

Girls' Hockey or Boys' Hockey? The Choice For Girls Who Play Hockey

By Gini Weslowski,
Co-Director for Girls Hockey,
Webster Youth Hockey, Webster, NY

The hockey season is winding down, and evaluations and tryouts for next season are on the horizon. Hockey players and their parents are thinking about where they would like to play. Travel or house? Organization X or organization Y? But girls have an additional choice to make; **play on a girls' team or play with the boys?** At the same time, youth hockey organizations have a choice to make regarding what options they will provide for girls. These are important decisions – but are these decisions based on good information?

Many say that girls should play with boys up to PeeWee level, when checking is introduced in youth hockey. The rules are the same, the sport is the same up until that point, so why separate them? At the PeeWee level and above, some people say that girls who are serious about hockey should stay with boys as long as they can. The level of play is higher, the game is faster, she will develop into a better player. But are these things true? If they are true, are they the only important factors? In spite of dramatic and continuing growth in the number of girls playing hockey, most coaches and most parents have much more direct experience with boys hockey (and male hockey players) than with girls'. They may never have seen a girls' hockey game, or they may have experience with only one team or program, and that experience might be outdated as well. (In addition, playing on a higher level team, girls or boys, does not *always* translate to a better experience or make a better hockey player.)

What this means is that often the decision to play with the boys is made with little or inaccurate knowledge of the girls' hockey choices available or the pros and cons of playing girls' hockey. And, the decisions that people make also affect how many options and what kind of options there are for girls. The more girls that stay in boys' hockey the fewer there are in girls' hockey, which affects the number and caliber of the girls' teams out there. I do not mean that all girls should play on girls' teams, just that the decision should be made with more equal information.

The 2005 Girls Hockey Survey

What are the differences between girls' and boys' teams, and how do these differences impact the girls who play hockey? This question is addressed by a national survey of girls and their parents, we conducted in 2005 in conjunction with USA Hockey Girls' and Women's Section. With more than 6,000 responses representing every region of the US, and every age group and level of play the survey provides valuable insights into the issues around girls in hockey. For the first time, we have a comprehensive look at girls in the sport and what their experiences have been.

Girls Love Hockey

One clear and unequivocal finding of the survey was that girls LOVE hockey. On a scale of 1-5, where 1=I hate it and 5= I love it, the average rating was 4.79. If this were a history test, hockey would receive a 96, or an A+. This finding holds true for each age group as well, with girls' passion for hockey increasing in the older age groups. (Chart 1) This is great news for those of us trying to attract and retain girls in hockey programs. It's an easy sell.

But along with this positive feeling about hockey, there are differences between girls playing boys' hockey and girls playing girls' hockey. Girls playing with boys rated their experience a 4.69, while those on girls teams rated it 4.82. (Chart 2) This difference is statistically significant, and it was consistent across the age groups, indicating that this is a real difference, not a random thing.

In addition, girls playing on girls' teams were more likely to say that their teammates respect them, that they feel like part of the team, that their team plays like a team, and that they get a fair amount of playing time. And girls on girls' teams were more likely to report that most of their teammates were friends. (Chart 3)

One of the most telling results from this survey show that girls playing boys hockey were more likely to quit. Most (79%) of the girls who said they planned to quit hockey were playing boys hockey, while only 44% of girls who were not quitting were playing boys hockey. (Chart 4)

What Do Girls Like Best About Playing for a Girls' Team?

Many people say that girls should play with boys up until checking is introduced. They believe the most important difference between boys' and girls' hockey is checking and physical play.

What Girls Say About Being on a Girls' Team:

"The girl's are more fun to be around because you can talk to them about anything and have fun all the time."
"You don't have to worry about how nasty the boys are and girls relate to each other better and we have sooo much fun. But when on the ice were not girls we're HOCKEY PLAYERS!"
"You feel like you are in the right place more so than you do with a guys team"
"There was a sense of equality, you didnt feel inferior to the boys and you didnt have to prove anything for the girls for them to accept you as a member of the team."
"I wish more girls would get into hockey"

But what do girls think is best about girls' hockey?

- 73% of girls who were playing on a girls' team cites friendships, bonding, comraderie, and not being "different" as the thing they liked

best about playing for a girls' team.

-10% said being in the locker room with the team was best. Only 6% of these girls gave

reasons related to no checking or less rough play as the best part of playing on a girls' team.

When we asked these girls what they would like to change about their girls' team, 24% said nothing, 10% said better coaching, 7% said more girls, 7% said improved skills, and 5% wanted to see more teamwork. (Chart 6)

What About Boys Teams?

We also asked girls who play on boys teams what they liked best.

- 32% said that the boys hockey was faster and more competitive.
- 6% they liked proving that they could compete with boys and
- 15% said they liked the physical play.
- The rest gave other reasons such as "it's the only option," "I could play with my brother," "I have never played on a girls team so I don't know." (Chart 7)

About being on a boys' team:

"I was the only girl last year, and of course, I had no one to talk to in the locker room. Also, the coaches need to be less biased and play girls and boys as players, based on skills"
"I want to be accepted...it shouldn't matter if I am a girl. I don't want to hear boys putting me down for being a girl or not passing to me because I'm a girl."
I wish I didnt have to get dressed away from my teammates, but I guess it was ok because they smelled pretty bad anyway
"More girls." "Get more girls"
"I would love for there to be more girls open to playing hockey. Too many dismiss the sport without a thought because there are so few high school teams and we need more players on our teams."

We asked girls' who played on boys' teams what they would change, and 24% said nothing, and 22% said they would add more girls, 12% said they wished their teammates or coach treated them more fairly and 10% wanted to see more teamwork. No one listed less physical play as something they

wanted to change. (Chart 8)

Conclusions

These results point out several important things about girls and hockey.

- The first is something anyone involved with girls who play hockey already know- **girls LOVE to play hockey!** They are enthusiastic about the sport at all ages and at all levels of play. They want to have fun, they want to win, they want to

improve, and they expect good coaching and a good hockey organization. They deserve to be taken seriously when they practice and when they play. And their opinions should be listened to.

- Girls have a different perspective on many aspects of hockey than boys, and their coaches, do. **Girls value the social aspects of hockey more than their coaches and parents may realize.** Girls mention teamwork, friendships, comraderie, and bonding as important components of their hockey experience. Fairness, equity and respect are also important to them.
- **Girls enjoy hockey more when they play with other girls.** At all ages and levels of play, girls feel more like a part of the team, feel more respected, and see more cooperation and teamwork on a girls' team. These things are all important to girls, and should not be disregarded because "boys hockey is more competitive." Most of all, girls are more likely to stay in the sport if they are playing on girls' teams.
- **The idea that the most important difference between girls' and boys' hockey has to do with checking is absolutely wrong.** That may be the difference in the rules, but it misses the way girls relate to the game, and a fundamental difference in the way girls are.
- **Youth hockey organizations should work harder to provide girls-only options for girls at all levels.** Attitudes towards girls hockey needs to change at all levels, so that girls are encouraged, rather than discouraged from trying girls hockey. The more that happens the more options there will be for girls, and the level of play for girls will increase quickly.

Bringing More Girls Into the Sport-- and Keeping Them

USA Hockey's New York Girls' and Womens' Section has made it a priority to recruit and retain more girls in hockey. The 2005 Girls' Hockey Survey was a part of that effort. Introducing the sport to girls- and giving them an easy way to try it is critical. Programs like the "Biscuit in the Net" program with Girl Scouts have been successful at bringing girls in. NYSAHA assembled 40 sets of hockey equipment for organizations in NY State to use for these "Try Hockey" programs.

In Toronto, NYS girls' hockey program obtained a grant from RBC HOCKEY. With this NYS is able to offer registration for only **\$99.00 for NEW NYS PLAYERS.**

Youth Hockey Programs

This survey and its' results should serve as a challenge to youth hockey organizations to better meet the needs of girls. Good organizations should not be content with

simply offering girls' teams only if enough girls happen to come forward. To develop a strong girls' hockey program, it is necessary to work at it:

- Offer free ice for "SKILLS AND DRILLS" Programs to draw kids in,
- Support the development of girls' teams at different levels so that there are appropriate options for girls who want to play girls' hockey.
- Treat girls' hockey equitably and make that equity visible. Don't tolerate comments or actions that undermine these efforts. Don't tolerate inferior coaches, or officials.
- Encourage coaches, parents and players to see what girls hockey is really like.

Girls High School Hockey

Along with youth hockey programs, girls' high school hockey is a necessary, and inevitable, part of the girls' hockey continuum. 93% of girls responding to the survey said they would want to play for a girls' high school team if there was one at their school. Momentum is growing in many parts of the country, and this will continue to spread. Girls want the same opportunity to place hockey for their school that boys have long enjoyed. School districts should provide this opportunity for girls if they do so for boys. In addition to meeting the needs of girls who already play, a girls' high school team will also draw attention to the sport and further expand girls' hockey.

With these efforts, more girls will want to play hockey and more will stay in hockey. When girls' hockey is valued honestly and appropriately, and when girls' preferences and opinions are used to give girls what they want in the sport, everybody wins.