

KTMHA makes 'major' move to AA level for the 2023-24 season

By Jim Stewart

March is a significant hockey month in Ontario as regional and provincial championship tournaments begin in earnest. Randy Shepherd is focused on his King Township teams' present performance as the playoffs ramp up, but he also has his eyes firmly on the future. The president of the 500-player organization released his organization's strategy last week to advance the King Township Minor Hockey Association and its member teams. In a significant administrative decision, the KTMHA has declared itself an AA centre in 'a major move' for the 2023-24 season. President Shepherd's goal is clear: to retain the KTMHA's top-flight players from fleeing to other AA centres which currently surround King. Although he cited geographical factors, Shepherd also extolled the terrific play of the current U12 King Rebellion team as reflective of the talent assembled on local rosters. 'What a team! Virtually a generational talent pool of players. The team is so well-structured by Coach Anthony (Cortese).'

Shepherd noted that Coach Cortese's team bounced back from a rare loss versus Newmarket 'Their hot goalie stole a playoff game?' and decisively defeated Markham 5-0 on Saturday afternoon at Nobleton Arena. Shepherd noted that 'five different players scored in the win against Markham' and the team has its momentum back for its final two games in the York-Simcoe 'round-robin style' playoffs. The U12 Rebellion will play two road games versus Richmond Hill on March 8 (results unavailable at press time) and Stouffville on March 9. The re-seeded top 4 teams qualify for the York-Simcoe semifinals and the Y-S finalists qualify for the OMHA championship tournament. The KTMHA president took time from his busy administrative and coaching schedule to chat about the changes for the 2023-24 season and the current state of the association, including its top-performing teams.

King Weekly Sentinel: Why has the KTMHA decided to change its base category from A level hockey to AA level hockey for the 2023-24 season?

Randy Shepherd: With all the changes happening in the York Simcoe Minor Hockey League for the 23/24 season, we felt it necessary to make this change to ensure King Minor Hockey remains a viable competitive option for our local players. If we did not make this move, KTMHA would have been the only 'A' centre in the area. We would have been completely surrounded by 'AA' centres to the west, north, and east as possible centres to lose NRPs to. Couple that with our southern border to the GTHL and we felt it absolutely necessary to protect our borders from player migration. We actually resisted this move for some time, but with the Bradford/Innisfil and Georgina/East Gwillimbury mergers, KTMHA would have been the only logical centre for the larger centres to draw players from. We would not be able to survive as an association with the possibility of losing players through the NRP process to every centre around us.

KWS: What are the benefits and challenges related to this category change for the KTMHA?

Shepherd: The immediate benefit is that all our players must return to King Rebellion for the 2023/24 season. We have many talented athletes playing elsewhere at higher level 'AA' hockey that we could not offer. We are hopeful that with all our returning athletes, we will be able to strengthen our program and provide competitive teams at the new 'AA' level. We are excited to welcome everyone home to help build the King Rebellion brand! As for the challenges, this is a major move for our association. Although the majority of the membership supports and understands this move, some of the age groups may struggle. NRPs are no longer available to our athletes so we will immediately get all those athletes back. Some have found loopholes to be able to play in the GTHL. We hope that those playing in the GTHL will return organically as we now offer a true 'AA' program, but we are prepared to petition the GTHL, OMHA, OHF, and Hockey Canada to ensure those loopholes are closed. We do expect some resistance from those families, but we now offer the level of hockey they desire. It's time to come home.

KWS: Please comment on the success of your U12 Rebellion team. Who is their coach, what is their current overall and league record, and who are their top players as they head into their playoffs?

Shepherd: Our U12AA team is perfect example of how hometown hockey can work if a team stays together and builds a great program! Most of the team has been together since they started hockey at the IP level. Coach Anthony Cortese is a great coach and done a magnificent job retaining players and even recruiting some players back from the GTHL. We are extremely proud of Coach Cortese and his team! Last year, they played at the 'A' level and dominated the regular season, playdowns, and nearly every 'AA' tournament they entered. They fell just short of the OMHA Championship with a tight-fought loss in the finals. This season we moved the team to play in the 'AA' loop and, with nearly the same record as last season in the higher level, they are poised to make a good run in the playdowns again this year!

KWS: As well, are there any other outstanding teams and players in your program that you would like us to promote as your rep teams head into March and the league playoffs?

Shepherd: Our 16A and U18A teams both finished first in their respective divisions! These teams are also mostly intact with our homegrown local talent. Again, great

examples how hometown hockey can be successful if athletes stay. Most of our other ?A? teams are mid pack or better with a few teams that are struggling. The teams that are struggling the most are the ones most affected by player migration. Without a doubt, we can build a strong program here in King once our players return. King Township is an amazing place to live; together we can make it a great place to play hockey as well!KTMHA is going to invest heavily into both the grass roots local league and competitive team development to help provide our athletes with world class training to support this move to ?AA? level hockey. Significant changes to competitive teams operating procedures will also allow teams to expand their team budgets to offer further development opportunities. Further changes will also be coming to the 24/25 season to even better equip our teams for success! With the TWRC set to open in 2024, we will also have a world class arena and training facility for our athletes to train and play at.KWS: ?How many players are currently registered with the KTMHA and how many house league, select, and rep teams does the organization support?Shepherd: Currently, we are around the 500 members mark, give or take. These are small numbers for an ?AA? centre, but we believe we have the talent and the U12AA, U16A, and U18A teams are again great examples of that. We field teams at all levels, both Schomberg Red Wings and the Noble-King Knights offer our local league mixed cohort programs at U6 ? U18. The King Rebellion offers our competitive team programming at the same levels, but most are single cohort divisions. With all the changes being made at the competitive King Rebellion Level, I would to stress to all that no changes are being made to our local league programs. Our recreational athletes can expect the same hometown hockey experience as always!