

Courtesy of eltmann.com

Omaha Lancers goaltender Jeff Lerg of Livonia, Mich., has been named *Let's Play Hockey/USHL Player of the Year*. (Right) Lerg was selected to play in the USHL Prospects/All-Star Game this season. (Above) Prior to an April 1 game, Lerg gets prepared to take the ice. Lerg went 36-11-4 with a 2.16 GAA and .916 save percentage. He's off to Michigan State in 2005-06.



How about smaller teams, fewer whistles?

By Jack Blatherwick

Let's Play Hockey Columnist

I'm not in the camp with those who believe it is essential to have two, three or four practices for every game. Hey, competition is fun!

Besides, no one has yet come up with a drill that has as much hockey in it as a scrimmage: not as many transitions, creative decisions, competitive battles, skating, passing, stickhandling and playmaking all put together at once. The inventor of this game of hockey was pretty darn smart when you think about it.

Don't get me wrong. I love hockey practice -- flow drills, skating repetitions, 1-on-1 battles, offensive attack, defensive skills. There's no question hockey skills need to be

repeated over and over, and practice is an extremely important part of player development.

But we shouldn't think practices have to be nothing but drills -- that we can't include competitive games and scrimmages -- full-ice, half-ice, and in small areas. Actually, youth coaches need to plan more competitive games and scrimmages -- partly because they're a lot of fun and partly because there is a lot of hockey learned.

Another reason to add scrimmages is that structured (travel) games are such a waste of time.

Consider this: after planning an entire family day around a hockey game -- sometimes at ridiculous expense and time -- a youth

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Girls' development takes another step

Advanced 15 Festival to debut in Mankato

By Dave McMahon

Let's Play Hockey Editor

The development of girls' hockey in Minnesota takes yet another step forward next week when Minnesota Hockey offers its inaugural Girls' Advanced 15 Summer Festival at Minnesota State University in Mankato.

Longtime Mankato youth hockey supporter Larry Morales spearheaded the effort to get the camp to Mankato June 11-16. As it develops, it will be run similar to the equivalent boys' festival at St. Cloud State Univer-

sity. It will have a chance to be college coaches and tutored

Minnesota Jeff Vizenor coaching

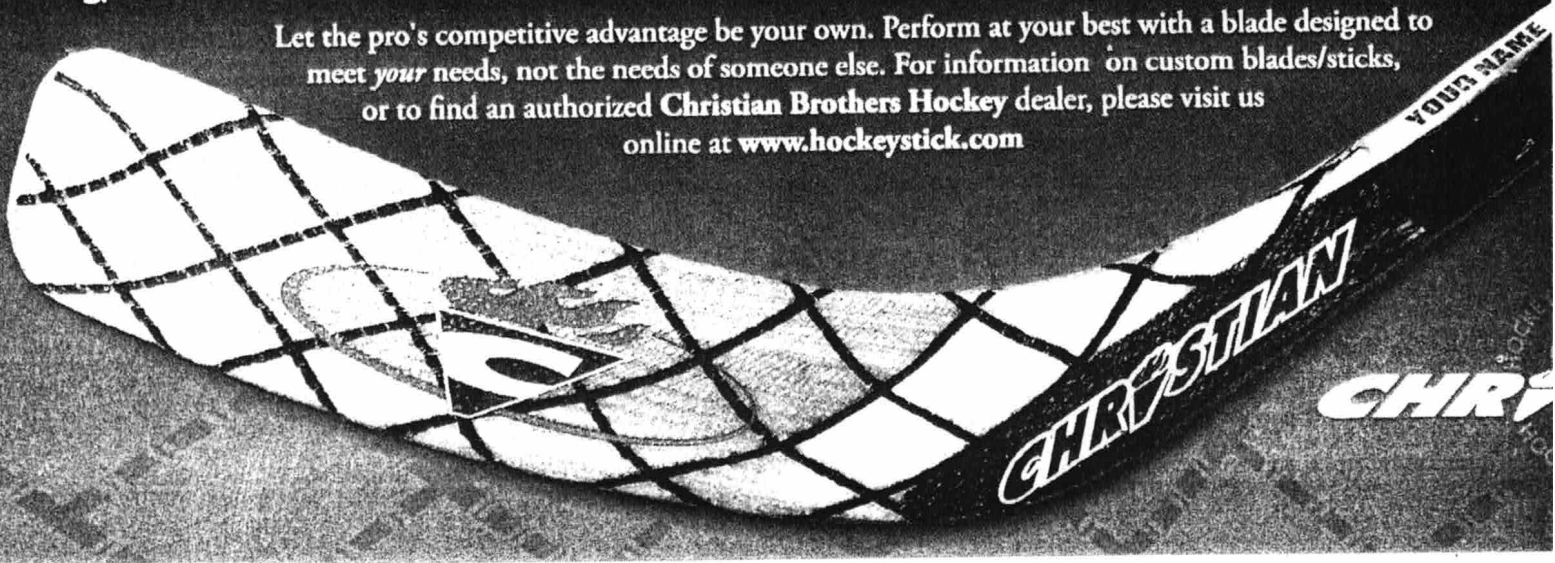
The list of Hallidorso (Bemidji State), Mike David Lalil

High school (Duluth East breakers) also will be

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Blatherwick

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game is limited by the rental time of 60 or 75 minutes. Following a slow warm-up that doesn't begin to match the intensity and speed of a practice, the puck is dropped for the first of 20 times by the referee.

An outside observer might ask who we're trying to develop, because the refs have the puck more than the players — 35-40 minutes of a 75 minute rental. This includes the obligatory two-minute rest before each period — even the first.

It's true. Half the scheduled game time is wasted. Consider that high school teams rent 120 minutes to play a 51-minute game. Colleges rent 150 minutes to play 60. This is not a problem when you have as much time as needed, but youth games are limited by ice rental.

Worse yet, each individual's playing time is needlessly reduced by having large numbers sitting on the bench. For example, if a youth team has 14 skaters, the average player will compete for about 12 minutes of the 75. 12 minutes!!! And if we rent 60 minutes, players get 9-10 minutes of competition.

Is this why you packed up the car and drove 40 minutes or more?

We're kidding ourselves if we think that adding spice to the game makes it better. Having trophies for seventh place in a weekend tournament doesn't enhance the experience. Telling referees to massage the puck for half the game doesn't make it "big time," like the NHL on TV. The scoreboard, or patches on the jacket, or cowbells in the cheering section do not make it a more productive experience.

When kids (and families) invest four hours to play 9-12 minutes, the cowbells don't make better players; nor do two dozen face-offs — or sitting on the bench.

Actually, the grander the production the less development, because players get the false impression that a mistake is a terrible thing rather than a learning experience. After all, this is an "important event."

But events don't make hockey players. The game itself does.

The intrinsic things in hockey are the real fun — things like skating, shooting, stickhandling, making creative plays to beat the D, deking the goalie. Or for the goalie, making a ton of saves.

For a defenseman it's stopping an opposing forward, riding him to the boards, and telling him by the stare that you just won the battle.

If we were truly committed to player development — and fun — we'd increase the playing time by adopting "speed-up" hockey rules and reducing the size of youth teams. There would be face-offs only after goals and penalties. We'd reduce the size of teams to 10 or 11 players. One goalie per team is better for development than two.

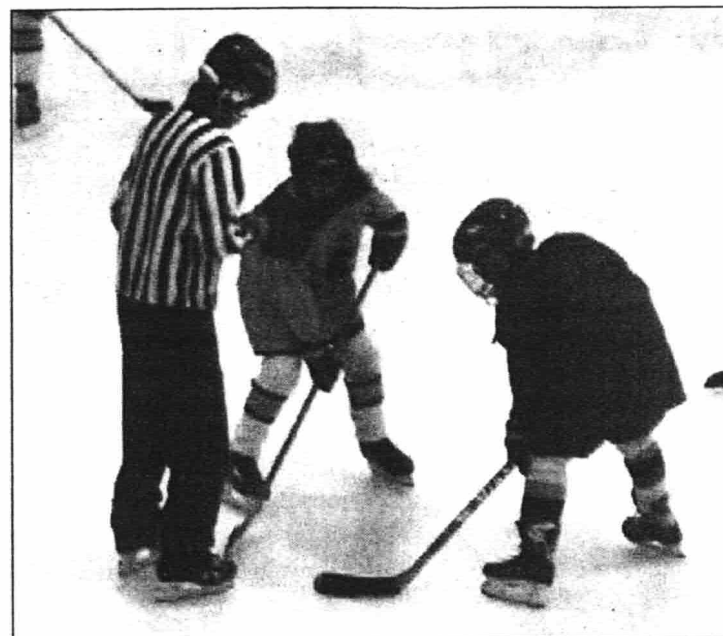
We'd warm up off the ice, add a brief on-ice warm-up and drop the puck and play hockey for 55 of the 60 minutes we purchased.

For younger players, we might put a divider across the middle red line and have more half-ice scrimmages — four teams competing at once.

In this ideal world:

1. Each player would get more ice time, of course; but weaker players especially, will develop confidence by playing in situations they might not if there were more players.

Everyone skates more, touches the puck more, and most importantly, each player becomes an integral part of the team, not someone the coach tries to hide when the game is on the line.



The ref holds the puck 35-40 minutes during a 75-minute ice-rental time.

Every good player at the college or professional level got plenty of ice time as a kid; perhaps more than half the game. They would tell us this experience — more than anything else — helped develop competitive confidence.

2. Coaches would have fewer parental problems related to ice time, because there is no way to "shorten the bench" toward the end of games. Everyone plays. No one is the odd-man out.

3. Games will be more of a conditioning challenge; kids might even come home tired. Currently, for most players any fatigue is from psychological tension, not physical exertion. Hockey games — more than any other youth sport — fail to accomplish the mission to improve cardiovascular fitness and reduce obesity and type II diabetes. A youth hockey game can hardly be called a "workout" if kids burn fewer than 50 calories.

4. If each team had 10 players (or fewer on some days), there'd be a premium on thinking, conserving energy, learning to burst at the right time, not just skating hard without a purpose. With three lines or more, players don't need to think. They just "hustle" up and down the ice.

We can hold coaching seminars and make all the plans in the world to improve practices — and this will make a difference. But increasing the competitive playing time will — without a doubt, help the more aggressive players improve.

And the less-aggressive kids? How do they learn to compete when their competitive ice time is reduced needlessly?

Jack Blatherwick, Ph.D., is a physiologist for the Washington Capitals, and has held the same post for other NHL and Olympic teams. Check out Blatherwick's website at www.overspeed.info.