

20 Questions with Hockey Director Chris Wickersham

TG: Do you remember your first steps on the ice?

Chris: Yes, I was 4 years old, and it was at my friend's rink that was in his backyard. I didn't spend too much time on my feet.

TG: You grew up in St. Louis Park, MN. The Minnesota youth hockey system is built around community-based hockey: tell us what you have learned from that system and how the WHC can benefit from this?

Chris: I experienced what it was like to grow up playing with the same group of players/friends in a healthy, competitive, nourishing environment. I have watched youth hockey done right, and wrong, and my experience growing up in Minnesota was done right. I look to give our players and families a similar experience that they will look fondly on years after they leave the program.

TG: Describe the path you took as a young hockey player?

Chris: My fall and winters were all hockey. In the off-season I would focus on baseball but play lots of roller hockey with my friends. Once I became a Pee Wee I would play on a summer select team. I played 3 years of Squirts, 1 year of Pee Wee, and 2 years of Bantams before playing on my high school team.

TG: Who were some coaches and people that had the biggest influence on you?

Chris: Jack Blatherwick, Ken Pauley, and Alex (can't remember last name) my day care teacher. Alex's 2nd job was at a local ice rink, and he made sure the day care had all the gear needed to play roller hockey every day. Two sets of goalie pads, nets, sticks...we had it all. Even kids that didn't play ice hockey, played roller hockey. It was unreal. All 3 of those guys played huge roles in my development as a player and as a person.

TG: You played in two Minnesota High School Championships (and won!). Tell us what that experience was like to play in front of 17,000 fans?

Chris: It was an experience I'll never forget. As a young kid you would watch the State Tournament and look up to the players and imagine how cool it would be to someday get there. I feel very lucky to have been on a team that made the tournament one time, twice was pretty surreal. I am also thankful that back then they didn't do the "All Hair Team." I likely would have been on a blooper reel. My hair has developed nicely since '99.

TG: Minnesota is the land of 10,000 frozen lakes: tell us the role skating outdoors played in your development as a youngster? What are some of your favorite memories of skating outdoors?

Chris: Playing hockey outdoors is amazing. Many of my favorite hockey memories took place on an outdoor rink or in a friend's backyard. Occasionally the warming house would be closed, so we would sit in a snowbank to put on our skates (without thinking about it twice). We would play against older players (and younger). I always took it as a challenge in competing with the older kids.

TG: Tell us how you reached your decision to attend St. Mary's?

Chris: I thought it was far enough from home where my parents wouldn't bother me, yet close enough to shoot home if I needed.

TG: What were your favorite places to play in college?

Chris: St. Olaf, and our home rink.

TG: Talk a little bit about the Division 3 hockey experience and how it could be within reach for many of our players?

Chris: Division 3 hockey is very competitive, and I enjoyed the experience. If our players work hard while having fun and developing their game, I see no reason why a good number of players can't reach that level of hockey. That being said, I hope each player in the WHC can achieve their goals, whatever they might be. I hope we have a few kids that dream of playing in the NHL. I also know our program has a good number of kids who just want to have fun, and that is okay too.

TG: You've had the opportunity to coach at most every level: Youth Tier 2 and Tier 1, Junior A, College club, and NCAA Division 3 in addition to your work with Prodigy with Skill Development: tell us how you have learned from all those experiences?

Chris: Obviously each age and talent level is different. The one constant is that players will work hard if they are motivated, and practices are well structured. Games are almost always fun; practices are key to development of both the individual player and the team.

TG: OK, let's shift gears. What attracted you to the position of being the WHC Hockey Director?

Chris: I have always enjoyed coaching youth players as well as working with other coaches. Being able to ensure WHC players and families have a great "hockey experience" is a big motivator for me. I have watched many kids and families (primarily in Illinois) have a negative experience. Being in my role as Hockey Director ensures I can help a player's hockey journey from Mite-Bantam.

TG: How have you spent your first few weeks on the job?

Chris: I have spent a good amount of time meeting and having great conversations with the coaching staff. Within that, doing our best to make sure the coaches are in on our "Green Line Development Plan," then preparing our team of coaches to execute that plan. The coaching staff we will have some online platforms that are unique to youth hockey where it will help with the development of our players and communication to our families.

TG: What would you say are your three goals you hope to achieve in Year 1? What are your longer-term goals?

Chris: One of my goals in Year 1 is to help create a fresh culture across the club. Next, I want the parents in the club to notice that we have a big emphasis on skill development, and our commitment and capabilities of helping their child reach their goals. Lastly, I want to help our coaches grow and have everyone working towards our Green Line Principles... a culture where our coaches are extremely prepared for practices and games, and where our players know the amount of effort and competitiveness we expect out of them.

TG: Talk a little about skill development; you will be on the ice lots with both travel and house players. You have assembled a great team of skills coaches. What are your expectations for the coaches and the players?

Chris: I expect the coaches to come to the rink prepared to teach, while bringing a positive message (role model) and energy to the rink. I expect our players to come ready to learn, while giving their maximum effort while being a good student and teammate. If both coaches and players do this, we will achieve great things!

TG: What will a Chris Wickersham practice session look like?

Chris: There will be a handful of skills and teaching concepts we will look to add to each player's tool box throughout the season. The typical practice will teach this skill/concept, then allow our players to learn how/when/where to utilize this new skill. We will use small area games (constraint based) to help put our players in a game like setting, where these skills/concepts will be most often implemented. There will be certain skills that might not translate immediately in the player's game; these will be skills and concepts that will often take time for our players to implement into their game play (and that's okay). We expect them to try (and often fail) in practice before they are comfortable enough to implement these skills in games. It's up to the WHC coaches, players, and even parents to encourage our players to continually experiment with these new set of tools in both practices and in games.

TG: What are your impressions of the WHC as you went through the interview process?

Chris: I was really impressed that each person I spoke with, truly seemed to be here for the right reason, and that is to create the best possible hockey experience for the kids, while also being adamant about development. Everyone I have met really seems like a good person.

TG: How do you plan to help our House League coaches and players?

Chris: I plan on educating the House League coaches and players very similarly to our Travel League coaches and players. I understand that those players' goals may be different than a kid playing travel, and I want to help them achieve their goals while giving them added confidence that if they keep working hard, they can achieve more than they might think. Just like our travel players, I want the house league players to enter and exit the rink with a smile on their face.

TG: You spoke lots about "kids having fun" throughout your interviews; what steps will you take to ensure that takes place?

Chris: A big part of kids having fun, is making sure practices are fun. Just about every parent and kid can agree that games are fun. Adding fun games that have a true developmental purpose to practice, is also fun. Becoming a better player and developing is fun. Staying stagnant in your development is not fun. Let's work hard and get better!

TG: Tell us a bit about your life away from the rink?

Chris: Away from the rink I enjoy watching hockey, discussing hockey, and learning more about hockey. I should probably have some more hobbies that are not hockey related. So, I just googled it, and I would like to be an "urban explorer". Basically, we like to stroll around the city and see new things. In addition to that, I spend most of my time with my 14-month-old son, James, my wife, and my dog.

TG: What are your favorite sports teams?

Chris: My favorite teams are the Chicago Blackhawks, the Minnesota Twins and the Minnesota Vikings.

TG: Do you see your little guy playing this great sport?

Chris: I really hope he wants to play hockey. We currently play mini sticks at least twice a day. That being said, I just want him to be passionate about a healthy hobby or sport. Whatever he wants to do, I will support 100%. At home there is often a stick in the room to encourage hockey, but it's ALMOST always his idea to play.