

The Most Underrated League in Minnesota

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By Minnesota Hockey

There aren't too many unknowns when it comes to hockey here in Minnesota. When a new training technique or development opportunity pops up, news of it travels to every community in the state faster than a bullet train bound from Rochester to Roseau.

Yet, only a few have caught onto a development strategy that has helped high school age players in one community win seven state titles in just six years.

How is that possible? And no, it's not a typo.

The answer is there's more than one league for high school age hockey players in Minnesota.

The one everyone is familiar with is high school hockey. With history and tradition that rivals any high school sport in the country and a state tournament that draws more than 18,000 fans to games, playing for a high school team in Minnesota is a big deal. Kids dream about eventually putting on that jersey for the first time and having a chance to represent their community. Nearly every elite player to come out of Minnesota played high school hockey.

It isn't the only opportunity though. In fact, many are aware of the alternative, which is Junior Gold hockey. What people fail to realize is the quality of development and competition currently taking place in the Junior Gold ranks.

"We had four kids from our [2012] State Championship go onto to play junior hockey, and two of them are still playing," said Edina Junior Gold A coach Bill Smith.

One of them is Adam Carlson, the goaltender whose climb from Junior Gold to the North American Hockey League (NAHL) was featured by the Minnesota Wild last season as part of their Hockey Day Minnesota coverage. So far this year, Carlson is third in the NAHL in minutes played and has one of the top save percentages at .926.

Carlson isn't the only player experience success though. Smith also reminisces about former players who have gone onto major roles on the Edina varsity team.

"Brett Nelson skated twice for us on our [Junior Gold] B teams. Then, [Edina High School Head Coach Curt Giles] took him back his senior season, and he was the captain. Andy Bryant was a sophomore and was the only kid that didn't advance from Bantam A to high school. He was our leading scorer. Then, Giles took him, and he led the high school in scoring his junior and senior year."

In case you haven't guessed it, the community we mentioned earlier was Edina. Over the past six years, Edina has claimed three MSHSL Class AA State Championships as well as three Junior Gold A and one Junior Gold B Minnesota Hockey State Championships for a total of seven state titles.

Many are quick to assume the reason they are able to do that is because of numbers. While it's true the number of kids makes a difference, it's more than that. Edina has created a culture that acknowledges the benefits of continued development in Junior Gold rather than viewing it as an inferior league.

"We're fortunate in Edina that Curt Giles has bought in," said Smith, who has worked closely with Giles since he became the high school coach. "He's a supporter of Junior Gold. This year we have 91 skaters and 10 goalies, not including JV kids, trying out for varsity. He has to let kids go that are good hockey players. He sends them to us. Since we've been at Edina, we haven't had one kid cut from the high school team quit playing hockey. That's pretty amazing really. In some of these other areas, kids are cut and they're done."

Junior Gold gives the kids an opportunity to keep playing competitive hockey. They get a league schedule of 24 games, plus practices and tournaments, which often add up to nearly as much ice time as varsity teams get.

"It's basically just like high school," said Smith. "You have to be able to play good hockey to compete in the Junior Gold league. It's solid hockey all the way through."

"It keeps them alive. It doesn't wash their dreams. These kids are willing to compete, and we're fortunate that Curt will give them a chance. Curt comes to games and talks to our kids. He even comes and helps with our practices. If they're willing to work, they're going to get a shot to make it."

While Edina has set the gold standard in the Junior Gold ranks, other communities like Wayzata, White Bear Lake, Blaine and Minnetonka are embracing the importance of Junior Gold to enhance their high school hockey programs.

Wondering how you can add this component to your community's development strategy?

"If you can get the high school coaches to buy in, it really makes it easy," advises Smith. "They can't all be on the high school team. If they want to keep the kids playing, they should be giving them a place to play."