

Two coaches are pioneers in girls hockey



Linda Mroz, left, of the Monsignor Martin Association and Nicola Adimey of Amherst/Sweet Home are the first female head coaches in the history of the 4-year-old Western New York Girls Varsity Hockey Federation. Buffalo News photo illustration; Photos by James P. McCoy and Harry Scull Jr. / Buffalo News

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on January 14, 2014 - 12:18 AM
updated January 14, 2014 at 6:37 AM

Linda Mroz calls herself mama bear and with good reason, but trailblazer would be a nickname, too, for the former Niagara women's hockey standout defenseman.

That's because she's once again a history-maker.

Mroz, the former Linda Groff, quickly helped Niagara become a legitimate contender during its infancy, which included helping the now-defunct program reach its only Frozen Four in its fourth season of play in 2002.

Now she, along with Nicola Adimey, is the answer to the following trivia question:

Who were the first women to earn head coaching positions in the Western New York Girls Varsity Hockey Federation?

Mroz has taken the reins of two-time defending Federation champion Monsignor Martin Association. She succeeded Chris Malicki after serving as his assistant for three seasons, including last year's impressive 20-0 campaign. Adimey, who grew up playing the sport in Germany and moved to the United States in 2000, now runs the show for Amherst/Sweet Home after assisting Jim Ryan last season.

"The girls like it," said Adimey. "It's almost like a natural development of girls' hockey. It's grown so much, of course, there needs to be female coaches now."

Females have been coaching sports, including hockey, for years but this is a huge step in the development of the 4-year-old Federation – and one that could potentially lead to more former players trading their shoulder pads for coaching whistles.

In Mroz, the Fed has a former Division I player with not only vast knowledge of the sport but of how the collegiate recruiting game works, giving back to the sport that gave her so much.

In Adimey, players have a coach who still laces ‘em up and plays in a competitive recreation league when she’s not at the rink coaching. Adimey quipped that she’s been in an ice rink all but four days since Nov. 1 (Thanksgiving Day, Christmas and two days during last week’s blizzard in which schools were closed).

“It’s nice to have these two women heading programs that are strong,” said Fed chairman and Williamsville coach Rick Hopkins. “They’re both very good role models for the girls in the league. I think it’s great.

“It’d be great if every team was coached by a former player.”

Mroz, who grew up playing boys hockey with the Amherst Youth Association Knights before making the transition to girls’ game and playing for the Buffalo Bisons and Nichols School, said succeeding Malicki is a “huge deal” and with good reason.

Two league championships. A perfect season. A hockey bag full of respect.

“He left a huge legacy to follow,” said Mroz, who has guided the team to a 3-2-2 start. “It’s a huge honor to follow in his footsteps. I hope I can do just as great a job as he did with the girls.”

Being a mom to three young boys has helped Mroz connect with the team as she considers coaching similar to parenthood – except she has 25 daughters waiting for her at the rink, looking for guidance. She knows when to be firm. She knows when to be encouraging. She knows when its time to let the kids have some fun.

The latter is the reason Mroz still has a few lingering purple streaks in her hair. As a way of easing freshmen onto the team, she gives them a challenge. The challenge: if any get a hat trick, she said she would dye her hair purple. First-line center Kaitlyn Drew-Mead did just that earlier in the season.

“I like to have fun but they know when I give them a look,” Mroz said, “they know they have to turn” the intensity “on.”

She is exceptionally organized which is key because her team practices only once a week. That places a premium on maximizing that one-hour of ice time to get a lot done. Mroz writes out a practice plan and goes over it with the players in the locker room before each workout. It’s something she learned from her college coach, Margot Page. If players know what they’re going to work on during practice before hitting the ice, it means they can work out at a brisker pace and get more accomplished in a short time.

It helps that most of the girls play travel hockey and get ice time with their respective youth teams to further sharpen their skills. Remember, the Fed plays mostly a Monday-Thursday schedule in an arrangement with travel teams so that those elite players have a chance at representing their respective schools/school districts while still being available weekends to play for their respective full-season teams.

Monsignor Martin players also set in-game goals of what they’d like to accomplish, besides winning. For example, if the team seemed off on its passing in practice, it sets a goal of completing a specific

amount of tape-to-tape passes in a game. Mroz charts how many times during the contest the team does that.

“Would it be nice to win a championship? Yes. Is it necessary? No,” said Mroz, who also serves as the Girls House Program Director for the Buffalo Regals Youth Hockey Association and also guided Sacred Heart to the Monsignor Martin Association girls lacrosse title last season. “My job as coach is to make sure they’re becoming better hockey players and better human beings at the end of the season.”

Sounds like parenthood, which is something Adimey is quite familiar with as well, since she’s the mother of three daughters. Her oldest, Casey, is an eighth-grader and a returning defenseman for the Katz.

Adimey has coached girls’ teams (10-under and 12-under) with Amherst Youth Hockey for six years. She joined Amherst/Sweet Home as an assistant last season.

She still gets the occasional “You’re the head coach?” reaction from other coaches or parents who don’t know her. She quickly wins them over when they realize in addition to being able to skate, shoot and pass, she knows the game.

“Guys come in, they do the hockey talk and I think they have the respect right there,” Adimey said. “As a woman, you come in it’s not good enough to just do the talk. They have to see you have the skill, too.”

She demonstrated enough during her one season as a high school assistant to earn a promotion.

“It’s all about being positive. I’m not a yeller,” said Adimey, whose team has won its last three and is off to a 4-2 start. “I like to create a positive atmosphere on the bench. I want to be encouraging but I also make it clear what I do expect and I think there’s a good balance for that.

“Last year I didn’t know what to expect. I was so impressed with the skill level. I was just so happy to be a part of it. When Jim called and asked me to take over” the program, “I said, why not?”

Why not, indeed.

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