

Intent is Clear at Newport's Mite Development Program

The name of the Newport (R.I.) Whalers Mite Development Program could not be any clearer and to the point.

After years of offering mite programming that annually attracted about 40-50 kids playing on three or four travel teams and a house league with 25 players, the Whalers Youth Hockey Association decided to change direction at the 8U level and focus on USA Hockey's American Development Model principles.

"We had a mite travel model that included driving all over to play games, tournaments and jamborees," said Scot West, the Whalers MDP director. "But after hearing the ADM presentation a couple of times on age-appropriate learning and making sure the kids are having fun, the light bulb finally went off. We decided that there was no reason for mite travel, there will be plenty of that to come as the kids get older."

So before last season the Whalers got their mite coaches on board and changed their 8U programming to an eight-team house league with two station-based practices and one cross-ice game per week.

Now in its second year, the MDP's concentration on having fun, building skills and fostering a love for the game is paying off. Feedback from parents on the new-look program has been overwhelmingly positive and the MDP added more than 10 new mite-aged players from last season.

"They did a great job remodeling the mite program," said Penelope Bennett, whose youngest son Patrick played in the MDP last season and has moved up to squirts this year. "It is completely different than before. The skill stations kept the kids more engaged and moving all the time. And the coaches were into it and did a great job teaching skills and making it fun."

"Patrick really enjoyed it and we could see the improvement in him and the other kids in the first three or four weeks of the program."

The Whalers made presentations directly to parents and posted information on their website to explain the switch to the ADM's age-appropriate programming. Putting more kids on the ice with station-based practices helped keep the program as affordable as possible. And, with 90 percent of the MDP's ice time at one arena, parents no longer have to drive all over Rhode Island and into neighboring Massachusetts and Connecticut to compete.

"On the whole I think we got most of it right. The kids are having more fun, the parents like the set schedule and the fact that they are seeing their players improve," said West. "We have seen the benefits of the ADM and we are committed to it."

West credits the efforts of Roger Grillo, one of USA Hockey's ADM regional managers, along with "all of the ADM information and practice plans that USA Hockey has made available" for helping the association make the transition.

"Newport youth hockey and their Mite Development Program are a model for how to run a successful and productive association," said Grillo. "The leadership and support from the coaches has been fantastic and the buy in for the ADM has been outstanding."