

POTENTIAL FOR GROWTH

UPSTATE NEW YORK GIRLS

HOCKEY: Players, coaches take game seriously

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ARTICLE OPTIONS



Ginette Cornett and Katherine Sweeney looked at Monday's game in the same light.

Potsdam and Canton were facing off in a potential preview of the Upstate New York Girls Hockey championship game at Pine Street Arena in Potsdam. The exhausting battle ended in a scoreless tie, as the two teams prepare to chase their league crown. Cornett and the Sandstoners came up short last season. All Sweeney and the Golden Bears want is a shot.

But a title isn't either team's most pressing desire.

The fact that the New York State Public High School Athletic Association (NYSPHSAA) doesn't recognize varsity girls hockey with a state championship doesn't matter to the league's coaches or players. NYSPHSAA would sponsor the sport and sanction a state title if four programs existed in six different sections. The upstate league currently has 13 teams comprised of players from five sections.

Cornett and Sweeney agreed that the upstate crown is considered their state championship. But the continued expansion of the league merits greater recognition.

"We appreciate having a state title, and we've been close a couple years now," Cornett said. "But I think just having the chance to play means more."

PHOTOS



COLLEEN WHITE / WATERTOWN DAILY TIMES

Co-captains for the Alexandria girls hockey team are, from left, Madison Cantwell, Jamie Wiley and Morgan Garlock.

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OPPORTUNITY IS THE REWARD

Whether it's at practices or in games, Terry Satterley has been marveled by the possibilities of the Alexandria girls hockey team.

Sure, the number of losses outweighs the wins, and a few girls on the roster haven't skated with a stick before. But the Purple Ghosts' head coach believes the program has a bright future as its inaugural season wraps up.

"The passion is there," Satterley said. "They want it badly enough to do all these things. They funded it themselves. It's not school funded. If they're willing to do that much, they want it badly."

Six teams have been added to the Upstate New York Girls Hockey League since 2007, which includes squads from Massena and St. Lawrence Central. The league began with four teams in 1998. Carl Normandin, Section 10's athletics coordinator, said the statewide interest in joining the league has been vast. An advisory board will meet with NYSPHSAA officials to discuss expansion and other matters in June.

"I think most people see it as a viable opportunity for girls to enjoy the sport," said Potsdam coach Joe Stark. "We have places where kids want to play. When you have a legitimate high school team in your town, the younger girls know they have a place for them down the road."

While the number of minor girls hockey teams in the area is slim, mergers have helped the programs succeed. Canton has on its roster players who attend Ogdensburg Free Academy, Lisbon and Madrid-Waddington.

"When the Ogdensburg girls came over, it was just like they were at home, playing with us," Sweeney said. "It's like we're not even from two different towns."

The one option girls had for varsity competition was battling for time on the boys team. In most cases,

girls are buried on the bench for games. Practices were the only place where they could enhance their toughness and skill.

"I know a couple of girls who played with the boys, hoping it would make them better hockey players," Cornett said. "I think if you're going to play with girls in college, you should play with girls in high school."

For those who won't play in college, it's a chance to build a rapport with classmates and girls from other schools. It's also an opening for girls to learn about hockey. Cornett said Potsdam rolled out three offensive lines for the first time last week.

"It was so fun to see them out there and get a chance to play," Cornett said. "In other places, you wouldn't get the chance because it's so competitive."

Cornett, Sweeney and others are seeking to extend their hockey careers collegiately next season. It's a certainty that playing in the upstate league has helped, but a little extra time is needed elsewhere to catch the eyes of college coaches.

FUTURE EXPOSURE

Canton head coach Christin Powers would've done things differently had the upstate league grown to this extent years ago.

Powers, a Canton native, grew up playing minor hockey and participating on the Golden Bears' boys team. She earned time at St. Lawrence University for four years and graduated in 2005. If she was playing today, Powers would've changed her route to SLU.

"At this time, I would've definitely played (with) girls," Powers said. "The level of play has come along dramatically. The skill level is great."

Syracuse University women's coach Paul Flanagan said Division I schools recruit players who come from established varsity girls hockey programs or are standouts on travel teams. The former St. Lawrence coach said more than 130 high schools in Minnesota offer varsity girls hockey, making it a hot bed for prospects.

"The elite girl with Division I or good Division III potential won't get recruited out of Canton, Potsdam or out in Skaneateles," Flanagan said. "If I had my pick, I'd watch Cornwall's under-19 team play (in Ontario). It's about continued growth in the programs and developing depth within individual programs. Not just in talent, but in numbers."

Local exceptions include Alley and Katie Bero from Akwesasne. They played for Salmon River, but also competed on a team in Canada. Alley is a freshman at SLU, while Katie is in her first year at Syracuse.

Another area standout who chose a different avenue was Brasher Falls native Marianna Locke. She played and contributed to the boys hockey team at St. Lawrence Central, where her father, Mickey, was the Larries' head coach. She was also a standout for the North Country Ice Storm club team, which is based in Potsdam. Locke is a senior captain at St. Lawrence University this season.

The success of the Adirondack region at the Empire State Summer Games assisted in evolving the upstate league's talent pool. Adirondack has won five gold medals this decade and eight medals overall. Sweeney and Cornett played on the regional team the last two years.

"Winning the gold (in 2007) with the Beros on the team definitely improved this league," Sweeney said. "It got a lot more girls to come out and play hockey."

The opportunity to try out for the scholastic squad may disappear with reports of the possible cancellation of the 2009 games looming. The chances of developing premier talent may be rare, but Powers is still optimistic.

"I don't think the high school level is going to reach anywhere near the level needed to compete in Division I," Powers said. "But you never know. It could, and I hope it does."

EXPANSION ON HOLD?

The country's economic crisis could have a trickle-down effect on the upstate league.

Nina Van Erck, NYSPHSAA's executive director, said that tight school budgets and state cuts may temper enthusiasm to start varsity girls hockey programs next year.

But Van Erck said, "With the programs we currently have, would I love to see the sport grow? Absolutely."

Satterley said boosters and parents have spent hours on fundraisers just to aid Alexandria in making road trips to Ithaca and Skaneateles. But long bus rides and a list of expenses haven't deterred the Purple Ghosts from moving forward.

"I think that'll happen," said Satterley of the league's expansion. "It'll be like other sports. Girls lacrosse was that way. I think we have a lot of interest."

For now, the league is in solid standing. It will begin an eight-team playoff Feb. 7 with the final four scheduled for the following weekend and Pine Street Arena. So in 10 days, Cornett and Sweeney may see each other again on the same ice, looking to avenge the scoreless tie from Monday.

"Coming out today, we all looked at it like this could well be the state championship game," Sweeney said. "With the state or not, it's still very important."

Even with the potential title implications, more importantly, it's an opportunity to play another day.