

OJHL season may be over, but support for players continues

By **Robert Belardi**

It wasn't a pleasant piece of news in a time where anything pleasant seems to be few and far between.

On April 13, the Ontario Junior Hockey League (OJHL) released an email declaring their 2021 season had been cancelled. Done. Finished. Relinquished. However you want to put it, there will be no official games from here on out.

The Board of Governors brought this to an official vote on which direction they found most suitable and during the current stay-at-home order this was the best fit.

Under normal circumstances the OJHL season would have officially ended on May 31 of this year.

With Ontario currently in a 28-day Stay at Home order and the end of the Hockey Canada season fast approaching, the league's Board of Governors have made the very difficult decision to officially conclude the 2020-2021 OJHL season and turn our attention and planning for the upcoming 2021-2022 season, said league commissioner Marty Savoy in a statement.

For Junior A hockey, it has been turbulent few months on end enduring the current struggle of the pandemic. Since cancelling the season at the midway point in 2020, there have been numerous adjustments to get things back up and running with compliance to the provincial government's provisions.

On September 5, 2020, the OJHL had planned to begin the season at the end of October and November with alternative start dates. Teams were permitted to train and the commissioner Marty Savoy said at the time that the league wouldn't begin until the number of fans entering the arenas were to be determined.

Five days later, on September 10, the Ontario government was preparing to invest \$21 million dollars into aiding athletes and coaches in the province.

Director of Communications Jim Mason confirmed this would not apply to the OJHL.

New five-on-five formats had been approved by the Ontario Hockey Federation. Playoff formats were being headlined. A deal with a disinfecting service had been made. But, of course, COVID got in the way. While these had been confirmed, the league began to target January as a new start date.

In December, the OJHL began offering COVID-modified mental health support began by the OJHL and the OJHL Foundation. The Foundation's First Assist Program provided an outlet for all 507 elite-student athletes across all 22 teams. It was also available for coaches and team staff.

Most recently, before the cancellation of the season, the OJHL had reportedly made major upgrades to their photography services.

The OJHL has studied every possible scenario to get our players back on the ice and, unfortunately, with the current state of the pandemic and provincial guidelines, we are unable to conduct the 2020-2021 season, OJHL Chairman Marc Mercier said in the press release.

As a Governor of a team within the league, I realize the disappointment and impact this decision has on our players.

Despite the frustrations and all of the disappointments for Junior A hockey players, it might be possible for teams in certain regions to play some exhibition games.

As stated in a press release the OJHL has said once the stay-at-home order is lifted, teams that are permitted to play with respect to the current provisions of their Regional Health Units may participate in exhibition games.

The release confirmed in total so far, only six teams have played in a total of 58 exhibition games.