



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 NOHA

Main NOHA Pilot Program

- **Who:** U9 Tier 1 teams
- **How Many Teams:** Approximately 15 teams across 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: 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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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.

Q: Will there be tournaments?

A: Tournament opportunities will be available following Hockey Canada pathway guidelines. Specific tournament schedules and limitations are being finalized and will be communicated by your association.

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 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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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 recorded and the penalized player will sit in the penalty box, but both teams continue playing with five skaters on the ice.

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 and recorded. 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.

Contact Information

For questions about the pilot program:

Please contact your local minor hockey association first, who will coordinate with 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.