



Moving Forward with Phase 2 of the Schomberg-NobleKing Partnership: Reviewing Our Successes and Opportunities for Improvement

On February 20, Schomberg Minor Hockey (SMHA) will hold its Annual Membership Meeting. This will be an important meeting for all Members to attend, as one of the key items on the agenda will be a proposal to continue with “Phase 2” of the ongoing King Township Hockey Partnership with NobleKing Minor Hockey. We hope that you will attend this meeting, and choose to support the proposal to continue with this Partnership.

The second phase of Partnership changes being considered include amendments to the SMHA Bylaws, that will change the structure of the SMHA Board of Directors to a slightly smaller size. In the future, both SMHA and NobleKing will become smaller Local League organizations, with the combined Rep Hockey Program and many shared business functions being jointly operated out of the new King Township Minor Hockey Association. This revised structure will allow two of the smallest Rep Hockey Centres in York Region to cooperate in running a more competitive and jointly run Rep Program on behalf of all the players in King Township, while keeping their Local community teams intact, playing out of their hometown arenas. The jointly run Rep Program also allows both Clubs to operate more efficiently, by sharing certain business functions in a more effective and cost efficient manner.

Significant Progress Has Been Made This Year

The 2017-18 season has been one of transition. Change can be both exciting and difficult. Overall, our move to a jointly administered Rep Hockey Program has gone well. The combined Rep Program is off to a decent start, with a solid Coaching Selection and Tryout Process. Many SMHA Rep Coaches and Bench Staff continued to coach on the combined King Rebellion Rep Teams, and approximately 73 SMHA players successfully made these new Rep Teams, representing approximately 35% of Rep level players. This is roughly on par with the percentage of Schomberg players who are part of the broader Schomberg-NobleKing organization. We are pleased with this ratio, and it demonstrates that Rep team opportunities are being made available fairly to players from both Clubs.

Significant work has gone into drafting new Policies and Procedures, creating new financial systems, negotiating new ice contracts with King Township, establishing new borders with surrounding hockey associations, developing and purchasing new team uniforms and clothing lines, etc.

Overall, our hard-working volunteers have put in thousands of hours of volunteer time to make all this work, and many of our King Township Teams have had good hockey seasons. In total, 5 of the King Township Rep Teams have made OMHA Provincial Playoffs. While the Rebellion teams may not be top of the standings in most age divisions, most of the Teams are more competitive on the ice than either Association was previously on their own, and most importantly, the kids involved are developing skills and having fun.

Equally as important, the new jointly run organization is working well. Both Associations have come together as a team, which was essential, as volunteer resources to operate independently are increasingly in short supply. Moving a number of key functions to the King Township level, such as OMHA Director, Risk Management Director and Treasurer – means that many of the operating functions essential to minor hockey can be run more efficiently. This is especially true of “heavy workload” functions like the Administration, Registrar, Ice Scheduler, Gatekeeper and Referee in Chief roles,

which under the new structure are now carried out by staff, easing the burden on our declining volunteer base. We can only afford to do this under a combined structure of 600-700 players. Schomberg simply cannot afford to maintain a paid administrative infrastructure like this on its own with only 200 players.

The King Township Rep Tournament and related KTMHA fundraising has gone relatively well, with the King Rep Association generating fundraising revenue that has been shared down to the Local League partner organizations to help support their Local League development programs. Under this new structure, it's important that the Rep Program "gives back" financially to help support the grassroots Local League Teams.

Overall Numbers

In terms of overall numbers between the Local League and Rep Programs, the number of Schomberg participants at the Rep and Local League levels is comparable, between the 2016-17 season and the 2017-2018 season. Last season, there were approximately 119 SMHA players in the Local League Program, and for this season there are 122 participants. Similarly, last season there were 70 SMHA players on Schomberg specific Rep teams, and this season there are approximately 73 Schomberg Rep players – excluding the Juvenile group. These numbers would suggest that the level of participation across both Programs has not been significantly impacted one way or the other by the Partnership, and that Schomberg players have, overall, still managed to secure a proportionate level of Rep opportunities under the new Partnership Program, while most Local League teams have been largely unaffected.

At our high point, three to four seasons ago, we hit a high of 253 players. Over the past several seasons, total player numbers have been dropping, and excluding the Juvenile team, SMHA numbers at the younger levels have now dropped below 200 participants for the first time in many years. It becomes very difficult to sustain a program that provides players with a full menu of skill and development options with less than 200 players – and the King Partnership provides us with more flexibility to help address this growing challenge.

Local League Skill Development Remains a Priority

In Schomberg, we have continued to maintain things that we consider to be a priority for our Local Teams, like our development program. Our overall development budget was approximately \$8000 for the season, which was pro-rated from our budget the previous season – based on the number of Local League players. In other words, we have tried to maintain the same proportionate level of per player development spending under the new model. All of our development spending has been focused on Local League teams, primarily at ages Pee Wee and below. This has included 10-12 weeks of clinics for our IP and Tyke Groups, and weekly skill clinics throughout September for Atoms, Pee Wee's and Bantams. Our goaltending clinics have continued throughout the season, and we plan on offering safe contact clinics for Bantams in the spring. We also hosted Coaching development clinics, and continued PA Day skill clinics hosted at the King Township level, that were open to all players. Skill Development should continue to be a priority for us, but this can only continue to offer skill development if Schomberg families contribute their time and money to the necessary fundraising to make this possible, as this program is costly, and is not covered by basic registration fees.

Opportunities for Improvement

Has the transition process been perfect? Absolutely not – no change process this big happens without challenges. There have been a few bumps along the way, and we continue to learn from our mistakes, and are trying to listen to our members and make improvements. We knew going into this that the first year of the Partnership would involve many growing pains. For example, we are hoping to streamline and improve the Rep tryout process, to help condense the timeline and ensure that players get evaluated more objectively using external observers. We also need to achieve greater balance between the needs of the Rep and Local League Programs.

Ice Scheduling

The ice scheduling continues to be a work in progress, as we try to find better ways to align King teams between the 3 Township arenas, in a way that makes sense, and that better allows Teams with conflicting schedules to AP from one another. We are also looking at ways to host similar Rep and Local League games together, to coordinate Referee scheduling, and better promote community involvement and fan participation.

Practice Time

Available practice time was roughly comparable this year for our Local League Teams. Some slippage in practice time has already been a reality over the past several seasons, as municipal ice costs have increased significantly (3 to 4% each year) over the past 3 years and we have tried hard to hold the line on registration costs to keep hockey affordable. For example, we were already forced to move to half ice practices for many of the younger teams, and practices every two weeks for Midget Local League, approximately 3 to 4 years ago, as a way of better managing ice costs.

It's important to understand that Schomberg as an independent Association has lost money each year for the past several seasons, as we have generally spent more than we take in, and extra practice time only exists where there is revenue to pay for it.

Over the years, Schomberg teams had gotten used to our ice scheduler being able to assign the occasional bonus practice every few weeks when extra ice came available. This was possible because Schomberg often purchased more ice than we needed – months in advance, before we knew final player numbers. From a financial perspective, this was not sustainable in the long term. We were also unsure about how our fundraising would do this season – with certain revenue generating events like the annual Golf Tournament not doing well, and fewer and fewer teams and families willing to support fundraising events or volunteer to help run the snack bar.

Given these difficult financial realities, we tried to manage available ice time more strictly to budget this season, ensuring that each team received the ice time that their annual registration costs actually covered. Available ice time in King during prime time hours is also maxed out, creating some challenges. On average, registration fees cover approximately one game and one practice per week – with a financial break even requiring approximately 15 players per team. Compared to previous years, this resulted in about 10% fewer practice slots being available. While perhaps not a popular decision, we seem to have got our budget back on track and are predicted to break even for the year. Going forward, we will need to continue to manage ice costs carefully, and where teams are interested in acquiring additional practice time or development sessions beyond what their Association registration fees will pay for, this will need to be covered by either fundraising or team specific budgets.

How Competitive are Our Teams?

There has been some talk at the Local League level about whether the Schomberg Local League Teams have been competitive this season, and whether the King Rebellion Rep Teams have had an impact on this. That is difficult to say with any degree of certainty. When we initially went into this Partnership, the primary focus was in icing competitive “A” Level Rep Teams, with little thought about possible “AE” Teams. However, attendance at initial Tryouts was far higher than anticipated, and once the A Teams were selected, parent pressure for “AE” Teams from both Schomberg and NobleKing was overwhelming. Ultimately, we made a difficult decision to ice “AE” teams at certain levels (not all) where player numbers seemed to support an additional team.

While the AE Teams have provided good development opportunities, few of them have been competitive in the standings. It remains to be seen whether the same demand for “AE” Teams will exist next season – and if there is demand, that decision will need to be carefully managed, so as to allow “AE” Teams only where player numbers and talent justify a third team at a particular level, and not where it would jeopardize the viability of Local League Teams. For example, no “AE” Team was iced at the Bantam level this season, because of very low player numbers.

But banning all “AE” Teams is not the answer either. In certain age divisions, an “AE” Team may make sense – or we may wish to bump an “A” level team down to “AE”, where the talent pool requires it. For example, at Midget this season, a second “AE” Team made sense, because of the large number of players in those birth years, who wanted to play full contact hockey.

Having a second Rep team at “AE” was the only way to meet this need, as many of those players would not have been interested in playing non-contact hockey at the Local League level. We need to maintain some flexibility when making this type of decision.

Moreover, in future years, the issue of “AE” teams will really become a question isolated to teams at the Atom and Pee Wee levels. For levels Bantam and up, the York Simcoe Hockey League is no longer offering a Rep hockey loop for “AE” teams at all. So there will only be “AE” Rep teams below the Bantam level. In addition, by 2018-19, Hockey Canada and the OHF have announced that “half ice” hockey will likely be moving all the way up to the Novice level – which will likely mean the elimination of Novice Rep and Novice AAA programs entirely.

So without question, we will definitely need to manage the question of “AE” teams in the future in a careful way, but this will likely be an issue focused at the Atom and Pee Wee levels, based on membership demand, the talent pool, and player numbers. This will need to be an issue managed carefully on a year to year basis – and it is simply not practical to create overly rigid rules seeking to ban certain types of teams forever.

From a practical perspective, if we look at Schomberg Local League standings this year, they are not significantly different than where Schomberg Local League Teams have placed over the past 2 seasons. This is in part, a reflection of our Association’s small size, and the fact that a number of the more competitive Local League Centres, like Thornton and Richmond Hill, have teams that are artificially strong because they draw players from large house-league programs or have their programs flooded with stronger players from large Rep Centres like Barrie.

Other Centres this year have failed to balance some of their Local League teams, creating further competitive issues for smaller Centres like Schomberg.

Reviewing the Impact of King Rep Teams on Our Local League

IP and Tyke Divisions

There is really no impact from our Partnership on the IP and Tyke Divisions, as no Rep teams run at these levels. Overall, the IP and Tyke registration numbers are strong, and we have invested in development programs to help these young players along. The King Rebellion Partnership does provide Tyke players with a potential new option, in terms of also participation in the Tyke Select Program should they choose to do so – but this is an “extra” opportunity, and does not reduce Local League players in anyway. Do to Schomberg’s small size, we could not sustain a Tyke Select Program on our own, and can only offer this opportunity in partnership with NobleKing.

The Tyke Teams were impacted this year by changing OMHA player movement rules in relation to the new IP half ice policy implemented by the OHF. This effectively prevented us from being able to move a few IP players up to the Tyke team in order to help with small team numbers. But this was exclusively an OHF/OMHA player movement issue created by new policy implemented with little advance notice, and had nothing to do with the King Hockey Partnership.

Novice Local League

Unfortunately, there were insufficient players for a Novice Local League team this year. We have been struggling with Novice hockey for several years now, as Novice is currently a one year age co-hort (age 8) which makes it challenging for smaller associations to muster sufficient players for this age division. We are told that next season, the OMHA may be considering a return to a 2 year Novice program (Minor and Major) which would help address this.

Based on 2016-17 registration numbers, we were expecting approximately 19 returning Novice players. When King Rep Tryouts took place, we had anticipated approximately 7-9 SMHA players making Rep teams, leaving around 9 or 10 for an SMHA Local League Team, which would have been reinforced with a couple of Tykes playing up.

Unfortunately, by the time September rolled around, only 13 or 14 Novice players had registered in total, 9 of whom made King Rep Teams. This left only 4 or 5 players for a Local League team – and even had we brought up Tyke players to help support this group, it would not have been a positive hockey experience for them. So a difficult decision was made to collapse our Novice Local League team. Of the families impacted, some of the children were accommodated on the Atom Rep Team, and one player moved down to re-join the Tyke group as a beginner skater. Others were offered an opportunity to play Novice hockey with a NobleKing team. Out of the group affected, only 2 players declined these options and opted for a registration refund. This was regrettable, but largely unavoidable under the circumstances.

Even if Schomberg had remained independent, there were not a sufficient number of Novice players for two teams. With only 13 or 14 players, we would have likely chosen to ice a Rep team first. Where a Centre fails to ice a Rep team, it must provide players with territorial “releases” allowing them to play Rep in other Centres, which over time, leads to a permanent loss of players in an age category. In previous years, Schomberg has often iced a Rep team first, to avoid issuing player releases, and with Novice numbers this low, the reality is that we would have still not had a Local League Team. Similarly, even if the 3 SMHA players on the King Novice AE Team have been available, the Novice group would still have been exceptionally small – which again, was not sufficient to ice an independent Local League team.

Sadly, the Novice numbers this year were just too small to manage. And one way or another, players and families were bound to be disappointed. At least with the King partnership, we had more options available for more players, in terms of both an AE Team, and the ability to shift players to NobleKing as necessary. This level of cooperation is important in years with exceptionally low numbers like this.

Atom Local League

At the Atom Level, the King Rep Teams did not have any significant impact on the success of the Schomberg Atom Local League Team, which had a robust roster of 14 players. Approximately 17 Schomberg players made Rep teams at the King Township level across 3 Atom Teams, and if the 4 Schomberg players on the “AE” Team had of been playing at the Local League level, we would have been left with one large roster of 19 players that would have been difficult to manage, and which would have resulted in little ice time opportunities for Local League players.

Pee Wee Local League

At the Pee Wee Level, the Schomberg Pee Wee Local League Team had a roster of 17 players. Initially, we had 21 registered, and several players were “wait listed” as we can only roster a maximum of 19 players on a team.

In order to bring kids in from the waiting list, four Pee Wee players were moved up to Bantam Local League to help make that Team sustainable, due to extremely low Bantam numbers. Across the King Rebellion Rep Teams, there were approximately 14 Schomberg players who would have otherwise played in Schomberg, that made teams at the Major, Minor and AE Levels. Even had Schomberg remained independent, the Pee Wee Local League Team would have remained largely the same, as the King Rebellion Rep players would have likely been the same players to make a stand-alone Schomberg team.

To make matters more complicated, as an independent “CC” Centre, Schomberg likely would have lost its best 6 players at Pee Wee (3 at Major / 3 at Minor) under the OMHA Passport rules, either making an independent Schomberg team not viable at all, or requiring further call-ups from the Local League group. This could have potentially made the Local League team weaker.

Had the King Rebellion Pee Wee AE Team not formed – four additional players may have been available for the Schomberg Local League Team, requiring that large group to be split into two smaller teams of 10 and 11 players respectively. These split teams would have struggled due to their small size. As one can appreciate, these complicated decisions often become a difficult numbers game, and making decisions regarding Rep teams in May is a challenge, when many Local League families still register late during August and sometimes even September. But based on the Teams and player numbers reviewed, it is questionable as to whether the existence of King Rebellion Teams impacted the Pee Wee Local League experience to any measurable degree.

Bantam Local League

At the Bantam level – there was no “AE” Team formed at all. This is an age division that has been impacted for several years due to low birth numbers and player departures. There were almost an insufficient number of players to even ice a Schomberg Local League team this year without calling up several Pee Wee’s to help support it. At the Major Bantam Rep level, only 2 Schomberg players made the Major Bantam team beyond the NRP players we had lost long ago. At the Minor Bantam Rep level, only 6 Schomberg players made the King Rebellion Team – for a total of 8 Schomberg players participating at the King Township Rep level. Without the Schomberg-NobleKing Partnership, the sustainability of our Bantam Program at all levels would have been a struggle this season.

As can be seen from the numbers, the existence of King Rebellion Rep Teams at these key age divisions, did not divert any significantly larger group of Schomberg players away from the Schomberg Local League Program than would have normally occurred had Schomberg attempted to ice its own independent teams this season – and many of the players participating at the King Rep level would have likely been lost anyway due to the OMHA NRP Passport rules, at the age divisions of Pee Wee and up.

Midget Local League

The Midget Local League program was not impacted at all by the King Partnership. In fact, we had a larger number of Midget participants than the previous year, requiring the one team of 19 to be split into two smaller teams of 12-13. While the splitting of the talent pool impacted competitiveness, both teams had a good season, and players saw much more ice time than the year before.

Conclusion

Whether we remain an independent Schomberg Association, or are part of a larger King Township Hockey organization, how we divide up players and teams each year has and always will be a delicate numbers game.

The fact remains that decisions to ice teams at any level is a difficult decision each year, based on unpredictable player numbers that fluctuate based on player movement issues and late registrations – and the best that Board decision makers can do is make an educated guess based on last season’s registration numbers, and hope that player registration projections turn out to be accurate.

Based on the player registration and tryout information available at the time these decisions were made for the 2017-18 season, Board decision makers in both Associations did their absolute best to ensure that stable teams at the Local League levels remained in place.

Despite the constant challenges of managing difficult to balance player numbers, having a larger pool of players available provides members with additional options that they did not have before, in terms of teams playing at different skill levels – and we have more players to move around where necessary to help fill in gaps when teams are left short-handed. More overall players means more choices – which helps us better cope with the chronic issue of low player enrollment - a problem we have been struggling with for years.

While our move towards creating a Partnership between Schomberg and NobleKing Minor Hockey has not been without its share of growing pains, the overall results of the Partnership have benefited both organizations. Ongoing changes at the OMHA level for next season, including the further expansion of NRP player movement rules at levels Pee Wee and above will likely create additional challenges for smaller centres to retain players, and as much as we may all love Hometown Hockey, consolidating our operations as a “A” level Rep Centre help us to reduce the impact of these player movement issues.

We have pooled our resources and are sharing the administrative burden necessary to sustain the minor hockey organization in a more efficient way, with less burden on our limited number of volunteers. A larger pool of players has allowed for more competitive teams at many levels – with a greater number of options for players to participate at different competitive levels, without the hassle of complicated player movement issues.

The organizations have more stable player numbers for business and ice time planning purposes, and the financial situation of both partner associations is stable.

There is still much work to be done – but we appreciate the support and patience of our members as we work through the early lessons learned, with a goal of building a better minor hockey experience for everyone.