youngest ages. We believe that these changes give us a better ability to do just that.

As previously mentioned, while we are separating kids based on skill, this is for a very different purpose than in our “A” program at the older ages. In those ages, winning and losing becomes progressively more important as the athlete moves up through the ages. At the initiation level, we are not separating kids by skill to win hockey games, we are doing this to better develop all of our athletes so that they can have success at the older ages. There will be no scores kept at this level. Learning to compete isn’t dependent on keeping score, but rather creating a culture where the athlete learns to enjoy competing against themselves during the learning process.

In an ideal world, our athletes will be oblivious to everything you are reading. It is my hope that from the athlete perspective, they will show up to some pre-season warm up skates and at some point they will find themselves on a team with some old friends, and some new. We strongly encourage parents not to challenge their athlete to “make the good team” and only to have as much fun as possible, while doing their best.

Initiation hockey is the start of what we we hope is a long hockey journey for these young athletes - not the end. We know that no matter what skill group an athlete ends up on, they will have the opportunity to have an incredible season. We know that no matter what skill group an athlete is in at U9, they are not going to be “stuck” for their for their minor hockey playing career. There are countless examples of athletes who have “come out of nowhere” to play competitive hockey at older age groups.

While we will have parent and coach meetings to further explain these changes and other important points; please feel free to reach out if you have any specific questions or concerns.

I hope that everyone is able to enjoy the last few weeks of summer and I look forward to seeing everyone at the rink soon.

Thanks,

Devon