

# Cross-ice proponents Slobodnik and Breazeale named Hockey Persons of the Year

BY LARRY O'CONNOR

They parted the ice and, in doing so, opened a valley of opportunity for young hockey players to develop.

Michigan Hockey's 2009 Hockey Person of the Year award co-recipients, Mike Slobodnik and Joel Breazeale, have become the pied pipers of a scaled down version of the game known as Cross-Ice.

In 2003, Breazeale helped implement a cross-ice program for players ages 4-8 years old with the Kentwood Hockey Association. Slobodnik followed suit at nearby Walker Ice Arena and Fitness Center a few years later.

The premise is simple: Rather than have 4-8 year old kids trying to lug the puck 200 feet up ice, the rink is cut in half where two or more games take place simultaneously. Small-ice games allow kids to handle the puck more and work on fundamentals.

It's also less expensive. At the Walker Arena, the cost is \$350 for the five-month program where the kids skate twice a week. Though the enticements are many, the end result is straightforward.

"If you get kids involved in the sport, they are not getting out," says Slobodnik, who is Walker Arena's hockey director. "It's too good a sport."

Though hardly radical, the concept needed a pair of tireless promoters like Breazeale and Slobodnik to sell skeptics.

Their passion for cross-ice programs, not to mention an overall zeal for the game, is infectious. About 11 associations in Michigan have cross-ice programs and the number continues to grow.

Some 50-60 kids are in cross-ice programs at Walker Arena alone where there is a waiting list. At Georgetown Arena, where Breazeale serves as hockey director, the number jumped from 32 to 50 this season.

At Kentwood, which Breazeale says had a creative and proactive board at the time, 60 kids turned out for the first season.

"You can tell they are both guys who get it as far as developing young players," says Jack Witt, Michigan Amateur Hockey Association's coach-in-chief. "That the highest compliment I can



Walker Ice and Fitness' Mike Slobodnik and Georgetown Ice Arena's Joel Breazeale are co-winners of the 2009 MH Hockey Person of the Year award.

give them.

"They've taken what USA Hockey has developed over the years, and frankly, what Hockey Canada and Europeans have long been doing, and implemented it."

The cross-ice model works best when it's used as a two- to three-year development program for players ages 8 and under, Breazeale says. Too many associations only use cross-ice as part of learn to play program, he says.

Cross-ice borrows a page from the youth soccer playbook where small-sided games are seen as paramount to player development. Correspondingly, cross-ice methods are employed throughout Europe and in Canada.

"I think too many people get caught up in the wins and losses at the youth level and, to me, that should be a secondary factor,"

Slobodnik says. "It's about player development and lifelong love of the sport. The wins and losses will take care of themselves."

While Slobodnik terms cross-ice programs "a no-brainer," the pair has met stiff resistance in some circles.

Opposition has come from two areas, the pair says. Many doubters include former players and current coaches, who figure if the rink-length game was good enough for them; it's good enough for future generations.

Other naysayers have been parents whose older children were reared under the old system and are reluctant to switch.

"Change is something they don't always want to swallow," Breazeale says. "And, they have a hard time believing that something with less ice, less money and less time can be done more effectively, and in fact better."

"Mike and I have a long and proven track record of that actually happening."

Dividends for the cross-ice method won't be seen for a while, though there are inklings of success. This year's Adray Community Hockey League mite championship featured a cross-ice trained team from Georgetown Arena and a similarly indoctrinated squad from Royal Oak, Breazeale says.

"I love to watch my cross-ice players that played for me in '08 and '09 have success at the mite and squirt level," Slobodnik says. "That's what is fun."

Though competitors – Breazeale and Slobodnik operate different rinks within the greater Grand Rapids area – a common thread bonds them.

"Looking at the big perspective, we want to do what's right for the game," Slobodnik says. "I know if Mike Slobodnik does what's right for the game and Joel Breazeale does what's right for the game, we're going to get more kids involved and we're all going to be successful if we do that."

Breazeale is also grateful for Slobodnik's support for perhaps a less noble reason.

"For a while I was the only crazy in town," Breazeale says. "Now I wasn't the only nut. It takes more than one voice."