



The screenshot shows the top portion of a web page. At the top, there is a dark blue navigation bar with a white hamburger menu icon on the left, the text "NEW ENGLAND HOCKEY JOURNAL" in the center, and "LOGOUT" and "DASHBOARD" on the right. Below this is a white section with the word "COLUMNISTS" in small letters. The main title of the article is "Hot Shots: A different way of developing youth players" in a large, bold, black font. Below the title is a small circular profile picture of a man, followed by the text "By Rob Crawford" and "March 1, 2018".

Imagine looking forward to hockey practices and games with the same enthusiasm normally reserved for Christmas morning. Imagine standing along the boards, stick in hand, impatiently watching the Zamboni creep along the ice for what seems like an hour, then bursting onto the rink with a feeling of total joy. Imagine playing on a team with your older and younger siblings and cousins. Imagine playing in games that are always close. Imagine playing on a coed team with a range of abilities, yet your least experienced teammates, your most skilled teammates and you all have an equal chance of being a star. Imagine striving to win without an iota of pressure from your coach.

Hard to imagine, isn't it? Yet this dream is exactly what two of my sons, one of my daughters and four of my nephews experienced when they played in Concord-Carlisle Youth Hockey's "Hot Shots," a coed, in-house hockey league for kids ages 8-14. Ask these seven teenagers today about Hot Shots and their faces light up as they recall the winters of 2012-15, when their passion for hockey was at its peak.

What makes Hot Shots so special, so unforgettable?

Exuberant players and low-key parents: Hot Shots families are a self selecting bunch. Through word of mouth, interested parents and players learn that Hot Shots is ideal for kids who started skating late, or who love hockey but simply don't have time for multiple practices per week and pre-dawn games in another state. And it's ideal for parents and kids who seek a positive athletic experience without the stressful baggage that so often accompanies "competitive" sports programs. So by definition, the hockey players and families who sign up for Hot Shots are different. Pure fun is their main goal. Although many of the players are excellent athletes, hardly any will make their high school's varsity hockey team — and almost none even dream of doing so. They're just dying to play hockey, to be part of a team, and to compete ... right now.

Rosters built for parity — and progeny: Because parity makes games more competitive and fun, the league's coaches work together all season to ensure balanced teams. After constructing opening-day rosters based on players' ability, experience and age, coaches make trades a few times during the season to galvanize struggling teams and bring dominant squads back to earth. By the time the playoffs roll around in February, the Hot Shots championship trophy (a cardboard and tinfoil replica of the Stanley Cup) is truly up for grabs.

While trades rejigger the league's competitive balance, as a rule they never divide family members or carpools. The league's organizers place siblings, cousins and carpool-mates on the same team and keep them together for the entire season. Perhaps no extended family has benefited as much from this aspect of the Hot Shots philosophy as ours. Never again will so many of my children and nephews wear the same uniform, compete on the same ice, walk through the same postgame handshake line and spend so much time in the same minivan.

A burnout-proof schedule: Whereas almost all other youth hockey leagues in the Boston area run from September through March (seven months), Hot Shots starts two months later and ends one month earlier. Four months is still a long season, but it's short enough to allow kids to focus on fall sports in the fall and to put away their hockey pads before the pre-spring thaw, when lacrosse sticks and baseball gloves emerge from hibernation.

The Hot Shots season also is less condensed. Each of the four teams has one weeknight practice and one weekend game. And if a player can't make it to a scheduled practice? No problem: All players are invited to attend another team's practice if that ice time is more convenient. And if a player can't make it to a game? No problem: It's fully understood that players and their families have other commitments outside of hockey. And if a coach sees he'll be short on players for a particular game? No problem: He emails players from other teams and easily recruits eager substitutes.

This might sound like a lax attendance policy, but the truth is a firmer policy isn't necessary — kids love Hot Shots so much, they almost always skip or reschedule their other commitments to play hockey. Yet when they absolutely must miss a practice or a game, players feel no guilt — only sorrow.

Games engineered for evenness: Hot Shots games are a blast to watch. As in any other youth hockey game, the players go all-out to win. But the clever parameters devised by the league's organizers, and implemented by the coaches (who are outstanding), make the games fair, fun and competitive for all kids on both teams, regardless of ability level.

It starts in the net. Players take turns playing goalie, with each boy/girl playing the position at least once during the course of the season. In the practice preceding a player's turn in goal, he/she receives focused coaching to prepare for the upcoming game. For most kids, it's the first time they've ever donned goalie pads, and they instantly gain perspective on the difficulty of the position.

About 11 players per team show up for each game, and the top five players are assigned to the first line, while the least experienced five players skate on the second line. During the game, first-liners only play against first-liners, and second-liners only play against second-liners. (This is how 8-year-old "little sisters" can safely coexist on a team with 14-year-old "big brothers." In games, they're never on the ice at the same time.) Every two minutes a buzzer sounds, and the lines quickly switch. During this transition, the referee (usually the league's founder, Tim First) picks up the puck and slings it to an empty space on the ice, and play continues unabated.

In addition to ensuring equal playing time for everyone, this inspired approach makes the weakest players on a team just as important to the game's outcome as the strongest players. It's remarkable to see the first-liners (mostly 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds) cheering like crazy from the bench for their second-line teammates (mostly 8-, 9- and 10 year-olds), and to see the camaraderie afterward in the locker room. In Hot Shots, it's not uncommon for beginners to earn the game puck and for 60-pound fourth-graders to get high-fives and hugs from 110-pound freshmen. I've never seen this dynamic in another organized youth sports league.

An experience beyond the rink: One of the things I remember most about those Hot Shots years is the rituals the kids developed for the car rides to and from the games. They created a 12-song psych-up playlist that they blared on my car's stereo for the entire 30-minute drive from our house to the Middlesex School rink. ("Juke Box Hero," "Hall of Fame," "Tessie" and "Remember the Name" always will be Hot Shots songs.) And they had rules. Everyone had to sing along with the music, and handheld devices (which distracted from the singing) had to be put away.

On the way home from games, the kids — sweaty and famished — insisted we stop at The Corner Store, a small Concord diner that became our revered postgame hangout. Siblings, cousins and an uncle or two would squeeze around a tiny table, wolf down eggs, bacon and toast, and talk and laugh about the great plays everyone made, the team's playoff seeding and next week's opponent.

No one wanted those meals to end, or those seasons to end. They did end, of course, but they left us all with hallowed memories of pure hockey exhilaration, as well as priceless wisdom about how to build a magnificent youth hockey league. It's simple, really:

1. *Make "maximizing fun for the kids" the league's guiding principle*
2. *Foster cooperation among the coaches to form balanced teams and design competitive situations*
3. *Get out of the way and let the kids play.*

The awesomeness of hockey will take care of the rest.