

We Made It

By Tom Gullen

It is July 29th right about lunch time when I look at my phone and see a text from our House League Commissioner Rob Levoy. I will spare you the details, but the message was clear; the hockey season we had hoped for was in danger. After months of successfully and safely playing, hockey (and many other sports) was suddenly the problem. Outbreaks at area High Schools that occurred at social gatherings were attributed to sports.

Close to eight months have passed since that July day. I think of the old introduction to Wide World of Sports: “The thrill of victory/the agony of defeat”. The simple is complicated; suddenly the words “games” and “scrimmages” are not acceptable, at least in Illinois. They are replaced with “special events” and “shared ice”. Instead of playing our neighboring programs, we play other Winnetka teams. It wasn’t perfect, but it gave the kids an opportunity to play against some of their school friends.

Early October comes around and after six weeks the kids are getting antsy to play. Instead of driving 10 minutes down Willow Road to play Northbrook, we drive 90 minutes to Mequon, WI to play. It was OK to play hockey in Wisconsin. Drives to Kenosha and Pleasant Prairie became common place. Cheap gas and Spotted Cows are a side benefit!

We slowly get into a rhythm: our House League players, minus the Bantams since we only have one team and we cannot bring teams into our “bubble”, are allowed to play. New ideas come and go: the “Original Six” seemed like a great idea that lasted a week. Slowly we begin “sharing the ice” with other programs; referees are on the ice, but we call them “supervisors” who wear black. Our players get used to playing in front of no fans; the referees love the silence and no one there to critique their calls. The kids play hard. We get into a nice mix of these “shared ice” events, even putting together a little Thanksgiving event with four other programs. It is beginning to feel normal.

But as we get into November we see the number of Covid cases increase; more games are being cancelled. November 17th and another dreaded Tuesday Press Conference and another shut down. No indoor sports. It seems like the sport of hockey is taking it on the chin at every turn: articles in The Washington Post where epidemiologists are quoted as if they are mechanical engineers on air circulation in ice rinks: another kick in the rear.

So, for five weeks, we move outdoors: to Watts Ice Arena, to Warren Park in Chicago, and to Capuano Ice Rink in Evergreen Park. We get the kids on the ice once or twice a week.

It is now January and a new year. I have become an expert on the daily data from the Illinois Department of Health. Numbers start to decrease; we move to new tiers and finally, Phase 4. We are back. We are playing games whenever and wherever possible. Electric whistles are now the norm. Our House League kids are back and FINALLY our Bantam House team gets to play a game. We form House Select teams and have 70 kids in our MMDP and Mite House Plus programs. We also have no Covid cases.

As we head into the final week of our season, I am extremely proud of what we accomplished. Our travel teams will end up with 30-40 games, or about 80% of a normal year. We will finish with about 15 House games. The Bantam House team has crammed 15 games into seven weeks. We got our House Selects another eight games. The MMDP and House Plus kids got an extra 15 hours of skills and 3 on 3. The House League playoffs are upon us. Our travel teams have had a great season winning over 70% of their games. To our 15 travel team managers: you are all rock stars! It has not been an easy task to manage a team in a pandemic, but you answered the bell.

To our Coaches, House and Travel: You were expected to do so much more than be a coach, most of which you really shouldn't have had to do. But you remembered what was most important: the kids. You kept kids happy playing a game and being active socially and physically.

To our Board: You thought through and analyzed every decision with one thing in mind: the safety of our kids.

To Our Executive Board of Sharf, Passen, Doll, Wilson, Kulakofsky, and Levoy and Evan our Hockey Director: it seemed like we were on a Zoom every day. I'd like to say my Zooming Skills improved, but they did not.

And lastly to every parent: Thank you for believing. Thank you for having the confidence that we could play safely. Thank you for helping us at every turn. It took a village.

We made it!