



The Rev. Dave Richards of St. Gregory the Great blesses the Monsignor Martin girls hockey team before the players take to the ice in the first-ever girls varsity hockey game in Western New York.  
John Hickey/Buffalo News.

## Dropping the puck on a new era

### Wait is over for seven teams in WNY Girls Ice Hockey Federation

By **Charlie Specht**

NEWS STAFF REPORTER

Updated: December 2, 2010, 08:56 AM

The puck dropped on the first girls varsity hockey season in Western New York history Wednesday night, and with it soared the hopes of legions of girls who finally got to wear their school colors on the ice.

The Monsignor Martin Association team defeated Williamsville, 5-1, in Amherst's Northtown Center before about 90 people.

But supporters were cheering as much for the game as for the culmination of the five-year effort of parents working with school districts to form the Western New York Girls Ice Hockey Federation.

"We're really speechless," said parent advocate Isabell Posner. "It's great that so many girls are getting the chance to play the game finally for their schools. It's such a great game. I

mean, how can you not have girls hockey in Western New York? We've got Canada up north, it's the hockey seat of America and we didn't have it."

The formation of the seven-team league -- with four teams funded by school districts and three privately funded -- means Western New York is no longer one of the few areas in the state without girls varsity hockey (only Nichols School had fielded a team). Minnesota, by comparison, has more than than 200 girls teams.

But in an era of tight budgets, organizers said it was demand that made the difference.

School districts, wary of adding a sport when already making cutbacks in existing sports, signed on after finding out so many area girls -- most of whom have long played travel hockey in boys leagues -- were registered with USA Hockey.

Posner estimated there were 1,000 area girls registered with the sport's governing board, and she said nearly 100 students tried out for the Williamsville team, which is composed of players from each of the district's schools.

The league includes teams from Williamsville, Kenmore, West Seneca, Lancaster, and combined teams from Frontier/Orchard Park, Amherst/Sweet Home and the Monsignor Martin Association.

Minutes before the game, the anticipation peaked in the Monsignor Martin locker room, filled with girls from the area's Catholic schools.

"The girls were so excited," said Ann Marie Gajewski, manager of the team. "The locker room was electric."

The girls gathered as the Rev. David Richards of St. Gregory the Great Catholic Church in Amherst said a blessing over the team.

"He said a prayer and he told us to go out there and kick some butt," said Tara Barnhardt, a Monsignor Martin forward.

Barnhardt made sure her team did just that, scoring the game's -- and the league's -- first goal and following up with two more to complete the hat trick.

Two of Barnhardt's classmates at St. Mary's in Lancaster described her as "nervous" in the lead-up to the game, but her mother, quintessential "hockey mom" Cindy Barnhardt, said Tara and her teammates were just plain excited.

"When we first found out it was going to happen, she came out of her bedroom screaming, saying, 'They're doing it! They're going to have a team!'" she said.

Gajewski, the manager, said her team was able to offset some of the costs by ordering just one set of jerseys and keeping practice and game ice time, the most expensive part of the sport, to a minimum.

Organizers of some teams estimated the bill to be at least \$22,000 for each team, but Gajewski said parents at the Catholic schools pay about \$650 per girl. She said the team would also be hosting fundraisers.

Gajewski said the benefits of the sport far outweigh its costs.

"It's good for them," she said. "It's a good aerobic activity, it teaches them time management because it's so demanding. There are a lot of positives they get from this."

Posner, the parent advocate, said as long as girls from a young age want to play hockey in the sport's various travel leagues, the federation shouldn't have a problem sustaining itself. She also said having a varsity program to shoot for makes all the difference.

Bill Pavone, the parent representative for the Kenmore team, said women's hockey programs at Niagara University and the University at Buffalo should only encourage those girls.

And parents and students alike say there's nothing like pulling a varsity jersey over your head.

"[Now] you have girls playing a high school sport," Posner said. "Before, you had to be a die-hard."

Posner's daughter, Abby, is one of those diehards. Posner, who plays on the Amherst/Sweet Home team, gathered rink-side to watch the inaugural game with seven of her teammates. In between high-pitched shouts for her friends, she explained the dedication and commitment required to play the sport she loves.

Tuesday night, Posner played in a 10 p.m. scrimmage before showing up for a 5:30 a.m. Amherst/Sweet Home practice. Then it was on to school and back to the rink again for the game.

"A lot of people think girls [can't play]," she said, "but it's fun, and we can do it just as good as the boys."

[e-mail: cspecht@buffnews.com](mailto:cspecht@buffnews.com)