



# Our New Year's Resolution: Let's Make Normal Happen

*By Tom Gullen, Executive Director*

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The other day I was on the phone with Tim Benz, who is in his first year as Hockey Director in Wilmette. About half way through the conversation Tim says to me, "Tom, is it always this hard?"

This led to a long discussion on the unusual year we are in and trying to run a hockey program. A task that is simple in a normal year is now complicated. In a normal year there is a scheduling meeting, and the season is pretty much laid out in front of you. In 2020, scheduling a game is a complex process which typically involves multiple revisions before the game is actually played.

## ***Nothing is simple.***

Over the pandemic I have tried to follow what is happening with hockey in some of our neighboring states. My source of information is three websites: Wisconsin Prep Hockey, Minnesota Hockey Hub, and Let's Play Hockey, a hockey magazine out of Minnesota.

I have always been fond of hockey in Wisconsin. While most of the country has become highly structured (and expensive!), hockey in Wisconsin has retained some of that "Ma and Pa" mentality of youth sports from years ago. That means that volunteers fix the rink, put the ice in, drive the Zamboni, work the concession stand and so on. Programs are not only scattered throughout the state in larger population centers like Madison, Milwaukee, and Green Bay, but small towns like Eagle River, Antigo, and the location of my first "hockey trip" as a coach, Waupun.

Last evening eighteen boys' games and six girls' games were played throughout the state at places like the Cornerstone Community Center in Green Bay and my personal favorite, the Poppy Waterman Ice Rink in the Wisconsin Dells. 24 games, 48 teams, close to 1,000 players played high school hockey last night in Wisconsin. Not one cancellation. They did so under strict safety protocols implemented by the Wisconsin Amateur Hockey Association and the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association.

That is 24 more games than were played here in Illinois.

Yes, hockey is much is much different this year in Wisconsin than a normal year; the season is shorter, spectators are limited, locker rooms are restricted, players are wearing masks, and some areas (Dane County) are just now getting back onto the ice.

***But they are playing.***

In Minnesota, hockey is king. Imagine football in Texas or basketball in Indiana. Hockey is the sense of pride throughout the state from Edina to the tiny town of Warroad on the Canadian border that churns out Division One, Olympic, and professional players. Will they play youth and High School hockey in Minnesota?

The answer is yes, there will be hockey. Yes, the season will be a little shorter than normal, but there will be a season. That did not just happen. It took a collaborative effort of the Minnesota Ice Arena Managers Association, Minnesota Hockey, the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission, and the Minnesota Department of Public Health. They involved psychologists that understand the impact the pandemic is having on children and the need for both physical activity and social interaction with peers. From this collaboration came a well-crafted return to play document. We have borrowed it multiple times.

***But they are playing.***

And so, as we move to a New Year, filled with the excitement that we can put this pandemic in the rear view mirror, I have a simple wish. I want kids to play. I want parents to cheer. I want kids to be safe. And I believe we can do all of this.

***Here's to a normal 2021!***