



AND THE

Holidays



Families Balance Traditions And Hockey Over The Holidays

// By Jim Leitner

John Manzi found an off-beat way to ring in the new year in 2019 with his buddies on the Syracuse (N.Y.) Nationals 14 & Under travel team.

During a break from playing in a holiday tournament in Ottawa, the Nationals gathered in their hotel for an ugly sweater contest. They stayed awake until the clock struck midnight, tooted their noisemakers, laughed and created memories that will last a lifetime.

“What made it so much fun was we had such a great group of guys all the way around,” said Manzi, now 18 and a center for the New Jersey-based Protec Jr. Ducks.

“Being with the guys is what brought it all together, and we had such a great time. It’s probably one of my favorite hockey memories.”

The extended breaks from school during the holiday create opportunities for youth hockey travel programs to compete in large-scale tournaments and create their own special memories. But it comes at a cost: missing quality time with their immediate families back home.





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"It was always a little tough to have to leave your family on a holiday, but as soon as you got to your destination and whatever tournament you were playing in, the parents and coaches always found a way to make sure you and your teammates were having that holiday fun, whatever time of year it was," Manzi said. "You still get to celebrate with your family at home, you just had to do it on a different day than the actual holiday."

Holidays on the road can still have a home-cooked feel.

The Syracuse Nationals always try to rent a large ballroom in their travel hotel for a potluck Thanksgiving dinner. There's grab bags and gift exchanges—mostly with hockey related items—around Christmas, and those ugly sweater contests on New Year's.

"It's something you really have to experience to appreciate, and most people who go to the holiday tournaments on a yearly basis are so accustomed to it, they actually look forward to it," said Manzi's father, also named John, who serves as the hockey director for the Syracuse Nationals.

"The hockey community is a large community, but, at the same time, it's a small community because everybody knows everybody. And it's actually kind of cool to spend the holidays with your hockey family."

Even if your immediate family doesn't quite understand it.

"My own mother says, 'Geez, really, you're not going to be with me on Christmas? Who knows how many more Christmases I'll be around?'" the elder Manzi said. "It's not an easy adjustment to make, especially if you

come from a family with a lot of holiday traditions. We all live on our phones these days, so it's not hard to call your family back home. You can find an alternate weekend to celebrate the holidays with your family. You find ways to make it work.

"I've learned to embrace the moments, because, before you know it, whether they make the NHL or not, these moments will be over. When the kids move on with their lives,

you'll look back on these days and remember the great times you had. I'm glad I was able to share those moments with people I've come to care for as if they were my own family."

Holiday hockey tournaments offer so much more than an opportunity for youngsters to play competitively and foster a deeper love for the game. They create an environment for parents to bond with others from their own organization as well as those from opposing teams.

After all, the time on the ice takes up only a small portion of the time on the road.

"You want to have a great experience on the ice, but it's just as important to have something to do away from the rink because it builds that team relationship," said John Marraffa, whose sons Nico, 10, and J.J., 8, play for the Valley Youth Hockey organization based in Syracuse.

"When you go to a tournament for a holiday or a weekend, you're with everyone from your organization almost the entire time. So, it's important to stay at a hotel that's accommodating and allows the kids to do things like play knee hockey in the hallways. Obviously, you have to be respectful of the hotel, but you also want to have a good time."

It's just as important for the families of the players to get together, whether that's for pizza in the lobby or renting a room for dinner. Hockey families come with little brothers and sisters and older siblings, so it's important to take into consider the entire travel party.



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"It's really your family, Part 2," Maraffa said. "It's your hockey family that carries you through holiday travel and weekend travel from September through May these days. It may be difficult for your family at home to understand the kids' hockey journey, but it's been a great experience for myself, my wife and the kids because we've built some great relationships with the travel team and the parents. It's been a lot of fun."

James Zitmanis, who schedules tournaments throughout the year as director of Weekend Hockey, can sense an elevated energy level at the holiday events. The kids get excited because they're out of school, the parents are off work, and the extended time encourages teams from greater distances to travel to events.

"The longer weekends mean you can bring in teams from out of state or out of country that you're not going to see during the rest of the year," said Zitmanis, whose organization hosts USA Hockey-sanctioned tournaments over most of the winter holiday weekends.

"The last thing you want to do is go to a tournament and have to play a team from your league back home. You want to see teams you've never seen before, because it gives you a chance to measure yourself against teams

from other parts of the country. You get to see different styles of hockey and you get to see where you need to grow as a team."

Weekend Hockey's Martin Luther King Weekend tournament, for example, includes teams from British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, California, Texas, Idaho, New Hampshire and Massachusetts, to name a few.

"We'll have teams call us and ask who's all coming before they decide to sign up," Zitmanis said. "When they hear that kind of diversity, they'll say, 'OK, we're in.' You kind of get tired of playing the same teams all the time."

The Wishbone Invitational Tournament offers travel hockey programs in the Chicagoland area the best of both worlds during a five-day period over the week of

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Thanksgiving. Players not only have the opportunity to play a holiday tournament, but they also compete within distances close enough to enjoy family Thanksgiving traditions at home.

Most of the school districts in the area begin their holiday breaks on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, giving tournament organizers time to schedule each team as many as four games before a championship contest on the weekend. Arenas in the neighboring Illinois communities of Vernon Hills, Glenview, Northbrook and Winnetka host games in various age divisions.

"You really don't mind having to get up on Thanksgiving for an early morning game when you know you get to go home and be with family, enjoy your turkey and reminisce about how much fun it was to have grandma and grandpa in the stands for your game and celebrate the holiday with family," said Cherice Paoli, the learn to play director at Glacier Ice Arena in Vernon Hills who works hand-in-hand with the Chicago Blackhawks' youth hockey development initiatives.

"The kiddos really look forward to it, because Thanksgiving is the first long break they get in the school year. The Mites, especially, get really excited because it's their first tournament of the year. They have so much more energy, because they're not coming to the rink at 5 p.m. for practice after a long day at school. And the tournament has a traditional feel to it, so it's something to look forward to in suburban Chicago." ☆

Jim Leitner is the sports editor of the Dubuque (Iowa) Telegraph Herald.