

Alberta Female Hockey Review 2013

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November 29, 2013

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Review Objectives

1. Gather information on the current state of female hockey in Alberta and gather information on best practices throughout Canada.
2. To determine observations and themes based on information gathered that will provide a foundation for the forward progress of the female game in Alberta.
3. To present the themes and observations to the 2013 Semi-annual meeting of Hockey Alberta.

Methodology

- Two surveys, face to face interviews and telephone interviews were conducted in November 2013. In total 75 people were invited to complete a survey; 21 people participated in face-to-face interviews and 15 telephone interviews were conducted. Interviews included players, coaches, parents, minor hockey and league executives and key staff of Hockey Canada and Hockey Alberta. Coaches from a sport school, a sport academy, ACAC and CIS contributed to our understanding.
- The two surveys sought to determine preferences and rationale for female hockey participation in leagues and sport schools, opportunity levels and barriers to participation, the role of sport schools in Alberta and how female hockey in Alberta might be enhanced. Face to face and telephone interviews sought to dig much deeper than a survey might to determine the state of hockey while identify challenges and opportunities for enhancement to the female game.
- Exit interview data from the 2012 Hockey Alberta U18 female players, coaches and parents was reviewed.

Key Findings

- Most female hockey people have the same expectations of girls' hockey as they do for boys' hockey. These expectations for female hockey are very much ahead of the pace of growth. There is a significant concern with a focus that is increasingly seen as developing hockey players' vs developing athletes.
- Club teams, leagues and provincial and national team programs work in opposition to each other as opposed to complementing each other.
- There is a perception that Hockey Alberta is not really in charge of female hockey programming and that entrepreneurial and business entities are now the driving force behind elite female hockey but with a significant effect on traditional programs.
- The majority of respondents agreed that there are enough AAA teams and more teams create greater pressures on minor hockey associations to keep up with private entrepreneurial schools. Volunteers run organizations are challenged to compete with private business in providing access to facilities and experts in fitness training, nutrition and career guidance.
- Minor hockey programs are facing increasing pressure from private entrepreneurial entities, sport schools and sport academies and in effect creating a great pressure on everyone to compete for players and parents who want much more than is currently available.
- The number of teams and players below the AAA level cannot sustain the demands and recruiting of players by sport schools.
- There is a strongly-perceived belief that those girls wishing to pursue provincial and national teams as well as scholarships to US institutions will have a better chance if they access the training opportunities provided by sport schools.
- Sport Schools are seen as a better program to garner exposure to scouts for national teams as well as NCAA programs. They are also seen as providing better coaching and greater access to supportive training requirements than minor hockey programs where access to facilities and experts is limited. The day time access to resources is a significant benefit for girls wanting more than the traditional minor hockey program is able to provide.
- Several parents indicated that the Sport School option was a "life style" choice for their family. Hockey, school and training were all covered off during the day which freed up evenings for studies and family, friendship time. This in particular was evident in Calgary where travel across the city for practices and games takes an increasing amount of time, for youth and parents, on very busy roads.
- Concern was expressed in Calgary that adding a Winsport team to the mix goes against decisions made to decrease the number of AAA teams in Calgary. It was stated that "adding another team doesn't make sense".
- The process to approval of sport teams may not be clear to all parties.
- Much of the dialogue and arising themes in this review mirror or complement at least three theme outcomes from the 2013 Alberta Hockey Summit Report.
 - **Clear Alignment and Vision for Hockey in Alberta**
 - **Develop a Model for the Ideal LMHA**
 - **Focus on the Player**

Food for Thought – Ideas from Experts and Female Hockey Stakeholders

These are ideas and thought shared from experts like Mel Davidson and Paul Carson of Hockey Canada, coaches and administrators at all levels. Sport Schools and academies as well as ACAC and CIS coaches contributed and were in agreement with the ideas shared below.

1. Hockey Alberta may need to take a more direct facilitative leadership role in ensuring a female hockey development model that incorporates existing minor hockey associations, leagues and sport schools and hockey academies. This model should more closely match the ideals of the LTAD model. Hockey Alberta may need to take a more direct role in controlling numbers of games that teams and leagues participate in to better ensure a development focus.
2. The idea of a hybrid program that provides less league play and more competitive and special training opportunities for players and coaches was shared by several respondents. Possible expansion of the Team Alberta program made available in the way of “special training initiatives” that all players could access. Leagues would be required to build breaks in their scheduling to accommodate participation.
3. The working relationships between stakeholders need attention. Efforts to work more closely and cooperatively with leagues and club teams to ensure “best practices” is key for athletes participating in provincial and national high performance teams.
4. Additional coach mentorship for male coaches in minor hockey to gain skills for working with female athletes is important.
5. Role clarity for Sport Schools in the province and ensure oversight with respect to guidelines and rules around recruitment of players.
6. An in-depth review of other models like Quebec and Saskatchewan along with purposeful discussions will help facilitate a made-in-Alberta program. A moratorium on new sport school teams may need to be considered to allow for a clear framework to be established.
7. Eleven Midget AAA and 4 Sport School teams have a significant impact on the current structure or system. Male programs see 5% of their total registrations playing “AAA” hockey. Female hockey has a 22% participation level. Is this healthy?

Recommendation

Form a consortium or group of experts in female hockey to consider:

- Review the Review
- Make recommendations to Hockey Alberta Board of Directors
- Develop a Female ADM and supporting framework.
- Draft a vision for female hockey and create a growth plan.
- Identify ways to establish complementary programs for female players.
- Bring LMHA, Leagues and Sport Schools together.

Review of Themes Arising

Theme Participation Opportunities

- Registration rates differ greatly between urban and rural centers resulting in differing opportunities, especially for higher skilled levels of players. Parents are wanting more than the current resources of local minor hockey associations can provide.
- In most rural locations females must play in the male program. Moving to a centre with greater female opportunities is a challenge due to player release requirements and general unwillingness of associations to let players leave their programs. High proportions of female players are in male programs even in Edmonton and Calgary where “girl only” programs exist.
- Facility access is a challenge in many locations with limited ice times for all teams and in particular for new female teams.
- Most felt that recruitment of new players should be an intentional activity for Hockey Alberta and minor hockey associations.
- When asked whether girls should be forced to play in female-only programs, the majority felt that girls should have the choice to play where they were capable of playing. Most also felt that they should be playing on girl only teams by Bantam.

Theme Skill Development and Competitive Opportunities

- Concern was expressed by knowledgeable persons and recognized experts that there is less and less focus on developing athletes and more and more on developing hockey players. This may be a reason why Alberta is less represented on national teams; our skill level is not sufficient. Skill development at all levels is paramount and a better job is required to improve skills of young girls.
- Many felt that male coaches needed additional training and support to be better able to work with young girls and female athletes in general.
- League and club team coaches struggle to work together with provincial programming to ensure athletes are available and physically and mentally ready to participate in activities like the National U18 and Canada Games programming.
- There is a need to enhance competitive opportunities for better players as leagues are not seen as providing enough high level competition.
- Additional training including access to experts in nutrition, fitness and mental skills is important for minor hockey teams to be successful. Minor hockey programs may need to find a way to offer additional programming to the better players or risk losing them to a program that is able to provide it.
- Our findings are supported by existing research on female hockey participation. Girls appreciate opportunities to play with like-minded players and skill levels.
- All respondents indicated that Hockey Alberta does an excellent job of its U17 and U18 programs.

Theme Working Relationships

- Almost all respondents indicated similar wants for programming. Most also indicated that leagues and Hockey Alberta must work much more cooperatively with respect to scheduling and ensuring opportunities are available.
- There is great frustration among the leagues, Hockey Alberta, parents and players at the seemingly great difficulty in planning the various programs. More must be done to ensure national and provincial programs are made available to athletes wanting to participate at this level. It appears that people are working against each other and are struggling with the flexibility to make a workable system..
- Club team coaches do not appear to support Hockey Alberta high performance programming. They see it as “stealing our players” when they need them for their own team and league commitments.

Theme Governance & Role Clarity

- There was significant agreement that minor hockey associations and sport schools operate by much different rules and that improvements in oversight by Hockey Alberta is required. Some indicated that rules around recruiting players by Sport Schools are non-existent and or are not followed. Frustration was evident among minor hockey groups that there are different and much more restrictive rules for minor hockey than sport schools.
- Some felt that improvements in representation of female hockey at the Hockey Alberta level were required. Some felt that when female hockey was absorbed into minor hockey several years ago that female hockey has lost its voice because male hockey comes first.
- Several people interviewed indicated that they felt that Hockey Alberta should be the main organizer of AAA Female Hockey as the challenges faced administratively by volunteers is becoming unmanageable especially given the increasing number of private programs competing for players.
- Most felt that there is a role for Sport Schools in the province but that its role and that of minor hockey associations, leagues and Hockey Alberta need to be clarified. Guidelines and operational rules need to be developed so as to enhance participation and available competition opportunities.
- At times it felt like people believed Hockey Alberta was a competitor for players just like associations, leagues and sport schools. Groups seem to hunker down to protect what they have versus working together to enhance opportunities for players.

Limitations of this Review

1. In the initial stages of our review development we felt it important to have more face to face interview style interactions vs the survey method. This certainly gave us a chance to dig deeper for clarification and additional comments but our time limitations and peoples schedules didn't allow for as many face to face interviews as initially planned for.
2. Not all minor hockey associations were surveyed; this in itself is not a problem other than by not including everyone some may feel excluded from an important process.
3. Due to time constraints we did not review the practices of other provinces. The researcher's belief is that Hockey Alberta staff has a pretty good handle on this information and therefore this was not a priority.
4. This is one person's understanding and summary of interviews and survey feedback. A larger group of experts may want to review the review and further develop recommendations for the consideration of Hockey Alberta.

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