

Breaking the ice

More and more young girls are warming up to ice hockey

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Webster Cyclones' Angelika Weslowski, middle, skates away from the Perinton Edge's Liz Bailey, left, and Jessie Lesczynski. The Cyclones are a 14U girls team in the Great Lakes Girls Hockey League. Webster also has a beginners girls team and a 19U girls team.

(November 4, 2007) — Rachel Triassi roams the blue line, seeking to steal the puck from an unsuspecting forward.

Carefully she works her magic along the boards, pokes the puck free and helps jump-start her 14U Monroe County travel hockey team's transition game at Lakeshore Ice Arena.

Despite the success of the play, Rachel wonders what it would be like if girls hockey allowed checking, when players use their bodies to separate their opponent from the puck.

While USA Hockey rules prohibit checking in the girls game, in Rachel's mind, the more contact in the sport, the better.

"I don't understand why girls can't check and be physical," said Rachel, 13, a freshman at Spencerport and defender on the 14U Monroe County house team. Monroe County Youth Hockey also has a 12U and a 19U travel team.

"When I'm playing and find myself in a (checking) situation, I want to be more aggressive and deliver a hit, but I know I can't. But the game is still a lot of fun."

Regardless of the physicality of the game, the number of girls youth hockey teams is on the rise. From 2000 to 2006, the number of girls enrolled in USA Hockey jumped almost 19 percent — from 3,465 to 4,122 — in New York state. Across the country, the trend is similar: The number of females ages 6-19 playing hockey jumped almost four percent, from 40,301 to 41,839.

But the biggest increase — and biggest reason for excitement — is taking place at the beginner or 8-and-under age groups, where the number of girls trying hockey has climbed 7 percent in one year, from 10,921 to 11,679. New York state is now home to the fourth-most girls hockey players in the country, trailing Massachusetts, Michigan and Minnesota, according to the 2005-06 statistics.

Ray Cardella is the girls hockey coordinator for the Edge, a first-year alliance between the Rochester Youth Hockey and Perinton Youth Hockey girls programs. There are 130 girls on the seven teams, including six travel teams, and there's also a U10 team that competes against boys teams in a house league.

"Girls hockey is getting more competitive, with better play, so we felt we needed to start developing girls at a younger age, to get them used to girls hockey and give them a chance to play something other than on boys teams," said Cardella, 46, a Greece resident who credits the 1998 USA team winning the gold medal at the Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan, with helping jumpstart the girls program, which began about 1995 with 40 to 50 girls on two or three teams.

"One of our objectives is to have similar skill and age-appropriate players playing together, because before, you would have a 16U team with 11- and 12-year-olds on it, and that can be a deterrent to player development."

When the Webster Lady Cyclones program was founded seven years ago, there was one team, a U19 squad, with players ranging in age from 7 to 19 playing in select tournaments.

Now Webster's blossoming program, which boasted two state title-winning teams last year, has a beginner program with 10 girls plus a 14U and 19U travel team. Brittany Romano plays center and left wing on the 19U team and started playing hockey on a boys team because both her father and brother played.

"Hockey is mainly a male sport, and in the past, girls would be intimidated by it (the physical nature of the sport)," said Brittany, 15, a sophomore at Penfield in her seventh year playing hockey.

"Now that girls can see other girls playing, while the interest has always been there, now there are more chances for girls to get out and play hockey."

Indeed, there are ample opportunities to get out and try girls hockey. Most rinks offer learn-to-skate programs for girls, and there are several leagues, including the Lower Lakes Female Hockey League (Ontario, Canada), Great Lakes Girls Hockey League, Monroe County Youth Hockey and the Rochester/Perinton Youth Hockey program.

Girls can also play for the Tri-County Eagles Youth Hockey team in Brockport.

For as long as she can recall, Katie Corbett has laced up her skates and played hockey. Most of the time, she played with boys, but four years ago she joined a girls team, and said she believes the nuances of the girls game has made her a better player.

"Because we can't check, we have to move the puck to our teammates faster, and that makes us be smarter with the puck," said Katie, 14, an Irondequoit freshman who plays left wing on the Edge's 14U Tier I travel team.

As much fun as Bianca Camillaci had playing on a boys team last year, she decided to switch over to the Monroe County Youth Hockey girls league this year.

"The boys game was definitely faster-paced and more aggressive, while the girls game is more technical," said Bianca, 14, an eighth-grader at the Martin Williams School, a Hilton resident and center on the 14U team.

"The camaraderie is better, too. I was never in the locker room with my team last year. There was an obvious barrier between me and the guys. Girls aren't as show-offy as the guys; there's a lot more passing and setting up of plays."

One of the complaints about girls hockey is the lack of varsity teams in the area. Sure, the girls can continue to suit up on predominantly boys teams, but there isn't a single girls varsity hockey team in Rochester.

"It's real disappointing because a lot of girls, including myself, want to play beyond youth hockey," said Rachel. "Girls can play just as well as the boys can."

There is hope for varsity girls hockey. Last November, an exhibition game occurred between teams from Webster/Penfield and Fairport/Pittsford. Gini Weslowski, 48, the director of girls hockey in Webster, views that game as proof that the girls game will one day be played in area high schools.

"We allowed girls to try a sport that's considered rough, and our girls, who have long played youth hockey, showed that they all can play the sport, and play it well," said Weslowski, a Pittsford resident.