

Ice Hockey Programs For Special Athletes

(Concept – Preparation – Implementation)

The Masters Thesis of:

Mr. Tracy E. Tucker

President & Head Coach
Colorado Special Hockey Association

Head Coach Peewee B1 Team
University of Denver Youth Hockey Association

Rocky Mountain District

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Introduction

Ice hockey has traditionally been a sport that can be enjoyed by players of all ages and ability levels. This is unless the athlete has a mental challenge (such as Down Syndrome or Autism) that prevents him or her from participating. There has never been a place in our great game for these players; that is until now. There are now 22 teams throughout the US and Canada, made up exclusively of these types of athletes. The teams are part of a league called *Special Hockey International* (SHI). The league was started in Toronto, which remains its Canadian headquarters, and has proliferated in the US. The US headquarters for SHI is St. Louis, Missouri. The number of athletes in the league is now more than 600.

The problem has been that there is not much in the way of a guide to assist new teams in starting up. Communication in the league has not been particularly good, and when a new team starts up, it's sort of on its own relative to where to start. An additional problem is that most of the US teams are registered with USA Hockey, yet almost no one is aware of their existence. When the team contacts the USA Hockey District Registrar, it's as if it the first of its kind, and in most districts that is exactly the case. That means the District Registrar doesn't know what to make of the team, and is sometimes at a loss as to how to treat it. Most teams are made up of players that are very young and players that are older than "Midget" age. Therefore, the question is: "Is the team a youth team, or an adult team?"

The purpose of this thesis is to reverse the situations described above. I hope for this document to serve as a guide for new teams, and as a catalyst for USA hockey to take a greater interest in special hockey. The benefits to the teams are obvious. The more exposure they get the better it is for morale, and the more they stand to benefit from a strong relationship with USA Hockey. The benefit to USA Hockey is that it can demonstrate that hockey is really a game for everyone.

The Colorado Special Hockey Association was the fifth association in the league, and was started in 1996. When I founded the team I first went to Special Olympics. I was told that Special Olympics considered ice hockey "too dangerous" for special athletes, and they would not be able to embrace the program. I then went to USA Hockey, who was more than eager to see our program succeed. Since then, our relationship with Special Olympics has been improving, but as yet they have no such program. That means that without our program, these athletes would not have a place to play. I believe there is a huge amount of pinned up demand for special hockey in the US. This is evidenced by the success of every team that has started up. There is no record of a special hockey team failing due to lack of interest. The teams have been universally accepted by their communities, and even by whatever professional teams are in their areas. I believe it's time for USA Hockey to take a leading role in helping to bring more teams into existence. This is accomplished first through understanding the league and its teams, and embracing the mission of special hockey. When this happens, more special athletes will know they have the opportunity to play, and the concept will really take off.

As I mentioned, Special Olympics is aware of special hockey programs, and the relationship is improving. If this trend continues it is possible that ice hockey will be added to the sports available through Special Olympics. While I don't think this is a bad thing, I think USA Hockey has the opportunity to be the first to bring ice hockey to special athletes on a large scale. As the governing body of hockey in the US, I believe it is really the place of USA Hockey to lead the way. USA hockey is dedicated to hockey, whereas Special Olympics is dedicated to bringing a variety of sports to special athletes. While I have no intention of fighting any effort that would open up an opportunity for more athletes to play the game of hockey, I believe it would be unfortunate for another organization to lead the way.

The NHLPA is taking a much more visible role in getting the word out about special hockey. Special hockey has been embraced by individual players and management around the NHL. Kelly Chase of the St. Louis Blues (retired) was the pioneer in this area. He embraced the Gateway Special Hockey Association in St. Louis, and was recognized by the NHL with the King Clancy Trophy for his efforts. Other players to embrace the programs include Jeff Odgers of the Atlanta Thrashers, Curtis Leschyshyn of the Ottawa Senators, Tony Twist of the St. Louis Blues (retired), Adam Foote of the Colorado Avalanche, and most recently Chris Drury of the Colorado Avalanche. Franchises that have supported special hockey include the St. Louis Blues, Colorado Avalanche, Ottawa Senators, and the Toronto Maple Leafs. Ken Dryden, President of the Leafs, dropped the first puck at the SHI annual tournament in Toronto, in March 2001. The annual tournament alternates between US and Canadian venues. In 2000 it was hosted by the Colorado Special Hockey Association in Denver. Kelly Chase has always said it is his goal to see a special hockey association in every NHL city, with the full support of the NHL franchise in that city. It is my belief that with the help of the NHL, the individual franchises, the players themselves, the NHLPA and USA Hockey, special hockey could enjoy the success and exposure enjoyed by Special Olympics.

Special Hockey International has also been recognized by the Hockey Hall of Fame. An exhibit dedicated to special hockey will go up in 2001, and the trophy for the SHI coaching staff of the year will be engraved with the names of the recipients, and be kept permanently in the hall. Incidentally, the coaching staff of Colorado Special Hockey were the first recipients of this award, and I and my coaches will always have the honor of being the first...!!! All of this is simply to demonstrate that special hockey is on the verge of bigger and better things, and it is my hope that USA Hockey plays a significant role in the development. From educating coaches, to helping establish procedures for dealing with the individual associations and districts, to the humanitarian aspect of bringing the game to these incredible athletes. As children with special needs get older, the distance between them and their typical peers begins to become more apparent. This is a critical time for them to become aware of a special hockey program, and you may see an influx of teen aged players with increased visibility of special hockey.

There are a number of important considerations, both on and off the ice, that go into bringing the desire to start a special hockey association to fruition. I will explore most of these aspects in this document, so future teams will not feel as if they are reinventing the wheel. All of this has been done successfully in the past, and I have participated in helping teams get started, as well as starting my own program. There is however more to it than starting it. It must be based on a solid foundation of planning that will allow it to continue and grow successfully. This document is intended to be a road map for the prospective organizer, and a guide to USA hockey for dealing with the individual associations.

Part I: The Concept Phase

1. How to determine if you are the person to lead the program

This is the all-important question. There are some people who hear about special hockey and think it would be really great to lead the way for the program in their area. Unfortunately, it is easy to look ahead to a successful program without taking into consideration the enormous responsibility of defining a plan for success, and executing that plan over the long haul. There is no doubt that this effort is the most rewarding thing one can imagine, but it is important to understand that it is no easy task. It takes incredible persistence and patience, as well as knowledge of many areas of expertise. One must have good business sense, because the off ice planning and management is as important as the on ice part.

I started the Colorado Special Hockey Association for a number of reasons. The most obvious is that I have a son with Down syndrome. This made it easy for me to determine that if he was going to play hockey, there needed to be a program. There was not a program of this kind in Denver, Colorado at the time, and I decided that I was going to make it happen. I didn't care how much effort and planning it took, or how long it took, or how much rejection I faced along the way, I was going to bring this dream to life. Many of the programs elsewhere in the country have been born out of the same desire of parents, and many of the association founders are themselves the parents of special athletes. That is a good starting point, but there is certainly more to consider.

The first thing to ask yourself if you are considering starting a special hockey association is whether or not there is need for the program in your area. In most cases the answer will be "yes" simply because there is probably not already such a program in the area. If there were, you would probably know about it. This will also probably be true because there are special athletes, many of whom would flock to such a program, in almost every city in the US. This is especially true in NHL cities where hockey is already well known and popular.

Presuming the answer is "yes" there is a need or pinned up demand for special hockey in a given area, the next question is whether or not you are the individual to bring a special hockey association to the area. This is a more complicated question, and many things should be considered. First, are you prepared for the work involved...? As I said, this is no easy task, and it involves a lot of work, as well as the persistence to get around barriers that would prevent your success. Are you ready to stay in it over the long haul...? This is important because your athletes will come to depend on your program being there for many years to come. Disappointing the athletes should be avoided at all costs.

Another simple question is: What is your motivation for starting the program, and is it enough to sustain your enthusiasm for years to come..? You should be dedicated to the athletes first and foremost, and if you're not, you may want to reconsider. There is the opportunity to get to know NHL players, and experience personal recognition for an effort like this, and if that comes into your thinking in the beginning, you may not have the proper perspective. It is difficult to actually consider that this may be a motivating factor in your thinking, but unfortunately, I've seen coaches and volunteers with exactly that in mind. I've turned them away, as I've developed the ability to spot those types of people. You must truly be introspective and honest with yourself when considering your suitability for this task. If you start with an inaccurate picture of what is

involved, or your suitability to the task, success will be very difficult. An unsuccessful effort is not good for the athletes, and will end up wasting your time.

If you are an honest person with good planning and organizational skills, you have some degree of business acumen, you have a great deal of patience, and the genuine desire to see the game of hockey made available to athletes who would otherwise not have the opportunity to play, and you believe you can stick to something with determination, then you may be right for the job. You may or may not be the parent of a special athlete yourself, and this is not necessarily a requirement, but if you are, it will definitely remind you on a daily basis why you're doing what you're doing. It is possible that you have experience with special needs children or adults which qualifies you to start a program, even though you are not the parent of a special needs person yourself. Many special education teachers have dedicated their lives to their career helping special needs children and adults and are not parents at all.

Another consideration is whether or not you have any experience dealing with people with special needs. Even if you are a parent of a special needs person, you may only be experienced in the particular area of your child. If that is the case, are you willing to become a student of other types of developmental disabilities...? It is also important to consider whether or not you have the patience to teach the game of hockey to a group of athletes that will vary widely in terms of age, mental and physical ability level, attention span and so forth. Just because one has coached hockey to typical athletes in the past does not mean they have the patience to teach the game to athletes who may take years (literally) to be able to stand up on skates. My own son took two years to skate on his own, and his progress is very slow.

Lastly, it is important to have a passion for the game of hockey. If you lack this key ingredient, perhaps there is some other way in which you can dedicate yourself to helping those with special needs. There are many avenues for this desire to help people. Whether or not you will coach the team yourself, you should have this passion for the game, even if it is as a fan of the game. Some program organizers have a passion and love for hockey, but lack coaching or playing experience. Some have experience dealing with people with special needs, but have never coached or played the game of hockey. Some have many years of hockey experience, but have never worked with people with special needs. None of these people are necessarily unqualified to start and sustain a program, but there is a mix of many of the qualities that go into the right person to be the founder of special hockey association. It is a good idea to take an honest introspective look at your qualifications, and your willingness to become a student in those areas where you lack experience. The person with the passion for hockey, and the willingness to see it made available to those who would otherwise not have the chance to play, and the patience to be adaptable to a wide range of situations, is probably best suited. If one has all the qualities but lacks hockey experience, will there be any difficulty recruiting a qualified person to handle the on ice portion of the program...? This person may also be well qualified to found a program.

In summary, there is no perfect person or profile of an association founder, but there are many qualities and considerations. The most important of those considerations is whether the person is willing to do the work, and has a burning desire to see special athletes play the game of hockey. The task can be overwhelming at times, and seem like it will never come to fruition. Determination, patience, tenacity and adaptability are the most important factors.

2. What is the potential pool of athletes in your area...?

It is important to consider the potential pool of athletes in the area of the perspective association. There would be nothing worse than going to all the effort of planning and setting up a program only to have no one show up to play. One thing that is a good indicator is how many schools there are in the area. Most public schools have a special education program, and as part of your research into whether there is a need for the program is to call and talk to these people. They have a good feel for the scope and size of the special education community in a given city.

Another good indicator is the simple question of how popular hockey is in your area. If you live in a city dominated by another sport, it is possible that the response will be marginal. If however you live in an NHL city or in a city where minor pro or college hockey is already popular, the response is likely to be good. This research is important before you go the effort of starting the program. Talking to people in the special education field, and in whatever hockey community there is in the area, is a good measurement of the demand for the program.

If there is a local youth hockey association in the area, it is a good idea to talk to the director or coaches in the association. You can ask them if they're aware of any special needs athletes who may want to play, or are perhaps the siblings of athletes playing in the existing association. The opinions of these people are a good gauge of what the demand for hockey is like in the area.

While you are doing this research is as good a time as any to initiate a dialogue with Special Olympics. They usually have a local chapter, and the concept of ice hockey will no doubt be pretty foreign to them, but they will be a good source to determine the number of special athletes in the area. They may be receptive to talking to you, and even referring athletes to your program, or they may be a brick wall. This is a matter of the people involved, and is difficult to predict. You won't know until you talk to them, and it is best to start at the top with a director level contact. You may have to "cold call" them to get any answers.

The next logical question after you do this research is: "How many athletes are enough to start a program..?" That is really an individual decision, but my advise would be to start small and let word of mouth build your program. Don't think however that once you do this initial research, that is all you have to do. This process continues constantly, and takes discipline to continue these contacts and conversations. It will always be necessary to attract new players, as there will be some degree of turn over, and players may mature out of your program. Meaning that they may find other things to occupy their time as they get older. It is wise to consider the "competition" for the attention of potential athletes in your area among your determining criteria. In Colorado, we have some of the best skiing in North America, and many of our players also like to ski with Special Olympics. We deal with this by taking a Winter break in our season during December and January. This has been very successful for us.

The answer to the question of how many payers are enough to start is about five, but will clearly vary from place to place. The important thing is that you do the research to find out what the potential demand is. This is one of the most important first steps in deciding if a program needs to be started.

3. What are the barriers to entry into special hockey...?

There are some significant barriers to entry into special hockey. One of the most prevalent is that starting a program requires proper funding. The problem is that unless you're fantastically wealthy yourself, you must go out and solicit this funding from outside sources. But, how is one to raise money for a program that doesn't even really exist yet...? That is a tough question, and may stop a program before it really starts.

Special Hockey International is in the process of maturing into an organization that acts toward individual teams much like the NHL acts towards its individual franchises. This will be discussed in further detail in an upcoming section of this document, but the brief explanation is that the league's primary functions are expansion and funding its tournament. That means the league will raise and allocate a certain amount of funding for the start up of new teams. There isn't much of it available today, but the league is moving quickly to correct this situation. What this means is that you can't presume the league will help fund the start up of your program. It is best to go to businesses in the area that are small enough to make the decision to help, yet are large enough to contribute a significant amount to be of real help. A good place to start is with businesses that do business with the public, who can benefit from this sort of humanitarian outreach. It will take a lot of persistence, and you will face a fair amount of rejection, so you must be ready to accept the rejection and go on to the next one.

It is another good idea to look for retail type businesses that have pictures in the establishment of little league baseball teams or other community teams they have sponsored. They are likely to be the most receptive to your pitch, which is something you will get better at delivering as you go. It is important that you are not the type of person that is shy about approaching strangers and telling your story.

Another barrier to entry is getting the word out that your program exists. It will difficult to attract players and sponsors if no one knows you are there. This is especially true when you first start out, because until you set up the infrastructure of your organization, there won't really be a team yet. In this critical period you are selling a dream rather than something tangible. After your team gets started this process will become easier, but again, it is something that never stops. You may start by putting flyers up at your local ice arena, or you may start at the grocery store or other places where lots of people congregate. You must again be willing to start out small. This is a source of frustration for many founders, and can lead to derailment of the program in the beginning.

Another barrier to entry is the availability of ice time. If the closest rink is miles away, it might be difficult to attract players. There might be local rink, but the question is the availability of a reasonable time slot on that rink. If the ice time is very early or very late, it will again be difficult to get people to come out who are not used to the odd hours we hockey people keep. Most rinks give preference to returning programs, and starting a new program is next to impossible due to the lack of ice. If there is no ice, there is no program. You must do this research before you invest too much time in the rest.

These are only the most obvious barriers to entry. There are certainly more, but I'll leave this topic so as not to dwell too much on negatives. This discussion is not meant to dissuade a potential founder, rather it is to make sure many different factors are considered at the beginning of the effort. It would be extremely bad to start building demand for a program, only to have the dream fizzle. It is better to give careful consideration to these risk factors to insure that the program is in the right place at the right time.

4. What type of support can the potential founder expect from Special Hockey International...?

Special Hockey International is at a critical point in its development and growth. Up to now, it has been a loose collection of teams, with similar missions, that gather to play each other. The league was founded in Canada, and the second association materialized in St. Louis. There is a very competent cadre of leadership, but no real clear cut means of communication between the different associations. Each new association has started from scratch, without much in the way of guidance from the league. This is because the league has had no clear-cut mandate other than to make hockey available to special athletes. This is a worthy purpose, but the means to execute the mission has been slow to develop. The primary problem in my view is a lack of communication. The secondary problem is taking the goals of the league management and turning those into effective programs that lead to the accomplishment of the goals. There is no lack of good ideas, and certainly no lack of big hearts with the right motivation. The people running the league are the right people for the jobs, and are some of the finest people I've ever met. The problem is that there is no second layer of management to make sure the ideas make it to the rest of the league. This is certainly not an indictment of the league leadership. They have managed to get the job done, and helped many associations (including ours) get started. Now however, the league has grown to the point where more infrastructure is necessary, and the function of the league must be more clearly defined.

These things are very clear to the league leadership. They understand that the time has come to take the league to the next level of maturity. They have decided that the best way to relate to the individual associations is similar to the way the NHL relates to its franchises. That is that the league will concentrate on two primary purposes: Expansion and funding and assisting in the organization of the annual tournament. I think these are the correct functions of the league, and I'm committed to helping the league succeed in these goals in any way I can.

If the league is to provide the "seed" funding for expansion, there will no doubt need to be an application process. Once an association is approved and a franchise awarded, the league should also approve a certain amount of seed money that should be in the form of a low cost loan, that should have very liberal repayment terms. As of now, this does happen, but the funds come from the association that has served as the US headquarters organization, and there is no application process or approval criteria beyond a simple written request. This is because the US headquarters franchise has been the most successful at raising funds, but there needs to be a more clear difference between that individual association, and the league. It isn't fair to have an individual association raise funds, and be strapped with the responsibility of being the treasury for the entire league. Their program has not suffered by doing this yet, but at some point it will become a burden even they can't bear on their own. Today, there is only one way to get the aforementioned seed money. That is to request a loan form the individual association that has served as the US Headquarters.

The league needs to have its own non-profit organization status, and it should be the kind that allows a subordinate organization to use it until they qualify for their own non-profit status. Getting that non-profit status will be discussed later, but should be one of the very first things the new franchises do. The problem is that there are franchises in Canada and the US, so which set of laws do they follow...? The answer in my view is that both the Canadian and US headquarters organizations should qualify for and receive non-profit status in their respective countries. A new franchise then operates under the auspices of the headquarters organization in its own country.

But, it should clearly be the league, as opposed to an individual franchise, as it has been up to now. Part of the application process should be the prospective founder meeting with league management. If the franchise is to be in the US, the candidate should come to St. Louis, the US headquarters. If the franchise is to be in Canada, of course the meeting would take place in Toronto. There should also be a newsletter, web site, or other means by which the league regularly communicates with the other franchises. The league has its own web site now, and it is a very nice site, but the information tends to remain fairly static.

There should also be a clear set of instructions or a formula to guide the process of starting a new association, and putting it in a position where it will be able to repay the start up loan from the league. I hope this document will either be that guide, or serve as a blueprint to create the guide. I stand ready to assist the league in this process.

5. The Field Trip

I first learned that hockey was being played by special athletes when I saw a copy of *American Hockey* magazine, with a cover story about the Gateway Special Hockey Association in St. Louis, Missouri. I contacted the founder of the Gateway program and asked if there was anything like it in Colorado. The answer was “no.” So after many phone conversations with him, I finally asked if he would mind if I came to visit a practice.

When I arrived in St. Louis, I was amazed by the athletes and coaches I met. One gentleman in particular stood out in the crowd. He seemed to have a love for the game, and of course a special love for his athletes. This gentleman passed away a year or two later, and the Special Hockey International league has named an award for the coaching staff of the year after him. This is just one of the great memories I have of my initial, fact finding field trip. I also learned how the coaches designed a practice to accommodate the whole team, and I got a feel for how they were teaching the game to special athletes. I gathered enough information to go back home and start the process of founding the Colorado Special Hockey Association.

If at all possible, I would encourage the potential founder to make such a field trip to see an existing program in action. It may cost you a plane ticket, rental car and hotel room out of your own pocket, but the information you can gather will be well worth the investment. It was also a good indication to the founder of the Gateway program, who became the President of Special Hockey International, that I was serious about starting my program. This is certainly not a requirement, as you can go through the process without doing this, but it is a great learning experience.

Part I Summary

To summarize section one, the concept phase of building a special hockey association involves many considerations. First, you must determine if there is a need for the association. Next, you must take an honest, introspective look at whether or not you are the person to bring the special hockey association into existence. There is much research to do, and this critical part cannot be taken lightly. The research will prevent mistakes and pitfalls along the way. This research involves seeking out people that understand the game of hockey, and more importantly the nuances of the community in your area. You should also talk to experts in the field of special education and developmental disabilities to close any gaps you may have in experience or understanding. You must be prepared to become a student of hockey, and working with a wide variety of attention spans, physical and mental abilities of the athletes. You must take into consideration the barriers to entry into special hockey, how the effort will be funded, where the athletes themselves will come from, and how large the potential pool of athletes is in your area. You must consider whether or not you are in an area where hockey is already popular, or if you will have to build interest in hockey at the same time that you are building interest in your program. You may want to speak to the local chapter of Special Olympics during this phase, to determine if a partnership with them is even possible.

The most important bit of research during this phase is to determine if there will ice available for your program. If there is no ice, there can be no program. This is perhaps the most difficult aspect depending on where you are, and how difficult spare ice time is to get. Developing relationships with those in charge of selling ice, and managing the arenas is always a good idea.

You must be prepared for limited outside assistance from Special Hockey International, but it is important to realize that without SHI and the people who founded it, none of us would be doing what we are doing. These pioneering people took the initial risks, and blazed the trail for the rest of us. It is not wise to think you can go this effort alone without being a part of Special Hockey International, as it is the best collection of similar associations to the one you are considering. You must be self-motivated, tenacious, determined, and above all, have great patience. Once you have been through this process, you are ready to embark on the next phase, which will be the most challenging. That is setting up the infrastructure of your organization, and doing the planning that will build and sustain it.

You may also consider making a fact-finding field trip to visit an existing special hockey program. You can see how practices are structured, and it is a great motivational tool. You will come back from such a trip excited and ready to begin the next phase in the process of setting up your association.

Part II: The (office) Planning Phase

1. Ice Time

As I said in the last section, securing your ice time is the most important thing you will have to do. It should be taken into consideration during the concept phase as part of your initial research, and it must be the first thing you do in the planning phase.

When I started the Colorado Special Hockey Association I went to three arenas in the Denver area. In the first visit, I was greeted with apathy. By that I mean the management of this arena could not have cared less that this dream of bringing the game of hockey to special athletes was so important to me. They told me that they had no extra ice, and without sponsorship for my association I was not likely to succeed. After many follow up phone calls, it was clear that this would not be the home of Colorado Special Hockey Association. So, off I went to the next arena.

The second arena had two sheets of ice, and in my mind was the perfect place. Again, I was met with not much interest. The arena manager didn't know me, and told me that he had both sheets of his ice booked from 5:00 AM to 1:00 AM, and all of the ice reserved for hockey programs was already filled up with returning programs. What I later learned is that there is a tremendous amount of latitude in how ice is scheduled. These arena managers can with the stroke of a pencil on an ice schedule make or break a new program. So I decided to refine my approach.

When Colorado Special Hockey Association was in its planning phase, there were about five sheets of ice in the greater Denver area. But, there was a new arena that had just opened. I contacted the manager of the arena, and I described a program for special athletes that I was in the process of putting together. I explained that I was setting up the organization, but there was still much work to be done. I asked if there might be an extra hour a week of ice that we might buy. When I said I refined my approach, I mean that I didn't try to make the program sound like it was further down the path than it was. I was just honest about the fact that we were just starting up, and we didn't even have any athletes yet. The response from the arena manager was that when we got further down the road of setting the program up, I should give him a call back. This was by far the most positive response I had gotten, and I took it as a sign that I should continue.

After a few months had passed, and we had done many more of the things I will discuss in this section, I called the arena manager back and said: "OK, I'm ready, are you...?" The arena manager turned out to be one of the most valuable people in the development of the program. He moved another program off the ice schedule (sorry guys) and gave us an hour a week for three months. I paid for this ice out of my pocket, and I think the arena manager was taking the approach that if we survived these first three months, we might be in good shape.

After our first three months on the ice, the regular hockey season had ended, and it was time for the summer break in the action. The arena manager came to me and said we had done reasonably well, and in his opinion if we took the summer off after just three months of progress we would be essentially starting over when we came back. I agreed, but the association wasn't exactly swimming in money, and I was planning to take the summer to raise some more funds. That's when the incredible happened. The arena manager said that he would make the ice available to us at no charge. Had this not happened our program could have failed in its infancy.

This isn't likely to be the typical story, and I'm getting a bit ahead of myself, because there were many of the steps in the planning process that were necessary before we got three months down the road. I simply include this story, and its jump ahead in the time line, to illustrate one important point: The arena managers are very important people to your success. Get to know them, tell them what you're up to, and involve them in the planning process. If you do this, you may end up with your own incredible story about the start up of your association.

2. The Mission Statement

As I said in the last section, I got a little ahead of myself by discussing the first three months on the ice, and the incredible story of the arena manager. Long before we got to the point of being ready to take the ice there were many more steps in the planning and set up of the association. After you determine that there is in fact ice available for your program, you need to create your mission statement. This should succinctly describe why your program exists. Someone should be able to read your mission statement and tell exactly what you do, and why you do it. The mission statement of Colorado Special Hockey is:

The mission of Colorado Special Hockey is to offer an amateur level ice hockey program for children and young adults with Down Syndrome, Autism or any other developmental disability. The program is open to any player over age five or older, male or female, who is physically able to play, but would be unable to participate in any other organized program due to his or her developmental disability.

It is important to be clear and concise in your mission statement, and construct it in such a way that it is not confusing to the reader. You must presume that the reader knows nothing about your program, and for that matter, nothing about hockey. You will also need to have this ready for your incorporation. The reason it is important to do this right after you know you have ice time is that it helps you stay focused. Just like any other goal setting, it should be the goal of your program to be exactly what you've set out for it to be in your mission statement.

3. Naming Your Team and Choosing a Color Scheme

After you have arrived at your mission statement, it is important to give your team an identity. This can be based on something your geographic area is known for, or it can be something that is important to you. The only caution is that if it's something that is important to you, and only you, it may be confusing to others. While this effort is clearly yours, you should keep the theme one of general interest.

If there is a well known college or pro hockey team in your area, you may consider adopting its color scheme. One reason this is a good idea is because their colors will no doubt be readily available in most hockey stores. Secondly, it may allow you to partner with this team and identify with them. I would however encourage you to choose a name different from the college or pro team, for example if the team in the area is the Colorado Avalanche, you wouldn't necessarily want to just be the "Jr. Avalanche" or the "Special Avalanche." You will want to give your team its own identity.

Our organization is called the Colorado Special Hockey Association, and the name of our team is the Colorado Golden Eagles. We use the Colorado Avalanche color scheme, because as I mentioned before, it allows us to identify with the Avalanche, while allowing us to maintain our own identity. I chose the name Golden Eagles because it projects power, freedom, and other

positive images. It is also a bird that is easily associated with the state of Colorado, and the western US. I actually borrowed the name from a former minor pro team in Salt Lake City, Utah. Again, the choice is yours, but keep in mind that is something that will stay with your team throughout its existence, unless of course you decide to change it. I would recommend against changing the name of the team, because your players will have identified with the first name you choose. You will no doubt have put the name and logo on your jersey, and changing them is an extra and unnecessary expense.

We changed our color scheme twice, which is why I recommend against it. This is especially true if the change is a major one that requires changing the hockey pants and helmet. Chances are that you won't want to change everyone's pants and helmets at the same time due to the cost. That means you might end up with players in different colors, and that will detract from the team spirit. If a player is part of a team, he or she should look like they're part of the team, and not be in different colors than their team mates. We really didn't have a choice when we changed color schemes. Our first set of jerseys were donated to us, and they were bright yellow. They were bad, but they were free, and we were grateful for them. At the time, we had college and minor pro teams in the area, but I didn't really like the color schemes. I looked for a color scheme that I thought fit our name. I wanted to keep a hint of yellow (just not the whole jersey), because we had "Golden" in our team name. I then of course wanted to choose colors that blended well with yellow. I chose the color scheme of the Vancouver Canucks. Low and behold, in a couple of years they changed their colors and we were out of luck. We couldn't get their old colors any more.

Our second choice was that of the University of Denver Pioneers, one of the most well known teams in college hockey. Their colors were easy to get in the Denver area hockey stores. Just when I thought we had a color scheme we could stay with, the Quebec Nordiques relocated to Denver, and became the Colorado Avalanche. The second change to the colors of the Avalanche was really at the request of the players. I didn't mind the expense of this change, but needless to say, I wish it hadn't been necessary. So, choose your colors carefully, with as much of an eye towards the future as possible.

4. Bylaws

The next thing you will need is a set of bylaws (see appendix A for a sample of the bylaws of Colorado Special Hockey). The purpose of the bylaws are to define the rules under which your association will operate. They will be necessary when you incorporate, and they will serve to protect your interest in the association.

I wrote the bylaws of Colorado Special Hockey from a template provided to me by the Small Business Development Group of the Greater Denver Chamber of Commerce. This group was a tremendous help in getting a small non-profit corporation off the ground. Most of their time and resources were free. The general structure of the bylaws were already there, and I changed them to accommodate the type of association we were putting together.

If you look at Article III of the bylaws you will read about membership. It was never my intention to make sure no one else ever had any control over the association. It was my intention to protect my interest in the association, given that I had done the work to put it together. I therefore created a type of membership called a "Founding Membership." The methods of establishing this type of membership in the organization are clearly described in the bylaws, and I

won't bother to repeat them here, but they have certain voting rights that enable them to maintain an interest in the direction of the association.

There is also a board of directors for the association, and this board meets to vote on "strategic" matters. "Strategic" issues are those that effect the general direction of the association. I'll spend more time on the function of the board in a later section. For now, I'll just say that the board is a very important mechanism in the operation of the association, and their role is not minimized by the fact that the association has founding members. You will read in the bylaws that the founding members hold an annual meeting to elect directors. This means that the founding members can elect their "slate" of directors, again as a means to protect the interests of those who took the original risk to start the program.

It is important to note that the bylaws contain checks and balances to protect the integrity of the association. This is necessary to be recognized as a legitimate organization, as opposed to a sole proprietorship. As a sole proprietorship it would be next to impossible to gain non-profit organization status by the IRS. Another important reason to have checks and balances is that any company or foundation that contributes money to your association will want the assurance that such checks and balances protect their contributions. One of the checks and balances is the fact that the bylaws can be changed by action of the board of directors. One of the changes to the bylaws in appendix A is the addition of a board member at large, and a parent representative as permanent board members, with full voting rights. I will explore their functions in the separate section on the board of directors, but briefly, they are to add outside perspective to the function of the association, and to represent the voice of the parents in the association in its direction.

5. Incorporation and Non-Profit Status

Your association will need to be a corporation. This will make it easier to get non-profit status or recognition from the IRS. Non-profit corporations are governed under section 501c(3) of the IRS code. You will hear the terms non-profit and 501c(3) organization used interchangeably. Non-profit status is important to attract sponsorship. It means that every contribution made to your organization will be 100% tax deductible by the contributors. I will discuss how you go about applying for and getting non-profit status later in this section.

There are some steps that should be followed in specific order before you're ready to incorporate. These steps may vary depending upon your state, but they will be generally the same. **It is also important to note that these steps, and for that matter everything in this section, apply to associations in the United States. If your association is in Canada, I would recommend seeking the advice of an attorney in Canada.**

The first thing you will need is an Employer Identification Number (EIN). It is most likely that you will never be an employer per se, but as far as the state is concerned, if you are a company, you are an employer, even if the only employee is yourself. This is an insignificant point, so don't let it confuse you. The reason you need an EIN is so the state will be able to identify your organization by this number. There is a form available from your state department of revenue, or perhaps the Secretary of State's office. If you strike out in both of those places they will be able to tell you where to get the form. It takes a few weeks to get this number.

Once you have your EIN you are ready to go on to the next step, which is opening a club checking account. Without the EIN, you will have to use your personal Social Security Number to open this account. That is not a good idea, because it looks bad to potential sponsors if they are making contributions that go into an account with your social security number on it. There is

also the risk that you will be subject to taxation, because the money going into this account may be construed as personal income. Therefore, the EIN is as much for your personal protection as it is to keep things above board.

Now it is time to take your bylaws and your EIN to the office of the Secretary of State and file Articles of Incorporation. Your state may require that you have a corporate seal, although it is not a requirement in all states. Once you file these documents with the Secretary of State's office, you are in business.

The next step in the process is to apply for non-profit status with the IRS. This is done by filing an IRS form 1023. It is a good idea to seek the advice of an attorney during this process, if not having it prepared entirely by an attorney. We had ours prepared by an attorney, and we were successful on our first attempt. It is not uncommon for an organization to fail on its first or second attempts, or to have the IRS come back with questions about your application. Attorneys are sometimes available pro-bono (free) for this type of work. If you don't have an attorney you can ask to do this pro-bono, sometimes you can contact your local bar association for a referral to one who may help.

There is much more to the process of filing your IRS form 1023 than I can do justice here, so I would recommend the book we used as a guide for the process ourselves. It is called *The Complete Guide to Non-Profit Corporations* by Ted Nichols. It is published by Enterprise Dearborn, a division of Dearborn Publishing Group. You can find it in the business section of major book stores, or perhaps through your local Chamber of Commerce. The most difficult part of filing your 1023 is that it asks for financial data, and when you're first starting out you don't have any financial data. Your attorney will be able to tell you how to deal with this issue.

The important thing to note is that you don't have to have a non-profit organization number to be able to accept tax deductible contributions. I learned from the Small Business Development Center at the Chamber of Commerce that if an organization acts like a non-profit organization, it is considered one. That is another reason your bylaws are important, and why your EIN is important. If someone wants to make a contribution, you can give them a receipt with your EIN on it in lieu of your non-profit organization number from the IRS. You can put on the receipt the words "charitable contribution." Another acceptable practice is to write them a brief letter providing the same information on association letterhead explaining the situation. This will usually be enough to suffice for their tax purposes.

I would reiterate the fact that the information in this section is meant to act as a guide only, and is not intended in any way to be legal advice. You should seek the advice of an attorney during this process to make sure you are following all the rules, and there are no special considerations for your particular state. It is also obvious that I am describing the process for the United States, and if your association is in Canada, you should seek proper legal advice for the process in your country.

6. Legal and Financial Representation

Most of the things I've described so far are things that you can figure out on your own with a significant amount of research. I would however HIGHLY recommend that you seek out a qualified attorney to guide you through the process. You are putting yourself in a position of risk as a founder of the association, and common sense would dictate that legal council for your association is a good idea. We have been fortunate to have attorneys as friends, parents of athletes and even one of our coaches. Not everyone reading this document will have that luxury.

Many attorneys are required to do a certain amount of pro-bono work for the community as a requirement of the State Bar Association, or their firm. You can find these attorneys by calling the state Bar Association itself, or sometimes the Chamber of Commerce in your city will be able to point you in their direction. You can also find them with a little internet research. You should approach them with a clear description of what you are trying to do, and what you need from them. This is again a matter of common sense and courtesy.

You should also have the help of a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) for your association. These people are represented by CPA associations that function similarly to how the Bar Association functions for attorneys. They also do a certain amount of pro-bono work, and can be found in similar ways to finding an attorney. We are again blessed to have the grandparent of one of our players who is a CPA. The reason it is important to have a CPA on board is to review and audit your book keeping. We keep our books both manually, and on computer, using the software package *Quicken 2000*. Using the software is a good way to cross check (not with a hockey stick) the data. Our association Treasurer records the data manually, and I then take the books and enter the data in to the software. I can generate virtually any financial report necessary, and I can do an electronic reconciliation with the bank statement. This is another of the important checks and balances we use to keep our data accurate. It also makes it very easy to print out whatever reports might be needed to apply for a grant. We then take this financial data to our CPA who checks and signs off on its accuracy. This practice allows us to say that we have audited financial statements when we apply for grants, or corporate sponsorship. It is a matter of credibility which you should seriously consider having for your association.

7. Insurance

As I mentioned earlier, you are taking a certain amount of risk in founding the association, both from a personal liability standpoint, and for the financial management of the association. For that reason you should have liability insurance, catastrophic health insurance and insurance to protect the financial assets of the association against theft. The athletes and coaches get insurance along with their registration with USA Hockey, and USA Hockey also has relationships with private insurance carriers where the association can get liability insurance and theft insurance. The levels of this coverage will differ with the size of your association. The reason theft insurance is necessary is to act as an additional check and balance. It lends a great deal of credibility for our association to assure its board of directors, parents and contributors that the club's funds are insured against theft by its officers, or anyone else. It is also quite likely that the arena in which you practice and play will demand liability insurance coverage to protect itself. Information regarding the insurance for the association is available through USA Hockey. They have a risk management department, which can supply you with any information you might need. One publication that will be helpful to you is the *Summary of Insurance Coverages for Members*. In it is described the various types of insurance coverages you get with your USA Hockey

membership, and those that are available for an additional charge. The Executive Protection Program is one you will want to investigate thoroughly.

8. Board of Directors

You will of course need a board of directors for your association. This will be necessary for the sake of credibility, and to qualify for just about anything. The manner of acting for the board should be addressed in your bylaws (see sample bylaws in appendix A). The purpose of the board of directors is to determine the strategic direction of your association. These are matters of policy, approval of the budget, or any other matter where a consensus is necessary. The day-to-day operation of the association is the responsibility of the holders of the offices such as President, Vice President, etc. One position you may wish to have is Executive Director. This person is sort of the manager of the operations, and follows the direction of the President. Our association does not have an Executive Director, simply because the duties are already carried out by the other officers, and to have this position would be redundant. It is optional under our association bylaws.

As I discussed in the section on bylaws, the board of directors are very important to our association even though we have the category called founding membership. The founding members essentially elect the board of directors, although additional directors can be added by an act of the board itself. This was the way we added a Board Member at Large, and a Parent Representative to the board as permanent members with full voting rights. The Board Member at Large is a person who has been a financial supporter of the organization, but does not have an athlete in the program, nor does he take an active role in the day-to-day operation of the association. Our Board Member at Large is a respected member of the Denver business community, and gives us an outside perspective. His opinion is not clouded by the personal interest of having a player on the team. This is another way to add credibility, and gives the appearance of a well rounded board.

The Parent Representative was added to the board to do exactly what the title implies. This person is responsible for conducting parent meetings, determining the consensus of the parents, and representing their voice in votes of the board. We consider this a better approach than trying to poll the parents constantly to try and determine their opinion. It makes it so the votes are not simply a majority, and we don't have dozens of votes to tally. It removes the board and officers from the uncomfortable position of trying to represent the opinions of dozens of people, and having essentially "mob rule." It is representative voting, and it is up to the parents to influence the vote of their representative through discussions and meetings. If the parents believe their interests are not being served by the actions of the Parent Representative, they have the right to vote that person out of the position. It is up to the parents whom they submit to the board as their representative, and we as the board make no rules regarding whom they submit or how they arrive at their candidate. We simply say the Parent Representative serves a finite term, and they may only submit one candidate for board approval. If they submit no candidate, the position may remain vacant on the board until the next cycle. We also say the parents may only submit a candidate once a year so we are not constantly voting on the matter during the year. This amendment to the bylaws can be seen in appendix A.

Since the board of directors are concerned with strategic matters, it is not necessary to meet weekly, or even monthly. Things do not change often enough to necessitate that frequency. Our board meets quarterly, which is about as long as you will want to go between meetings, and this

frequency works well for us. We record minutes from the meetings and prepare those for the next meeting. We update the status of previous action items, discuss new business, and vote on any new matters presented. We also make sure there are an odd number of votes on the board to avoid ties, and our voting is done verbally.

9. Dealing with the Parents of Special Needs Athletes

I decided to include a separate section on this topic, because parents play a pivotal role in the success of any youth sports association. I've talked to many people who in hearing about our association for the first time imagine the parents of special needs athletes would be grateful for the fact that the association exists at all, and would therefore be a breeze compared to the parents of typical children. In fact, while they are for the most part grateful for the fact that the association exists, they have a tendency to be more vocal and are sometimes more difficult to deal with than parents of typical children. Over the years I have come to attribute this to the fact that these parents, and I am one of them myself, are used to having to advocate on behalf of their children as a matter of standard practice. That is to say that whether it is at school, or in any other endeavor, their children tend to get the short end of the stick unless the parents are there aggressively protecting their interests. I applaud this fact and I applaud their passion for the well being of their children, but I sometimes have to disarm this passion when it comes to our program. I try to tell them that being the parent of a special needs child myself I understand their plight. They don't have to advocate for their child with us, because we are on their side. This is not a place where their child is going to get the short end of the stick in favor of a more able child or group. But, old habits die hard, and you have to earn their trust and respect.

One thing we have done to minimize any potential hard feelings is to create the position of Parent Representative, which I described in the last section. This gives the parents the feeling that they are being heard, and they are being taken seriously. I also make it very clear however, that I am always available for direct contact and discussion, and seek their input constantly. I communicate with them in the form of a regular letter "from the desk of the president." This is sometimes redundant information, because their Parent Representative has already made them aware of certain things, but some of it is new information. I may also choose to share with them things that I am considering, and ask for their opinions outside of the normal process of the Parent Representative process. I don't want them to get in the mind set that they can only express their views through the Parent Representative, and therefore only once per quarter at the board meetings. Communication is the key to any successful relationship, and you will need to polish your diplomatic skills to deal with parents.

We don't have a great group of parents, many of whom step up and volunteer, and ask for more. On the other hand, if an issue gets stuck in their minds, they have a tendency to be quite passionate about it. I try to avoid tension through open communication, and I try to attack potential problems in their infancy, rather than letting a little thing turn into a negative collective opinion. Sometimes it works great, and other times it works like a flat tire. The key remains to communicate.

We have had parents who felt strongly enough to leave the association over one issue or another. Typically, before they leave they will try to impose their point of view on the rest of the association to get things done their way. It is not uncommon for people to think they have a better way of doing things, and I am not arrogant enough to think that my way is the only way. What I sometimes struggle with (and this has happened more than once) is when someone comes in years after the program was started, with the notion that they are going to change things, or that they should be running the show because they could do it better. They very well may be right,

and I say to them that if they feel strongly enough about it they are free to start their own association. This will not only show them how much work it is to run the association, but we will have someone to play against...!!! I have offered to help anyone seeking to split off and start their own association, and this document may serve as yet another means of making good on that offer. The offer is sincere and is a standing offer, but as yet there have been no takers.

10. Fund Raising and Marketing

The next step in the process of getting your association off the ground is fund raising and marketing. The two things you will need most are the dollars to make the association solvent, and to get the word out that you exist. By getting the word out, you attract new players and new sponsors. There are many ways to do these things, and I will explore some of them briefly.

In the beginning you are going to need cash quickly, because you will incur some expenses in the early stages of setting up your association. The expenses may include buying your ice, as I said before it is not likely you have the luxury of donated ice like we do. You may have to buy your first batch of equipment for your first players, although I will address the issue of equipment in a later section. You might choose to produce a video tape about your program, which will cost money. You might choose to run newspaper ads. You might decide as we did that the association needs a post office box for its primary address, and its own phone number other than your personal address and phone number. You might need to buy your insurance right away, and a plethora of other potential expenses. Your funding will come from three primary sources. These issues are discussed in more depth in appendix B, which is sample of a business plan I wrote for the association when I wanted to bring up our web site (www.goldeneagleshockey.com). The three primary sources are corporate donations, private donations and grants. Another source of income will be possibly from Special Hockey International, but the terms under which revenue is shared, or for that matter *if* revenue will be shared from league fund raising activities, is far from determined yet.

The fastest way to get money in significant amounts to help you with start up expenses is from corporate sponsors. It is best not to target large corporations in the beginning because usually they have annual cycles for this type of community outreach, and if you miss the annual cycle it will be too long before they go through the cycle again to help you in the short term. It is best to go after small to medium sized, privately held companies that are headquartered in your city. They are large enough to give you the kinds of donations that will matter (i.e. \$500 to \$1000 at a time), and they are small enough to approve the donation without having to go through an annual cycle to do so. It is a good idea to target companies that do business with the public (i.e. restaurants, car dealerships that are not national chains, and other retail establishments). These companies are concerned with their image, and your association is right up their alley. A clue as to which businesses might be open to this kind of support include those that display in their establishment a picture of another youth sports team they have sponsored. You might also check with any hockey shops in the area, because not only can they support financially, but they might (and I stress the word might) be open to donations of equipment as well. You can target large companies for long term support.

The next best place to get funding fast is through private donations. These are donations from individuals that are just a matter of appealing to the individuals' sense of caring. The problem with this type of support is that it takes a lot of effort to reach a lot of individuals, and the donations while well intended, are typically small. You have to reach an awful lot of individuals to generate a significant amount of money.

The third most likely place to get funding is from grants from foundations that support your type of activity. These tend to be nice hits when they happen, but they have their down side as well. First, you have to find the foundations. We did this by buying a book from the Chamber of Commerce that lists all the foundations in Colorado, the types of programs they support, and how and when you can apply for their grants. Another difficulty is that the hit rate is not very good. For every ten grants for which you apply, you might win one or two of them. That means you are going to have to have the discipline to apply for enough of them to maintain some sort acceptable success rate. This takes a huge time investment that will not pay off quickly enough to help you with start up expenses. It is another good source for long term support, but don't count on it for start up. There is also the fact that most grant cycles are annual, and it takes between three and sometimes twelve months between the time you submit your application and the time the actual award is dispersed.

Another problem with grants is that you need to provide audited financial statements for more than one year. When you are starting up, you don't have audited financial statements, because you haven't been in existence for any length of time. Usually, you have to have been operating for at least one year before you have anything to submit that they will consider sufficient. Foundations are looking for stability. They want to know that you are well established, and that they are not your only source of funding. In most cases you can only ask for a certain percentage of your budget from any given foundation, which also suggests that you have to have a formal budget to begin with. It also means that you have to have won some other grants to show that you are well funded from a variety of sources. It is almost as if you have to have money already to get this kind of money. It is best to target this sort of revenue for after you've been up and running for a year or so.

A way to simplify the process of grant writing is to use your state's "common grant application." Colorado is a state that has this, as do many other (but certainly not all) states. This is a form you can get from the state's administration offices, or from their web site. It contains a certain amount of information common to most grant requirements, and you then only have to generate your financial statements, and whatever customization is necessary to fit the application for a particular grant. We use the book I mentioned before that we got from the Chamber of Commerce, and we look for foundations that are even remotely related to what we do. We look for key phrases like "youth sports," "youth activities," "disabled sports," or even "community outreach" etc.

There is another way to raise money and stabilize your cash flow, and that is through the use of a web site as a marketing tool (see appendix B for a sample business plan for your web site). This is something tangible that you can offer a potential sponsor without turning your players into walking billboards. I'm not opposed to putting a company logo on the sweater or helmet, but at some point you have to draw the line or your players will look like a suitcase that has been around the world twice, with different logos and decals.

It is a good idea to produce a brochure you can send out, or you can put in a "take one" display at a retail establishment. The brochure should be clear and concise, and must contain enough information that the person reading it will be able to glean enough information to seek you out to get more. It should answer questions without being too "busy" or confusing.

These are just a few marketing ideas. There are many other ways to go about getting the word out. We were fortunate enough to have a news story done about us even before we got officially on the ice. But this was as a result of being persistent, and having the help of Curtis Leschyshyn

who played for the Colorado Avalanche at the time. I'll discuss more about this and other relationships with pro players in a separate section.

11. Budgeting and Financial Management

This will be one of the more challenging aspects of running your association, especially in the beginning. Unless you start with a large sum of money of your own, or you find a company or foundation to give you an infusion of capital to start up, you will have to start on a shoe string budget. The start up period will test your ability to manage the association's finances more than any other time.

The first thing we decided in starting our association was that we would not take any compensation for our efforts, and that we wouldn't have any paid employees. It would be an all volunteer association. At some point we may decide that we have grown to the point where we will want to have paid employees, but I don't foresee that happening any time soon. I only hope we get big enough for that. My personal goal is to retire at an early age so I can run the association full time, and let my retirement portfolio allow me to still do it without compensation. But, I'm getting ahead of myself.

In the beginning, a budget may be as simple as sitting down with a sheet of paper and trying to anticipate everything you might need to run the association, and what it might cost. You will need to budget for such things as ice time, equipment, any overhead required for the club to function (phone line, fax line, PO box, business cards, etc.). That will essentially be your first budget. It is important to go through this exercise in the beginning, because without fail the first question you will be asked by any financial supporter is how much you think it will take to achieve your goals. For example, if you ask a company or individual to buy jerseys for the players, they are going to want to know how much the jerseys will cost. You should shop around as if you already have the money, and you already have at least one full team of players. When you see what jerseys cost, you then add this to your budget, and you will be able to tell the potential sponsor how much you are seeking for this item in the budget.

After ice time and equipment, the next most costly thing your association will need to plan for is the annual tournament held by the league, Special Hockey International. I will discuss this in greater detail in a separate section, but you should budget about \$1000 per player to attend. This planning will need to be done almost from the very start, because the next tournament will usually be less than a year away.

Our association pays for all ice time, all players equipment (with the exception of skates, and any accessory beyond what is required to take the ice), and jerseys. When it comes to the tournament, we try to pay for the airfare and hotel accommodations for the player and one escort. We do this because our players are usually not capable of traveling alone, and there needs to be an escort with the player who has consent authority during the trip. We also do this to protect ourselves from liability should anything happen during the trip. If the player is traveling with someone with consent authority, such as a parent, our liability is reduced. Additionally, there may be special needs the player has that no one else is qualified to attend. We also pay for the entry fee into the tournament, which is one of the largest expenses associated with a typical athlete in a traditional hockey program.

We don't cover skates, because skates are something that if fitted properly, are a custom item. It also gives the family of the athlete a degree of financial interest, without being oppressively expensive. Skates are usually about \$100. We also take this position because skates are something the athlete can keep and use, even if they decide to leave the program. The only other item we don't pay for is the athlete's registration fee with USA Hockey (\$22). Again, this is done to give the family of the athlete a stake in the athlete's participation. That means the average cost for the athlete is \$100 for skates, and \$22 to USA Hockey. This is miniscule compared to the cost of a typical athlete to participate in a traditional hockey program.

Our goal has been from the beginning to make the program affordable, and we never wanted someone to not be able to participate for financial reasons. We took into consideration that the families of special needs athletes may have extraordinary medical expenses, or some other financial situation that made it difficult for them to afford the cost normally associated with a traditional hockey program. If for some reason the family can't afford the average \$120 to participate, we will pay 100% of the cost for that athlete. This is handled on a case-by-case basis. You should clearly plan for this in your budget if you intend to cover the same things we do.

The most difficult thing about budgeting and financial management of the association is the fact that we are never certain how much money we will raise, or where it will come from. Nor, do we know when it will come. I have likened it to having a job where you report for work, but you don't know what the salary is, or when payday is. This would make the management of your personal finances very difficult, and the same is true of the financial management of the association. I spoke to this point in a business plan I wrote for the association, which is in appendix B. See section 10 for more ideas about fund raising and marketing.

The preparation of the budget is the responsibility of the President, or Executive Director. This task may in some cases be delegated to a budget committee, and then approved by the President or Executive Director. The budget should then be submitted to the Board of Directors for final approval. This should be an annual process. In the beginning, there may not be a Board of Directors beyond the founders, but you should go through the motions of budget approval even during the first year, and add members to the Board of Directors as you go.

The methods and tools we use for financial management are simple, and contain checks and balances. The association has a checking account, and only the President and Treasurer are allowed to sign checks. When the bank statements arrive, they are entered manually into the hard copy books (i.e. general ledger) kept by the Treasurer. A different person then enters the same data into *Quicken 2000*, which is the computer based accounting system we use. As described in an earlier section, this gives us the benefit of having a second person review the data while entering it into the accounting system. The system then performs an electronic reconciliation of the account. The system is capable of generating any necessary financial statements, which are periodically published to the association membership, and are always available for review upon the request of anyone in the association. The hard copy general ledger is also given to the association's CPA for final review and sign off. An annual audit is performed, which allows us to submit audited financial statements when we apply for funding from any source. This triple check of the data insures it is accurate, and protects the association from embezzlement. The association funds are further secured by the insurance we carry for protection from theft of up to \$100,000.00.

The question often asked by many founders is: What expenses incurred on behalf of the association are eligible for reimbursement...? This is especially true during start up when some, if not all, the money comes out of the founder's pocket. I advise founders to use common sense

when considering this issue. Imagine everyone in the association, and everyone who has or will give you money, and an auditor from the IRS, gathered in a room. If you would have any qualms about accepting reimbursement for an expense, and justifying it to this assembled group, then don't take it. Our policy is that any expense incurred on behalf of the association, with the prior approval of any officer of the association, is eligible for reimbursement. It is also the policy of our association that if any coach wishes to get certification through the USA Hockey Coaching Education Program, the association will reimburse the coach 100%. That includes travel expenses if necessary. The reason we do this is that the coaches are all volunteers, yet the certification is a requirement of USA Hockey. The coaches are already giving unselfishly of their time and energy, and the certification process requires an additional investment of time and dedication. We encourage our coaches to pursue Mater level certification, which will usually require travel and time away from their daily responsibilities. We believe if a coach is willing to invest the time and effort to get the certification, which is clearly a benefit to the association, it is the least we can do to reimburse the expense, given that they receive no other compensation.

Reimbursing expenses incurred on behalf of the association, as long as they are consistent with established association policy, is common business practice. If those charged with the financial management of the association keep that in mind, there should never be a question about expense reimbursement. Our policy is to take care of the athletes first, as they are the highest priority. If there is enough money we then take care of the coaching staff, including their certification and their travel to the tournament. This past year however, we didn't have enough money to cover all of our day-to-day expenses, and pay for every athlete and an escort to attend the tournament. Our alternative was to offer assistance to any family who would not otherwise be able to attend the tournament. We would fund partially or completely depending on the need. This allowed us to be able to continue to say that we've never turned anyone away from the program or tournament participation due to financial reasons.

It is ironic that the financial management of the association becomes easier as more money starts to come in. It is the start up period that will show the founders how adept they are at financial management, as this tends to be the time of famine. If common sense, standard business practices and clear priorities are applied, many of the questions relative to finances will answer themselves. Advice is available from other associations and founders that have experienced the same set of issues. These resources should be sought out so as to prevent each association to solve the problems themselves, without the benefit of the experience of those who have gone before them.

12. Selecting a Head Coach if You Are Not Going to Do It Yourself

Many of the founders of special hockey associations do so because they have a child with special needs who is interested in playing the game. Sometimes these people are not hockey players or coaches themselves, and therefore are not qualified to coach the team. In these cases a qualified Head Coach is the next person that should be recruited.

We shall presume for the sake of this discussion the founder who has to recruit a Head Coach will have to recruit a stranger for the job. That being the case, how does one go about finding a qualified candidate...? Unlike the assistant coaches, the Head Coach is someone who should be chosen primarily based on hockey experience. I will discuss the criteria for assistant coaches in the next section.

The Head Coach will need to be someone with hockey experience because he or she will be primarily responsible for teaching the game to the special athletes. However, the best Head Coaching candidate will not necessarily be the coach with the most hockey experience. A coach that is a former player, or that has many years of coaching typical hockey players may not have the patience to coach special athletes. The coach must be able to design and manage a practice that takes into account a wide variety of mental and physical abilities, as well as attention spans. The candidate should share the desire of the founder to see hockey made available to special athletes. The candidate should be someone of even temperament, with the adaptability to handle many different on ice situations. The candidate should be willing to become a student of developmental disabilities, in order to be prepared to deal with the unique characteristics they involve. The candidate should be certified with USA Hockey, preferably at no less than Intermediate level, and he or she should be willing to make a long-term commitment of time and effort. Part time assistant coaches are fine, but the Head Coach should be the one constant on the ice. That is to say the Head Coach should be at almost every practice, game and tournament, whereas assistant coaches should be at enough of those functions that the players know them.

The best place to find the candidate is to ask the director of any youth hockey association in your area if they might recommend some candidates. You should start with more than one if possible. You should then contact them with the short version of what you are trying to do, and where you are in the process. If they are interested, you should meet with them and interview them, looking specifically for the traits mentioned above. You should also ask them to provide a coaching resume, and submit to a background investigation, as they will be dealing with children. Whether or not you ever do the background investigation is up to you, and most people with something to hide will object. You should also ask around if possible to seek other opinions within the hockey community as to the general opinion of your candidate. If you are not connected to the hockey community, or you are just not comfortable with asking around, you can ask the candidate to provide at least three references. All of these things may seem like they would scare off most candidates, and the truth is they might. Let me assure you that these techniques will keep you from selecting someone wrong for the job. If they stand up to a rigorous selection process, they will probably be in it for the long haul.

In summary, the Head Coaching candidate should fit the same profile as the potential founders, described in *Part I*. It is also acceptable to put the candidate in contact with other coaches around Special Hockey International. Those coaches can be reached through the league offices. If the candidate is asking lots of questions, it is a good indication they are seriously considering the job. You should be clear that you are looking for a long-term commitment, because a Head Coach is a

key source of stability for the athletes. The Head Coach should be willing to give a little more than the assistant coaches, and lead by example.

13. Selecting Assistant Coaches

The process of choosing assistant coaches is essentially the same as choosing a Head Coach in terms of motivation. Assistant coaches however need not necessarily be people who show up every single week. You should have enough assistant coaches to manage the number of players you have (the ideal ratio is one per three to five players). This is important because you will be dealing with a wide variety of ability levels and attention spans.

Your assistant coaches do not have to necessarily be people with many years of hockey experience, although some is desirable. They should at least know how to skate so as not be a hazard on the ice, but a person who shags pucks and helps you set up cones for drills may be useful to you. You may also use, as we do, typical players from local competitive associations to assist you by going through drills to show your athletes what they are supposed to do. It has always been my belief that kids learn more from other kids by watching them than they learn from adults lecturing them.

Assistant coaches should already be certified at least at the IP level (consult the USA Hockey web site for more information on certification levels). The Initiation Program or IP is USA Hockey's first level of certification, and its focus is teaching coaches how to teach new players how to skate and play the game.

We have a couple of assistant coaches who did not come to us from the hockey community. One is a pediatric speech therapist with many years of teaching children with developmental delays and disabilities. Her help has been very valuable in teaching the rest of us how to work with some of our players who have difficulty communicating, or who have attention problems. We also have a registered nurse as an assistant coach to deal with on ice injuries, although those are infrequent. Her background is also in pediatrics, which gives her a good background and skill set to work with our athletes. Both of these people were relatively new to the game of hockey, but have become quick studies. They are both certified at the IP level, and work primarily with our beginners. If you can recruit this kind of help for your assistant coaching staff, I would encourage you to do so.

Other helpful backgrounds are occupational and physical therapists, and adaptive physical education teachers. Even if these people don't participate on the ice necessarily, they might be able to observe from off the ice or on the bench. They may have good ideas for working with your athletes that you or your Head Coach will be able to work into your practice plan.

For both head and assistant coaches, practice planning is a must. This is true when coaching typical athletes in competitive hockey, and is especially true with your athletes. We have some athletes on our team who don't adapt to change very easily, and if we suddenly decide we are going to do something new, we may have to bring it into the practice plan slowly. I'll discuss this in more detail in the section on practice planning.

The criteria for selecting assistant coaches is similar to that of the Head Coach, but you may want to take into consideration special skills or qualifications that would add value for your athletes. As with the Head Coach, simply picking the person with the most years of hockey experience is not necessarily the best person for the job. These people will need to be willing to make a long term commitment just as the Head Coach, but if you have enough of them they need not attend

every practice. It will be easier to get them to come regularly if they know there is help, and they won't have to be there all the time. With adaptive PE teachers, and those who will observe from off the ice, they can show up with even less regularity. A visit to practice on a monthly basis might be enough, and will allow them to see the progress from visit to visit.

14. Recruiting Players

The best place to look for players is at elementary, middle and high schools in your area. The reason these are good places to look is because they almost always have special education programs, and the students in these programs will be the exact students you are trying to reach. The best way we have found to reach the potential players and their parents is through the school administrators, and teachers. If these people are made aware of your program, they can distribute information on your behalf to their students to take home. The thing to keep in mind of course is that you should have information to distribute, even if it's not much more than a flyer made on your home computer. It doesn't have to be fancy, but it should contain the basic information. That is a brief description of what you do, why you do it, when and where you do it, and how to reach you to get more information. As you might gather, it also means you must have the things I've just mentioned in place. You will have considered much of this information long before you get to this point, because you will have come up with a mission statement. This is a good thing to include in anything you distribute about your program. When we started, we wrote letters to each of the special education teachers in our local public school district, and followed up later with phone calls to them to ask them to distribute information for us. This was reasonably successful.

Another good place to get the word out is within the local hockey association in the area. Many of them have informational newsletters that they send to their players and families. These players are not necessarily your target audience, but they may know of others who might share their interest in the sport, and would qualify for your program. The qualifications for players will be discussed in the next section.

You may also go so far as running a small block advertisement in the sports section of your local newspaper. We did this in the beginning, and got several players, as well as a couple of volunteer coaches. These are the only coaches we have that were not already friends, former teammates, or coaches we already knew. This doesn't have to be elaborate either. It should be brief and to the point, again containing information similar to that in your mission statement. Brevity, as they say, is the sole of wit. That means you must say as much as you can while being as brief as you can. The advertisement should contain information that will cause the reader to want to know more.

Another good idea is to create a video about the program, but this may have to be further down the road. You will first need to get your program off the ground so you will have a team to video tape. I would recommend against having something professionally done at first, because that can be very expensive. If you're fortunate enough to have a parent in your program that is an expert in this field, you are miles ahead. We had this luxury, and as a result, our video made its way around to various schools, and other places where we could reach the people we needed to reach. It might be a good idea to wait until your program is well established to use this tool to help grow your program. The more professional it looks the better, but I would again advise that you not get carried away. This is a judgment call. The more money you spend on this type of thing, the better it will look, but the more money you will have to divert to it at the expense of other things that may be more important. You should just consider whether the investment is worth the potential return. It may not be wise in the beginning to use your association's funds for this, as

they will be more limited in the beginning, and such an expense will be harder to justify to your board, and potential supporters. Once money is not so thin, you will have much more latitude.

15. Player Qualifications

The one thing you do not want your program to be is a substitute program for players that simply didn't manage to make the team in their regular association. That is to say, you don't want players that could very well play in an existing association with a little more hard work. While I feel for these players in ever increasing competitive youth hockey programs, our association is not for these players.

Our program is for players that have a mental challenge such as Down syndrome, Autism, or other developmental delay that would prevent them from being able to play in any other existing association. We even have players that don't have a "labeled" developmental disability, but who qualify for special education nevertheless. It is the developmentally delayed athlete that our program is for. I have turned away players that have contacted us, because they simply were not qualified.

The thing to keep in mind is that children with developmental disabilities, especially those that are more obvious such as Down syndrome, may be able to participate in athletic activities with their typical peers for a time. However, as they get older, the differences between them and their typical peers become more pronounced. This is the point at which many of them get left behind, and are not able to keep up. They are then faced with the disappointment of having to quit altogether, or find some other program especially for them. Many of them turn to Special Olympics, and that is a wonderful place to turn, but as I mentioned before, if their love is ice hockey, Special Olympics doesn't offer ice hockey. These are the athletes for whom we created our program.

A requirement we have is that the player must be at least five years old. We make this age the minimum for a couple of good reasons. First, the special needs child younger than five years may not know exactly what ice hockey is, and therefore will most likely be there because it's their parents desire for them to play instead of their own. By age five this may still be the case, but a little less so. We've also found that a child at age five is easier to work with on the ice. They are usually walking by this age, and will be a little more stable on their feet. I essentially arrived at this determination based on the experience with my own son. It may seem like splitting hairs, but he was much more ready to start at five than he was at four. That extra year made a significant difference. This is not a league requirement, but we've made it a requirement of our team.

There is no maximum age, which is one of the things that complicates the relationship with USA Hockey. The typical "youth" hockey player is no older than 18, and USA Hockey has taken the position that they should register the team according to the age of the oldest player on the team. This is fine until you get players that are older than 18. Then what do you do...? You can't really register the team as an adult team because you have players under 18. I realize the issue is of course insurance. **It is my position that USA Hockey should investigate and create a special designation for our type of team. This may require that a different kind of insurance coverage be investigated and arranged for a "hybrid" team such as ours. I will spend more time on this issue in the section about our relationship with USA Hockey.**

One thing of which you must be aware, is that children with Down syndrome have a proclivity toward a condition called Alnto-axial Instability. I'm not about to attempt to give a medical explanation of what it is, but in brief terms, it is a condition which causes the vertebrae in the neck to be instable, or dislocated due to weakness in the structures that are supposed to keep them in place. If a child has this condition it is possible that even a slight strain on the neck could cause serious injury. For this reason we require that a player with Down syndrome have an x-ray that is negative for this condition in order to play. Sometimes, a player may have an x-ray that is "marginal" as opposed to negative. We will still allow this player to participate, but we require that they have a letter from their doctor saying it's alright for them to play. I'm not certain, but I believe most other athletic associations for children with Down syndrome require the same thing. You must be very careful from a liability standpoint where this is concerned, and different states have different liability laws. It is wise to seek the advice of your attorney on this issue. It may be possible for the player to dress and skate without necessarily playing hockey, but that will be up to you and your attorney to decide. We have never had this sort of issue come up, because up to now all of our players have had negative x-rays.

We have the requirement that our players must be able to walk without assistance. We believe that if a player can walk without assistance, we can teach him/her to skate. Our program is not for the physically challenged, it is for the mentally challenged. There may or may not be another program for the physically challenged athlete, but we don't believe we are qualified to accommodate them. This not intended to be unfairly exclusive, we believe it would be unfair to the athlete if they come out with the expectation of playing hockey only to be disappointed because we are not equipped to accommodate them. It probably wouldn't be much fun for that athlete, and they run the risk of being left out or left behind just like they would anywhere else. We don't ever want an athlete to leave our program disappointed, therefore we believe it's best to make this a requirement.

Some associations in our league will accommodate the physically challenged athlete, and I applaud them for it. They are better able to accommodate these athletes, because they have the skills on their coaching staffs to do so. I remember one player at the league tournament that was out on the ice with a walker. I was inspired by his participation, and I remember wishing we were better able to accommodate athletes like him, but the unfortunate reality is that we are not. I have never seen an athlete in the league in a wheelchair either. To my knowledge this has never come up, but I would have to take the same position on that issue as well. I'm not saying we wouldn't be willing to try, but I wouldn't want to do the athlete a disservice by doing a bad job either. The reality is that we try to be as many things to as many as we can, but there are certain things that are outside our mission, and what I call our "core competency." This is a sensitive issue, and you will have to decide what you are able to do. I would advise any new founder to give careful consideration to taking on something that will result in disappointment for the athlete.

We once had a player on our team that was deaf. He was a very good player, and was physically able to play the game very well. The problem he had of course was that he couldn't hear the whistle, and none of us signed well enough to communicate effectively with him on the bench or on the ice. I really liked this kid, and he had obvious athletic ability. I let him come out and play, and as is the case with every player, he was fully involved. By that I mean we didn't tell him he couldn't go to the tournament, or play in our games at home. Because he was otherwise a very talented player, he had to constantly back off, so as not to show up his opponents or teammates. He was very good about this, and was a great team player, but I could tell he was frustrated that he couldn't give it his all. He left our program, and I'm afraid he left disappointed. I enjoyed having him in the program, but

we really weren't what he was looking for. I learned a lesson with him that we can't be everything to everyone, and I would take a very hard look at the situation before I did it again. These types of learning experiences are what I want to try and help any potential founder avoid by sharing my own stories. My goal is to give the reader of this document the benefit of what we learned without having to disappoint an athlete first themselves.

Lastly, we say that our players must be free of any physical condition that would be seriously aggravated by playing the game. What I have in mind here are heart or respiratory problems. We don't yet require a doctor's physical exam, but as we get bigger this may become a requirement. Clearly, we do this to limit our own liability, but we also do it so the athlete won't be put in a situation that will risk his/her health.

There will sometimes be hard decisions to make regarding which athletes are and are not qualified to participate. The qualifications of our athletes are pretty well addressed in our mission statement. We say our program is for any child over the age of five, or young adult, with a mental challenge such as Down syndrome, Autism, or any related developmental disability that would prevent the athlete from participating in any other organized ice hockey program. They must be able to walk without assistance, and be free from any physical or medical condition that would be aggravated by playing the game. Our qualifications are very similar (I believe) to Special Olympics. If you are a new founder, and you wish further clarification, you might try contacting your local branch of Special Olympics for their qualifications, or you may feel free to contact us directly.

16. How a new player joins the team, and how special hockey differs from typical competitive hockey associations.

Traditionally, hockey seasons all over the US and Canada start and end at about the same time, and they all have fairly standard methods for how players get into the association. Typically, a player that is new to an association will have to get on a waiting list to see if there will be a spot for him/her, because returning players get first choice. By about August, the associations know how many players will be returning, and they then open the remaining spots for new players on the waiting list. Then there is a tryout for the players on the waiting list, which is followed in late August by the regular association tryouts. Teams are then picked, and preseason practice starts in September. The season starts in October, and runs through the state tournament (in the US), which is normally sometime in March or April. If the player is on a "tier team" meaning a AA or AAA team, they can continue to play into May or later. When the season ends, there is about a month or so with very little activity, which is when most associations run camps and clinics. This is also the time when some players go off to camps in the US and Canada, which can be a week or two in duration. Then the whole process starts over. If a player doesn't make it into the association, sometimes they can play on an in house team, which is a less formal program that gives the player a chance to play the game, but they don't play in a competitive league, nor do they travel. During the year, most teams will play in tournaments for which they apply, and may or may not be accepted. Most travel teams play in three to five or more of these tournaments per year. Some players join teams after the start of the season, because spots sometimes open up due to players dropping out. This usually goes on until sometime in November, but the dates the rosters are "frozen" changes from association to association. Once the rosters are frozen, that is the team for the rest of the year.

When a typical player signs up for the wait list, or returns to the association, he/she must pay a portion of the ice fee for the year along with registration. Some associations then require a second installment, and a third when the season starts. By the time the player begins the season, they will have paid anywhere from \$500 to \$1000, depending on the level at which they play, and the association in which they play. Some are even more expensive than that. Tournaments for the typical player are of course extra, and can range from \$100 to \$300 each. If a team plays in five tournaments, this can be an additional \$1500 for the year. Then there is equipment, and depending upon the size of the player, and how much has to be replaced during the year due to wear or being outgrown, this can be upwards of \$1000. That makes the typical investment for a player in a competitive association as much as \$3000.

Players are typically assigned to teams based on the USA Hockey age recommendations. That means players play with others their own age. They are then divided into ability levels with the best players making AA and AAA teams, and the remaining players filling levels from A to C. If a player doesn't make any of these teams, he/she must then play in the in house program, or not play at all. Most associations will have three or four teams at each age level, and 350 players in the association is not uncommon. Some are larger, and some are smaller. Depending on how many sheets of ice the facility has, and how many teams they have to accommodate, teams will usually get two or three practices per week, with at least one of those being a full ice practice. Some associations are able to give their teams full ice all the time, but one can be assured there will be some practices at very early hours. This is especially true as the player gets older.

Special hockey associations are different of course. They also vary from one to another, and the associations in Canada are most times quite different from the associations in the US. In Canada there is a lot more ice available, and there are a lot more special hockey players. This is mostly due to the fact that hockey is a way of life for Canadian kids, whereas in the US hockey is more of a novelty. That is with certain geographical exceptions such as Minnesota, where oddly enough there is not yet a special hockey association. Ice time is typically paid for through association funds, or is donated to the special hockey association. This makes time and availability differ greatly from place to place. Most of the special hockey associations in Canada get much more ice time than we do in the US, and many of them are within a few miles of each other, so they are able to play against each other quite often. In most cases, special hockey associations run their seasons at roughly the same time as most traditional associations.

In Colorado, we are quite different. Our program originally ran for ten months a year, with our only break being December and January. This was originally done to accommodate the ice arena where we play and practice, so they could use our slot for tournaments, or other revenue producing activities. What we found out was that many of our players also ski with Special Olympics, as Colorado is one of the best places in the world to ski. The break made it possible for our players to ski, and continue to play hockey during the same season. It is also nice to have a break from hockey during the holiday season. We now take a summer break in addition to our winter break. This is so children who have a summer vacation from school are free to be out of town, and free to do other things like summer sports. We found that the absentee rate in the summer was almost twice what it is during the winter, so we decided a summer break during the months of June and July was a good idea. Our season now runs in two segments: August to Thanksgiving, and February to the end of May. This tends to mirror the school year roughly, and it means the athletes are usually in town during this time.

Unlike traditional hockey associations, the cost to play in ours is very minimal. As I mentioned in a previous section, this is so families who may have extraordinary expenses resulting from the care of a special needs family member would never be turned away for financial reasons. It puts

the game of ice hockey within the financial reach of every potential special athlete. We also do not play in tournaments throughout the year. We work our entire season in preparation for the tournament held annually by Special Hockey International. All our financial planning is geared toward attending that tournament. Sometimes we don't have enough money to pay for everyone, and in those years we offer financial aide to anyone who needs it. This is again so that no one ever has to miss out on the tournament for financial reasons.

Another difference between our association and most typical competitive associations, is that we don't have a maximum number of players, or least not yet. That means we don't have a waiting list for players. Our association is almost large enough to split into two teams, and the more players we have the better. Some of the Canadian associations have four or five teams, and many of the US associations have more than one. Since we are still trying to recruit as many players as possible, we allow a player to join the team at any point during the season. We will even take a brand new player to the tournament if he/she wants to go. We don't have the luxury of many hours a week of ice time, and we practice only once a week for an hour. When we split into two teams, this will double.

The process for a player to join the team has come from a few years of refinement. We describe this process in detail on our web site. The first step is after the player has heard about the program, we ask them to call the main phone number for the association, or to send us an email through our web site. I field most of these calls myself, because I want to talk to the parents or guardians of the athlete. This is where I screen them to make sure they meet the eligibility requirements. Once I determine they do, I then invite them to practice. When they come to their first practice, it is only to observe, and I ask them to make this very clear to the potential player. It's not good if a new potential player comes to the first practice expecting to go on the ice, only to be disappointed. I made this a requirement, because some potential new players have never been in an ice arena, nor do they have any idea what to expect. By having them come to a practice to observe the first time, they may decide they are not interested after all, or that this is exactly what they are looking for. I consider it a worth while step, because I would hate to equip an athlete only to have them decide they don't want to play after they see a practice. I also take the opportunity of the observation visit to introduce the player to his/her teammates, and the players parents to the people that will help them assimilate into the program. Those key people are the registrar, who will give them a welcome packet of information, and do the things necessary to get them registered with USA Hockey, and make sure all required medical documentation is in order if necessary. That would be the Alanto-axial x-ray for the players with Down syndrome, and any medical clearance from the player's doctor if there is a condition which requires the doctor's approval for participation. As I mentioned earlier, these are mainly heart and respiratory conditions that might be aggravated by playing.

The next person they need to meet is the equipment manager. This person will size the player and determine what equipment we can use from the spare pool, and what must be purchased new. By having the player and parents meet the equipment manager during the observation visit, he can bring or buy the equipment for the next practice. We do ask that the parents supply their own skates, because skates are a custom fit, and the player can keep and use the skates even if they leave the program. This also makes it so the parents have some financial interest, and keeps them motivated to get their money's worth. The association provides jerseys and socks, although this past season, the parents decided among themselves they would pay for the dark (away) jersey, and let the association pay for the light (home). If a player's parents can't afford jerseys, socks or skates, we have them in our spare equipment pool. If we don't have any to fit, we will buy them a good, but reasonably priced pair. In the case of skates this is not ideal, because as I said, if skates are purchased from a good equipment supplier they will be close to a custom fit. Parents

may want to get a more expensive skate, and that is entirely their choice. Some players may even require a more expensive skate due to odd size or foot construction, which is another reason we let them buy their own. Then they may get whatever they want or need. There is a huge variety of skates from the very basic to the pro type. We recommend players go to the Precision Edge hockey store, which operates in the same arena where we practice and play. We buy all of our equipment there, and the owners and employees are familiar with our program. They take good care of us and our players, and they understand that fitting our players is not like fitting typical athletes. They must have the patience to take some extra time with our players, which they do.

Once the player has spoken to one of us, comes to their first practice to observe and meet everyone and gets their equipment, they may come to the next practice ready to take the ice. As I said, this may be at any time of the year, and is all there is to becoming a member of our association. The player is then evaluated as to his/her ability level, and assimilated into the practice routine accordingly. A detailed explanation of the on ice portion of working with a new player will be covered in a later section.

17. Tournament Preparation

Special Hockey International holds its tournament annually. This tournament allows all the teams affiliated with the league to come together in one place at one time. This event started in 1994 with three teams, and is now has more than 22 associations participating. Some associations bring more than one team. The total number of participants is now close to 1000 players. The event is now so large that not every team gets to play every other team, and the 2002 tournament will be split between two different ice arenas.

The tournament used to be held over Thanksgiving weekend (US). It was then voted by the SHI Board of Governors that this was too early in the season, and being a holiday weekend in the US, the Canadian teams had difficulty booking travel. For that reason it was moved to February, then to March, and the 2003 planners are pushing for an April date. From our standpoint, the later in the spring the better, because we just get back on the ice in February, after our winter break. The location alternates from a US to a Canadian venue every year. Even numbered years are in the US, and odd numbered years are in Canada.

In preparation for the tournament, it is necessary for US teams to obtain a travel permit from USA Hockey. This guarantees the team is in good standing with USA Hockey, and it means that it is covered by the appropriate USA Hockey insurance for travel and participation. Without this permit, SHI will not allow a US team to participate in the annual tournament. It is necessary to obtain this permit regardless of where the tournament is being held. You may get this permit through your USA Hockey district administration. The registrar is the district official with whom you will have the most contact, and if he/she does not handle it personally, he/she will be able to direct you to the right person in your district. It is wise to get close to the USA Hockey district administration in your area, as they can be very helpful, and helping associations is their job. I'll touch more on this issue in a later section.

It will be up to the management team, and/or Board of Directors if you so choose, to determine what your association will pay for. In the beginning you will probably not have enough money to pay for much, but I would encourage you to pay for some portion of the travel expenses for your first tournament. This will encourage your players' families to attend, and attending the tournament can totally change your outlook. Our association policy is to pay for every player's airfare, and hotel room. In years when we don't have enough money to do that, we make

financial aide available to those in need. We handle this case by case, and in some cases we will pay 100%. Since our bylaws are silent on this matter, I handle this by “executive order.” You may choose to incorporate something along these lines into your bylaws, or you may choose to give your board final say on any matter about which your bylaws are silent. That is strictly your decision as the founder. I would advise you to read the section on bylaws, and to retain daily operational authority yourself.

It is advisable to determine what will be necessary for you to attend the tournament, and divide things into tasks. You may then determine if it is necessary to delegate these tasks to volunteers which may be handled as a committee. If you do take this committee approach, it is wise to hold frequent committee meetings, and publish the results of those meetings to your general membership in the form of a letter from yourself or the committee chairperson. You may in the beginning not have enough help to do that, and end up doing most of it yourself, but it is critical to keep everyone informed. The key is to ask for help. In many cases the parents are dying to help, but are afraid to offer.

The conundrum regarding the tournament is always the same. The tournament planners send out a letter the summer prior to their event asking all the associations to respond with the number of attendees, teams, etc. When you first start out, you have no idea how many players you will have by the time the tournament rolls around. You also don’t know how much you will be able to pay for, which may effect how many players are able to go. Commonly, a first year team will not have enough players to make up an entire team, which causes some new founders to question whether or not they are able to attend the tournament at all in their first year of existence. In the paragraphs below, I will offer advice about how to handle these issues.

First, you should try your best to go to the tournament, even in your first year of existence. You will make yourself visible to the league leadership, which is important to your association with the league. Making yourself known to league management is important to keep yourself in the communications loop, and to be sure your team is included in whatever benefits the league is able to secure for its affiliated associations. You are your association’s advocate with the league. This will be much more difficult if you don’t attend.

If you don’t have enough players to put an entire team on the ice, it is important to let the tournament planners know, so they plan on your attendance, but don’t schedule games for your team alone. They will more than likely combine you with another new team until you have enough players together to put an entire team on the ice. Combining teams is a common practice at the tournament, because this is a common problem. You should let the league know you exist by contacting them, and you should find out where the next tournament is being held. You should then make sure you are on the communications list for all tournament information. You should let the tournament planners know that you only have a few players now, but you anticipate more by the time the tournament rolls around. If you have five players, you should estimate ten for the tournament, and stay in close to contact with the tournament planners as your numbers change. This is the best, and really the only option, unless you are able to predict the future. Communication is the key to success in this area as it is in most.

You may encounter parents, or members of your association leadership, who don’t think going to the tournament is important. This is common for people who have never attended the tournament. There is nothing like the tournament experience, and until one has attended it, they truly have no idea how wonderful it is. It will affect your whole outlook on your program and strengthen your resolve beyond belief. If you come back from the tournament experience less than motivated to continue full speed ahead, special hockey is really not for you. There was a

parent in our association that liked having his son on the team, and thought the program was wonderful, but he thought the tournament was unnecessary. He was of the opinion that his son got more from participation at the local level, and the tournament took too much money away from what was being done here at home. In other words, going to the tournament was being done at the expense and sacrifice of the local efforts of the association. I understood his position, and could easily see his point, but I could not have disagreed with him more. I had been to many of the tournaments, and I saw what the effect was on myself and everyone else who had attended. After a couple of years in our program, it came time for us to host the tournament in Denver in 2000. His son had the time of his life, and the father was able to see that the tournament was in fact a very positive thing. He is now one of the association's strongest supporters for attending the tournament. Any time someone objects to the tournament and the associated expense of going to it, I will always take their points under advisement, but I let them know that they are coming from a weaker position if they have never been to one. If after they attend one they can tell me it is a waste of time and money, certainly their opinion will have more credibility, and perhaps they should consider carefully their involvement in the association.

18. Your Relationship with a Local College or Pro Team

If there is a local college or professional hockey organization, it is in general a good thing to seek a relationship with them. The reason this is a good idea is because they will no doubt have a public relations department that is responsible for making them visible to the public, and if you are associated with them, you can benefit from this exposure. What you will need most, especially in the beginning is financial support, new players, and in some cases coaches. The local team will possibly view your association as a positive public relations opportunity. I have heard in the past of these relationships bordering on the exploitative, meaning the college or pro team is realizing much more benefit than the special hockey association is getting in return, in which case the relationship should be carefully examined. I would never encourage anything that is exploitative of the association or the athletes.

I do not necessarily recommend that the special hockey association take on the identity of the college or pro team, unless of course they want to. In the case of Colorado Special Hockey Association, we use the colors of the Colorado Avalanche, but we maintain our own identity. As I mentioned in a previous section, this is because the Avalanche colors are readily available in Denver, and the Avalanche organization has been tremendously supportive of our program.

Some ideas to make your relationship with the college or pro team visible are to have something displayed in the arena, or in the program or media guide if they have one. Sometimes the local print and broadcast media will be interested in such a relationship, and may choose to do a story about it. You will have to do a little public relations work yourself to make the media in your area aware of it, and you will of course have to get the college or pro team to agree to this sort of publicity. We have done this in the past with the media in our area, and the Avalanche have been wonderfully cooperative. Another idea is a golf tournament or some other jointly sponsored event. I would caution you that if there is no golf tournament already in place, they can be enormously complex events to plan and execute, and I would not necessarily recommend that you get involved in doing the planning. Your plate will be full enough with your program. If however the event is already in place, the team may get some positive mileage out of saying something to the effect of "The event proceeds will go to benefit *Anytown* Special Hockey Association."

Other ideas include having your team run a brief scrimmage during the intermission of one of the college or pro team's games, or to have the players get involved to the extent that they may come

to one of your practices, or somehow be seen with your players. Often it is the players, if they're reasonably recognizable, that the general public is interested in. When the public sees the players involved with a program like yours it usually gives a positive impression of the player and both organizations. There is a lot of work involved with such an effort, and each team is different both in how they will treat you, and their level of cooperation. For that reason I can't really tell you how this will go, but I can tell you that it is usually best to start with the public relations liaison for the team.

In summary, don't expect too much from your local or pro team in the beginning. These relationships grow closer over time, and you will have to nurture them through positive experiences. Start small and work your way up to the type of relationship we enjoy with the Colorado Avalanche. Our relationship with them has developed over many years, and is now one that we have come to depend upon. It includes the players, management and media personalities, and we can now depend on their support whenever we ask for it. This is always bigger and better in an NHL city, but can be just as beneficial (albeit on a smaller scale) in a minor pro or college town.

19. Your Relationship with Individual NHL, Minor Pro and College Players

These sorts of relationships are clearly desirable, but can sometimes be elusive. By elusive I mean that they can be difficult to establish. Each situation is different, and each player is different. I'll describe how we have established our relationships with individual players, and then make some recommendations for a new association.

First, and this is starting to become a repetitive sentiment, don't expect too much from the pro/college players. You must understand that they get many requests for this sort of thing. There are lots of people and organizations that would like to have the players involved, and they can't possibly accommodate all of them. Some requests are more legitimate than others, and screening access to the players is usually the responsibility of the club for which they play. In the case of an NHL team this will generally be the public relations group's responsibility. Most colleges have a Media Director for their various athletic programs, and they serve as the general liaison for this type of thing. This is a good starting point, but only after you have established some other sort of relationship with the organization. For example, if the club has a community fund or foundation that gives grants to local organizations, you could apply for this grant. Once you pass the muster of that process, the question of your legitimacy has already been answered. Then it may be a good time to expand your relationship with the club to include individual players.

In our case, there was already an established relationship between our league (Special Hockey International) and Kelly Chase who was playing for the NHL's St. Louis Blues. Kelly was personal friends with Curtis Leschyshyn who was then playing for the Colorado Avalanche. Curt called us after Kelly approached him and offered his support. That led to our relationships with other players such as Jeff Odgers, Adam Foote, and now Chris Drury. It was a matter of fortunate circumstances where our legitimacy was never really in question, because we had an inside contact. It is clearly not the normal way for things like this to come about, and you should not depend on this sort of good luck. It is more likely that the players will be available to you through their respective organizations' public relations group, and this more traditional method is how you should approach them. Don't lose heart, as the process will no doubt take much persistence on your part.

I would recommend that you take very good care of these relationships with the players. As I said before, the players (especially NHL players) are swamped with requests for their time, and often their money. The fastest way to turn off a player is to be overly demanding or bothersome, or to set your expectations too high. You must be mindful of their very demanding schedules, and remember that many of them are still kids themselves. Many of them have never been around people with special needs, and the whole thing may be a bit overwhelming to them. It is also very important, although it should be a matter of common sense, that you should never ever exploit these relationships for your own gain. By that I mean you shouldn't do things like ask them for game tickets for you and your buddies, or ask them to get you an autograph of your favorite one of their team mates, or other things that are clearly for you and not your association. These irresponsible actions are very obvious and will turn the player right off. This can result in your association, and more importantly your athletes, being disappointed in the relationship. On the other hand, don't be "star struck" by them either. They're just ordinary people with extraordinary jobs. If you treat them with common courtesy you will likely receive it in return. The best rule of thumb is to make sure when you ask the player for something, it doesn't require that they go to extraordinary measures to accommodate your request, and it is with your association's interests in mind as opposed to your own. If a personal friendship develops, that's great, but let it take its natural course.

Don't try and force anything on your own terms. This is a very bad idea and will usually result in the end of that player's support. They can usually tell if someone is trying to take advantage of them in an inappropriate manner. Each player is different, and his involvement should be on his terms. You should tell him in general what kind of things would be beneficial to your association, and let him tell you how much of that he can accommodate. He will also tell you how best to contact him. It is critical to respect this matter in particular. If you panic and think because you haven't gotten a reply when you think enough time has passed, and try to reach him through every means possible, you're usually over-reacting. He is not ignoring you and he will get back to you when he can. It usually has to do with his schedule and the demands of his job. You have to understand that his job as a player comes first. Again, common courtesy and common sense are the best recommendations I can give you. Most of the things I've discussed in the last few paragraphs are things that will be unnecessary for most people. I've included them to help you manage these relationships, especially if you've never had to do so. Also, to hopefully help you prevent disappointment for your athletes or the player in question.

The next thing to consider is which player to choose. Most of the time this will be done for you. The NHL, minor pro, or college team will have a player in mind that will be right for this sort of thing. You should defer to their recommendation, although there are things to consider from your perspective as well. For example, there are some players that are not necessarily comfortable with people with special needs. There are also players that see an opportunity to get some positive exposure from association with you, but are only rarely available. The latter are very rare, but you need to make sure you've discussed the player's expectations with whoever has introduced you to them. The reason this important is because the special athletes will never forget the day they got to meet the player, and conversely can be easily disappointed if that player is unable to follow through with an appearance or something. That's why it is also a good idea to keep the player's plans to come to your practice a surprise unless you are 100% sure it will happen. Protecting your special athletes from disappointment should be your primary concern. That is also why you need to be sure you have the right pro/college player. Your special athletes won't care if the player has given you financial support, which is why financial support should never be one of your requests of the individual pro/college player. The special athletes are more interested in the player's attention. That's something not everyone gets, and it means more to your special athletes than all the financial support in the world.

Hopefully these tips will come in handy for you. To briefly recap, the key is to have the right level of expectation, which will help you get the most of any relationship with an individual pro/college player. Don't over-react to long periods of no contact. Don't read things into the relationship that are not there. Don't ask the player to move mountains for you, and never ask for or expect financial support from them. Let the relationship develop naturally and be mindful of the player's schedule. Let the player tell you when, how (i.e. through their team or personally) and how often to call upon them. Remember that each individual player is different and will offer their support in different ways. Each player will be comfortable with different levels of involvement. Most importantly, keep your association's interests ahead of your own. If you do these things, you should have a great relationship with the pro/college player that will benefit your special athletes and your association.

20. Your relationship with USA Hockey

The relationship between USA Hockey and the various special hockey associations around the country has been inconsistent. This section is not intended to be an indictment of either party, but to suggest some standardization in the relationship. It is also clearly not applicable to Canadian Special Hockey Associations, and Special Hockey International is the best place for a Canadian association to start. It is my belief that special hockey in the US could rival Special Olympics® in size, scope and visibility. In order for this to happen, more people within USA Hockey need to be aware of special hockey, and a formal relationship needs to be established with Special Hockey International. Further, there needs to be a standard practice for dealing with a new special hockey association when it starts up. There needs to be a separate insurance policy for these athletes which should clearly be the responsibility of the Risk Management organization at USA Hockey, and there needs to be information available to the individual district management teams.

The first problem most special hockey associations have is that they are usually the first of their kind in any given state and/or district. For this reason, the District Registrar doesn't usually know what to make of the special hockey association. When the special hockey association is starting up, they are typically going through the steps described in the earlier sections of this document, and in most cases they don't even have any players yet. When the players do start to come they may range in age from five years old to adults. This presents a problem for the Registrar because he/she doesn't know how to classify the team. Are they a mite team because they have mite aged athletes, or are they an adult team because they have adults on the roster? It is my recommendation that there be a special designation or classification for a special hockey association. Most of the special hockey associations will have players ranging in age from five years old to adults.

There are many things that will need to go into creating a special category for these teams. The thing that stands out is the fact that the current insurance available doesn't take into consideration the fact that there may be players on a team of such diverse age. For that reason, I would recommend that the Risk Manager at USA Hockey seek out insurance suited to the special hockey association. This information should be distributed to the various District Registrars, so when they are contacted by the special hockey association they are prepared to deal with them.

There should also be some standardization of the relationship with the state amateur hockey association. This will avoid the special hockey association chasing its tail to figure out whom to contact first. Recently, a special hockey association contacted its USA Hockey District Registrar only to be told to contact the state amateur association first. When they contacted the state

organization they were told they needed to contact their USA Hockey District Registrar. This sort of confusion is what needs to be avoided. The USA Hockey District Registrars need to know it is possible that a special hockey association might pop up in their district. They should take the necessary steps to prepare the state organization for this possibility through proactive communication ahead of time. If there are things the state organization will require, those things should have been discussed prior to the first contact by the special hockey association.

If you are a new founder and you are reading this document prior to taking any of the steps already described, it is my sincere hope that there will be a policy established by USA Hockey that will answer the question of how your association and its team(s) should be registered. The first step is to contact your District Registrar. If they are unaware of a policy, then you should contact Special Hockey International to get their recommendation on how to proceed. Special Hockey International has requested that contact with USA Hockey be done through them. This is a good thing to do because they are in the process of determining with USA Hockey how best to deal with the individual associations. They are doing the same for the Canadian counterpart of USA Hockey. You will need a good working relationship with your District Registrar, so it is my recommendation that your initial contact be through Special Hockey International, but that a dialogue should be established with the District Registrar thereafter. You will be adding and removing players, and re-registering from season to season, and those processes are best handled locally. There is a registration form called an Individual Membership Registration (IMR), that is required for every player and coach and those come from the District Registrar. Adding the additional step of contacting Special Hockey International every time a player arrives or leaves is not practical. Special Hockey International has requested that you contact them in lieu of contact directly with the national office of USA Hockey so there are not many different policies from district to district.

Another glaring problem is the Special Hockey International, as its name suggests, is an international organization with teams in more than one country. There is a US headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri, and a Canadian headquarters in Toronto. Your best bet as a new founder is to consult the SHI website for contact information. SHI will then direct you as to whom you should contact next, or they should handle these contacts on your behalf. This level of effective communication is still being established as of the writing of this document, but if we are to hope for standardization we must continue to work toward that end.

USA Hockey has been supportive of special hockey, and is trying to get the word out about it through avenues such as *American Hockey Magazine*. I think the more of this that happens, the better. I believe it would be a positive thing for USA Hockey to project that while amateur hockey can sometimes be very competitive, and in some cases prohibitively expensive, steps are being taken to make it a game for everyone. Special Olympics® realizes great exposure and good will, and USA Hockey could realize some of those same things if special hockey is handled properly. While *American Hockey Magazine* is a great place to get the word out, it only goes to the registered members of USA Hockey. This is important, and should be applauded, but other methods of outreach should be undertaken. That is to say that when traditional hockey is marketed to the public, special hockey should be considered along with it. The positive impact of USA Hockey embracing the special athlete as well as the typical athlete will be immeasurable.

It is also more difficult to reach the special athletes to make them aware of the existence of special hockey, which is why I would encourage a partnership of some sort between Special Hockey International, USA Hockey, the NHL, NHLPA and even Special Olympics. I would even go so far as to recommend a person be assigned, or a position created, within USA Hockey

to facilitate this partnership, as well as helping to establish with Special Hockey International the policies for dealing with special hockey associations.

If USA Hockey were to create a position within its organizational structure specifically to deal with special hockey, the person would have a number of clear challenges right off the bat. First, they should meet with the existing risk management group to determine what went into selecting the insurance coverage available with USA Hockey membership. The person should work with the insurance companies themselves to determine what special liability there might be for special athletes, and if there might be a reasonable alternative plan for special hockey associations. Once a different category is determined from a risk management standpoint, they should establish a separate category, classification or type of membership within USA Hockey for special hockey associations. There will need to be changes in the rosters and IMR forms, or perhaps a separate form altogether to accommodate these changes. The next step in their job would be to contact the state organizations in which special hockey associations already exist. The Colorado Amateur Hockey Association has recently added a position to handle “disabled hockey,” and this person should be sought out as a resource for the types of things to be considered. Once that dialogue is established, and procedures determined for dealing with special associations, the other state organizations should be contacted and encouraged to do the same. After these steps have been taken, and procedures determined, the District Registrars should be informed and educated about how to deal with special hockey associations that may be founded in their areas.

At the same time the person should begin working with Special Hockey International to establish a uniform approach for dealing with the various associations, and with the league as a whole. Clearly SHI will have already thought of many of the things that will need to be addressed, and may have initiated a dialogue with USA Hockey on these issues. This process should be centralized within USA Hockey, and there should be one clear point of contact with the directive to deal specifically with these matters. The goal of working closely with SHI is so there is a standard practice within USA Hockey for assisting a special hockey association in getting off the ground.

The person should also be working with individual professional organizations to help form partnerships to reach out to special athletes. There will likely be a few US born players on every NHL team, and while the NHL is primarily concerned with professional hockey, the development of a strong amateur and youth organization is clearly in their best interest. A partnership with the NHL, and NHLPA to reach out to special athletes will never produce a professional player, but it will mean great things in terms of public relations. It needs to be pointed out to the NHL and its franchises the benefit of being involved in their respective communities in this way. The person holding the job within USA Hockey will have the challenge of getting the attention of these organizations and getting that message across in such a way as to build interest. This may be a full time job in itself. It would be a wise thing to try and initiate a partnership with Special Olympics to lend visibility.

The position within USA Hockey will be part risk management, part administrative, part marketing and part public relations. It will take a very versatile person and preferably one with experience in dealing with special hockey associations. In the beginning it will no doubt be one person, but the goal should be to establish a group of people within USA Hockey specifically to deal with special hockey. SHI itself is perhaps not big enough to necessitate this sort of addition to the USA Hockey organization, but with USA Hockey behind it, it could reach that level in short order. It’s all a matter of visibility and having someone driving the process.

Former NHL player Kelly Chase once stood before the membership of the Colorado Special Hockey Association and said that it was his goal to see a special hockey association in every NHL city. This would be a great thing for USA Hockey to embrace and help facilitate, and would give USA Hockey the opportunity to project that amateur hockey is a game for everyone. Special Olympics doesn't have ice hockey, and I believe it should be USA Hockey, in association with the aforementioned organizations, that leads the way to making ice hockey available to special athletes.

Part III: The (on ice) Implementation Phase

1. The First Parents/Players Meeting

It is important that you have a meeting prior to taking the ice for the first time. You may only have a few players (we had five), but this meeting is critical. This is where you sort of come clean with the parents. You need to let them know that your organization is a start up organization, and that you are not necessarily experts yet, but that you are surrounded with qualified coaches and advisors (which you will be by this time), and you are backed up by the likes of SHI, and USA Hockey. You are following a formula for success that has been tried and proven effective in many other cities, and they can rest assured that your association will grow and flourish.

Honesty and good communications are the keys to success, and getting off on the right foot with your first batch of parents is critical. When we first started, we had a couple of kids with Down Syndrome, and one with Autism. I didn't know the first thing about Autism except what I had briefly read, and I made this clear to the parents. But, I also made it clear that I knew the game of hockey, and I would get the advice of qualified professionals as to how best to teach the game their athlete. One of the people I had helping me in the beginning was a pediatric speech therapist who was very valuable to have in the association. She was new to the game of hockey, but not to teaching children with Autism. Had I not had her, I would have been at a loss. You should seek this kind of expertise to help you with any disability with which you are unfamiliar, and you need to honestly convey this situation to your first batch of parents and athletes.

Another topic for this meeting is when your ice time will be, and what the on ice experience will be like, even if you're not exactly sure yourself what it will be yet. If you intend to coach the team yourself, you will have done some practice planning by this time (or you should have anyway) and this is a good thing to share with the parents and athletes at this time. If you are the founder, but are depending on another person to be your Head Coach, you may want to give the floor to the Head Coach to cover this kind of information.

This is your opportunity to introduce all those who will be participating in the instruction of the athletes, and all those who will be volunteering behind the scenes. You should tell what each person brings to the association, and you may even let them tell their own story. The parents and athletes will be interested to know why your program exists, and why those who are running it are there.

Other house keeping matters should be discussed like uniforms and equipment, team name and colors, telling the parents what they will need in preparation to show up to the first practice, etc. Essentially, anything you want the parents and athletes to know before they get on the ice should be covered in this meeting. It is also very important that you allow time for the parents and athletes to ask questions, and make them feel like their input and feedback are of interest to you. You should give out your phone number and email address, and you should get the same information from each of them. Email communication is by far the most efficient use of your time after the initial meeting.

I would recommend having this meeting about a month to two weeks prior to your first practice. I would also recommend that you have it at the arena where you will practice. By doing it that close to the first practice, the information will still be fresh in the minds of the parents and athletes, and having it at the arena means they know how to find the place. I would recommend getting a spare room at the arena, and even having an arena employee conduct a brief tour to show where locker rooms and other facilities are. Some founders have held this meeting in their home, which is entirely up to you, but it makes it more difficult to hold the attention of the athletes when there are dogs barking, phones ringing, etc. It is up to you where and when you hold the meeting, but you should definitely hold it, and I've given you my recommendations as to when, where, how and why.

2. Considerations for Various Types of Disabilities

You must take into consideration that there are many types of athletes that will qualify for your program (see section on player qualifications). This means you may have some athletes that are further along in terms of intellectual and physical ability, as well as varying attention spans. There is a good chance you will be totally unfamiliar with a particular mental challenge, but the athlete meets your criteria for participation, and it is up to you or your coaching staff to teach them. For this reason you must be prepared to become a student of the disability.

The best place to research a disability (in my opinion) is via the internet. There are literally thousands of web sites dedicated to disabilities. Many of them are from universities, and other medical sources. The easiest thing to do is go to your favorite internet search engine and type the name of the disability in its most common terms. For example, the simple search criteria "Down syndrome," will yield many resources for you to learn about this particular condition. Study these resources so you will be prepared for the idiosyncrasies associated with it.

Once you have done your own homework, seek out professionals who can teach you how to teach people with whatever the condition is you are facing. Speech therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists and adaptive physical education teachers are useful resources. Those with pediatric experience and those that have worked with children with special needs are particularly useful. You might want to invite those people to practice to have them observe. Discuss with them the types of things that are required to play the game of ice hockey, and get their input about things that may be useful or adapted for the environment. You may even consider having the professional on the ice with you, or you may have them show up periodically and observe from off the ice.

It is also wise to seek the input of the parents or guardians of the athlete to find out what works for that individual and what does not. The parents know their child better than anyone, and even though they may know nothing about hockey, and they are not a health care professional, they will have been through many experiences with their child. This experience is extremely valuable to you, and the parents should be encouraged to share with your coaching staff anything that may be of help. For example, some people with autism have certain "hot buttons" that they will respond to positively, and conversely they may have some that will set off a negative response. These may be things that make no sense to you, or things that would seem perfectly harmless to you, but can ruin an entire session for the athlete.

You should be observant. You should seek the input of professionals. You should listen to the parents of the athlete, and most of all you should become familiar to the athlete him/herself. Take the time to talk to the athlete and let him/her get to know you. Yelling at them is not productive, and will more often than not result in a negative reaction. If you have coached before and found that a “tough” approach is the one that works for you, you should either leave that at home, or take a closer look at your involvement in a special hockey association. I find when I’m coaching typical athletes, they sometimes benefit from a stern approach, but I must change my approach with special athletes. They do not react the same way as typical athletes. You may think you’re doing the right thing for them by being tough on them, but this is the sort of behavior that can take a special athlete and cause him/her to go into a shell, which may take a very long time to reverse.

The best advice I can give you is to take a gentler approach with special athletes. You don’t necessarily have to change the things that have made you a successful coach, in terms of teaching the fundamentals of the game, you may just need to work on your delivery. You need to become a student of the disability, and seek the opinion of those that know more about it than you do. Listen, observe and react accordingly.

3. Choosing a Captain and Alternates

I think it is as important to have an on ice leader from the ranks of your players in special hockey as it is in typical hockey. You may have too few players, or your players may be too young when you first start, but as you grow you should look for signs of leadership. Certainly the qualifications for the captain and alternates will be different from those you would look for in typical athletes, but many of them will be the same.

First, I think you should look to an older player, and one that has an basic understanding that if they are selected captain, they are expected to demonstrate leadership by being positive and encouraging to their team mates. You should look for the player that has good attendance. You should look for the player that gives their best effort, regardless of the level of their ability. You should look for the player that shows the most heart, in keeping with the philosophy upon which the Special Hockey International league was founded.

Once you have selected your captain, and I do think it should be the coach’s decision in the case of a special hockey team, you should explain to them what it means to be the captain, and what you expect of them. I would also recommend awarding the “C” to them in a brief ceremony in front of all the players and parents. I did this with my captains, and it meant more to them than I can express in words.

The way we’ve done it up to now is to select a captain for each season, and reselect at the start of the new season. Even if you want to keep the same captain for the next season you should get in the habit of awarding the “C” each season. If you’re keeping the same captain, explain in your little ceremony why that athlete has earned the “C” again. This is a good opportunity to throw a little praise and positive reinforcement toward the athlete. Things like that go a long way toward building confidence and self-esteem. If we’re giving the “C” to the same player for the upcoming season, we will sometimes choose another alternate and give that player an “A” for his/her sweater. If you are replacing your captain, you should have the former captain wear an “A” and explain that they have done a good job, and even though they are not the captain anymore they are still wearing an “A” which also indicates they are still considered a leader. If you’re looking for the magic number of players to have before you go through this process, there really isn’t one.

I guess I would wait until there are at least five skaters, and one goaltender, but it's totally the Head Coach's call. The reason I recommend having the coach decide, as opposed to the players as it's sometimes done in typical hockey, is because the coach is better suited to pick out the player that demonstrates the qualities he/she wants the other players to emulate. The players themselves may not really grasp that concept and vote for whomever they like the most, or whomever they perceive to be the "best" player in terms of physical ability. In still other cases, some teams may have players that don't get the concept of a captain at all. It goes without saying, but never pick a goaltender to be your captain. Your goaltender may be the most qualified player, but the goaltender can't leave the crease to talk to an official or the bench. Nor can they be there to lead the team when play is at the other end of the ice.

To summarize, you should select the player that best demonstrates the qualities of leadership in terms of on ice and off ice behavior. You don't want to pick the player that misses practice all the time, or that shows up late, or that misbehaves on the ice. On the same token, you don't want to choose a player that doesn't understand what being the captain means when you explain it to them. If you don't have a qualified captain in the beginning, wait until you do have one. There's no hurry to do this. It can wait for the right candidate, but it should be something you're always considering, even from the beginning.

4. Developing the Practice Plan

One of the most important things any coach can do is properly plan for a practice. Ice time is a valuable commodity, and is usually very expensive. For that reason a coach must make sure he/she is ready to make maximum use of the ice when it is available. Developing a good practice plan is the key to making this happen.

In some cases, the new special hockey association will not have enough players to warrant using a full sheet of ice for practice. This is in addition to the fact that the ice will be very hard to come by in most cases, because times don't usually open up unless another program gives up a time. That is why it is necessary to have a good working relationship with arena management, and why it is usually easiest for a new special hockey association to start up in the summer when there is less demand from traditional hockey programs.

The practice plan used by Colorado Special Hockey Association has evolved over the course of many years, and with the input of many people. Those people have been hockey coaches, parents and professionals in working with people with special needs. We have found that the traditional hockey practice consisting of drills where there is a lot of down time and waiting in line don't really work for special athletes. As I mentioned before, you will be dealing with a wide range of ages and attention spans, not to mention a wide range of physical ability levels. That means that the first athlete in line may be 15 years old, and reasonably able to skate, but the next athlete in line may be a five year old who is just learning. This can throw a monkey wrench into a drill that looks great on paper, but in actual practice may cause it to take a long time. It is this idle time that will cause you to lose those standing in line.

The first thing you will need is enough qualified help on the ice to break up into small groups of three to five individual players. If you only have three to five players total on your team in the beginning, then one or two assistant coaches will be sufficient. As your team grows, so should your coaching staff. See the section on selecting assistant coaches to help you determine when and how to add these people to your coaching staff.

There are many ways to run a successful practice, and if you were to poll the special hockey coaches in different associations you would find as many good ideas as there are coaches. I simply submit to you our formula as one example. It was developed to work with the athletes we have, and the things we want to teach. Our coaching staff believes there are certain basic skills a player must have to play the game, and those things should be taught and mastered before moving on to the next level of difficulty. Usually, the hardest thing for the traditional hockey coach to keep in mind is that it will take longer to teach a concept to this group of athletes than it would to typical athletes. Patience is the key.

As you may already be aware if you are coming from a traditional hockey coaching background, hockey is different from other sports, because you have to teach the athlete to skate before you can begin to teach them the game. In every other sport the athlete arrives already knowing how to walk or run, and you can go right in to teaching the game. It is a good idea for all of the coaches in a special hockey association to go through the USA Hockey Initiation Program (IP), and to get that level of certification. It is intended to teach coaches to teach skating and the other skills involved with ice hockey to first time skaters. The special hockey coach will need to take the knowledge gained in this training and adapt it to the special athlete. This will be done in accordance with the goals of the Head Coach of the special hockey association, as established before the team takes the ice.

It is necessary to set long term goals for your team before trying to worry about the details of the first practices. For example, you may decide that your first order of business is to get everyone on their skates and to make one successful lap around the rink. Later, your goals may include. As ours do now, being able to run a successful breakout. I will spend some time specifically on teaching the beginning skater, and make some recommendations on moving the players along to the next level of difficulty in a later section. For now, just concentrate on putting some thought into what you want to be the result of your first few practices, and your first season. Don't be afraid to think big, but also understand that setting the goals properly will be the key to reaching them. Don't set them too high and end up frustrated. You should talk to your own assistant coaches, the parents of your athletes, and any other coaches whom you respect. It is also a good idea to talk to the other coaches of special hockey teams around the US and Canada. They can be reached through Special Hockey International.

When we first take the ice, our players are allowed to skate around and warm up for about five to ten minutes. There are pucks on the ice during this warm up, because we believe that if an athlete is handling the puck, even to kill time, he/she is developing skill. This is also a good time to let them goof off a little before the structure of the practice begins. They can get things out of their system during this warm up, such as apprehension about being on the ice, or horseplay for that matter.

Before the practice starts, you should get your coaches together and discuss the activities for that practice, and what each coach will be doing during the practice. This will avoid any unnecessary delays or confusion during the practice. For example, you may be using cones during a specific section of the practice, in which case you should designate someone to get the cones, get them set up the way they need to be set up for the drill or skill station, and put away right after. Also, by letting the coaches know what their responsibilities are ahead of time, they can be prepared for what they are going to do. As a Head Coach, I develop the framework, divide the players up into groups of similar ability levels, and let my assistant coaches determine what they are going to do in their individual groups to teach the skill I want them working on.

After a five or ten minute warm up period, I blow the whistle and get ALL the players together, regardless of their ability level, as a team. They all start on the goal line in one end of the ice, and do things like skate to the blue line and back, forward a few times and then backwards. They may not be learning anything during this exercise in terms of individual skill development, but that isn't the point. They are together as a team, and we are sending the message that regardless of their ability level, they are a part of the team. This part of the practice usually takes about ten minutes.

The next step in our practice framework is to get them all together and determine who is going to be with whom for the next exercise, which is splitting up into groups of three to five players for individual skill development. It takes about five minutes to split them up and get them to their respective areas on the ice. Again, you should have assigned an assistant coach to an area of the ice, and told them what skill you want them to work on. The coaches should come to practice with a plan for their respective groups, and you should let them know ahead of time what they will be doing. It is wise to get their input, and have them work on areas in which they are strong. You may have one coach particularly good at teaching skating, and one who is good at teaching them how to move with the puck. You should make sure you have divided the ice up in such a way as to make maximum use of the ice surface, while giving each group enough room to do what they need to do. You should make sure you have a group set aside to teach the first time skaters, and it may be necessary to leave a group of first time and beginning skaters in that group for the duration of this section of the practice. This part of the practice is arguably the most important, and I would recommend allowing the most time for it. We usually budget twenty to thirty minutes, depending on the number of players and coaches we have. About every ten minutes I blow the whistle and players move from one station to the next. The coaches stay put, and the players do the moving. It is a good idea to warn the coaches a minute or two before the whistle is blown so they can prepare their group to go to the next station. If this is done properly the players will move in organized fashion instead of the whistle blast triggering chaos. The groups should have at least one leader, and one assistant if possible. It is also a good idea to make your more senior coaches the leaders, and allow the assistants to develop to the point where they are prepared to lead themselves. It is the prerogative of the leaders to let the assistants take the lead occasionally under the supervision of the more senior coach.

During the group sessions the Head Coach should be going around from group to group, listening, watching and giving input. This will also give the Head Coach a chance to see what is working and what is not. Maybe you have someone in the wrong group, or maybe the skill needs to be changed. It may also be that you have assigned two coaches to work together that may be better off working in a different group. This is the time for the Head Coach to observe these things and make changes accordingly. That is not to say the Head Coach should barge in and take over, but rather make suggestions by pulling the leader aside after practice. Any time the Head Coach wishes to interrupt the group proceedings, he should always have the courtesy to ask the group leader for permission to address the group. Groups should be three to five players, as mentioned before, and players should be grouped as closely as possible according to ability level. The second consideration should be according to size. You may also want to assign a second assistant to a group if the group happens to have players that are much less skilled. You will also want to make sure you have a group for your goaltender(s). We have two goaltenders and a dedicated goaltending coach. You may not have this luxury, especially in the beginning. If you do have more than one goaltender, you may want to assign an area of the ice where they will have enough room to have two nets set up. You can then assign an assistant to that group so each goaltender can have some individual attention, and the other isn't standing around. Standing around should be avoided more than anything else.

After the group sessions are over, we usually put everyone on the benches and go back to team drills. We sometimes use this time for a game of some sort. The game may be freeze tag, or it may be a scrimmage. We sometimes run scrimmages three on three, five on five, or everyone on everyone (a game we call the “fire drill”). The purpose of this time is to come back together as a team, and build team spirit. To a lesser degree we want to use this time to build team concepts. After the season has been going for a few weeks, we will use this time to run more formal break-out, and other zone specific drills, and we will split the players up into lines. Lines are five player units that work together, and are grouped again by ability level. The down side to this is that the top line is usually made up of the players that are more skilled, and they get the most repetitions. The other players unfortunately have to sit on the bench when this is happening, which is why we must be careful not to spend too much time on it. When we do use the time for zone specific drills, the other players are encouraged to watch and pay attention, which can be a challenge. But, we don’t want our players to get on the ice for a scrimmage or at the tournament having never seen the whole sheet of ice, or worked on any team oriented drills.

I would caution you to not to jump into zone specific team hockey concepts before your team is ready, because the results can be a mess. It has taken us many years to get to the point where we can even think about it. In the beginning it is best to build team spirit by playing games during this time. Don’t be afraid to run small games during this time in the beginning. You could potentially split the ice into halves and run two half ice games three on three. If you only have a few players in the beginning I would recommend a game like freeze tag. The goal of this section of the practice is to have fun, and build team spirit. You will be able to teach team hockey skills later when your team is ready. The players should get a chance to shoot the puck around, as this is what we call the pay off. They are there to play hockey, and that usually means in their minds that you skate and shoot the puck. Scoring a goal is fun for anyone and especially these players. Most players, regardless of their mental or physical ability level, know scoring a goal is the point of the game of hockey. Keep that in mind, and look for games that allow it to happen. It is also important to give your goaltender(s) a chance to face some shots. Keeping your goaltender(s) involved in the practice is very important.

The practice plan we now use is clearly for a team that has been on the ice for a while, and a team that has pretty strong numbers. In the beginning we had five players that had never skated before, and we were happy just to have them standing on their skates, and able to get up on their own when they fell down. Don’t be frustrated by these things. You will get more players as word gets out about your program, and your players will get better. The important thing is that you have planned a practice that works for your team, and that your players have fun. If they are having fun they will want to be there, and the word will spread that good things are happening. I will cover some suggestions for the first practice and teaching the beginning skater with special needs in a later section.

5. Teaching the Beginning Skater with Special Needs

By this point you should be aware that athletes with special needs learn and advance at a different pace than typical athletes. Many of the athletes in your association will never have skated before. Some will have skated on inline skates, and some will have already ice skated, but probably never have played hockey. Usually parents will volunteer right up front how much skating experience their athlete has. They do this because they think sometimes that if their athlete has never skated before they can't possibly play the game. Although the mean well, they have a basic misunderstanding. I tell parents that I actually prefer a new player that has never skated before, because we can teach them in our own way, which of course we believe to be the proper way.

I learned to teach beginning skating a number of years before I ever began my coaching career from a lady that coached professional hockey players, and figure skaters alike. Many of the things taught to figure skaters are useful when teaching proper skating stride and edge control. I don't intend to turn this section into a technical dissertation about the mechanics of teaching beginning skating, but I do want to share a few of my own philosophies.

First, as many hockey coaches will tell you, athletes that have first learned to skate on inline skates usually develop some bad habits. There are no edges on wheels, and edge control is usually nonexistent in the inline skater, unless they first learned to ice skate. Also, it is typical that stopping skills must be taught from the beginning, because stopping on wheels is totally different than it is on the edges of ice skates. I would prefer that an athlete have skiing experience to inline skating experience. At least then he/she will have a feel for moving on edges. This is sometimes a bonus of living in Colorado. Many of our players have skiing experience, and teaching edge control on ice skates is fairly easy. I'm also of the belief that most inline skating is learned without the benefit of instruction, which means more bad habits that must be broken when teaching ice skating. Those include body position and control, and the inefficient use of energy. I believe inline skating if learned first, causes the athlete to develop a "lazy" skating stride. Therefore it is important to teach the athlete to properly stride. You can teach a good fundamental power skating stride to anyone, and this should be an area of focus with the experienced inline skater that has never ice skated.

My last negative comment on inline skating is that the wheels of the skates are not "rocker" shaped as they are on ice skates. That means weight distribution will be different on the edge of an ice skate, and proper body position should be one of the first things taught. I have seen inline skaters come on the ice and fall backwards because they let their weight get on the back of the ice skate blade. This is primarily due to the fact that they have never experienced the feeling of a rocker shaped ice skate blade. Teaching them to properly stand and begin to move on the ice skate blade is clearly an important first lesson. If inline skates have any redeeming qualities, it is that they teach the skater what it feels like to move with an unstable surface under them. Also, if a skater has first learned to ice skate, inline skating is a great way to get mileage and exercise, especially with ice time being so rare. You would be wise to ask the parents to put away the inline skates until you as the coach are comfortable with the skater's ability to stride, balance and stop properly. It's far better for the skater to go to a public ice skating session than to practice on the sidewalk at home on inline skates.

For a player who has never skated at all, the things mentioned are as important as for the inline skater, but many smaller steps are necessary before leaping right into power stride. They must first be able to stand on their skates, and movement is best taught with a partner holding a stick in

front of them that they can use for support. Another common practice is to have the skater push a chair until they are comfortable enough to stand and move without the support. A mistake often made by coaches is to let the skater become too dependent on the support, and allow it to become a crutch. It is important to read and react to the individual skater, and continue to challenge them. Children with special needs have usually been in some sort of therapy from age zero, and unfortunately have learned how to manipulate their instructors. The special hockey coach needs to be aware of this fact, and not allow this to happen. The process may take twice as long (or longer) than it would to teach a typical athlete, and it goes without saying that patience is key. It is wise to teach them in smaller steps than you would the typical athlete.

Most of what I've discussed in this section is common to special athletes and typical athletes alike. It is necessary to keep in mind that special athletes take sometimes much longer to learn something like ice skating, which can involve using muscles never used before by the special athlete. You must also keep in mind that things that are normally very easy for the typical athlete to do can be very difficult for the special athlete. This is especially true of ice skating which involves the coordination of lots of muscle groups, and lots of things happening physically at the same time. That is why I harp on the fact that you must move in smaller steps from one skill, or the mastery of one small task, before moving on to the next. These are just a few suggestions that have worked for us over the years. I would advise you to seek the input of a professional skating instructor, and combine that with the input of an adaptive PE teacher. You can then adapt what you have learned, in addition to your own experience as a hockey coach, into something that works for your group of special athletes. Many good techniques for teaching beginning skaters are also covered in the USA Hockey IP clinics. Even if you are very experienced as a skating instructor and hockey coach, there is always more to learn. Personally, I have been coaching for many years, and I am working on Master Level certification through the USA Hockey Coaching Education Program, but I intend to accompany my beginning coaches when they go through the IP clinic. I think this is important because I almost always learn something from another coach, regardless of the level of the class or clinic, and I want to see what my coaches are being taught, so I can help them adapt what they've learned to special athletes. I would encourage any Head Coach of a special hockey team to do the same.

6. Moving Players from The Beginning Group to the More Advanced Groups

The first thing to point out is that if you are to move a player from the beginning group to more advanced groups, you must have a beginning group. As I mentioned briefly in the section on practice planning, it is advisable to have a group set aside during the small group session time of the practice specifically for teaching the first time skaters. You will want to leave them in this group during the whole time you are doing the small group skills development. Clearly, moving a first time or beginning skater into a group learning to shoot the puck is not productive. You should have your best skating coaches assigned to this group.

Once skaters have demonstrated the ability to skate on their own, they should be grouped with skaters of similar ability level, and assimilated into the regular small groups that move from station to station. By doing it this way you don't have a group of three intermediate skaters with a beginning skater that will disrupt the flow of the group activity or drill. That won't be any fun for anyone, and will detract from the learning experience.

Your criteria for determining whether a skater is ready to move on is clearly based upon your best judgment as a coach, but I would recommend having a small test that includes the basic elements of skating. You may also incorporate obstacles such as stepping over sticks, as well as turning around cones and stopping. Don't make the test too stringent, because you're not trying to take the place of the other small groups intended to teach skating skills, but they should be able to move without assistance fast enough to participate in the other small groups before advancing. They will also let you know when they are ready. It will be obvious to them that their team-mates are moving from group to group, and they will usually be eager to do what their team-mates are doing. This will be a good built in motivator. You should let them know that if they want to advance, they have to do a few basic things well, but not perfectly. Short of playing in the NHL, I'm aware of few people, special needs notwithstanding, that skate perfectly. Don't hold them back too long, or nitpick about one tiny thing they could do better. As soon as they're moving with any speed, move them on to the groups where the other coaches can build on what they've learned.

7. The First Practice

The first practice will no doubt consist of very few players, most of whom will never have skated before. For that reason you might consider making the entire practice a group learn-to-skate session, until they are all ready to move on (see previous sections on practice planning, and teaching beginning skaters with special needs). They will progress at different rates, and you will be able to identify the faster advancers, at which time it might be good to split up into different small groups, even if the "groups" have only one player each. This may take months, so don't hold them to standards of typical athletes, and never ever use negative reinforcement to make a point, even if you believe they are manipulating you. I don't mean "manipulation" in a negative or sinister sense, but they will quickly learn where the boundaries are, and what buttons to push with you to get their way. As the parent of a child with Down syndrome, I speak from first hand experience, and this has proven true with other children with special needs as well. Learning a difficult task is sometimes no fun, and they know how to make it stop. That is sometimes by giving in to what the instructor is teaching, and sometimes by digging their heels in and refusing to go no further. It sometimes comes out as tears, but the beginning skating should be kept fun and light hearted, so they will want to come back. That's why positive reinforcement is key.

8. Playing Games

Playing games might take the form of scrimmages, or it might be playing a game like freeze tag. I've use the example of freeze tag more than once, and I'll explain why that can be fun and useful at the same time. First, freeze tag is a game most kids have played before, and it takes their minds off hockey for the last little bit of the practice time. Second, if you picture what is going on in a game of freeze tag on dry land, you can see how it might be useful in teaching skills beneficial to their skating ability. They are stopping and starting, and learning to skate without 100% of their attention on the act of skating. They are more focused on the game, and learning to skate without thinking about it.

In the beginning, playful, non-hockey related, games are a good way to ease up on the teaching you've done during practice up to that point. It will allow them to leave on a fun note, and make them eager to come back next time. It will also be about all you can do in the beginning, because they won't be ready for much of anything else yet. For the more advance team, playful games like freeze tag should be used sparingly to break things up once in a while. If they are more advanced, they will probably be more interested in playing hockey than freeze tag. You must also take into consideration the ages (mental and physical) of the players. Older kids will think freeze tag is very "un-cool." Before you ask the question, the answer is "yes," teenagers with special needs are concerned with being "cool."

As you progress, you may want to use your "game" time for hockey. That may be three on three small games in a small area, or it may be five on five on the whole sheet of ice. Small games are good skills development tools, and are very popular in Canada these days. Full ice games and scrimmages clearly teach them what playing the real game of hockey is like. When your team is advanced enough, you can make an entire practice a "game."

We don't have anyone else to play in Colorado, but we do have enough players to split up into two teams. Our approach is now to split them up into two teams and play a "real" game. We treat this like a game day for typical hockey players. The entire practice is for the purpose of playing the game. We have a referee, although penalties are EXTREMELY rare, and we light up the scoreboard and clock. This gives them he feeling of playing a real game, and is good preparation for the tournament (see section on tournament preparation). They don't want to practice all the time, or at least they won't when they have been at it for a few seasons. They want to play the game of hockey. Our standard format now is to play a hockey game, as I just described, every third practice. We increase the frequency of the games as the tournament approaches.

Sometimes, we will dress our coaches in full gear and have them participate in the games. When we do this we try not to ever have players and coaches on the ice at the same time, which can be dangerous. We will dress some coaches in dark jerseys, and some in light, and split them between the two teams. When it's time for the coaches to play, they are facing each other, and can go at it a little harder. This is great for the players, because they get to see the game played at a faster pace, and they can pull for their line of coaches to be better than those on the other team. This has had a very positive effect when we've done it. We also like to get the parents on the ice once a year, so they can see it's not as easy as it looks, but if you do this, make sure the parents are wearing helmets...!!!

9. Using Junior Coaches

If you have the luxury, as I have, to have another typical hockey player in your family, it is a good idea to have that player dress and come on the ice with your special hockey team. This player can demonstrate what the coach wants the special athletes to do. My older son Zac has been doing this since our special hockey team first took the ice. It has always been my belief that kids learn more from other kids than they do from adults. Kids have a certain way of relating to each other that we as adults don't understand. Our players watch Zac go through drills, or demonstrate some skill we are trying to teach, and it becomes crystal clear to them what they are supposed to do.

If you don't have this luxury, you might consult the hockey director at the rink where you practice, and see if there is a typical player that might work well in your situation. I would recommend that the Jr. coach be at least squirt age (9 or 10 years old), and that he/she have the temperament to handle working with children and young adults with special needs. This sort of help will be tremendously useful to you as a coach, unless you are prepared to demonstrate everything yourself. I would recommend against that because you will have other priorities while you are on the ice.

10. Rules Differences

Special Hockey has been described as resembling the play of mite and squirt level play. That is to say there is absolutely no checking. Accidental contact may result from a player not being able to stop or avoid another player, but this is not a designed part of the game. The pace of play is usually pretty slow, and there isn't that much contact.

We also don't have any offsides or icing. Adding these elements to the game with special athletes would make the game move too slowly. It is a slow pace as it is, and teaching the players that they need to clear the zone to get on sides would pretty much squash the offense. It's not fun for the players when the game moves too slowly. Icing happens fairly frequently in our games, and again, it's usually by accident. To stop the game, retrieve the puck and line up again to face off would grind the pace to a crawl.

There has also been debate as to whether or not to allow slap shots. Some of the athletes, especially in Canada where they have lots more ice time for skill development, the players have pretty good shots. Many of them are capable of sending a pretty good slap shot on net. The problem is that there are a wide range of ability levels among the players, especially at the goal-tender position. It's also possible for a smaller player to be hit by the puck shot by a more skilled player, which causes safety concerns. For that reason, the current rule in SHI is "no slap shots."

We play five on five, just like everyone else, and aside from these differences, the game is pretty standard. There are very few penalties called, so special teams are almost not a part of the game. Some special hockey coaches do spend time on special teams, but we have chosen to de-emphasize it since it almost never happens.

Part IV. Conclusion

As is clearly indicated in this document, there are many things to take into consideration before undertaking the task of starting a special hockey program. It is not something for the faint of heart. It will involve a great deal of rejection and frustration in the beginning as one goes through the process of setting everything up.

The steps to setting up a special hockey association follow a logical path, and it is easy to get ahead of oneself. If the steps in this document are followed in logical order, the process will be much easier. Sufficient planning must be done before anything is done on the ice. In fact, the on ice portion is the last of the three major sections of this thesis. That is because if sufficient planning isn't done, the founder and coaches will not be prepared to take the ice with a team.

There are three aspects to founding and sustaining a special hockey organization. The first is that the founder must become familiar with the business practices of starting a non-profit organization. Second, there needs to be sufficient time spent on the study and understanding of the different special needs one will encounter. Third, is the knowledge of the game of hockey, and the ability to adapt traditional coaching methods to special needs athletes. They can be categorized as the administrative, the medical, and the technical. If the founder is not a hockey coach himself/herself, he/she will need to recruit a qualified Head Coach. The Head Coach should then set out to recruit assistant coaches.

There are many things to take into consideration from a legal and financial standpoint when founding this type of organization. The founder must determine if there is any initial financial support or sponsorship available to start up. If there isn't, one of the first things the founder must ask himself/herself is they are financially able to handle funding the team personally until such funding becomes available.

Marketing the team, managing the team, recruiting players, and getting the word about the association are constant tasks. So are things such as grant writing, which can be a painfully slow process with a limited success rate. These things must be actively managed in order for the association to be a success.

There needs to be some uniformity at the local hockey association administration levels, as well as nationally within USA Hockey, to handle the start up and assistance of a special hockey association. There are some things in place today, and USA Hockey has been supportive, but they are not specific enough to special hockey, and should be refined. USA Hockey stands to gain tremendously from a public relations standpoint by embracing special hockey. It should be USA Hockey that causes special hockey to be successful in the US, as opposed to some other organization. Hockey should be a game for everyone, and embracing special hockey would be a way for USA Hockey to send the message that hockey is a game for everyone.

There needs to be additional attention put on special hockey at the national level, and partnerships need to be sought between USA Hockey, the individual state organizations, and Special Hockey International. Then partnerships should be fostered with the NHLPA, NHL and individual NHL franchises to reach out to the special athletes in the NHL cities. They are there, it's just a matter of reaching them. It shouldn't be like reinventing the wheel every time a new special hockey association starts up.

USA Hockey has given some consideration to the general term of “disabled hockey.” The problem with that term is that it is too broad. It is specifically geared to physically disabled athletes, which is wonderful, but not particularly useful to the special hockey association starting up. There needs to be a specific category for special hockey associations that have players ranging in age from five years to adult age. The risk management organization within USA Hockey needs to seek special insurance for these athletes, and create a separate category for special hockey. There should also be a person tasked at the national level with creating a standard approach, or set of guidelines to given to the prospective founder of the special hockey organization for dealing with the state organizations, and the district USA Hockey management. When the founder of the special hockey association contacts USA Hockey or the state organization for amateur hockey there isn't confusion about how to handle the association.

Special Hockey International needs to take the time to improve its communication with the perspective new founder, and to its existing associations for that matter. The new founder needs to be able to contact SHI about how to proceed, and be given a specific set of instructions. Perhaps this document will fill some of those existing gaps. I believe it is one of the primary purposes of SHI to fund and manage the expansion of the league. If there is league funding made available to seed the new associations, I also then believe it would be wise to have the prospective founder apply for an SHI franchise. Then the league can control its growth and expand into areas it wants to expand. It will also insure that a blueprint is followed that will make the association successful instead of having it fold before it gets going. I believe this is the league's responsibility, and good things are beginning to happen at SHI to begin this sort of thing.

The on ice part of teaching ice hockey to these athletes is quite different than coaching typical athletes, as one might imagine. If a coach has many years of coaching typical athletes, it's very possible that he/she will become frustrated by teaching the game to athletes that may take a very long time to learn it. It is wise to seek the input of special education providers, as well as adaptive PE teachers when possible. The coach may want to have the opinion of medical and other professionals when deciding how to design a practice for the special needs athletes. It is also a good idea to listen to the parents of the athletes about how to deal with their child or young adult. They know them better than anyone, and even though they are not necessarily hockey coaches, they know what kinds of things work when dealing with their child. Listen to them...!!!

The traditional hockey practice that consists of lost of drills where the players are standing in line and waiting for their turn is not usually successful, because of the different ability levels and attention spans of the athletes. It is also wise to design a practice with a heavy emphasis on individual instruction and skill development.

This document was created as the result of many years of trial and error, and is based on the personal experience of those of us who founded the Colorado Special Hockey Association. There have been many people who contributed to our success along the way, and many players that have loved the game and wanted to play. If it were not for the players themselves, none of us would be here. It is all about the athletes. If the guidelines in this document are used as a road map, the potential new association should be successful. The most important things to take from this document are he concepts of proper planning, patience and persistence.