



## **What the ADM Could Mean**

### **By Lyle Phair**

By now you would have had to have been living in a cave or be a complete newbie to the youth hockey world to have not at least heard of the American Development Model, more commonly known as the ADM.

That doesn't necessarily mean that you even remotely understand what exactly it is. Few people really do. And I am fairly sure that if you asked ten different people what it is, you would get ten different answers.

The ADM is exactly that. A recommended model, a blueprint that can be used by those who choose to. It is not a mandate forced upon the hockey community. It is a model developed utilizing the principles of Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) and extensive research and studies of how children learn and grow from toddlers to pre-teens to teenagers to young adults. If you have had an opportunity to see a presentation by the USA Hockey staff you had to have been impressed. It makes a lot of sense and there is plenty of supporting data.

However, change is never easy and it will probably take the better part of a decade to really see any noticeable impact on the youth hockey world in this country. But not in Michigan.

Noticeable changes have already started and we should be very much concerned about the effect those changes could have on the game here.

#### **A bottom up approach**

The ADM is essentially a bottom up approach to developing the player pool in USA Hockey. At the base, the entry level to the game, it is structured to allow for more players to get involved in playing the game by maximizing ice utilization to ultimately make the game more affordable. It's a pretty simple concept really. More players on the ice means the cost of that ice is split up among more players, which means it is less expensive for each of them. It is a rational approach to breaking down one of the barriers to entry - the perception (and in many cases and places reality) that the game is expensive to play.

From there it becomes about providing the same opportunity for all players to enjoy the game and develop their skills as they grow and mature. Which is in stark contrast to the current hockey model that demands that the biggest, most physically mature 7- and 8-year olds get promoted to the "travel" team with more ice time and "better coaching" while the remainder of the kids who were not blessed with an early-in-the-year birth date or a pre-pubescent growth spurt are thrown into the house hockey pool and treated as second-class citizens of the hockey world.

Ironically enough, some of these early outcasts survive and eventually surpass the early developers who for any number of reasons (stop growing, burn-out, inflated ego, pushy parents) flame out. Unfortunately there just aren't enough that have the chance to overcome the early odds they are subjected too. If that sounds a little like the "Tortoise and the Hare" it's not a coincidence. The growth of a hockey player is a marathon, not a sprint.

As players hit and surpass puberty, that's when it starts to really matter. Kids have physically and mentally matured to the point where the real hockey players start to separate themselves from those who matured early and didn't continue to grow and evolve. High Performance Club teams are formed from the best players in a program and those teams compete against teams from other clubs.

Obviously there is much, much more to it than that very simplistic overview. At the end of the day, the objective of the model is more players playing and more better players being produced. And like any model, it has its strong points and its weak points which could be debated forever.

### **The biggest challenge**

The biggest challenge facing the implementation of the ADM is that the majority of coaches and parents with kids in the game today really aren't that concerned with anything other than their team (the coaches) and their player (the parents). The future really doesn't matter to them. Other players and other teams don't matter to them. They just don't want to be "held back" by others. Just show me the quickest way to the finish line.

According to USA Hockey registration reports there were 57,033 registered players in Michigan in the 2000-01 season and that number fell to 50,793 in 2009-10. The alarming part is in the details. In 2009-10 there were approximately 3,000 less 8 & Under players, 3,000 less 9-10 year old players, 3,000 less 11-12 year old players, and 2,000 less 13-14 year old players than there were in 2000-01. For those of you who are good at math, that is about 11,000 less total youth players. Yikes. To quantify, that is 25% less 8 & Under players, 38% less Squirt players, 33% less Pee Wees and 26% fewer Bantams. Ouch.

And while the number of players and teams was substantially reduced in these age groups, the percentage of "travel" (A/AA/AAA) players and teams actually went up. A comparison of team registrations from the 2001-02 season with the 2008-09 season shows 608 mite teams in '01-02 falling to 310 in '08-09, 501 Squirt teams declining 327, 505 Pee Wee teams becoming 346 and 360 Bantam teams dropping to 292. Mite teams were not classified as "travel" in '01-02 but 70 of 310 (23%) Mite teams were travel in '08-'09. At the Squirt level, there were 131 travel teams (26%) in '01-02 and 121 (37%) in '08-09. Pee Wees went from 164 (32%) to 141 (41%) and Bantams 132 (37%) to 114 (39%).

### **What it all means**

Those of you who are still with me might be asking what all of this means. Essentially, there are substantially less players playing the game with a higher percentage of those players playing travel hockey. House hockey is shrinking and will continue to shrink unless something is done to change course. That is, if we care about the future of the game.

So what effect does the ADM have on this? Right now there is a major push to implement the ADM model at the Mite level which should help to increase the size of the player pool at the younger age groups. It's the "bottom-up" development approach and a step in the right direction.

However at the same time, under the auspices of aligning themselves with the principles of the ADM, the Tier I (AAA) organizations in Michigan have begun a "top-down" approach by forming Tier II (A/AA) travel teams in their organizations. So instead of the typical Tier I organization model consisting of 8-10 AAA teams, Belle Tire, Compuware, Honeybaked, Little Caesars and Victory Honda are looking to have as many as 8-10 more Tier II travel teams, which could mean as many as 10 new travel teams at each age group. Sounds great. What's the problem?

The Tier I organizations have "a name" which attracts players (more likely their parents, but the kids do play a part, pun intended). These players will come from association-based travel teams and some will come from association-based house hockey. House players will also now have a better chance of making an association-based travel team. Still sounds great, right?

Not for "house hockey", which just might be the most important element of the long-term viability of the sport. House hockey is the entry level for the sport. In theory it is a recreational, affordable, convenient level of play for everybody. What most people don't understand, or care to acknowledge, is that house hockey is what feeds the game. And it's dying. Hopefully the ADM "implementation" by the Tier I organizations will not serve to accelerate the process. So what will happen first? The growth of house hockey driven by the bottom-up approach of the ADM at the Mite level? Or the complete demise of house hockey spurred by the top-down approach of the Tier I organizations? Hopefully, the former.

If not, the ADM in Michigan might very well stand for Association Decimation Model.