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ALL-MINORITY HOCKEY TEAM PUTS 'HOCKEY IS FOR EVERYONE' INTO PRACTICE

By Heather Rule, 09/02/20, 2:00PM MDT

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Next Gen team of all minority players formed for Beantown Summer Classic

The team was a couple of years in the making, really.

Rod Braceful started researching what organizations were doing good things for kids in hockey, particularly minority kids. He connected with Dee Dee Ricks from Next Gen AAA Foundation, and they bounced around the idea of putting a hockey team together.

The result was a U20 team made up of all minority, male hockey players known as the Next Gen team at the Beantown Summer Classic earlier this month in New Hampshire.

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"They're doing what they've been doing for most of their lives," Braceful said. "I think the important piece was them being on a team with each other where they don't feel like a minority, with them being coached by someone that looks exactly like them."

When players arrived for the tournament, they had practice and then five or six players, including Millette, spent time together hanging out, had dinner and had a meeting at the hotel before the first game to go over expectations, according to Millette.

Having so many other minority teammates made everything easier, he added.

"I feel like it was really easy to gel," Millette said. "Normally, it's maybe one or two of us [minority players] in the locker room at a time.

"I feel like we're cut from the same cloth, so we kind of get the same jokes or the same slang or whatever. That part of it was super easy, and it just kind of happened."

It's different from what these players might experience playing hockey. Maybe they feel different in a locker room, according to Braceful. That camaraderie off the ice, during team meals and in the locker room was vastly different at the tournament.

"I think that they felt maybe like they weren't different for once, in a sport that just happens to be predominantly white," Braceful said.

It was a chance for these players to look around and see minority teammates who've been successful in USHL, coaches who played in the NHL, an NHL draft pick on the team in Jordan Harris (2018 third rounder by Montreal) and plenty of Division I players. That can mean a lot for the younger players on the team with aspirations of playing at those high levels in hockey, according to Braceful.

"I think it just gave them a little bit of extra support to say, 'Hey, I've already been on this ... I can do this, too, like all of these other guys,'" Braceful said. "Even though we don't always play together throughout the year, we're all in different parts of the country. We can all do this."

Building on this experience for the future, the original idea for the camp is still there, according to Braceful. COVID-19 made it a little harder to navigate this year, but the goal is to have a camp with on-and-off-ice teachings to continue to spread the word that hockey truly is for everyone, Braceful said.

"And instead of just saying it, actually being able to work together and show that," Braceful said.

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"I think the biggest thing was the fact that A, it's never been done," said Braceful, the assistant director of player personnel for the USA Hockey National Team Development Program. "And if it has been done, it hasn't been at this high of a level."

The idea started out as putting a camp together for American players and staff, representative of all races, to have instructors talk to players on and off the ice, according to Braceful. Once the COVID-19 pandemic put so many things at a standstill, the focus shifted to creating the all-minority team for the Beantown Summer Classic.

Two 14-year NHL veterans, Bryce Salvador and Mike Grier, were brought aboard to coach the team. Braceful recruited the players, many from the United States Hockey League or New England prep schools, which ended up being an all-Black squad before adding Hispanic American Christian Jimenez as well. There is discussion of having an even more diverse team in the future, with Asian Americans and more Hispanic Americans.

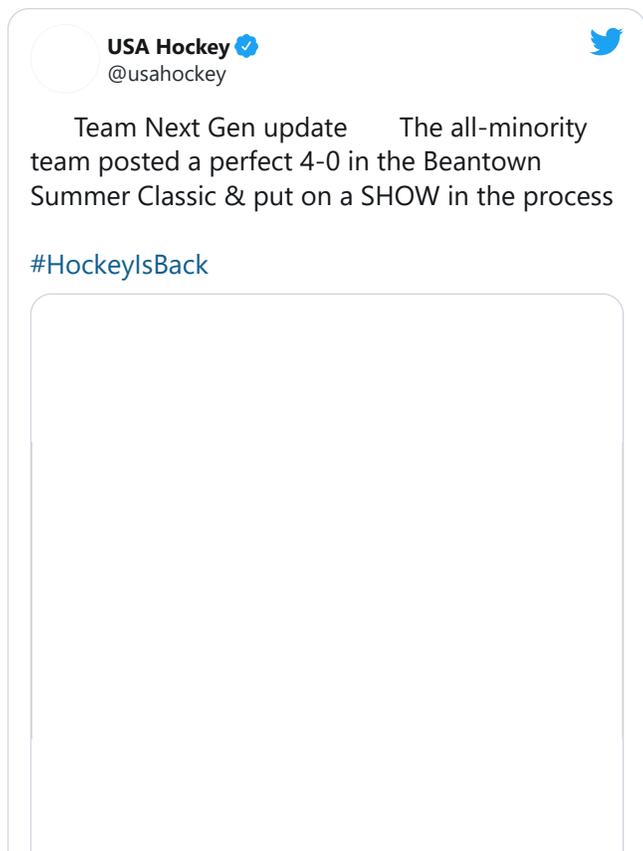
Next Gen hockey program director Jeff Devenney and family adviser Brett Peterson also assisted in getting the team together. It wasn't simply that they created a team of color, but the players were all high caliber. Multiple players hold Division I scholarships, with others having a ton of DI offers on the table, according to Braceful.

For many of the players, it was the first time they had a minority teammate, "someone that could relate and someone that walks in the same shoes that they walk in," Braceful said.

"And that's not just on the ice, but that's off the ice in society."

Forward Reggie Millette had Black teammates in the past, but certainly not an entire team of players. He had one Black teammate when he started out playing hockey from about 9 to 12 years old and then not until his first junior hockey team with two other Black players on the Austin Bruins in the North American Hockey League in Minnesota.

The 20-year-old Millette, originally from Jacksonville, Florida, plays with Dubuque in the USHL and is committed to American International College. Braceful asked him to play in the Beantown Summer Classic; only later did Millette find out he'd be playing on an all-minority team.



Millette thought right away that he and his new teammates "could do something special" in the tournament.

"That was really the main thing on my mind," said Millette, who scored a goal and three assists in the tournament. "If we actually end up winning, we'll inspire a lot of people."

To put the icing on the cake, the Next Gen team indeed went undefeated (4-0) and won the tournament. Braceful also said he heard nothing but positive feedback from people in the rinks and surrounding the tournament regarding this team.

No matter the makeup of the team, the cool thing for Braceful was seeing that once the puck was dropped, it's hockey. All of these players from some of the top prep schools, AAA programs and USHL teams came together and played the game they love.