

To: The Members of Chelmsford Hockey Club

From: David Ireland, Chair of Junior Section

Date: 26 June 2021

Re: 2020/2021 Season Report for Junior Section

Overview

This has been a very difficult season for the Club's Junior Section because of the severe restrictions on our hockey activity due to Covid-19 and related Government regulations.

The coaches and parent volunteers have all put in a huge effort and we've managed to have a very successful season, despite being unable to have all but a couple of competitive matches (across all teams – most had none) and no training at all for half the season.

The story of the season – a promising autumn

We started the season on schedule as Covid restrictions lifted in September and following England Hockey guidance. Player numbers coming into the season were 265 and some groups had to juggle training group sizes to remain within the 30 in a group Covid limit. But what was clear was that despite some continuing nervousness about the risk from the virus, there was enormous, enormous desire to get back out on the pitch and running about enjoying hockey, with the mental and physical health benefits from that far outweighing the risks for the vast majority.

Clubs agreed that the Essex league that usually runs for under 10s and under 12s could not operate the usual season of mini-tournaments which would see 6 clubs playing at a single location with hundreds of players and parents congregating. The compromise of bilateral fixtures was better than nothing, but didn't bring the excitement the players usually enjoy at the mini-tournament events.

The competitions for older groups, organised by England Hockey and the Home Counties Junior League (formerly Home Counties Girls League and Mercian League) were scheduled to go ahead. In the event I think we only got a couple of games across the groups. Partly this was scheduling – for some reason the EH fixtures were scheduled later in the season: possibly a well-intentioned plan for when Covid restrictions would be lighter...

The story of the season – a dark winter

But then come November and into December things started to get worse, not better. Travel restrictions were imposed ruling any further matches out, and although junior training was allowed to continue (unlike senior hockey) there was confusing and ambiguous or contradictory guidance from England Hockey and the Government / DCMS about whether club members living outside the immediate Chelmsford area were still permitted to come to the club to train.

This created a difficult position for the club and its management to act in the best interests of members: was this a conservative view to best contain Covid risk, or to follow an interpretation that facilitated the most hockey possible leaving tighter Covid steps to the choice of individual members.

But those weeks of debate were then abruptly stopped by the imposition of the full-on Lockdown 2.0 (also ruining Christmas in the process).

January, nothing happened.

February, nothing happened. We confirmed a second year with no Zevenbergen tour. We started to think about planning for a return.

March, noth... ah, we were allowed to start back, just at almost the precise moment the season would be finishing.

The story of the season – a flourishing spring

So, rather than just wrap up the season it was clear there was plenty of desire among players and coaches to take best advantage of whatever we could. So rather than stop the season at the Easter weekend we continued junior training through the Easter school holidays and right through the summer term ... we're still going now.

For younger groups (up to under 14) we offered either Friday evening hockey or Sunday morning hockey. Sundays were run as usual training sessions. Fridays followed more of the format we would usually offer in the summer (albeit usually it would be fewer weeks). Under 16 and under 18s were able to train on Friday evenings (as well as joining senior hockey of course). The other difference is that we have not charged for the Friday sessions where usually they are pay-and-play.

The state of the nation

Participation levels have been amazing. Despite the madness and disruption we have continued to attract new members, validating the decision to offer as much hockey as possible and standing testament to the fantastic coaching we offer.

At time of writing **we have 390 registered players in the junior section.** The Junior Section of the club is in an incredibly strong position and if we can continue to invest in and nurture these players the future of the club looks very rosy from here. But Covid and the myriad other sports, interests and educational commitments available to younger players mean we can't rest on our laurels and need continual vigilance and effort.

We gained many new players this season from our programmes supporting really good coaches into local schools, particularly with boys where schools often omit hockey in favour of football or rugby etc. This has a snowball effect as a flourishing boys section reinforces itself as the boys enjoy it and so stay / bring their friends (but we have also seen the vicious circle in recent years when we drop below critical mass.) Near term investment, both financial and otherwise, in supporting these programmes and in the club being a community focus for all things hockey in local schools will pay us back many, many times over by attracting and retaining good numbers of future players.

The way forward

I am stepping down as Junior Chair after two years in the role and four more on the Junior Committee. My three children and I will continue to play, I look forward to joining Hugo on the pitch in due course as turns 13 late next season, and I will certainly help and offer the benefit of my recent experience to the junior section.

Assuming her appointment is confirmed at this AGM I think Sally Dalton will be a fantastic Chair for the Juniors and I hope parents and senior club members give her all the support she will need to run this large and growing section of the club.

The Junior Section takes an absolute army of volunteers to keep everything going. They range from club stalwarts to willing new parents who have never set foot on a hockey pitch. Each age group has

one or more managers co-ordinating arrangements, an experienced lead coach, and several assistant coaches, usually parents within group – that's a lot of people.

On behalf of all the Juniors currently benefitting, and the club whose future the volunteers are helping to build and secure, I thank all of these individuals and find it quite amazing what they all achieve.