

Girls Take to



High school girls lace up for a league of their own

BY CARRIE ANTON

Women stepped onto Olympic ice to play hockey for the first time in front of the world at the 1998 Nagano Games. As the US won gold, girls all across the nation got fired up. Fast-forward six-and-a-half years and girls everywhere are playing ice hockey at all levels. Instead of merely cheering on their brothers like they did a decade ago, girls are taking to the ice in record numbers. Wisconsin has been on board with this trend since 2001-02, when high school girls finally got their own league through the WIAA.

Only the top four teams get to play at the fourth annual high school girls' ice hockey State Championship in March. If it seems like slim pickings, you're right—but that's because of the limited number of teams. To date, there are only eight WIAA high school girls' ice hockey teams in the state: Arrowhead (Hartland), Baraboo, Fond du Lac/Waupun, Hudson, New Richmond, Onalaska, Superior and Viroqua.

The small number of teams may seem like a downer, but the girls don't let it dampen their competitive spirits. "I've been involved in two of the three State Tournaments,"

the Ice



explains Coach Jim Thies of Hudson. "In all of those years, it didn't matter to me as a coach or any of the players on the Hudson High School team, whether there were two teams or 100 teams competing for the title. The atmosphere, intensity, excitement and thrill of being involved in the games were great."

Problems like small budgets and rink time may impede an upswing in girls' WIAA teams, but it's not an obstacle the girls currently let stand in their way. Their objectives—just like any other high school team in any other sport—are to work hard, have fun and win.

Making History

All the teams at one point started as U-19 teams in the Wisconsin Amateur Hockey Association (WAHA) before moving to the WIAA. When the WIAA took on the girls' ice hockey as a tournament program, there were only six teams in existence. The teams worked up through these local youth organizations, which were influential in supporting the transition.

The number one challenge to overcome was, and still is, limited school budgets. Sports cost money to support, and with the school boards already pinching pennies,

A Century Chiseled in Ice: The History of Girls' Hockey

According to the Canadian Hockey Association, the first organization to administer and develop women's ice hockey was the Ontario Hockey Association, which was organized in November 1890. Donned in long, wool skirts, turtleneck sweaters, hats and gloves, the female players took to the ice decades ago to blind pass, breakaway and hook check just like today—but with less padding.

As with many other cold-weather sports, Canada has been instrumental in the development of women's ice hockey. Women's teams, leagues and tournaments were booming throughout many regions of Canada in the 1920s and 1930s, but began to fizzle out with the start of World War II.

While girls continued to occupy the ice during subsequent decades, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that both Canadian and US women, respectively, were able to play hockey at an organized, intercollegiate level.

Today, girls and women of all ages are sweeping the ice in leagues and co-ed organizations, as well as through high school and college teams. USAHockey.com reports that slightly more than 10,000 girls registered with USA Hockey in the 1992-93 season. Over 15 years later, that number is well over 50,000.

Even though women have been playing for more than a century, the sport is considered still in its infancy. As the past two winter Olympics have proven, Canada and the US remain dominant forces in the future of women's international hockey and have an important role to play to help the sport thrive.

many were hesitant to add anything new. But with a strong interest from girls on the club teams and those who were playing on boys' teams, coaches, parents and supporters from various youth programs forged ahead.

Baraboo was the most recent team to do it, adding their team to the 2004-05 roster. "We're coming in at a prime time, especially since we're one of the first teams from this part of the State," says Coach Jim Cabaj. "Our team sets a good example for other club teams looking to make the switch. I think they can say, 'if little old Baraboo can do it, maybe we can do this, too.'"



Diverse Talent

High school coaches are getting closer to having the pick of the litter, as more and more girls want to gear up and grab sticks at early ages. Girls are joining youth teams as young as ages three and four, which of course is great preparation for eventually transitioning to a high school team.

On the flipside, there are also a number of girls on WIAA teams who sign on without even knowing how to skate. Then the challenge becomes how to please the strong skaters on the team while also teaching the basics to the rest. It's a balancing act that requires designing practices to keep the veteran players challenged while helping the novice players develop skills.

But once they do, it's "poetic." At least, that's how one coach explained it. "Hockey is a fun sport once you grasp skating," states Coach Bob Hunt of Arrowhead. "Girls don't check, which some people wish was different, but I think it makes it more poetic. The team can instead focus on improving the skills of speed and passing. The sport is really beautiful to watch when it's done well."

What the Future Holds

When it comes to boys' ice hockey, the WIAA is accepted for offering the highest level at which teams can compete in the



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"The difficulty right now is girls, and their families, feel the only way to get recognized is to be a part of the AAA or club hockey teams," says Coach Steve Gehr of New Richmond. "However, Minnesota is proof that it can be done at the high school level. They have twice as many girls' hockey teams there than Wisconsin boys' hockey teams. And those teams are highly regarded by college scouts."

It's easy to think, "Well, let's do whatever Minnesota did." However, Minnesota received a helping hand from legislation through what's called the Mighty Ducks program. Developed in 1995, the aim of the program was to create and expand opportunities for female hockey players by increasing ice time and altering existing arenas to meet the needs of the growing number of female athletes.

Wisconsin currently has no such plan underway, so the eight pioneer teams have a lot riding on them to make this sport stick. "I've heard there are at least three more teams close to joining on, but nothing is definite," says Coach Jeff May of Viroqua, who's confident growth is on the horizon. "The high school teams are gaining more exposure every day, and the girls are becoming role models for the youth teams—which is helping to spark interest early on. There's a lot of opportunity in the WIAA, and more will come as the number of teams continues to climb." ❄️



WIAA Girls' Hockey State Champions

2001-02	Hudson
2002-03	Hudson
2003-04	Fond du Lac/Waupun/ Campbellsport