

Half-ice hockey becoming the norm for younger age groups

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In a nation of hockey-crazed Canadians, there is always a polarizing subject to split the population.

The latest has been the implementation of half-ice hockey into the minor ranks, leaving parents and players alike on either side of the fence as to its effects, both positive and negative.

With the implementation of split-ice into the Tyke level for the 2018-19 season, the start of the 2019-20 season last month brought in new rules for the Novice level to play at half-ice for the first half of the season, before making the transition to a full length pad.

?You don't put five- and six-year-olds on a full-size soccer pitch, or expect them to play basketball on a full-sized court with no height adjustments ? hockey is no different,? Hockey Canada says on its website. ?Cross-ice/half-ice hockey allows young players the opportunity for more puck-touches which promotes greater opportunity for skill development (puck-handling, shooting, skating, coordination) and decision-making.?

The changes come hand-in-hand with a new style of puck at the novice level, moving to a 4-ounce puck rather than the regular 5.5-ounce puck.

?By shrinking the space we've given kids the opportunity to play in an area that is more conducive to developing skills at their level?Good players will benefit from a system like this as much as the new players coming into the game,? said Hockey Canada vice-president of hockey development Paul Carson in a webinar on changing the look of minor hockey in Ontario.

Schomberg Minor Hockey President Ilya Dagenais admitted it took him some time to warm up to the idea.

?To be honest I was pessimistic towards it all when I first saw the implementation guide,? said Dagenais. ?However after seeing it in action everything Hockey Canada said is true. The kids are more engaged, they get to touch the puck more and are having a ton of fun.

?I think the parents are more upset than the kids. Time will tell if long term it's successful for improved development of core hockey skills.?

According to the Ontario Minor Hockey Association, the implementation of half-ice hockey into Novice won't have kids feeling bored on the ice, something they admit a large number of parents have brought up as a potential issue across the province. In fact, an internal study said that kids earn six times more shots, five times more passes, and two times more puck touches while playing on split ice.

If that all rings true, Carson said it could prove vital for the player's development upon making the transition to a full ice surface, which for most Ontario Novice hockey organizations should come in early 2020.

?It's all part of a player's development?players will find it easier to learn the basics on the smaller ice surface, and will be better prepared for the higher age levels.?