

## 16U Rookie League Proposal

**Proposal:** that the Board agree to prioritize consulting on the establishment of a 16U Rookie League based upon this proposal document.

### **Background.**

In response to feedback gathered by Jarrod Finlay from parents, club presidents, and community members, this proposal seeks to create the *16U Rookie League* as an additional grade within the junior leagues. If agreed, it would augment both the 'Junior League Standards Framework' and the 'Age and Eligibility Policy'.

The *16U Rookie League* will provide a structured environment for novice or non-competitive players, addressing the skill divide between top-tier players and newer recruits. Additionally, it offers players a development path that can lead to participation in higher-level competitions such as Nationals, with support mechanisms to ensure fairness.

The 16U Rookie League also serves as a platform for players recovering from injury and helps clubs facing player shortages, providing a flexible solution for maintaining participation and competition integrity.

### **Context and Problem Statement.**

Presently, this problem has only been identified in Northland, Auckland and Waikato, so the proposal will focus on providing examples from that geographic area. The same structure could be implemented in the other half of the country if clubs indicate that they have teams available to enter.

Feedback reveals that the large skill gap between seasoned junior players and fresh recruits presents a significant challenge for both players and clubs. Novice players need a less intense, development-focused environment to bridge the skill gap without feeling overwhelmed. Furthermore, there is no current system to allow players recovering from injury to re-enter the sport at a less competitive level.

As a result, some clubs have expressed concerns about retaining players, with talk of breaking away from IHNZ due to the lack of a structured development path for less able players in older junior grades. A solution is urgently needed to prevent these issues from escalating.

### **Proposed Solution: Creation of the 16U Rookie League.**

The 16U Rookie League will address these challenges by providing a novice-grade division that offers multiple benefits for players and clubs. The key aspects of this league are as follows:

#### *1. Development-Focused Environment:*

- The 16U Rookie League is designed for novice players who are new to the sport or those with limited experience.
- In the northern end of New Zealand, potential teams include:
  - Devils 14U White, Devils 16U White, Panthers 14U Red (potential for a second 14U team), Vipers 16U Black, Stingrays 14/16U.
- IHNZ Nomads teams will be made up of players from clubs that do not have enough rookie players to form their own teams by combining players from different clubs.
- Potential to add Intermediate Womens Teams from both Northern and Central divisions. Either as regular participants or to play special exhibition games. As many of the Intermediate Women will be drawn from the 14U and 16U grades the age and size of the players should not pose an issue. While the nature of pulling the players from across their parent region. These teams will have very few chances to play as a cohesive team, so the “non-competition” environment of the Rookie League should prove to be a valuable tool for developing these players.

#### *2. Back Door to Nationals via Dispensation:*

- **Rewarding Development:** Players who demonstrate significant skill progression and development in the Rookie League may be granted dispensation to join their club’s competitive team for Nationals. This allows hard-working and determined rookies to close the skill gap and compete at a higher level.
- **Injury Recovery Support:** Players recovering from injuries can use the Rookie League to ease back into competitive play in a less physically demanding and less "win" focused environment. If they regain full fitness and close the gap in time for Nationals, they may also apply for dispensation to join their club’s Nationals team.
- **Bolstering Teams at Nationals:** Clubs facing shortages at Nationals due to injuries, financial constraints, or other factors can use the Rookie League to supplement their competitive teams. Players from the Rookie League may join their club's Nationals squad, pending approval from the dispensation committee, ensuring

fairness and balance across all teams.

- Should a club's regular 14U and/ or 16U team become short on numbers for any reasons (i.e. injury, illness, cost etc.) a process for the short-term call-up of players from the Rookie League is needed.
  - It would be ideal for a club's regular 16U team to call up players from their regular 14U team in the first instance. This places the focus on keeping the players of similar skill levels in the grade that is more fitting for them. 14U players would draw from the Rookie League. Players could still be pulled up from the Rookie League 16U but as a last resort.

In Summary:

16U Comp team short on numbers would call up 14U Comp players from within their club. If none are available, the 16U Comp team could then call on Club members within the Rookie League.

14U Comp team short on numbers would call up Rookie League players within their club.

- It needs to be remembered that players added to this "Rookie League" are not guaranteed a dispensation to attend Nationals. This is to enforce a spirit of fairness within the Rookie League and dissuade the stacking of teams with skilled players that would be better served in a regular Junior League 14U or 16U team.
- All 14U players in the Rookie League, and regular 14U players, would still be allowed and invited to trial for the Faceoff Cup (formally the Inter Conference Competition).

### 3. *Dispensation Process:*

- a. Any novice level full financial member of IHNZ who is too old to participate in the 12U age grade, and young enough to compete in the 16U age grade, may play in the 16U Rookie League without needing a dispensation in terms of their age.
- b. Any player seeking to participate in Nationals from the 16U Rookie League must receive approval from the dispensation committee. This ensures that only deserving players, who have worked hard or are recovering from injury, are given the opportunity to participate in Nationals without compromising the integrity of the competition.
- c. The dispensation process guarantees fairness while rewarding effort, perseverance, and recovery.

4. *Format for the 16U Rookie League:*
  - a. The 16U Rookie League would fall under IHNZ's 'Junior League Standards Framework'.
  
5. *Duration of the Rookie League and IHNZ offerings:*
  - a. If the proposal for a Rookie League is accepted. The Rookie League season would look to run alongside the regular season with games beginning in May and concluding in late August. If possible, within the schedule and depending on rink time. The season would look to include 'super rounds'. Super rounds would see as many of the teams in the Rookie League as possible collected at 1 or 2 venues to play multiple games in a day or over a weekend. The season could possibly culminate with a similar 'finals' like event for the teams.
  - b. With frequent play in the Rookie League, 'super rounds,' and a potential final event, followed by the Face Off Cup, including its trials, training, and culminating event, Rookie players will be well supported by IHNZ's offerings throughout the season from May to October.
  - c. There is scope to make the 'super rounds' a nation-wide Rookie event.
    - i. The IHNZ Nomads could be a vehicle to facilitate the creation of rookie teams from smaller divisions.
  - d. If logistics allow, one 'super round' could be aligned with a Masters event, and the program could include some kind of volunteer mentoring and coaching session.

### **Rationale and Benefits.**

- *Inclusivity and Development:* The 16U Rookie League provides a structured environment for newer players to develop their skills without being overshadowed by more experienced peers. It allows them to progress at their own pace, fostering greater inclusivity and retention within clubs.
- *Pathway to Nationals:* The possibility of earning a place at Nationals motivates players to work hard, giving them a tangible goal to strive for. It also provides a safety net for injured players to continue participating without rushing back into full competition.
- *Club Viability:* By offering clubs the flexibility to draw from the Rookie League in times of need, this proposal ensures that more teams can field competitive squads at Nationals, preventing clubs from being forced to withdraw due to a lack of players.
- *Retention of Clubs:* This structured approach will help prevent clubs from disengaging with IHNZ, particularly in one region where talk of breaking away has already begun. By offering a clear development pathway and a solution to the junior player problem, IHNZ can maintain unity and foster long-term growth.

## **Social Media Campaign to Name the 16U Rookie League Trophy.**

As part of the launch of the 16U Rookie League, we propose engaging the Communications Manager and Social Media Officers in a campaign to name a shield that will be awarded to the top rookie team. This initiative not only adds excitement to the league's establishment but also increases engagement from players, clubs, and the wider community.

This would involve soliciting name ideas from players, clubs, and fans, with the final name chosen through a voting process. This campaign would:

- Encourage wider participation in the Rookie League launch.
- Boost visibility and engagement across IHNZ's social media platforms.
- Allow the inline hockey community to feel ownership of this new initiative.

The Communications Manager would lead the campaign, with support from the Social Media Officers, who would manage the content and promotion across platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok.

## **Expansion Potential.**

The proposed 16U Rookie League trophy would initially be awarded to the top rookie team in the Northland/ Auckland/ Waikato region, where the 16U Rookie League is being piloted. However, as other regions establish their own rookie leagues, the trophy could evolve into a national competition, with the top rookie team from each region qualifying for Nationals. This would add a further level of excitement and competition, with the national title being the ultimate prize for rookie teams across the country.

## **Consultation Process.**

To ensure this proposal meets the needs of the IHNZ community, we recommend a broad consultation process. This should include an opportunity to provide input.

The Board recommends that the following clubs are invited to participate in this consultation:

- Hamilton Devils (Jan Botha)
- Hutt City Hawks (Sandy Nimmo)
- Levin Thunder ()
- Vipers Inline Hockey (Adrian Koit)
- Wanganui Lightning ()
- Wolves Inline Hockey Club ()

The consultation must be complete within 21 days of this proposal being tabled at a Board meeting, allowing for sufficient feedback while keeping the timeline on track for the 2025 season.

### **Next Steps.**

1. *Board Approval:* We seek the Board's approval to move forward with the 16U Rookie League concept and begin the consultation process.
2. *Club Consultation:* A diverse range of club presidents and stakeholders will be invited to provide input and refine the proposal.
3. *Campaign Development:* The Communications Manager, in collaboration with the Social Media Officers, will develop the campaign strategy, including timelines, promotional content, and voting mechanisms.
4. *Launch the Campaign:* The campaign will run across IHNZ's social media platforms, ensuring broad engagement and excitement for the 16U Rookie League.
5. *Implementation Plan:* Based on feedback, the proposal will be refined, and a clear plan will be developed for the 2025 season. Implementation will be led by the League Managers.

### **Conclusion.**

The 16U Rookie League offers a practical solution to the skill divide in junior inline hockey, providing a development-focused environment for newer players while allowing them a pathway to Nationals through hard work and perseverance. By addressing these concerns, IHNZ can prevent further disengagement from key clubs and players, ensuring the long-term growth and development of junior inline hockey in New Zealand.