

Breakaway proposal has Jr. A hockey teams on edge

Sparks are flying in the Ontario Provincial Jr. A Hockey League boardroom.

At the centre of the fireworks is a proposal at a governors meeting last week to create a "flagship division" within the league, spearheaded by a handful of teams, including the Newmarket Hurricanes, touching off what could be a sizzling summer of discontent.

Apparently, the aim of the group is to restore the league's status as a serious developmental level, keen to advance players to the next plateau.

Beyond that, it's mostly vows of silence from both the breakaway shoot and detractors concerning the particulars at the present time. Rest assured, though, there is plenty of ongoing backroom activity.

"It got a little ugly," said St. Michael's Buzzers' president Mike McCarron, considered one of the leaders of the movement to create the division.

"But at this stage, I'm not prepared to make any comments."

He did note, however, whatever occurred in the initial meeting where the plan was tabled has since experienced "a few twists and turns".

A second governors meeting was held Monday although it is known that at least a half-dozen teams were not in attendance.

Efforts to contact league chairperson Al Doria, also of the Vaughan Vipers, and Seguin Bruins owner Dan Skjodt, who is said to be leading the opposition to the new division, were unsuccessful.

As unpopular as the proposal may be to some, it isn't exactly news the league is in dire need of a good kick to



John Cudmore

Cuddy Shark

get it back on the rails.

As a respected program with the goal of developing players for the next level, specifically NCAA Division I schools, the league has taken a hit in recent seasons.

While a half-dozen or so teams pushing for the proposed division, it is not true every team is opposed to hearing what the group has to offer.

"As an organization we're looking at it," Stouffville Spirit co-owner Zeev Week told Sun-Tribune sports

writer Mike Hayakawa.

"If it looks like better hockey and is a situation that's better to developing kids, we'd be foolish not to join it. But there's still a lot of questions and answers that aren't there yet."

With 36 teams in its stable last season, the league has long been unwieldy and in need of pruning.

There are clearly too many teams that have no business competing at the Jr. A level. It shows on the ice. It shows in the fan support around the league. It shows in the number of NCAA scholarships not coming to players in the watered-down league.

Not surprisingly, the initial shock has left some teams disappointed at the thought of being left behind.

"It seems there was no consensus. If it does go ahead, it would be pretty incredible," said Aurora Tigers coach and president Jerome Dupont, who did not

attend the initial meeting.

"I'm all for a more competitive league, but if you're going to do it, you have to do it over time. I'm not sure if this is the right way, jamming it down people's throats."

"We're supportive of it and would entertain it," said Markham Waxers' president Robert Thiessen, describing the proposal as a "flagship conference" within the league.

"It would increase the profile of our team within Ontario. The ultimate plan would be that it would embody teams from Ottawa, Gatineau and be a provincial-wide league.

"For the league to flourish it needs local business and fan support. Look at the (United States Hockey League) where every arena is sold out to 5,000 to 7,000 fans. It's a strong league."

It also doesn't have a team in every whistle stop along the way, either.

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