February 2001

Women's Hockey at ISU?

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2001/iss3/8

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There’s a women’s hockey team at ISU?

More than 20 women pay hundreds of dollars to be a part of the university’s club.

by Justin Kendall

The clock strikes 9 p.m., and ice skaters file out of the Ames-ISU Ice Arena tucked behind the Towers residence halls, most of them unaware of why they have to vacate the antiquated building every night at this time. The zamboni begins to roll as members of the ISU women’s hockey team ready themselves for another late-night practice. Fifteen women are crunched together on black benches in one of the building’s musty locker rooms. The chatter is broken by head coach Erich Ludes’ request for entry. His request is granted, and he and two assistants walk into the room. Ludes diagrams two drills on the chalkboard as the women continue to put on padding and equipment. It’s business as usual for Iowa State’s best-kept secret.

“Nobody knows that we’re out there,” says Katrina “Kat” Hopp, club president. “That’s half of our problem, and we just don’t have the funds to make the posters like the guys do. They have posters everywhere. We just don’t have the funding to do that type of thing. People just don’t know we exist. Everybody’s like, ‘There’s a women’s hockey team?’”

Without money for posters or other means to fill the ice arena’s dirty red stands, the team has relied on alternative methods of cultivating a following. Word of mouth and home-made posters have gone a long way toward getting their name out, and the team has given away tickets during radio spots on
Ames' KCCQ and KASI. Games have also been scheduled following the ISU men's hockey team, helping to carry over some spectators, but crowds still mostly consist of the team members' inner circle. "Once in awhile, we'll get a decent crowd with our family and friends," says team captain Toni Guidarelli.

It's been a rough, six-year journey for the team, which has been battling for notoriety, recruits, ice time, and money. More than 20 athletes have dedicated their time and energy to carrying over some spectators, but crowds still mostly consist of the team members' inner circle.

Even though it is open to anyone, the team still has difficulty finding women who have the time. Plus, the $600 in club dues for varsity team members and $200 for junior varsity members are two major stumbling blocks in attracting recruits but are vital in helping cover costs. "People find that out, and they're just like, 'I can't afford that,'" says Hopp, sophomore in mechanical engineering. "Ice time is expensive, and you've got to do it to cover the trips because traveling is expensive, too."

Acquiring the names of incoming freshmen women from the Registrar's Office and sending them fliers about the club has helped draw new members. ClubFest and Veishea booths have also been helpful recruiting tools as well as Hopp's Web site, which offers a sign up for potential new members. "I'm actually amazed at how much response I've gotten off of it," Hopp says.

Funding is a major concern of the team's because of the high price of ice time, travel expenses, and other hockey-related costs. The club spends roughly $25,000 per season to cover those costs, which are covered by club dues, Government of the Student Body money, fund-raisers, and season-ticket sales. GSB's allotment of $11,500 last season only covered half of the club's expenses. Still, the money is crucial to keeping the team afloat. "I know without the GSB funds we wouldn't be able to play," Lutz says. "It would just be too expensive." Student season tickets are a bargain at $10. Team members have done everything from working a day at Adventureland Park to picking seed corn to help cut costs.

The time commitment can be a major burden; they practice four nights a week, Monday to Thursday, from either 9:15 p.m. to 10 p.m. or 9:45 p.m. to 11:15 p.m. The ladies are also weekend warriors, playing a two-game series every weekend either home or on the road as part of their 24-game schedule. For the expensive road trips, the team piles into two 15-passenger vans and rotates driving to various game sites across the Midwest including Wisconsin, Minnesota, and other hockey hotbeds.

Game times fluctuate from as early as 10 a.m. to as late as 11 p.m. However, these nighttime games and practice times are an improvement over the times the team's pioneers had. "The first year we were practicing at midnight, 2 in the morning," Lutz says, "trying to have 2 o'clock in the morning games just because it was so competitive to get ice time."

Still, the schedule of two games every weekend and practice four nights a week has proven difficult. Defensive player Katie Sullivan has had a tough time balancing her work schedule, classes, and commitment to the club. "It's taking up all my time," she says. "I don't think I could be here with a women's team and not play or not go out, but it's starting to get harder. With being a sophomore, you're starting to set in classes towards your core, and they get harder. So it sucks not having any time to study."

The schedule of constant practice and travel can be challenging, but you learn to adjust and budget your time, says Kati Ogren, sophomore in elementary education. "It gets a little hectic with trying to get projects done and trying to get your work caught up," she says. "When you're going to practice at 8:30 [p.m.] and sometimes not getting home until 11 [p.m.], you learn to juggle your time."

Lutz echoed Sullivan and Ogren's sentiments. "This is my fifth year, and I don't want to say that I'm burned out because I love hockey so much, but it's taken a lot of time in the last few years," she says. "There's a lot of things in the evenings during the week I'd like to go to, a lecture or go to the bar and have a beer with my friends and for six or seven months out of the year your social life is strictly hockey.

"My first semester of graduate school I prob-
ably slept four hours a night, which is pretty typical in graduate school anyway," Lutz adds. "This semester I'm trying to finish my thesis, plan a wedding, get a job, and still play hockey."

Lutz began playing hockey her senior year of college. She was with the team when it joined the Midwestern Women's Collegiate Hockey Association and following the folding of that league, saw the team join the American Collegiate Hockey Association this season.

Joining the ACHA is the next step in the club's long-term goal of becoming a varsity sport at ISU, Hopp says. "The original long-term goal of the people that started the club was to get it to be a varsity sport at our school, but we decided to go club first, kind of like the men are doing," Hopp says. "So we're just trying to take steps to achieve that goal."

ACHA membership brings increased competition, and Iowa is at a disadvantage when comparing recruiting with its Midwestern rivals. "Most of the schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin have high school programs that they're drawing from, and they're getting more experienced players," Lutz says. "Iowa doesn't have anything like that. Still I think we've been able to compete pretty well given that we're open to anyone that wants to come and dedicate their time to playing hockey and learning the game."

Head coach Ludes believes his team is up for all the challenges before it. "I think a lot of people in the world just think women's sports aren't as competitive as men's, but being with this group and last year's group, I disagree," he says. "I think their desire to win stems from their desire to go out and just play great hockey. They want to go out and show they can do these things and if they do those things well, they'll win and that's the ultimate goal."

He may sound like a modern-day Vince Lombardi, but Ludes says he sees his role as the choreographer of a dance. "One of the things that I love about it is that it's wide open. By that I mean, each player has the ability to be really creative," he says. "Rarely do things seem to happen without it and that's where communication fits in because there's five people out there and they each have responsibilities. So one person starts being creative and another person has to recognize that and back them up and support them."

"Hockey becomes beautiful when they're all working together and at the same time doing your own thing," he adds.

Ludes joined the Cyclone women last season after finding out that the head coaching position was vacant. The gleam in his eyes gives the impression that he's having the time of his life, savoring every minute. "That's the reason they're playing the game, and that's the reason I'm coaching the game," he says. "The games are generally fun when things are going well, whether it's in practice when a drill's going quick and everything's happening right or in a game when you're executing your game plan."

The future is ripe with new possibilities for the women's team. Goals range from adding new members to becoming a varsity sport at ISU. Lutz believes becoming a varsity sport is just another opportunity for more young women to receive scholarships. Plus, it would take the pressure off veteran members of the team who believe they have to play to keep the club alive. "We'd rather play two or three nights a week and not feel like the fate of the team is depending on keeping the numbers up and keeping some experienced players, which I think it is right now," Lutz says.

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However, the team is content with what they've achieved thus far. The new city ice arena is set to open in February or March. None of the players will shed a tear for the Ames-ISU Arena. "I think the current arena that we have is very dangerous, and I'm surprised that the city administration as well as the university administration has let it go on for so long," Lutz says.

Team members are also eager to finally have their own permanent locker room. They'll finally be able to store their equipment at the arena rather than lugging it to and from the arena nightly.

Just another victory along the way, for a team that has fought for everything it's received.

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photo by Sarah Fackrell

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