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Williamsville schools may add ice hockey team

Dropping the puck for high school girls

By Sandra Tan NEWS STAFF REPORTER

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When Kimberly Berus straps on a pair of ice skates, they don't come with the figure skating blade and toe pick. She wears hockey skates, the kind that accompany a stick, helmet and pads.

The 17-year-old junior at Williamsville North High School has been playing ice hockey since she was 5.

"It's just a great feeling," she said. "It's just a lot of fun to feel the adrenaline going through your body, when you step on the ice and when you touch the puck, and when you score a goal."

Kimberly would love to play for her high school, but no public school district in Western New York has seriously considered sponsoring a girls ice hockey team — until now.

The Williamsville Central School District recently listed a preliminary budget request of \$25,000 to field a single, districtwide girls varsity ice hockey team for next school year.

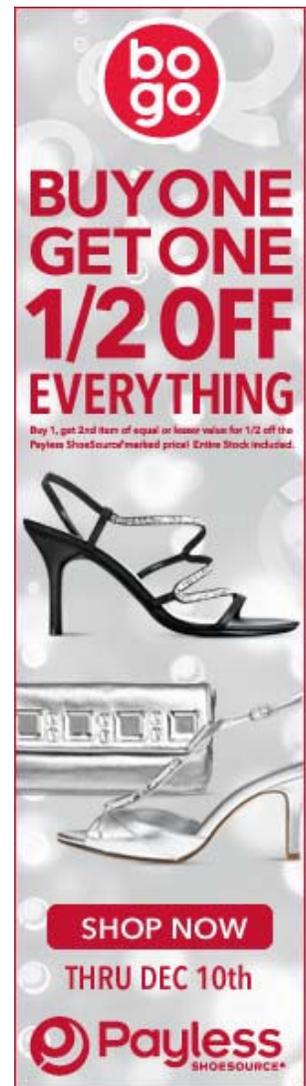
"We're ecstatic," said Kimberly's mother, Pam Berus, who has spearheaded a campaign to bring girls hockey to the district.

Some big obstacles remain before the girls team hits the ice.

"Girls ice hockey is going to happen — it's just a matter of time," said Jim Rusin, the district's athletic director. "Everything needs to be lined up." Rusin said the Williamsville district likes to be a pioneer in school sports offerings. But he stressed that the recommendation for a girls hockey team is still tentative and contingent on factors beyond the school district's control.

"It's very preliminary," he said.

The only high school in the region that currently sponsors a girls ice hockey team is Nichols, a private school. Nichols started a girls varsity team in 1995 and has remained the first and only school in Western New York to field a female team.



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Frank Sacheli, who has coached both boys and girls hockey, said he's found it more enjoyable to coach girls.

Girls are just as intense as boys when it comes to on-ice play, he said. But girls seem better at coping with losses and difficulties. They recover faster mentally, he said, while boys are more prone to brood over a loss until their next game.

"They seem to bounce back faster than the guys," Sacheli said. "It's more fun for them."

Roughly 900 girls ages 18 and under play ice hockey on all-girls teams in the Western New York region, said David Braunstein, west section president of New York State Amateur Hockey. Their play has been limited to community recreation teams.

Girls hockey is the same as boys hockey, except that checking isn't allowed. So while girls hockey is a physical, contact sport, he said, it is also a game that places more emphasis on skill, finesse and open-ice play.

A good female hockey player at the high school level has greater opportunities for college sports scholarships, and enough good players exist in Western New York to justify more public school interest in girls hockey than now exists, Sacheli said.

Currently, good female hockey players who want to play for their school end up on boys teams and play by their rules.

Gini Weslowski, a girls hockey advocate in the Rochester area and mother to a 14-year-old player, said her daughter tried out for the boys junior varsity team in the Pittsford school district. But she had to drop out because she broke her arm in a checking incident while playing on a boys travel team.

"I'd rather her play with girls," Weslowski said.

Some of the problems that face girls hockey are the same problems that faced boys hockey a decade ago.

The sport is expensive. Good-quality equipment alone can run \$1,000. And public schools — unlike Nichols — don't have the luxury of owning their own ice rink. Renting ice time costs.

But Williamsville's three high schools have offered boys ice hockey for many years. Those three teams stand among 12 public schools participating in the Western New York Varsity Hockey Federation, which also includes four Catholic schools.

The district is also fortunate to have the Amherst Pepsi Center within its boundaries for practices and games. Demand is there, too.

District parents and students have asked for a team for the past two years. If the district started a varsity girls team next year, they contend, 45 eligible girls would show up for tryouts. They made a big presentation to the school board in June last year pressing their cause and invoking gender equity rights under Title IX.

"It was a huge group, and they put on a fabulous presentation," said School Board member Camille Eichhorn.

If Williamsville starts a team, community organizations like the Amherst Youth Hockey Association could see the flight of strong players from their own, competitive teams, said Steve Godin, who coaches a 16- and-under girls travel team and has six players who attend Williamsville schools.

"It's good for girls hockey to get that kind of exposure," he said of the Williamsville team concept. "There's just going to be some growing pains during the season."

The biggest barrier to a girls team in the Williamsville district isn't the lack of ice time, the lack of interest, or the problematic scheduling. It's the lack of competition.

“Right now, there would be no one for us to play,” Rusin said.

If Williamsville were to form a team, it would join the New York State Girls Varsity Ice Hockey League, which currently consists of nine teams, all in the east and northeast end of the state.

The closest teams to Williamsville — Oswego, Ithaca and Skaneateles — are at least a three-hour bus ride away.

Over the past year or two, however, interest has grown in the greater Rochester area in promoting girls hockey at the school district level.

The Hilton Central School District has begun a girls intramural ice hockey program. And a wildly successful club exhibition game was held last year pitting teams of players from rival Rochester-area high schools.

Rusin and Williamsville Superintendent Howard Smith said a commitment of teams from the Rochester area is critical for the district to move forward on girls ice hockey.

“We can’t invest the money and build a team if we don’t have teams to play,” Smith said.

Williamsville was one of the pioneering school districts for boys hockey. The desire exists to do the same with girls ice hockey, said Smith and Rusin.

But practical considerations can’t be overlooked.

“I hate to get everybody excited here and have nowhere to go,” Rusin said. But, he added, “We’d like to be leader if it happens.”

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