



COLLABORATION & CONSISTENCY: THE KEYS TO SUCCESS FOR INDIANA YOUTH HOCKEY

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unity, and shared ideals, local youth
hockey is thriving in Indiana.

INDY JR FUEL / INDIANAPOLIS YOUTH HOCKEY ASSOCIATION

COLLABORATION & CONSISTENCY

By Oliver Wenck, IYHA Communications Director

Hockey is strong in the greater Indianapolis area, stronger than many outside of the sport may realize. Due to large scale collaboration, unity, and shared ideals, local youth hockey is thriving.

A little more than a decade ago, Indianapolis youth hockey had some great players, but few successful teams. Elite players were consistently leaving the community to play for programs in more traditional hockey markets, while recreational players were frequently being solicited to leave their current teams with the promise of a “better” player experience at another rink. The landscape was fractured and divided. Travel programs competed with one another for players, recreational leagues competed with one another for players, and associations struggled to find their footing or consistent revenue.

Luckily, this is no longer the case in central Indiana, and families are having a much better experience than previous generations.

Fixing the problems that plagued hockey for a few years came with a little sacrifice and a lot of cooperation, often from entities that had long since competed with one another. The first example of such cooperation was the merger of two longstanding associations, the Central Indiana Youth Hockey Association and the Indianapolis Youth Hockey Association. The CIYHA once ran elite travel teams that bore the name of the old USHL Indiana Ice, but in 2014 they rebranded their travel teams to be called the Indy Strong. At the same time, the IYHA was running a recreational league with some “select” teams who would participate in travel tournaments; these teams fell under the Indianapolis Racers banner.

In 2017, these programs came together, establishing a pipeline for players in the recreational league at the Carmel Ice Skadium to play travel hockey; all teams would keep the Indianapolis Racers name and logo. While this strengthened the IYHA and Indianapolis Racers travel teams, the city was still disjointed, with a clear divide between players at the Carmel Ice Skadium and the Fuel Tank in Fishers.

Near the end of the 2018-2019 hockey season, another merger was announced that brought about a partnership across three privately owned and operated facilities; all to benefit one group of people, youth hockey players. There had been several unions between various youth hockey non-profit associations in the prior years, but none that would shape the direction and future of youth hockey the way the 2018-2019 merger has proven to.



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In this deal, the Indianapolis Youth Hockey Association, the oldest hockey association in Indianapolis, would take on the title of Indy Jr Fuel and subsequently have access to the resources and support of the local professional team.

As of 2019, all three Hamilton County ice rinks (The Fuel Tank in Fishers, the Carmel Ice Skadium, and the Ice Barn in Westfield) host Indy Jr Fuel teams and programming from the Indianapolis Youth Hockey Association. The collaboration gave local youth hockey players more consistent training, better opportunities for development and progression, and a much stronger sense of community.

The Indianapolis Youth Hockey Association now serves more than 1,000 hockey players from ages four to eighteen; fielding sixty-four teams in total, from beginner and recreational levels to nationally competitive travel teams, and everything in between.

The retention rate for youth players is now well above 95%. In many ways, this is due to the creation of the 317 Hockey League. The 317 Hockey League is the only recreational hockey league in central Indiana and can only operate due to the collaboration between the rinks. For recreational hockey to succeed, the two major factors in the equation are fun and convenience. Both of which are attained with some planning and scheduling that can only be done by taking a holistic view of every facility.

Traditionally, individual rinks operate their own recreational leagues, often working in a silo designed to keep players in their facilities. In some cases, rinks will also host tenant associations to run a small travel program. However, this model leads to significant logistical and scheduling hurdles. It limits a rink's flexibility to host events like travel hockey tournaments or figure skating competitions, while trying to maintain any consistency with regard to scheduling practices and games. With oversight and planning by IYHA staff, 317 Hockey League games can be rescheduled or moved to accommodate both business opportunities for the facilities and significant events for the hockey community.

Having all recreational level teams in the city participate in the 317 Hockey League allows for ease of management and greater oversight by one association, streamlining player development, opportunities for advancement, and player safety. The type of collaboration seen in Indianapolis eliminates a patchwork of playing rules and reporting processes that can, in the worst scenarios, lead to dangerous gameplay or outcomes for youth players. A network of coaches, now working in tandem for the betterment of the player experience, also offers a more balanced and fair level of play.



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In other markets wherein the recreational hockey isn't as cohesive, some age groups or facilities see a notable imbalance of ages, roster sizes, and competition. For the 317 Hockey League, consistency is key.

For players wishing to play hockey at the recreational level, the IYHA oversees a total of forty-seven teams for players from the ages of four to eighteen. Girls also have their own space in the 317 Hockey League, with a four team all-girls division. All 317 Hockey League games are non-checking, offering a safer alternative for both beginners and experienced players.

A tertiary benefit of the 317 Hockey League is the ability for those players who excel from the pack to be identified by travel hockey coaches. Competing as the Indy Jr Fuel, IYHA also oversees seventeen travel teams. These teams play a few games every weekend against teams from across the Midwest. With age groups starting as young as 10 & Under, top Indy Jr Fuel teams compete with programs from Chicago, St. Louis, Grand Rapids, Detroit, and across Ohio. The IYHA fields four travel teams for each age group (10 & Under, 12 & Under, and 14 & Under), and three all-girls travel teams. Each team practices for three hours per week.

Indy Jr Fuel players are provided with a significant number of resources to help them develop not only as hockey players, but as athletes. Teams each receive one night of dedicated off ice training with a strength coach from the High Octane Sports Academy. Teams also have one night of specialized skills training with John Salway, a world-renowned skating coach who had previously been on Team USA figure skating but has held roles in player development with both Indiana Tech and the Fort Wayne Komets of the ECHL. Unique to Indianapolis, the IYHA also offers goalies one night per week of dedicated goaltending instruction with Indy Fuel alum and current goalie coach, Cam Gray.

Benefitting most from this merger is, of course, the players. Charlie Yott, a 22 year old defenseman for the NCAA DIII Worcester State Lancers, was 15 at the time of the merger between the Jr Fuel and IYHA and was playing for the Jr Fuel's 16 & Under AA team. He would spend one more season at the AA level before advancing to the local 18 & Under AAA team before a few seasons of junior hockey to prepare for his collegiate career.

When asked about his youth hockey experience as compared to his collegiate teammates, many of whom are from more prominent hockey markets, Charlie Yott explains, "I was able to have a full AAA schedule while living at home and attending public school [Lawrence North]. Almost every player I know who came from the Midwest moved away at a young age and attended online school. There's nothing wrong with that, but I feel like being able to be a kid benefitted me and my career a lot."

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“Indy has a path that’s focused on getting our players in the limelight. I had a chance to prove myself head to head against top prospects at the 18 & Under level in front of high level scouts and colleges. The opportunity was created by the IYHA for me to do that,” said Yott.

With all the success of local players, there were still improvements to be made and ground to be gained.

In 2020, a new idea was hatched to bring Indiana youth hockey to the next level. A vision of greater partnership and affiliation was tested and proven to work. Leaders from youth hockey associations across the state were all facing the same problem: they were losing key players to bigger associations in Chicago and Detroit. Some families were making the decision to commute more than two hours by car, two or more times per week, to play for teams they felt were more competitive or offered better opportunities for exposure to higher levels of play.

To keep Indiana’s best players in Indiana, each program in the state agreed to a partnership that would lead to the formation of a Tier I (also known as AAA) hockey program for the best players at every age from communities like Indianapolis, South Bend, Fort Wayne, Columbus, Bloomington or anywhere else. Thus the creation of a program called Indiana Elite.

Using central Indiana rinks as a home base for practices, training camps, and most games, the best players in the state could now train together, play together, and win together. IYHA staff was hired to run the day to day operations of Indiana Elite like uniform ordering, ice scheduling, and budget oversight, but Indiana Elite’s success is due to efforts across the state.

Indiana Elite fields eight boys/co-ed teams and three all-girls teams. All are nationally competitive, often beating the same Chicago area teams that local players once flocked toward.

Indiana Elite teams also adopted a unique practice model. Instead of teams practicing for three hours spread across three days, teams practice together twice one night per week at the Fuel Tank in Fishers. Rinks in towns across Indiana host skill sessions run by professional Indiana Elite coaches so that geography doesn’t impede development. This schedule accommodates the state-wide approach, reducing time spent in the car, while maximizing time spent training.

Indiana Elite teams continue to improve year over year. In just the fifth season of existence, the Indiana Elite program ranks 33rd nationally, according to MyHockey Rankings, a platform that aggregates travel hockey game scores from across North America.

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The program now ranks higher than those in cities with NHL franchises such as Philadelphia, Detroit, St. Louis, and San Jose. Last season, the 2011 birth-year team won the “Slavin” Division of the Tier 1 Elite League. In early November, two Indiana Elite teams (13 & Under and 12 & Under) won the championship of the CCM World Invitational in Chicago, the world’s largest youth hockey tournament.

Indiana Elite teams are among the best in the country, proving that Indiana hockey players are among the best in the country.

Players are reaping the rewards of the program’s success. Indiana Elite’s 18 & Under team has several players on an upward trajectory. Jake McIntosh, a 17 year old player from Westfield, is now playing with the Chippewa Steel of the North American Hockey League after starting the season with the IE group. Trevor Young, an 18 year old from Carmel, signed an agreement with the Northeast Generals in the same league. During an interview with a representative from the North American Prospects Hockey League, Trevor attributed much of his success to the chemistry he has with linemate Filip Pliastos, of Fort Wayne, a line combination not possible without the current IE model. The collective success of Indiana Elite teams is getting players attention and recognition.

At the helm through these changes has been IYHA Executive Director, Derek Edwardson, who took the role in 2014 after playing for NCAA Division I Miami University (OH) then a professional career that spanned 10 seasons and ended in Italy. He said of the current state of youth hockey in Indiana, “all the challenges of merging programs and pouring through the budgets are made worth it when we are able to promote players to higher levels while keeping them here at home.” He continued, “Everyone working in youth hockey wants the same thing which is more kids at the rink loving the game. Once that is established, and we’re working together, it’s an easy goal to work toward.”

There have always been great players from Indiana. Carmel native, Grant Hutton, who recently announced his retirement from professional hockey, played 13 games for the NHL’s New York Islanders during the 2024-2025 season.

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Hutton discussed his experience playing youth hockey in Indianapolis:

The first thing that comes to mind is the sense of community. You were part of a pretty tight-knit group of families who all cared about each other. A lot of my closest friendships to this day started in those early years with the Racers and Jr. Ice. We had coaches who cared, teammates who pushed each other to be their best version of themselves, and parents who were fully invested. It created an environment where you learned to work for everything you got. Looking back, those experiences really set the foundation for how I approached junior, college, and eventually pro hockey. It was pretty special to grow up in a smaller hockey market where everyone knows everyone. You really felt the support, and not just from your friends and teammates, but from people around the rink who watched you grow up and play year after year... In the bigger markets you would see players and coaches bounce around different programs every year. Our group stayed together and we formed real relationships and loyalty from a young age. So when I look back, the uniqueness of growing up playing in Indy came from the combination of a tight community and having to carve out your own opportunity. It prepared me in ways I didn't fully understand until I had the chance to compare it to other players' experiences from growing up.

In recent years, Grant Hutton has been on the ice with some of the higher level youth teams to help former teammates turned coaches and to provide his insight to this generation of Indiana born hockey players. He is excited for the future, as he's sees the potential in these young athletes:

I think just the overall competitiveness has grown. I think the success of local players moving on to junior, college, or even pro in some cases has shown kids here that the dream can be real, and because of that, the standard is higher and the kids are pushing themselves in a way that you used to see primarily in the traditional, bigger hockey markets. I think the future of Indy hockey looks really strong, the kids are super skilled, hungry, and are benefiting greatly from a level of development that simply didn't exist when I was their age. It's fun to watch, and I hope I can find a way to be more involved now that my career has come to an end.

To learn more about the Indianapolis Youth Hockey Association and the Indy Jr Fuel, visit www.iyha.com.

PHOTOS

Dash Neary (right), a hockey player from McCordsville, encourages his goalie during an 8 & Under game at the Ice Barn in Westfield. In his first year playing hockey, Dash has already learned great sportsmanship and how to become a great teammate.



Trevor Young, an 18 year-old from Carmel, makes a play to Filip Pliastos, of Fort Wayne, during a tournament in Sioux Falls, S.D. Young has signed a tender agreement to play for the Northeast Generals in the North American Hockey League.



Indy Jr Fuel 14U 'Gold' travel team won the Central States Developmental Hockey League Championship in 2025, led by former Niagara University standout and Indianapolis Ice alumnus, Mike Bozoian.



Grant Hutton, 5th from right in top row, celebrates a National Championship win with the Indianapolis Racers 14 & Under team in 2010. Also on this team is current Indiana Elite 14 & Under head coach, Drew Doyon, second from right in middle row.



Charlie Yott served as Captain of the Indy Jr Fuel 16U Gold team in 2019-2020, the first full season after the IYHA and Indy Jr Fuel merger. Charlie is currently playing hockey for Worcester State University, in Massachusetts.

