

Big Bear

November & Beyond

The Ursa Major

November 6- 8, Detroit, MI
Mite thru Midget/HS, B, BB, A, AA, & H.S.J.V.

Cold Fusion

November 6- 8, Kalamazoo, MI
Mite thru Midget B & BB

The Wild Turkey

November 27 - 29, Detroit, MI
Mite thru Midget/HS, B, BB, A, AA, & H.S.J.V.

The Indy Jones

November 27 - 29, Indianapolis, IN
Mite thru Midget / H.S. B, BB, A & AA.

The FireBolt

December 4 - 6, Ann Arbor, MI
Mite thru Midget/HS, B, A, AA, & H.S.J.V.

The Urban Legends

December 4 - 6, Detroit, MI
Mite thru Midget/H.S. - A & AA including H.S.J.V.

The Trenton Invitational

December 11 - 13, Trenton, MI
Mite thru Midget/HS, & J.V. B, BB, A, AA

The FireBird

January 8- 10, Ann Arbor, MI
Mite thru Midget/HS, B, A, AA, & H.S.J.V.

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Navigating the Frozen Waters

Junior B and Junior C levels are part of USA Hockey

Editor's Note: The following article is the fourth installment of our "Navigating the Frozen Waters" educational series aimed at helping both new and veteran players and parents understand the different levels and pathways of hockey available in Michigan and across the United States. Michigan Hockey will explore midget AAA, high school and youth hockey in future issues.

We invite you to share your questions and concerns regarding Navigating the Waters by e-mailing us at: mh@michiganhockeyonline.com.

BY TIM WILSON

The Midwest-based Great Lakes Junior Hockey League is one of four designated Tier III Junior B leagues in the United States and includes four teams in Michigan, three in Illinois and two in Wisconsin. This is the league's first year with Junior B status after operating as a Junior C circuit last season in its inaugural campaign.

With the league being so new to the overall U.S. junior scene, the GLJHL is working to build its name and establish a reputation.

"With our league, not a lot of people know it and a lot are skeptical," said Jeff Worlton, head coach of the Bay City-based Tri-City Icehawks. "People are finding out that we are competitive and you can move up."

The main goal of GLJHL teams is to develop players so they can move to the Junior A level and possibly beyond, according to Worlton.

"A lot of coaches at higher levels like kids to play Junior B first," he said. "It's a good way for a kid to get his feet wet in junior hockey with the speed and the fighting."

And educating parents and players comes with the territory.

"The hardest part of my job is explaining to parents that the bang is worth the buck," said Burton-based Michigan Mountain Cats head coach Matt Bendall. "We get some parents that think if their kid plays junior hockey this year that they will be playing college hockey next year."

Teams must convince a player that he is better off playing at a lower level of junior hockey than playing in midgets or at the high school level.

"You're playing a 48-game regular season plus playoffs," said Bendall, referring to the GLJHL. "Playing with better kids makes you a better player."

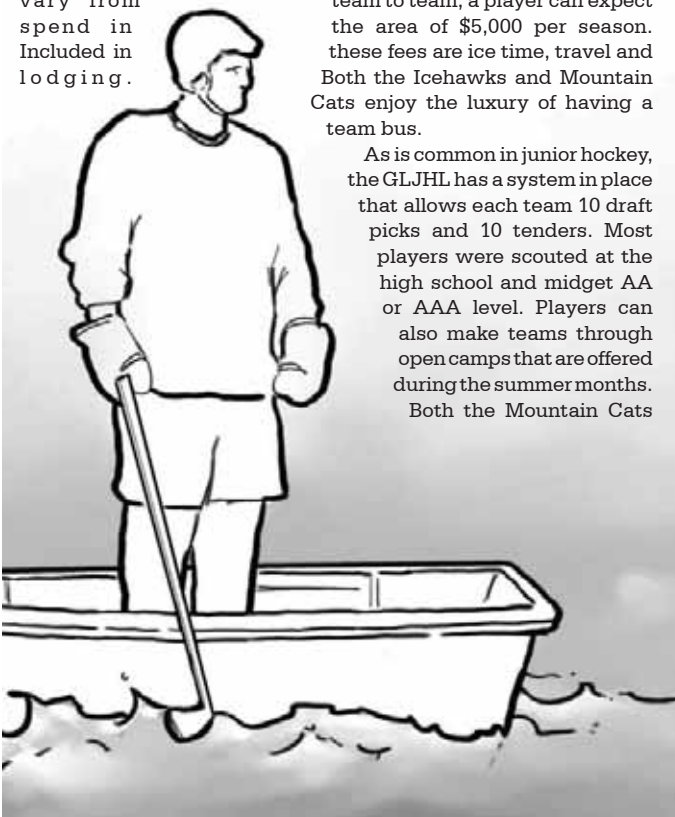
"It's more intense than high school both on and off the ice," said Worlton. "If you get your elbow up at the junior level you may have to answer for it. In high school, it's two minutes."

Like Tier III Junior A, Junior B is pay-to-play. Although fees can vary from team to team, a player can expect the area of \$5,000 per season. Included in these fees are ice time, travel and lodging.

Both the Icehawks and Mountain Cats enjoy the luxury of having a team bus.

As is common in junior hockey, the GLJHL has a system in place that allows each team 10 draft picks and 10 tenders. Most players were scouted at the high school and midget AA or AAA level. Players can also make teams through open camps that are offered during the summer months.

Both the Mountain Cats



and Icehawks have players from out of the area but most have local connections. Local billet families are provided for out of town players, with a cost of about \$250-\$300 per month.

"Generally we are very local with most players living within 90 miles and the majority within 30 miles," said Bendall.

While the Mountain Cats and Icehawks both have a strong local flavor to their teams, the Danville (IL) Inferno operate at the other end of the spectrum with just three players from the Danville area.

With a roster of 20 this season, 17 players needed to billet coming from as far as Alaska, Texas, North Carolina, Florida and Colorado.

"We probably have the most extensive billeting program in our league," said Danville general manager Cameron Estes.

Located in east-central Illinois, Danville is small city with a youth hockey program that consists of a roughly 60 player house division. So why move all the way to Danville to play Junior B hockey?

"Our rink, our fan base and our ethics behind our program," Estes said.

The Inferno average 450 fans per game in a building that seats close to 2,500 and run a very strict operation. Similar to other teams in the league, Danville requires that all players attend school or have a job. The team also has a zero tolerance policy for alcohol and randomly drug tests players.

"We have a great group of owners in this league," said Estes. "We all do things differently but we're all here for the kids first."

"This is about more than hockey. This is about preparing them for the real world," said Estes. "We like to pride ourselves on that out of 17 players last year, 10 have moved on. Out of our 20 players this season, two have already moved on to Tier III Junior A."

In Burton, the Mountain Cats also operate the state's only Junior C franchise as the westernmost member of the Continental Hockey Association's C division. One of only two Junior C leagues in the country, the CHA has six teams at the C level, with all but the Mountain Cats located in the Northeast section of the country.

"Junior C is a great place for a kid to start," said Bendall. "It's a good opportunity for kids that aren't ready for Junior B."

Although Bendall does not coach the "C" Mountain Cats, the two teams do skate together over the summer and players have the chance to move up or down. Fees to play at the C level are very similar to playing Junior B.

As the GLJHL works to establish itself, Bay City's Worlton has a message for players and parents.

"Don't let the letter B at the end of the word junior fool you," he said. "This is very good hockey, kids do get moved on. The teams in this league are stable and the league is growing."

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