



NORTHERN ONTARIO HOCKEY ASSOCIATION

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NOHA U9 Pilot Program Information 2025-2026 Season

Important Message to NOHA Families

The Northern Ontario Hockey Association (NOHA), in collaboration with the Ontario Hockey Federation (OHF) and Hockey Canada, is participating in an exciting pilot program for the 2025-2026 season that will enhance development opportunities for our U9 players.

What is the U9 Pilot Program?

The U9 Pilot Program is a Hockey Canada-approved initiative designed to provide earlier implementation of full-ice hockey for select U9 teams, combined with an intensive 60-day development phase focused on fundamental skill building. This pilot addresses the growing demand for structured, sanctioned full-ice programming while maintaining Hockey Canada's commitment to age-appropriate development.

This is a one-year pilot program that will be carefully evaluated to determine its effectiveness and potential for future expansion.

Two Pilot Programs in the NOHA

Main NOHA Pilot Program

- **Who:** U9 Tier 1 teams
- **How Many Teams:** Approximately 15 teams across the NOHA
- **Timeline:**
 - Season begins with 60-day development phase (September 2 - November 1, 2025)
 - Transition to full-ice hockey on November 1, 2025
 - All other U9 Teams continue half-ice until January 10, 2026

Nipissing District Hockey League (NDHL) Special Pilot

- **Who:** All U9 teams (both Tier 1 and Tier 2)
 - **How Many Teams:** Approximately 30 teams
 - **Timeline:**
 - U7 and U8 players remain on modified ice for the **entire season** as intended in the Hockey Canada Player Pathways
 - All U9 teams transition to full-ice on November 1, 2025
 - This pilot extends the half-ice experience for U8 players for a complete season rather than transitioning mid-year, ensuring full adherence to Hockey Canada's developmental framework
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Key Program Features

Development-First Approach

- **60-day structured development phase** from September 2 - November 1, 2025
- Coaches will use standardized Hockey Canada-approved practice plans
- Minimum **2:1 practice-to-game ratio** maintained throughout the season
- Three formal evaluation periods: November 1st, January 10th, and end of season

Game Format Changes

- **No special teams** - penalties will be recorded but teams continue 5-on-5 play
- Focus on continuous play to maximize development and ice time
- Tournament participation will follow Hockey Canada pathway guidelines

Enhanced Support

- Educational resources and planning tools provided by OHF
- Practice and game quality monitoring through video review
- Coach mentorship programs available

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why are some U9 players getting full-ice while others stay on half-ice?

A: This pilot is specifically designed to test whether certain U9 players are developmentally ready for an earlier transition to full-ice. The 60-day development phase ensures all participating players receive intensive skill development before transitioning. Half-ice hockey provides significant benefits including more puck touches, increased involvement, and age-appropriate skill development. This pilot will help determine the best approach for all players.

Q: How will my child's team be selected for the pilot?

A: Teams eligible for the pilot are U9 Tier 1 teams. Player evaluations beginning September 8th will determine appropriate placement. The focus is on matching players with similar skill levels and developmental readiness.

Q: What about goaltenders?

A: The NOHA is working closely with associations to ensure adequate goaltender coverage. Specialized goaltender training programs are available through certified local instructors. Any goaltender-related concerns will be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

Q: How many games will teams play?

A: The 2:1 practice-to-game ratio ensures appropriate development focus. Specific game schedules will depend on your association and league structure, balanced with the limited weekends available from November 1st through early March.



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UPDATED – Q: Can U8 players move up to participate?

A: Requests for U8 players to participate in U9 programming require substantial evidence of developmental readiness and will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with the OHF Policy for Players 8 and Under Playing Up.

UPDATED – Q: Will there be tournaments?

A: Tournament opportunities will be available following Hockey Canada pathway guidelines. Teams will be permitted to attend two (2) full ice tournaments in the 25/26 season, regardless of whether it is a local or out-of-town tournament. This number will be re-evaluated when we have additional information as to whether the pilot will continue.

Q: What happens after this pilot year?

A: The program will be thoroughly evaluated based on player development, family satisfaction, and operational effectiveness. Results will inform decisions about continuing or expanding the program in future seasons.

Q: How is this different from previous years?

A: This pilot introduces a structured development phase and earlier transition to full-ice for select U9 teams. The Nipissing District pilot also keeps U7/U8 players on modified ice for the entire season rather than transitioning mid-year.

Q: What if our smaller organization doesn't have enough players to form separate U7/U8 and U9 teams?

A: Organizations facing player number challenges should contact their League for support to determine the best approach for team formation. Solutions may include partnering with a neighbouring association, moving players up or down age groups based on skill and development readiness, or other collaborative arrangements. Each situation will be evaluated individually to ensure all players have appropriate playing opportunities while maintaining the integrity of the pilot program.

Q: What resources will be available for coaches?

A: Coaches will have access to comprehensive support including Hockey Canada-approved practice plans during the development phase. The Hockey Canada Network provides free access to practice plans and coaching resources for U9 and below programs. Additional educational resources and planning tools will be provided by the OHF, and coach mentorship programs are available to support program delivery.

Q: What if my child isn't selected for a Tier 1 team?

A: All hockey programming within the NOHA follows Hockey Canada's development model. Players not in Tier 1 teams will continue in age-appropriate programming designed to maximize their development and enjoyment of hockey. Half-ice hockey provides excellent developmental benefits with increased puck touches and participation.



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UPDATED – Q: What are the game rules for full-ice games in the pilot?

A: Full-ice games will be played with traditional hockey rules, with one important exception: there will be no power play or penalty kill situations. Teams will always play 5-on-5 to maximize player development and continuous play. Penalties will still be tracked and the penalized player will miss their next shift, but both teams continue playing with five skaters on the ice. This is only for the pilot period, which is November 1 to January 10. After this, traditional game rules will apply.

Q: What will games look like for U7/U8 players this season?

A: U7/U8 games will follow the half-ice model as outlined in the Hockey Canada U9 Player Pathways. Games are played 4-on-4 with goaltenders on a maximum surface of 100 feet by 85 feet. The format uses running time with continuous play on shift changes, no offside, no icing, and no face-offs after goals. Penalties are called. The half-ice format maximizes puck touches, player engagement, and development opportunities - research shows that direction changes, puck touches, pass attempts and puck battles are doubled, and shots per player are six times higher compared to full-ice hockey.

Q: Can U9 teams participating in the pilot play games before November 1st?

A: Yes, U9 teams in the pilot can play games during the 60-day development phase (September 2 - November 1, 2025), but these games must be played in a half-ice structure following the Hockey Canada U9 Player Pathway rules. Teams can also use controlled scrimmage settings during this period to begin teaching concepts like off-sides and icing that will take effect when they transition to the full-ice model on November 1st.

NEW – Q: Why must player evaluations be completed of November 1, January 10 and March 1?

A: Player evaluations are a critical component of the pilot program and are required by Hockey Canada and the OHF at three specific points: November 1st (after the development phase), January 10th, and at the end of the season. These evaluations serve multiple purposes: they help coaches monitor individual player development and progression throughout the season, assess whether players are ready for transitions and developing appropriately for their age and skill level, and gather essential data on the pilot's effectiveness. The information collected through these evaluations will inform future decisions about whether to continue or expand the program, ensuring that any changes to hockey programming are based on evidence and focused on what's best for player development.

NEW – Q: How many games, practices must we record? We do not have resources available (i.e. phone) to record – what can we do?

A: Based on feedback received from coaches, changes to the recording requirements have been made to ensure accessibility for all teams. Where LiveBarn is available, the NOHA will utilize that existing infrastructure for monitoring purposes. Where LiveBarn is not available, teams are



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required to record one practice every 2 months and one game every 2 months. These recordings help the NOHA monitor program quality and ensure the pilot objectives are being met. If your team does not have recording resources available, please note that many associations were provided with iPads by the NOHA in previous seasons. Reach out to your association to inquire about availability of these resources. If additional support is needed, contact your League or the NOHA to discuss possible solutions. The goal is to support program integrity while being mindful of the practical challenges teams may face.

NEW – Q: What happens if my Team does not comply with the requirements of the pilot?

A: All participating teams must adhere to the pilot program requirements, including maintaining the minimum 2:1 practice-to-game ratio, submitting practice and game schedules to the NOHA, using Hockey Canada-approved practice plans during the development phase, completing the three mandatory player evaluations, and following the 5-on-5 game format. The NOHA will provide continuous reminders to associations and teams to ensure that the objectives of the pilot are met. Teams that do not comply with these requirements may face consequences including removal from the pilot program, or other sanction(s) as determined by the NOHA Board of Directors. The NOHA will conduct monitoring through schedule reviews and video stream checks to ensure program integrity. Non-compliance impacts not only the team's participation but also the quality of data being collected to evaluate the pilot's success. Associations and Leagues have committed to following these guidelines to provide the best possible experience for all players.

NEW – Q: Why is skating so important to U7 and U9 Programs? What resources are available to Coaches?

A: Skating is the most critical technical skill because puckhandling, passing, and shooting are all reliant upon skating ability. As Hockey Canada states, "Learning the basic skills at a young age will set the foundation for everything a player will accomplish in the game of hockey." The Long-Term Player Development Model places U9 hockey at the Fundamentals 2 stage, where skating is refined alongside balance, passing, puck control, and shooting. Hockey Canada provides comprehensive resources to reinforce skating skills, including the Hockey Canada Network (free for U9 and below), which offers practice plans specifically designed to develop skating through progressive, age-appropriate drills. The standardized practice plans that coaches will use during the 60-day development phase emphasize skating fundamentals, and Hockey Canada's skill clinics and coaching resources focus extensively on proper skating technique and skill progression. The practice-focused environment of these programs, with the required 2:1 practice-to-game ratio, maximizes skating skill development opportunities.

NEW – Q: What will the NOHA be looking for in practices and games that are being reviewed and evaluated?

A: The NOHA's monitoring and evaluation will focus on ensuring teams are following the Hockey Canada Player Pathway guidelines that are available to all coaches and will be available, if needed, for Hockey Canada. The primary emphasis is on technical skill



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development and a development-first approach. This includes verifying that practices prioritize fundamental skills such as skating, puck control, passing, and shooting, with 75% of practice time dedicated to technical skills as recommended by Hockey Canada. We will be looking for evidence that coaches are using the provided Hockey Canada-approved practice plans, and creating a positive, age-appropriate learning environment focused on player development rather than game systems or competitive outcomes. The goal of these reviews is also to support coaches and ensure all players are receiving quality, developmentally appropriate programming that aligns with the pilot's objectives.

NEW – Q: Which pucks are used for U7/U8 and for U9?

A: For U7/U8, lightweight blue pucks are to be used. The NOHA has secured a sponsor to provide these to Associations at no cost. At U9, black pucks can be used.

NEW – Q: Should my team rotate goaltenders?

A: Yes, if there are multiple players interested in playing goal, we strongly encourage a rotation of goaltenders. There has been a general shortage of goaltenders in older divisions, so encouraging players who show interest at the U7 and U9 levels is important for the long-term health of hockey in our region. Additionally, where teams have two goaltenders, we encourage the goaltender not playing in goal during a particular game to play as a skater. Playing out as a skater provides significant benefits for goaltender development, including improved skating ability and edge work, better understanding of the game from a forward or defence perspective, enhanced puck handling and passing skills in open ice, development of offensive and defensive awareness, and overall athleticism and fitness. Many elite goaltenders credit their time as skaters for improving their positioning, anticipation, and ability to read plays. This well-rounded development approach helps create better, more complete hockey players and goaltenders.

Contact Information

For questions about the pilot program:

Please contact your local minor hockey association first, who will coordinate with the NOHA as needed.

Final Message

This pilot program represents an exciting opportunity to enhance player development while maintaining our commitment to age-appropriate, fun, and skill-focused hockey. The structured approach ensures all participants receive quality instruction and development opportunities.

We appreciate your support as we implement this innovative program and look forward to a successful 2025-2026 season.