

# **ALBERTA JUNIOR HOCKEY LEAGUE**

**JUNIOR HOCKEY TRUTH**

**LEAGUE GUIDE**



Below is my guide to playing in the AJHL, also known as the Alberta Junior Hockey League. Research for this article came straight from the AJHL, including interviews with the commissioner and my own experience playing in the league.

## HOW TO PLAY IN THE AJHL

Alberta's development model works a little differently than its Western neighbours. Since Alberta has two elite midget leagues at different age levels, players will get their foot in the door differently.

The best way to get an AJHL team's attention is to play in the AMHL, the province's Major Midget league. This league is for players 15 – 17 years old. However, most players are 16 and 17, with each team taking only two or three 15 year-olds. The rest of the 15 year-olds in the province play in the larger AMMHL (Minor Midget league), which is strictly for 15 year olds. Other provinces just have one AAA Midget league for all 15 – 17 year olds.

If your son plays in the AMHL as a 15 year-old, he'll definitely be seen by AJHL teams at a younger age than most of his peers. (WHL teams will probably be knocking on his door too.) He'll almost certainly get invited to their training camps but will be too young to play at this point.

For those who play in the AMMHL at 15, they are still on the right track. An AMMHL player's biggest goal is to make the jump to the Major Midget the next season. It's perfectly common for players to take this route, and if they have good 16 and 17 year-old seasons, they will get a look from an AJHL team.

There are also a handful of Junior B leagues in Alberta in which players can play. While Junior B is not a viable long-term option for success, it's not the worst option for a 15 or 16 year-old player who wants to stick close to home. Once a player is 18 and still playing in this league, the writing is starting to appear on the wall for his career's end though.

As a player inches toward the end of his 17 year-old year, he'll want to become an affiliate with an AJ team, get called up and play a few games. Becoming an affiliate is a matter of being seen, liked and signed.

## AVERAGE AGE TO BREAK INTO THE AJHL

The bulk of players in the AJHL break into the league at 18 years old, but the best recruits come in at 17. Make no mistake, the AJ wants young players—the league has the following rules to encourage younger players.

Teams must:

- dress five players 18 years of age and younger each game (including the backup goalie)
- limit their roster to six 20 year-olds, which is less than the national maximum
- only use a maximum of four (bona fide) ex-WHL players. (Players who've had more than a cup of coffee in the league.)





When a team takes a 17 year-old player, they get double-bang for their buck since he can count toward this number for two seasons. Eighteen year-olds are also a welcomed choice for backup goalies in this league since they can sit on the bench and count toward this 18-and-under rule. They free up the coach to dress an older forward.

As a final note, only two 16 year-olds may be dressed each game, but it would be rare for a team to take more than one to two anyway. In the case that a 15 year-old gets called up, the team must count him toward their limit of two 16 year-olds. Teams can only dress one 15 year-old per game.

## OUT-OF-PROVINCE-PLAYERS

Out-of-province players can only start playing in the AJHL at 18. Most OPPs come from east of Alberta, but few come from B.C.

A great avenue for a future OPP to get recruited is the Mac's midget tournament. This is biggest Midget AAA tournament in the world and it is held annually in Calgary over the Christmas break. Players who excel at this tournament get a lot of looks from a lot of leagues.

Beyond that, if your son has good stats in his home AAA league, he'll likely be on the radar if he lives in Western Canada. If you live in Eastern Canada, your son may help himself to get a team's attention by using the Junior Hockey Truth's *Training Camp Invite Formula*. If the coach has somebody who can scout your son on his behalf, or if your son is willing to take a chance on coming to camp without a guarantee, the coach can then see him play.

There isn't a direct correlation between how successful a team performs and where they draw their talent from, but certain teams look out of province more than others. Look at rosters from recent season to get a gauge on how open the team is to recruiting OOPs.

## AMERICANS PLAYING IN THE AJHL

While American players are allowed to play in this league, their aren't as many as in other leagues.

If you are from the States and your son makes an AJHL squad, he'll be playing in a league that has some teams who would be near the top of the USHL and others who would be at the bottom. It will be better hockey than the NAHL or tier III American junior.

If the AJHL is on your radar, pick up the phone and start making calls.

## NHL DRAFT PROSPECTS

The AJHL has produced some high draft picks over the past decade, including first-rounder Joe Colborne. On average, the league produces three picks, with some years having up to five and other years as few as one.



Without question, players who are drafted must have an NCAA scholarship secured. That being said, if a player can't secure an NCAA scholarship, he likely wouldn't have the talent to get drafted anyway.

With many WHL teams and a couple of NHL teams in the province, there is no lack of scouts in Alberta, and most AJHL locations are easily accessible.

### **TRAVEL: 3.5/5**

AJHL travel is a mixed bag. If you play for a team in the South division, most of his road trips will be two hours or less. This is as good as it gets for travel in Western Canada. However, if you play in the North you won't be so lucky.

The North division has a handful of teams in close proximity to each other. However, there are some longer road trips to Grand Prairie and Fort McMurray (4 – 6 hours every trip). Still, these trips are better than in the WHL in most cases.

Most teams are within a few hours of Calgary or Edmonton, which is where major airports are located.

### **AJHL SCHOLARSHIP POTENTIAL: 4/5**

Top players in the AJHL don't just get scholarships; they get scholarships to good NCAA schools. While they don't get as many as the BCHL, the AJ usually comes in third place for scholarships in Canada behind the OJHL.

Interestingly, for players not interested in division III scholarships, ones who are sent down from the WHL, or those interested in trade school, Alberta hosts a top-notch collegiate league, the ACAC. While it's second fiddle to Canadian university (CIS) hockey, there is certainly a mix of Western Canada's best Junior A players and WHL players seeking specific college programs. AJHL players can also play for one of the three CIS teams in the province. However, WHL players give stiff competition for spots at that level.

### **DRAFT: NO**

The AJHL does not have a draft system for recruiting players, but it does have a unique system for carding under-age player. (See "Protected List")

### **PROTECTED LIST: YES**

The AJHL doesn't have a protected list, per se, but they do keep "white cards".

Think of white cards as a five-player protected list each team keeps. Any player under 17 can be signed to one. Unlike the WHL lists, for example, to-be AJHL players must agree to be protected on a white card rather than just getting picked up. (They act like an official letter of intent.) Each team is granted five of these cards so they can secure five future prospects.

Some teams choose to use all five cards, some don't use cards at all.

If a white card player is 17 and does not get signed to a regular card by his parent AJHL club that fall, he becomes a free agent again. This rule forces teams to either play young players or let them go back to midget so another club can sign them. No single AJHL club can hoard prospects this way. Beyond these top prospects being signed to white cards, the league operates as a free market with talent being able to choose where they go.

In addition to white cards, teams also have affiliate cards. Each team can affiliate five players per season in total for up to five games (and more after that player's regular club is finished for the season).

An affiliate player usually plays in the AMHL or a Junior B league. He'll act as a fill-in for an injured player, or get called up for a taste of the league. Once he has maxed out his number of total number of games, the player can no longer be called up unless he signs a regular card... but most times the AJ will balance out their call-ups until midget players finish they season. That way, AJ teams don't have to give up a regular card to an affiliate player.

A player can be both on a white card and an affiliate card at the same time. The difference is that affiliate cards expire each season, so a player could be an affiliate with one team one year, and another team another year. White cards last until the player is released.

The January trade deadline marks the last day a player can become an affiliate.

## **PAY TO PLAY: NO**

The AJHL does not charge players to pay. Due to Alberta's oil economy, most teams are heavily sponsored, especially if they are community-owned. Players get taken care of better in this league than in most.

## **AJHL DETAILS**

**Nicknames you'll hear:** "The A-J"

**Provinces covered:** Alberta

**Established:** 1963

**Teams:** 16

**Games Played:** 58

**Trophy Name:** Fred Page Cup

**Reigning League Champion:** Brooks Bandits, (also RBC Cup national champions), 2013

**Royal Bank Cup National Region:** West

## **SCHOLARSHIPS AWARDED**

According to the AJHL website, there were 70 players with college commitments during the 2012-13 season. Of these scholarships, 29 were to division I schools, 10 were to division III schools, 12 were to CIS school and 15 to Canadian Senior Colleges (such as the ACAC).





## **NOTABLE ALUMNI**

Dany Heatley, Mike Comrie, John Davidson, Lanny McDonald, Mark Messier, Chris Phillips, Wade Redden, Lindy Ruff, Sheldon Souray, The Sutter Brothers, Scottie Upshall, Mike Vernon

## **RADIO/TV COVERAGE**

AJHL games are streamed live on the league's FASTHockey video portal.

## **LEAGUE CONTACT INFO**

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