



PRESS RELEASE English Ice Hockey Association

CHANGES LOOM

The EIHA have spent the last nine months considering and debating the issue of junior players sharing ice with their adult counterparts. Extensive discussions have been held with a number of bodies throughout the sporting world over the variety of issues which are raised when a “junior” plays alongside an “adult”.

Last autumn two young players from the Chelmsford Club sought permission from their local authority, Essex County Council, for a licence under legislation which would enable the players to ice alongside their senior counterparts. At that time, the EIHA became involved and put forward its thoughts and arguments as to why the players should be allowed to ice in senior games. The arguments put forward, however, carried little weight in the mind of the council's officials.

Under the Children's and Young Persons Act there is a legal obligation to seek a licence for young people to play with their adult counterparts. In addition to this, the health and safety of the young person is of paramount importance to the County Council who said that they did not *“believe it was possible, despite a child being provided with the appropriate helmet, face guard and clothing for ‘proper provision to be made for the child's health and kind treatment’ during a game of ice hockey where the opposing team and the child's team members would not, in the heat of the game be able to differentiate quickly enough between a child and an adult thereby leaving a child vulnerable to the same treatment as afforded to adult players”.*

The Board of the EIHA have spent the time since the decision considering the best way forward for the sport and, as part of their investigations, have looked at best practice and operational procedures within a number of other sports, including football, rugby, cricket and field hockey. Each sport presents its own very individual sets of circumstances and each writes its rules to cater for the specifics of the sport within the general parameters of the law governing the issues under scrutiny.

As a physically demanding sport involving body contact ice hockey presents its own very individual issues which must be taken into account when considering the issue of junior and adult players sharing the same ice time. Protecting the health and safety of the young, and the not so young, must be a key feature of any proposals for change which affect the operational practices of the sport. To that end, the Board of the Association have concluded that changes are needed to the way in which the sport is organised in order to comply with the legal issues which have been raised affecting the playing of juniors in front of audiences who pay to watch the game and also to cater for the health and safety issues which are integral to those legal

issues. Similarly, the legal responsibilities of adults taking part in the sport need to be viewed with some concern in order to protect those players from possible future litigation in the event of a junior player suffering an injury.

The changes will affect the current U19 and U16 age groups in particular and apply equally to male and female players. Under 16 teams (and below) comprise junior players only. The Under 19 League involves a mix of "junior", those not having reached their 16th birthday, and adults who have passed their 18th birthday.

The changes which are to be brought into being for next season therefore, affect the icing of junior players with adults. The Board have concluded that **no junior player will be able to share ice in a competitive situation with an adult.**

This means that no young player (i.e. those not having reached their 16th birthday) will be able to play in a senior game (English Premier Ice Hockey League, English National Ice Hockey League, Women's Premier League or Women's Division One) with effect from 1st August, 2007. As soon as a player reaches their 16th birthday he/she will be eligible for selection for a senior team listed above.

The current Under 19 league will be replaced, from the start of the season, with an Under 18 League. To enable player development, the EIHA board are taking this step to allow players who have reached their 15th birthday to play in the Under 18 league (those players would not be allowed to take part in an U19 game where some players had passed their 18th birthday). Players who have not reached their 15th birthday will continue to be eligible for the U16 League.

In all of this, the role of the team coach remains of utmost importance in the question of team selection and the selection of players for training. The EIHA relies heavily on the role of the head coach for the Club and individual team coaches. They will continue to be responsible for the selection of players within the confines of the new rules. The restrictions imposed relate only to competitive game situations and will not apply to training practices. In those situations the Board feel that the risk to young people is greatly reduced and so coaches will be able to include young people in training sessions at their discretion. Only coaches will be able to tell whether a young person has the ability and capability to train with a senior environment. The rule will, however, apply to any game situation, including in house scrimmages, challenge matches and tournaments.

PRESS RELEASE ENDS

Ken Taggart, EIHA Chairman
on behalf of the Board of Directors
11 May, 2007