

Wanted: A few good men and women

Shortage of referees causing concerns among minor hockey league officials across GTA

BY JOHN CUDMORE
Staff Writer

Never mind the right or wrong call — there are days some minor hockey organizations would be happy to have anyone at all to blow the whistle.

It is a brewing predicament minor hockey is facing with enough frequency to cause concern, as games in some York Simcoe Minor Hockey League centres are being scrubbed due to an unavailability of on-ice officials.

It is not yet an epidemic, but certainly it is a development worth noting.

In Markham, Waxers' organization referee-in-chief Gerry Brens was forced to cancel three rep games on a recent Saturday because officials were not available for the matches.

The Whitchurch-Stouffville Minor Hockey Association, too, has had some games cancelled because referees could not be assigned for games.

"It's the first time I've had to cancel three games in one day," said Brens, whose headaches snowballed the following day when a severe winter storm struck the area and wiped out games not only involving Markham teams, but also in other nearby centres and programs.

"But it's a case of guys taking a shift elsewhere sometimes. We compete for the same officials with the GTHL and women's hockey."

Then there are high school and adult recreational leagues, and even ringette, which often draw on the same pools of officials.

In short, more hockey is being played than ever before, but the pool of officials is not growing at the same rate.

Minor hockey's growth is always calculated in terms of player registrations, not the on-ice officials who supervise the action.

But without that valuable piece of the puzzle, the sport would be drastically altered.

"There's a big concern," said Harry Brailsford, a vice-president with the York Simcoe Minor Hockey League and Markham Waxers programs.

"We do have a numbers problem and with recruitment. We're doing everything we can to be competitive."

The problem is not confined to Markham, although it seems reasonable the risk is higher for communities bordering on the Greater



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

A referee officiates a high school hockey game at Angus Glen Arena in Markham. Minor hockey officials are becoming concerned over a shortage of game officials across the region.

Toronto Hockey League's territory.

It is a complex issue given the skill requirements for referees to oversee games at various levels.

Certification, such as coaching or officiating in other sports, is a progression.

Similar to players, officials must work their way through a certification process to qualify to referee high-end games.

In some ways, the predicament faced by minor hockey recalls the border wars for players bouncing between Ontario Minor Hockey Association and GTHL centres.

However, it is doubtful the independent ways of officials can ever be curtailed, as was the case with players when outside adjudicators were forced to intervene in minor hockey business more than a decade ago.

Fact is, officials are going to follow the money, especially if travel time is not a factor.

Despite mileage increases in 2006, OMHA pay rates have been stagnant since 2002, according to Kevin Hamilton, the OMHA's manager of development programs.

Ironically, OMHA statistics indi-

cate a slight increase in Area G, which encompasses York Simcoe, for registered officials for the current season.

This season, 693 officials are registered, up from 680 last season.

Part of the problem, however, is while entry level officials are holding firm, the loss of upper end referees leaves a void that is difficult to fill.

"It's probably a myriad of reasons and it's not being missed by the OMHA," said Peter Harmsen, a former referee scheduler for the Whitchurch-Stouffville Minor Hockey Association.

"Because of the turnover, it is tough to develop young officials. Each centre has to concentrate on developing younger officials and lure back those who have left."

In some cases, officials quit because they tire of abuse from spectators and coaches.

Some may opt to spend more time with families. Or, young officials head off to school in out-of-town locations — and in the past five years they have been doing so a year earlier due to the high school curriculum — a huge factor, as it

turns out.

The list of reasons is lengthy. None of which helps solve the current crisis in centres on the border.

"Our pool is a little weak right now because over the past couple of years we haven't had as many new ones come in," said Brens. "There is a shortage of a certain level of officials, but we have lots coming in (at the entry level). I don't think we'll see much improvement until next year."

It is forcing organizations to look outward to ensure officials for games.

It is not unusual to borrow officials from other centres, Brens said. That means knowing the staffing and schedule particulars for neighbouring communities to fill holes in his own schedule by calling in officials from another program.

Still, Brens concedes he is too often in scramble mode behind the scenes to ensure games are covered. But consideration must be given to the circumstances when determining the fate of a game.

"If you have a team coming in from Peterborough, for instance, you can't go until game time uncer-

tain whether you will have officials," he said.

For communities farther removed from the GTHL border, a shortage of on-ice officials seems less an issue.

Clearly, a minor hockey can never have too many officials. Both the Aurora and Newmarket minor hockey organizations are operating with comfortable numbers.

"I'm happy with the way our officiating is going," said Joe Bentolila, president of the Aurora Minor Hockey Association, where 80 to 90 officials are in the fold. In addition, he said, another 25 or so teens are involved at the first stage of a development program for new officials as scorekeepers.

Similarly, the Newmarket Minor Hockey Association's pool is adequately stocked and seemingly beyond the reach of the GTHL.

One area that can be controlled is in the way officials are treated by coaches, players and spectators.

It is a familiar problem, but one which remains constant over the years. Right or wrong, love 'em or loathe 'em, officials are an easy target.

"Nothing can put a bad taste in your mouth like when a referee makes a bad call," said Mike Humphreys, president of the Whitchurch-Stouffville Minor Hockey Association.

"But we are telling our coaches and parents you have to move on. We want people to respect our referees, especially our young guys."

Adds Brailsford: "It's not necessarily abuse, but let's say 'Canadian enthusiasm' for hockey."

As in many centres, the Aurora Minor Hockey Association makes parents aware that a zero-tolerance abuse policy exists.

The AMHA has even experimented with one-way radio systems by which a supervisor remains in contact with the on-ice official, offering advice during the game.

As well, the AMHA encourages its officials to advise the organization of potential trouble spots.

"Even if they hear verbal abuse by a coach toward players, it helps us monitor and helps decide next year's (coaching) selections," said Bentolila.

"The referees and parents have to know we're there to support them and want to help them. If we can, we can develop them better. If we're they to support them and listen to them, maybe people will back off."

It scored 96.

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