

Girls hockey grows with Lady RoughRiders

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Cedar Rapids Prairie sophomore Madeline Rainey is a three-sport athlete. She runs cross country and plays tennis for the Hawks, but leaves her classmates behind three evenings a week and nearly every weekend from late September through early April to play ice hockey with the Cedar Rapids Lady RoughRiders.

It is, “by far,” her favorite sport, she says. “When you get out on the ice, it’s so exciting, and there are so many things you can improve on, like skating and stick-handling. Nothing can compare to having fun on the ice.”

Like most of her teammates on the 20-member [Lady RoughRiders](#) squad, Rainey began playing hockey with her brother about the time she started kindergarten. “My dad and brother both played, and my brother was always at the rink, so it was kind of a family thing,” she says.

Rainey and other girls who fell in love with the sport at the newly opened Cedar Rapids Ice Arena played with the boys teams for several years.

That changed in 2008 with the arrival of Kevin Brooks as hockey director at the arena.

Former RoughRider started girls team

“I grew up working with girls hockey my whole life,” says Brooks, a native of the Boston area who coached in Massachusetts’ elite Assabet Valley girls hockey program.

Brooks played with the Cedar Rapids RoughRiders from 2001 to 2003, went on to play college hockey, then started the Minnesota Junior Mavericks girls hockey program before returning to Cedar Rapids.

As soon as he arrived, Brooks says, a couple of girls who played hockey at the arena asked if he would consider starting a girls team in Cedar Rapids. “I held a meeting and tryout to see if we had enough talent. We did have some very good girls, but what really convinced me was their dedication and their parents’ commitment,” he says.

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The team began with 13 players in the fall of 2008 and soon joined the Heartland Girls Hockey League, a division of USA Hockey.

During the season, the team practices three evenings a week, combining ice time with dry-land workouts focused on speed and agility. Two to three weekends per month the Lady Riders travel to “showcase weekend” events around the Midwest where five teams each play four games, two on Saturday and two on Sunday. The Lady Riders play one tournament per season on their home ice, providing them with a rare opportunity to garner attention from local friends, family and media.

Along with Rainey, Metro preps on the current team include Jessica Carlson from Prairie, Maddie Flesner and Clara Gilbert from Kennedy, Haley Schmelzer from Washington and Lauren Netz and Natasha Nichols from McKinley Middle School. Girls ages 13 to 19 are eligible to play for the team.

Other Lady Riders hail from Solon, Iowa City, West Branch, Mason City and Des Moines, says Brooks. “It’s unbelievable the commitment they make, driving to practices three evenings a week.”

Devotion and hard work pay off

Brooks says the girls’ devotion has paid off, as the team’s prowess has grown steadily during its first three seasons in the league.

“Our first year it was really tough,” he recalls. “The girls were in the locker room at one event and heard girls from another team saying, ‘We’re not worried about this team. They’re from Iowa.’”

By the end of the second season, no one was overlooking the Lady Riders, as they built a winning record, played well at the regionals and made their first trip to the national tournament. “The boys team is jealous of the girls for being the first team from Iowa to go to the national tournament,” Brooks notes with a grin.

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Team to play in national tournament

This year the Lady Riders went 19-2-4 during the regular season to finish second in the league. After a strong performance at the regional tournament in Pittsburgh, they are headed to Anaheim, Calif., for the national tournament on March 29.

"They continue growing every year," Brooks says. "It's been great. They are the first girls team from the state of Iowa, and they're getting a lot of recognition in the hockey world and with USA Hockey.

"Last year they finished ninth in the country and this year they are ranked fourth prior to the tournament. We're playing teams that have had hockey for many years, and our girls are right there with them.

"It comes down to the girls," he adds. "They all want to get better, and they all want to play college hockey."

Colleges look to team for talent

For coach and players alike, playing at the next level is the ultimate goal.

"I started the program to give girls the opportunity to play and the opportunity to play after high school," Brooks emphasizes. "For me, to move someone on to the next level, that's my big goal. Out of the 20 girls on our team right now, there are six that will no doubt in my mind play hockey in college."

Among them is the team's star player, Jordan Fencel, who made the tough choice to play hockey for the Lady Riders rather than basketball at Solon High School. Next year she'll be playing hockey at Division III Nichols College in Massachusetts, with a full academic scholarship paying her way.

Brooks describes Fencel as "the ultimate power forward. She's got size and power, and her

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tenacity is such that she would skate through the boards to get a goal.” With palpable pride, he notes that she is the first local prep – boy or girl – to go on to play collegiate hockey.

Although only a 10th grader, Rainey already has gotten inquiries from a handful of colleges as well, based on her play at the regional tournament in Pittsburgh.

“I would love to make D-I hockey anywhere,” she says. “That would be my dream.”

Plenty of girls share that ambition, according to Brooks. High school girls hockey is growing exponentially around the country, with emergent programs in California, Florida and Texas taking their place alongside traditional hockey hotbeds in the North and Northeast.

With more and more Lady RoughRider wannabes taking to the ice, Iowa is beginning to carve out its own hockey tradition, says Brooks. “We used to have one or two girls in our youth program. Now it’s 10 or 15.”