



Kimee Duplessis (Framingham, Mass.) scored six points as a freshman defender at Phillips Andover.

Patrick Donnelly/New England Hockey Journal

A PATH TO PRO

FULL-SEASON? SPLIT-SEASON? GIRLS PREP SCHOOL HOCKEY



By Patrick Donnelly

THE PREP HOCKEY LANDSCAPE is continually evolving, be it in the boys or girls space around New England or other areas of the country.

One change coming on the boys side is Dexter Southfield's move toward a full-season model with play from September through March, beginning in 2025. Dexter's varsity program will compete as a separate team with a different name and a different coach in the fall, staying within NEPSAC rules.

It's something that programs like Cushing and Kimball Union have done in recent years, too.

Is that trend something that girls hockey will embrace?

Not necessarily.

Dexter, for example, isn't making the same move for its girls hockey program.

Meanwhile, there's the opposite end of the spectrum with full-season models, which the likes of Lovell Academy, North American Hockey Academy and Shattuck-St. Mary's, among others, utilize. Those programs compete as one team for the entire season, typically from the beginning of September through March. Winchendon departed from the traditional NEPSAC model and joined those full-season teams last season.

The moves by Cushing, KUA and now Dexter to streamline the split-season model is a step toward trying to find the best of both worlds.

It begs the question: Is there a way for girls prep hockey to have both while maintaining the current NEPSAC model?

"I sense that there is a feeling amongst our prep school coaches, that people are worried that other world is creeping in and we're competing for kids," Phillips Andover coach Martha Fenton said. "I guess I believe there are enough great young athletes out there who are looking for opportunities like this — there's enough to go around."

Said Buckingham Browne & Nichols School coach Ed Bourget, "It's a tough question. I don't think you're going to see that model change in prep school. It's just a different clientele."

Bourget, who also is Mass. Hockey's girls player development director, sees the pros of the full-season models. However, in his eyes, the common full-season schedule that flows from the start of September through March "is almost too long" due to possible burnout for players.

"In a perfect world, I'm in favor of a season that mirrors the college season for development's sake. ... I like an October-to-March season," Bourget said. "The prep school kids that are getting older and stronger development-wise, that would help them the most if they mirrored what is going to be the next level. It's just the day-in, day-out of going to class, getting your

SPERITY

TRIES TO FIND A MIDDLE GROUND



Williston Northampton's Nora Curtis (24) and Mia Daley (18; Lynnfield, Mass.) celebrate one of Curtis' 17 goals this season.

practices in, figuring out when you're going to do your film work, all that stuff. It's kind of a sprint in the current prep school model. There are only about three months, and a lot of teams try to squish 25 to 30 games in those three months. That doesn't give you a lot of practice time."

Bourget believes that timeline would help maximize player development and skill work, which, in his experience, can get overlooked later in the NEPSAC season.

"What I think gets lost is you can do some player skill development earlier in the season, but it really gets challenging to do that as you get into late January, February because you're playing three days a week, sometimes four if games get canceled for snow or whatever. Then you're rushing around," he said. "As you get to a later part of the season, you're really trying to get ready for the games. Sometimes you're not in a healthy state, and you're going to give your kids a day off. So you're sometimes practicing once or twice a week and trying to play three games a week. That's not ideal for long-term skill development. ... If the season went from October to March, like the college season, you



Most of my girls have been two if not three-season athletes. I have always encouraged that, and I will always encourage that. Maybe I'm old school, but I'm a firm believer that playing multiple sports makes them better athletes. It introduces them to different coaches, different kids, different communities in their school.

— Martha Fenton,
Phillips Andover girls coach

could spread out your games more."

One hurdle standing in the way of Bourget's ideal world in the NEPSAC is the nature of the prep school experience for many student-athletes who want to play multiple sports.

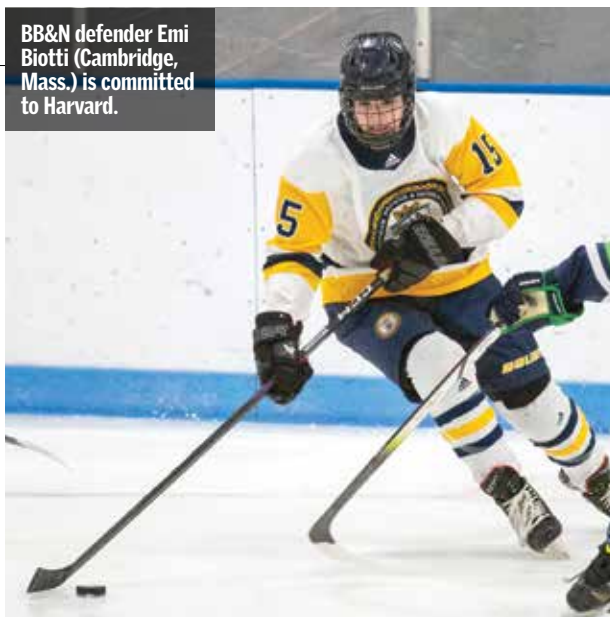
"Therein lies the tough part with prep schools," Bourget said. "We get a lot of athletes in prep that want to do the crossover, and our schedule allows that. I'm a huge fan of it. ... I think the schools would need to get creative. The problem is all the sports are going to have to cross over. That's why for prep, I don't see (full-season teams) being an option."

Student-athletes losing out on that experience is a common concern among prep coaches.

"Most of my girls have been two if not three-season athletes. I have always encouraged that, and I will always encourage that," Fenton said. "Maybe I'm old-school, but I'm a firm believer that playing multiple sports makes them better athletes. It introduces them to different coaches, different kids, different communities in their school.

"I think most college coaches would tell you they love having the multi-sport ath-

BB&N defender Emi Biotfi (Cambridge, Mass.) is committed to Harvard.



letes. They're the most athletic of the kids. They see the game differently. They understand it differently than the kid who's just been coached to play hockey. What I'm seeing is kids who are over-coached. I think it's limiting for them."

Dexter, for instance, will continue a fall skill development offering as a result of many of its middle and upper school girls hockey players being multi-sport athletes on fall teams, the school said.

Fenton believes there's room for everything to coexist, whether it's the traditional NEPSAC path, hockey academies, junior hockey, streamlined split-season models or full-season schools.

"My hope is that (traditional) model remains viable, that there is a place for these kids to play," she said. "I understand some kids want more hockey. I think there are ways for them to get that."

So how can girls prep try to get the best of both worlds?

Christa Talbot Syfu, Williston Northampton's girls coach and co-president of the NEPSGIHA coaches association, feels increased collaboration with club programs and leagues is the start.

"Our hope, as an organization and a coaching body, is to create a more seamless experience for kids in the fall, which is where most of the pressure lies for these kids," Talbot Syfu said.

Last October, the NEPSAC and NEGHL hosted skill sessions on 18 different prep school campuses with multiple schools converging on one campus and two to four college coaches running each session.

"The idea was kids didn't have to travel as far. There was a level of exposure, keeping kids closer to their region, and creating community," Talbot Syfu said. "That was sort of Phase 1, which, to be honest, was pretty successful."

That continued this spring with the NEGHL Spring Development Combine, when prep-level girls players received instruction from various coaches such as Merrimack College assistant Stephanie Wood, Lawrence Academy assistant Andrea Tarr, Bay State Breakers director and Hingham head coach Courtney Turner and Nobles assistant Kaitlin Spurling.

"It's exposure to different voices. It allows kids to see how a college coach runs a practice," Fenton said.

The hope is to expand that collaboration and include other programs like NA Elite and more that feature prep school players.

"I think this sort of meeting in the middle is something that our association is trying to accomplish," Talbot Syfu said. "The fact that these people are all sitting in a room together, saying, 'We're willing to work together to benefit the kids and their experience,' is, I think, one of the most valuable things that we can do.

"There's not any other sport that's working with the club programs servicing prep school students."

Talbot Syfu, however, understands it's not a one-size-fits-all landscape.

"Where do we get to in five years? I don't know," she said. "I mean, some of it will depend on, is the Winchendon model really working? Is that Dexter Southfield boys model really working? Are schools willing to sort of jump all into one sport? I don't have any strong feelings because I think every school has different challenges."

One common denominator: More options are never a bad thing.

"We could be thinking five years or 10 years from now, and it's kind of not changed at all. That would be a naive approach," Bourget said. "As a hockey person, you want the landscape to change. It's just like school or anything. The more options you have, the better off we'll be as a whole. We'll just develop better hockey players with the more options that they have. ... It's about growth of the game, right? We want to grow it. Growth is essential."

Fenton said, "There are so many young female hockey players out there right now. I think there's a place for all of it, and I don't really see it as competition, I see it as choices for the kids. ... I think the more opportunities we can present to kids the better."

But in the end, no matter how many different paths there are, it will always come down to what each player feels is best for them.

"Like most things, right?" Talbot Syfu said. "There's all different paths — hockey academies, prep schools, juniors — and families have to decide what their values are and what's important to them. Then align that with the various paths that are available to them and their family." ■

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