



PRESENTS

# THE HOCKEY GUIDE



FALL - WINTER 2015-2016

## Competition, skill development & fun bring growth for Stars

**E**ric Schmitz is a realist. He knows that most of the kids playing youth hockey will never see the ice in an NHL game, much like participants in any other youth sport. But he's also an idealist. He believes there's great joy in learning to play the game of hockey and his goal is to provide as many opportunities as possible.

"It's all about making it fun for the kids," said Schmitz, the new hockey director for the Kansas City Stars at the Kansas City Ice Center. "If they come to the rink and they're a kid who wants to play hockey, if you work with them in providing good instruction and practices, you'll help these kids develop their skills. But at the end of the day, they have to have fun."

Schmitz has been involved in youth hockey at the KCIC for eight years. "We're seeing steady improvement," he said. "We've been building for years, as

far as getting more kids involved.

"The programs that have gotten the kids involved in basic skating skills and basic hockey skills have helped us the most, especially in the younger years. The 'Learn to Play' players—the kids wanting to start to

skate and the kids wanting to play hockey—we get those players into the program before actually getting them on a team."

The merger of area youth hockey programs into the Kansas City Youth Hockey Association has helped the quality of play in the Stars program. At least early indications say so.



"The travel teams are where we've seen the effects of the unification the most," Schmitz said. "We're definitely seeing improvement. It's helped the program at the different levels. The Squirts (ages 9-10) division has seen the most effect. The Double-A program really has a strong team."

So what does Schmitz tell the kids who don't make the travel teams? "I tell them to keep working on it," he said. "That's what we strive for. I want to give every kid an opportunity to succeed and be successful. If it wasn't this year that worked out for them for the travel teams, the house level will provide great access for them. Then we

have our select program, which is a level above the house program. They offer more ice time and more competition. We can get them that experience, so that next year they can try again for the travel team, if that's their goal."

Dean Nelson, general manager of the KC Ice Center, says that the trickle-down effect of having more kids trying out for the highest level has helped every level. "It really has," Nelson said. "When we had the tryout for the Kansas City Jets (high school travel team), we had a larger number of kids who didn't make the squad. Those kids will filter back to the recreational level, which will make those levels stronger."

"There are kids who might have made the Jets in the past, but the competition

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3. New players start with Learn to Play Hockey
4. KC Jets have success at high school level



# KCIC's adult league hockey players have "ice in their veins"

Two years after retiring from a Hall of Fame career with the Detroit Red Wings in 1971, Gordie Howe signed on with the Houston Aeros of the World Hockey Association. The WHA was an upstart league formed to compete against the NHL.

Howe, who had spent 26 years with the Red Wings, was lured to the Aeros because they had signed Mark and Marty Howe, teenage brothers with a great deal of potential. Oh yeah, they also were Gordie's sons. They played together for four seasons with the Aeros and three with the Whalers before Gordie retired in 1980 at the age of 52.

While Howe was an outstanding player with many records to his name, his goals, points and accolades are not what he remembers most about his career.

"I always refer to that as my greatest accomplishment and excitement," the elder Howe said of sharing the ice for seven seasons with his sons.

Howe would certainly understand one of the reasons for playing in the adult hockey leagues at the Kansas City Ice Center.

"If you grew up playing tennis or racquetball, you would continue to play as long as

the outdoor rink, I thought, 'I think I can still do this.' I think most of the other guys are the same. If you grew up playing hockey, and that's all you know, you're going to play."

There's an expression in sports for athletes who don't seem to be affected by pressure. They are said to have "ice in their veins." In a

and I oversee everything," he said. "I make sure the scores get tallied, make sure the rosters get set, make sure the guys are paying and make sure that any infractions are dealt with properly. I do basically what any league commissioner does, without the big compensation package."



Participants in the KCIC adult leagues ranges in age, skill level and even demographics. Prendergast says that a couple of players travel from Columbia, Mo., for the weekly games. Others hail from Lawrence or St. Joseph. The games are generally played Sunday afternoons and evenings and after 10 p.m. on weeknights, so there's definitely a commitment necessary.

"It's hockey," Prendergast said.

"Most of the guys have played hockey for a long time. They understand the deal. It goes with the territory."

At the KCIC, there are 21 teams of 13 players each covering three divisions. "The A level is for guys who played in college and spent their whole life playing hockey at a high level," Prendergast said. "We have some guys

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was so great they couldn't make it this year. But they're just as talented. It also gives you more numbers, and there's strength in numbers."

Each of the area rinks has its own house league—Line Creek, Independence, St. Joseph, Mo., Topeka and the KCIC. The Stars are the name of the in-house program at the KCIC. The KCIC has four teams in each age group.

"Mostly they'll play against each other, but we will have a game against the Junior Mavericks or the Line Creek Saints or the St. Joe Griffons," Nelson said.

The Stars program has 250 kids involved, not counting the ones in the travel programs. That's up significantly in the four-plus years that Nelson has been at the KC Ice Center. There are also 70 kids involved in each ses-

sion of "Learn to Play Hockey," the natural feeder of the Stars program.

Schmitz knows it's an uphill climb. He grew up playing hockey in Superior, Wisc., a suburb of Duluth,

But with only about 1,000 kids playing youth hockey in the entire metro area in Kansas City, Schmitz knows he has to be more creative. He's not worried.

"I think we can grow by 500 kids or even

"We've seen a lot of kids get involved because their parents played. But we're starting to see kids whose parents didn't play hockey. They're learning a little more about the sport or they heard a friend talk about. If you have programs where kids are enjoying it right off the bat, that's how we're going to grow it. We can do that.

"We want to continue to provide opportunities for these kids, whether they want to play at the top level or play at a recreational level."

For more information on the KC Stars youth programs, visit [kcstarshockey.com](http://kcstarshockey.com). For information on the new KC Youth Hockey Association, visit [kcyouthhockey.com](http://kcyouthhockey.com).



Minn. There was high-level competition on every rink or pond. "I didn't have to be involved in a travel program because there were plenty of opportunities in my area," he said. "We didn't have to go too far to play hockey at a competitive level."

double it to 2,000 in the next five years," he said. "I think that's doable. We have to get the word out there. We have to get people in the building to see what it's about.



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# Growth of hockey in KC starts with “Learn to Play” program

**D**ean Nelson doesn't have any children, but he can relate to one of the joys of early parenthood.

Nelson is the general manager of the Kansas City Ice Center, where every eight weeks a new session of “Learn to Play Hockey” gets started. Kids come into the program from various skill levels, but they all improve during each eight week session. The next session starts November 14.

“It’s no different, I would expect, than a proud papa watching his kid learn to walk or ride a bike,” Nelson said. “The kids who are in the ‘Learn To Play Hockey’ program could play for the next 10 years. I’ll get to watch them progress through the years.”

“Learn to Play Hockey” is a program Nelson developed after he arrived at the KCIC a little more than four years ago. A similar program was in place, but the few kids involved had to share the ice with the kids in the “learn to skate” program.

“It wasn’t really growing,” Nelson said. “At that time I thought we needed a program that was focused on kids who wanted to learn to play hockey, not just skate, and that’s what we set out to do. Now we have 70 kids enrolled in every session.”

The range of skills of the kids entering the program varies.

The first level of students are called “Rookies.” They learn how to hold a stick and walk on the ice. They learn how to get back up when they fall down and how to push off, both

forward and backward.

From there they graduate up to the second level called “Little Stars.” There, they learn how to stop, how to turn and how to pivot



from forward to backward. They also work on basic stick-handling and shooting skills.

Level 3 skaters are called “All Stars.” At this level skaters work on passing while moving, tight turns, catching passes with their stick and shooting. By the time they finish level 3, they’re ready to join a hockey league.

Most “Learn to Play” participants are in the 3-10 age group, though there are a few older kids. “In Kansas City, some of the kids start a little later,” Nelson said. “They get the bug and they want to play hockey.”

“Where I’m from in Minnesota, the kids

start much earlier—at about age 3 or 4. They learn to crawl, then walk, then skate. What’s better than watching your kid take his second ‘first step.’ That’s skating in Minnesota.”

The “Learn to Play Hockey” program is more necessary in areas like Kansas City, where it’s not the expected progression. Nelson says that hockey is the area’s fifth most popular team sport, so it’s not a foregone conclusion that kids will be able to, or even want to, play hockey.

“It’s hard to develop hockey players,” he said. “You have soccer, as well as football, basketball and baseball. All four of those can be played outdoors for 10 months out of the year around here.

Hockey is one that is fighting to keep going.

Nelson says that hockey is harder to play than any of the other sports.

“Soccer is growing in Kansas City because anybody can do it,” Nelson said. “On the elite

level, it’s very hard. But on the social level, it’s very good for the majority of kids who want to do it. If you can run, you can probably kick the



ball. Whether they run fast or run slow, they can still do it.

“Hockey is a little different. If you can teach those basics at an early age and they can have some success with it, plus be part of a team, they’ll stick with it longer. That’s what is going to grow hockey in this area. It’s not just the kids who started young, but the ones who stick with it.

“I don’t want to offend the soccer fan, but soccer and hockey are very similar except hockey is played while sliding around on a sheet of ice on a thin blade. Kids, like adults, migrate toward things they do well.”

The Kansas City Ice Center also utilizes a program from USA Hockey that breathes life—and revenue—into the push for new hockey players. “Try Hockey For Free” is a twice-a-year event scheduled every November and February.

It’s a one-hour program that exposes kids to hockey. They get a USA jersey that comes free from USA Hockey. “It’s something they can take home with them,” Nelson said. “We have the skates and the equipment at the KC Ice Center. We get the kids all suited up. It gives them their first experience with hockey.

“It goes nicely with our program, but it’s a one-day program, where ‘Learn to Play Hockey’ is an eight-week program.”

To sign up for the next session of “Learn to Play Hockey” or the February “Try Hockey For Free” go to the KCIC website, [kciocenter.com](http://kciocenter.com). Do it, to make “Papa” Nelson proud.

**ADULT HOCKEY** | from page 2



who played semi-pro hockey. The B league is for guys who played high school hockey, and also have been playing their whole lives. The C/D league is for novice players, plus older guys and gals. Once you get out on the ice, you’ll know where you belong. I don’t have to tell you.”

Prendergast says that you’ll also know when it’s time to hang up the skates. “It’s a contact sport; you’re still going to get some incidental contact,” he said. “But, there is a difference in the speed at the different levels. As long as their bodies allow them to play at the level they think they can play at, then they’re going to do it.”

The advantage of playing with your sons

is a common theme in the C/D league. As the Howe’s can attest, it can create an extra edge.

During the first season of the WHA, one of the younger Howes got checked into the boards a bit after the whistle. Gordie was on the ice for that shift and saw it from center ice. Instead of lining up for the ensuing face off, Gordie took off. As he got closer to the offending



player, he lowered his shoulder, carried him into the boards, then left him crumpled on the ice. He wasn’t defending a teammate; he was defending his son.

There’s no checking in the KCIC adult leagues, so this scene won’t be repeated. But playing with your own flesh and blood definitely is a lure to participants of all ages.

To learn more about the Adult Leagues at the Kansas City Ice Center, visit [kciocenter.com](http://kciocenter.com) and select the Adult Hockey tab.

**CREDITS:** Photos in The Hockey Guide provided courtesy the following contributors: Bob Klem, John Boma, The KC Stars and The KC Jets.

All articles by David Smale.



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# Jets' high school success means success for KC Ice Center

**W**ith the success of the Kansas City Jets—two league titles in the last three years—there's more interest in the team from a fan's and future participant's standpoint. And that means nothing but good things for the Kansas City Ice Center.

The Jets, the elite high school traveling team that's housed at the KCIC, won the Midwest High School Hockey League championship this past spring after winning their first title in the spring of 2013.

The Jets are the only Double-A high school program in the area. Double-A is a classification for larger high schools. The Jets represent the entire Kansas City area, rather than a specific high school. So their opponents in the MHSHL are similar programs from surrounding states Nebraska and Iowa. A majority of the teams are in Iowa, which fits since the league used to be called the Iowa Hockey League.

But how do the Jets compare with some teams from some traditional hockey hotbeds? Kansas City Ice Center general manager Dean Nelson says they're not that far off.

"We recently took the Jets up to Rochester, Minn., my hometown, and competed against the Southeastern Minnesota elite team," Nelson said. "In the fall in Minnesota they have the Elite League, and they play by area, not by high school.

"We took the Jets up there and they competed. We didn't come out on the good side on the scoreboard, but we were competitive. The purpose of taking them up there was more than just the scoreboard. It was about competing and showing the kids what the next level looks like. We weren't embarrassed. They were very good games.

"I think we would compete with a lot of the Class A teams, which are the smaller schools."

The youth program at the KCIC has done a nice job of feeding the Jets, according to Jets coach Gary Emmons.

"We graduated about eight or nine (players

Kansas City. The ones we're developing now are eventually going to get to high school and I'll get them."

It's a "chicken and egg" thing, from a good standpoint. Nelson says the success of the Jets over the past few years has pumped energy into the youth program.

90 percent of the kids who play hockey will ever play, even in Minnesota, where I grew up. After high school, you go on to college to focus on your career, or you go to work, and you don't play competitive hockey any more.

"Now, in the Kansas City area, we have a legitimate high level team that all the kids can

look up to. They can say, 'I want to play for Coach Emmons and the Jets.' Because of the success they have, and the experience that Gary brings to the table (he played 13 years of professional hockey, mainly with the San Jose Sharks organizations, college hockey at Northern Michigan where he was a two time finalist for the Hobey Baker Award and played for the Canadian National Team), there's something to shoot for. Gary comes to the rink

all the time, including for camps and clinics, so the younger kids get a chance to meet Gary and talk with him. That's a goal for a lot of the young kids.

"Before, they could play youth hockey in this area, but they had to look somewhere else to play high-level high school hockey. Now they can stay at home and still play at a high level. The Midwest Hockey League is very competitive, very well structured and very respected throughout the Midwest.

And just like with any successful team, the more success the Jets have the bigger the crowds that come to see them. All home games are free (see schedule), which also helps attendance.

"There's more of a buzz around them," Nelson said. "When the better teams from our league come to play, the stands are full. It helps the rink." And it's always a thrill to back a winner.

For more information on Jets Hockey, visit their website, [kcjets.com](http://kcjets.com).



from) last year, so we have a good returning group," he said. "The whole key is what the youth program is doing. The better the youth program the better they are when they get to high school and try out for the Jets.

"Dean is doing a knock-down job with the

"The young kids really look up to the Jets players. The Jets players come out for the camps and clinics and work with the young kids," says Nelson. "Just having a



## JETS HOME 2015-2016 SCHEDULE AT KCIC

Date	Opponent	Varsity	JV
Sat. 11/28/15	Ames Little Cyclones	4:00 PM	6:00 PM
Sun. 11/29/15	Ames Little Cyclones	10:50 AM	9:20 AM
Sat. 12/5/15	Cedar Rapids Roughriders	5:40 PM	4:10 PM
Sun. 12/6/15	Cedar Rapids Roughriders	10:50 AM	9:20 AM
Fri. 1/1/16	Des Moines Oakleaves	3:30 PM	2:00 PM
Sat. 1/2/16	Des Moines Oakleaves	2:00 PM	12:30 PM
Sat. 1/23/16	Lincoln Jr. Stars	5:40 PM	4:10 PM
Sun. 1/24/16	Lincoln Jr. Stars	10:50 AM	9:20 AM
Sat. 1/30/16	Sioux City Metros	5:40 PM	4:10 PM
Sun. 1/31/16	Sioux City Metros	10:50 AM	9:20 AM
Sat. 2/20/16	Omaha Jr. Lancers	5:40 PM	4:10 PM
Sun. 2/21/16	Omaha Jr. Lancers	10:50 AM	9:20 AM

youth program. The numbers are through the roof. The summer camps he provides are really starting to develop some hockey players in

successful high school program has been feeding our youth program as well.

"High school is the highest level that

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