

IMPENDING USA HOCKEY RULE CHANGES ARE ALL ABOUT DEVELOPMENT



Hotly contested shorthanded icing, automatic offside tweaks take effect in August for some youth age brackets

By Patrick Donnelly

IT WOULD BE HARD TO MISS the collective groans from parents and coaches.

One team would be pressing hard offensively. The puck would go back to the point and hop over the defender's stick and just outside the blue line. The nearest defender would hustle back and turn around to see an opposing player skating directly at them.

The easy instinct would be to dump the puck back in. But in USA Hockey games, that's whistled for offsides. Boys players risk getting walloped and turning the puck over to avoid the whistle; girls risk a turnover, too.

Other times, confusion might be overheard from spectators when penalty killers are whistled for icing the puck to get a clear, something a player in NEPSAC or MIAA would have no trouble doing.

"A funny story is with my oldest, on his U-10 team last year. I was coaching, and we were shorthanded," recalled St. George's boys coach Allie Skelley. "We ice the puck, and (the official)

called it icing. I was like, 'What's going on here?' I started yelling at the ref, and the guy that was coaching with me had been coaching youth hockey for a while, he was like, 'Coach, that's the rule.' I said, 'What do you mean that's the rule? That's the most ridiculous thing in the world.'"

Experiences like Skelley's might not have been out of place at USA Hockey-sanctioned games for the past four seasons, as youth and girls rulebooks mandated automatic offside and no icing while shorthanded.

Skelley continued, "I asked a bunch of people in the youth hockey world, 'What's the point?'"

The point, as Jason Guerriero, USA Hockey's director of player development for the Massachusetts and New England districts, said, is to teach players to pick their heads up, possess the puck and find a pass or make a play, rather than dumping it into the zone or down the ice and giving away a possession. It all boils down to developing a player's hockey IQ.

"The big thing is, it does improve a lot of the hockey sense with the development piece," Guerriero said. "We have to remind ourselves, the reason we do a lot of these rule changes

or everything that we do with USA Hockey is about long-term player development. That is a big, big piece. Yes, in the moment, it could be frustrating, but we have so many clips of players that have now been playing these rules for the last four years. You can see that they'll get the puck, and most of the time with the old way, they'd just dump it right back in. Now, they're holding onto it and possessing it, and obviously, possession is a big piece of the game."

Regardless, many USA Hockey-sanctioned games at the older age levels soon will have a more traditional feel.

Beginning in August, USA Hockey will reinstate the ability to ice the puck while shorthanded for 150 and up for boys and 16-U and above for girls under rule 624(b). Delayed offside (or tag-up offside) also will return for those age groups and up under 630(d). For all ages, rule 630(d) also will remove the automatic whistle for shooting the puck on net into the attacking zone with attacking players still in the zone.

USA Hockey believes maintaining the automatic offside and shorthanded icing rules at the younger level will be vital to player development, ingraining good habits at a young age.

"Why that rule is going to stick at 14-U and below, is because you get a lot of coaches at the younger ages that are strictly result-driven," Guerriero said. "It is what it is. I wish it wasn't like that, and it should be just about development. But you'll get coaches at the 10-, 11- or 12-year-old age that are just telling kids to dump it in and go. ... The coaches are just going to try to win. They're not going to care about puck possession.

"There's a time and place for that, don't get me wrong, but when you're thinking about long-term player development, it's just creating more awareness with the puck, and it's making our players smarter in the end."

As players get older and prepare to potentially play at higher levels, like prep hockey or, on the boys side, junior hockey in the USHL, that hockey sense already will be instilled. NEPSAC, which plays under NCAA rules, and the USHL both have delayed offside and shorthanded icing.

Reinstating those rules at boys 150 and girls 16-U and above will help acclimate players to a game that will resemble what they will see at those levels.

"It's very important that those kids, when they go straight from 150 or 16-U to the USHL, have played basically what is going to be played from the USHL up to college and beyond," Guerriero said. "From a development standpoint, you're in that pocket of, 'OK, this is how it's going to be for the rest of your career, pretty much.' ... By then, they're not trying to reinvent the wheel and become more of a possession player because they've already got it. Seven years of development of possessing pucks is going to help these kids in the long run."

One example Guerriero pointed to is if players were to have no time to adjust, they might be thrown straight into a junior hockey setting without understanding how to run a power-play breakout or prepare for a penalty-kill forecheck. They wouldn't have to practice those situations if the shorthanded icing call continued through the older ages.

Not everyone, though, is as aligned with Guerriero's thinking.

"I look at (offside) completely differently," Skelley said. "I don't think kids would just dump it in. If they have the opportunity, they would actually possess it and be a little more creative. I don't see kids just dumping it in, but that's also not a bad play either. You can set up a forecheck and force the 'D' to go back and the other kids to break the puck out."

Skelley also echoed a common annoyance under the automatic offside rule, citing the impact on game flow and length that an abundance of whistles could have.

"It really affects the pace of the game," Skelley said. "There are some games where you're getting a whistle every 10 seconds — or at least it feels like it — and there's no flow to the game."

"That's one of the things that makes hockey the best game — constant action."

Guerriero said, "I remember when they had these conversations four years ago when the rule went into place. I see the frustration of the constant whistles, especially in the beginning, but over time, the kids figured it out. Just like anything else, they will sort it out."

Others see the downside of the shorthanded (and automatic) icing calls. As much as it might force the penalty killers to possess the puck and find a play, it also can take away an opportunity for a defender to make a play on the puck retrieval. Instead of developing the sense of how to handle forechecking pressure and restart transition the other way, the icing call kills the potential play.

"A nuance of a great defender is when they're going back on the puck, are they checking both sides of their shoulders and are they looking to make a play before they retrieve that puck?" said Ed Bourget, Buckingham Browne & Nichols' director of hockey operations and formerly the school's girls hockey coach and Mass. Hockey's director of girls player development. "Can they feel the pressure and see where it is?"

Skelley believes developing hockey sense and those habits for possession can be accomplished in practice through small-area games. After simulating those game-like situations, it should become second-nature in a real game, and the older levels will have the luxury of knowing they can dump the puck in or ice it on the penalty kill if they have no other options.

"The kids are playing more small games in practice than certainly we ever did growing up," Skelley said. "They're doing the cross-ice game at the Mite levels, too. That's the idea of small-area games or the cross-ice at the Mite level: more touches and possessing the puck. I feel like it's only a matter of time before they make a universal change."

Bourget said, "At BB&N, we talk about puck possession all the time. We want to possess the puck, whether we're on the power play, penalty kill or 5-on-5. We want puck possession. If there's a dangerous play happening and your opposition has taken everything away, then your last resort is high and hard off the glass and take the icing. It's just a faceoff in your end, right? We're prepared to do that. ... We basically want to teach kids different outs and scenarios."

Bourget, however, echoed Guerriero's sentiment in support of differentiating the rules between the older and younger age groups. From physical and mental developmental standpoints,



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**— Jason Guerriero
player development director
for USA Hockey's
Mass./New England district**

■ YOUTH HOCKEY

Bourget said, players improve differently at different ages.

"The way I looked at it was, you're not going to teach honors physics to a fourth-grader, right? But you're also not going to teach basic multiplication and fractions to a 10th-grader," Bourget said. "When they went to the blanket policy before, that's kind of what they did."

What might be best for players at 10-U or 12-U, might not be best for older players at 150 or 16-U and up. By the time a player reaches those older levels, that hockey sense and emphasis on possession already might be established.

"I look at it as overall development, and the brain and body develop differently at different age groups," Bourget said. "To have the same rules govern 10-U, 12-U, 14-U, 16-U, 18-U and all the way up, never changing a rule, that doesn't leave any growth potential. You're basically taking that whole group under the same expectations, but mentally, they're not there yet. Mentally, physically, they're completely different.

"That, for me, was bizarre with the rule-making, but I thought the intent was great because it breeds creativity and gives kids a different way of looking at the game. ... It's going to breed better quality hockey players by the time they're older."

Finding better ways to develop young hockey players is, above all else, the goal. The new rules will last until 2029. By then, there undoubtedly will be more rule changes (and more debate) with an eye toward setting players on the best possible path to success.

"That's ultimately what we're trying to do as a country," Guerriero said. "We have the most youth hockey players in the world, and if you think about the numbers alone and our resources, we should be at a completely different level than everybody else. So, what is it? You see some of these players in Europe and those countries, and their hockey IQ and awareness of the game is elite.

"We're elite here, too, but there's so much room for potential." ■

■ HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS: SENECAL

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became best friends," Senecal said. "It was like, 'Wow, this whole team ... we're family.' Like win or lose, we were going to be a family. We knew we had each other's backs, and we went into games with nothing to lose."

That mindset carried into the playoffs with Essex seeded No. 4 at 10-8-0 overall. The Hornets made quick work of No. 5 Rice Memorial with a 5-1 win in the quarterfinals. Their run continued with a 2-1 upset over No. 1 Burlington/Colchester in the semis. "We all just knew," Senecal said. "After we won that semis game, we were like, 'We're winning. There's no choice but to win.'"

Win they did. Essex upset No. 2 Belows Free Academy-St. Alban's, 5-1, in the championship. Senecal scored twice and added two assists.

"That was actually insane because I've never won a state championship in Vermont, and to think of it like my senior year, the last youth year of hockey, and I won one is so funny to me but also truly special," Senecal said. "We had an insane turnout of people. I think the whole school was there, and everyone was screaming and yelling. There were kids from the youth Essex teams all on the glass, too.

"Just seeing everyone's face light up, I felt like I was truly part of a special group within my community."

Even after 41 points (33 goals, including five in the playoffs) and a state championship, Senecal's greatest impact might have been in the community, giving the next generation of Vermont skaters another role model to aspire to, not unlike Senecal's inspiration growing up.

"I was signing stuff after games for little tiny toddlers," Senecal said. "It was just a great experience. Honestly, just giving those kids someone to look up to, I feel like it's really special. Growing up, I looked up to Amanda Pelkey. So, to think that I'm like those younger kids' Amanda Pelkey is insane."

Pelkey (Montpelier, Vt.), currently a forward with the Boston Fleet of the PWHL, played at NAHA and captained the University of Vermont before embarking on her professional career.

Senecal hopes to leave the Essex program in good hands. She's close with her younger teammates. They still skate and work out together. Even beyond current Hornets players, there's

a foundation being laid for continued growth.

"We want to grow the game, and we want more girls to play the game," Gernander said. "So seeing someone have success, you certainly hope there's ramifications from that. She's also really active with coaching. She's out there, and kids get to be on the ice with her, which is pretty cool. Certainly, the hope is that it inspires other girls to take up the stick and give it a shot.

Hockey might have been a driving force behind Senecal's return to Essex, but it became about more than just her play on the ice.

"She's just a kid you want to be around," McManus Souza said. "So many of those kids look up to her. I was at (New England) District tryouts with my younger daughter, and every player from Vermont asked if we knew Taylor Senecal. She's emerged as a local hero in some aspects this year.

"Hockey aside, those are the memories she's going to have for the rest of her life." ■



Paul Lamontagne

Taylor Senecal scored twice in the state championship game.