

Pat has 'ice' in her blood

Photos by DAVE PETERSON



Pat Denny is hugged by Steve Neilsen, captain of hockey team, after victory over Ames

By SHERRY RICCHIARDI

Special Staff Writer

MASON CITY, IA — When Pat Denny slips into a bulky hockey uniform and takes the ice, it's unlikely spectators can tell by looking that Denny's a girl — the only girl playing on a high school hockey team in Iowa.

During games, Denny, 17, of nearby Charles City, prefers being "one of the guys." The sturdy 5-foot 5-inch senior takes the hits and spills along with the rest of the team.

Denny's appearance on the all-male hockey team last year shocked some and angered others — especially some of Mason City's opponents.

It threw the Iowa High School Hockey League into a tizzy. Suddenly, it was confronted with the issue of whether to allow girls to compete on boys' teams.

Mark Mahoney, head of Waterloo's Columbus High School hockey program, says he is upset over the way the league handled the issue.

He particularly is angry over the cost of a conference phone call, a procedure allowing several people — in this case, league representatives from around the state — to talk with each other at one time. The bill tallied more than \$400, according to Mahoney, "and most of it was spent discussing the 'Mason City situation,' as they referred to it," he says.

"IT MADE ME especially angry since the hockey league only took in around \$2,000 last year. No one had the guts to come out and say whether or not she should play."

Mahoney's opinion: "It's a game, and any kid good enough should be able to play. It was her option. If she tried out and made it, why not?"

Just before the district play-offs last season, the league's governing board ruled that Denny could not compete. Mason City Coach John Tette appealed the decision; the team voted unanimously not to play in the tournament without her.

Says team captain Scott Huff, "Sure, Pat screws up sometimes, but we all

do. She keeps up with us pretty good. We stuck up for her when people tried to give her grief last year. We're behind her all the way."

The decision later was changed and Denny did play.

When Denny first started playing with the Mason City team, other teams did not realize it. "We didn't see any reason to call attention to it," Coach Pete says.

But, word got out and trouble followed. "I took a lot of verbal abuse from guys on other teams. In fact, I still do. But, that was bound to happen," Denny says.

"I know a few have tried to rough me up because I'm a girl. But, I've never been in a situation on the ice that I couldn't handle."

PETE SAYS, "Pat can take it with the best of them. She's a tough player

in my opinion."

Al Murdoch, an assistant professor of physical education and hockey coach at Iowa State University, who also heads the league, says he favors organizing a girls' hockey program in Iowa. "But until then, girls will have to try out for boys' teams," Murdoch says.

Denny talked recently about how she's adapted to playing with an all-male team.

"I'm really not out to prove anything. I just love to play hockey and there aren't any girls' teams around. I tried out and made it just like anybody else," she says.

"I also love to sew and bake. I'm pretty normal except for playing hockey on a boys' team. I guess some people think that's pretty strange."

When the team plays road games,

Denny dresses in the ladies room at the arena and joins the team in its locker room. At home games she dresses at home.

"The first time I walked into the locker room, I was scared to death. Everything stopped. One guy leaned over to another and said, 'There she is. There's the girl.' It was embarrassing. Now, everybody seems pretty used to me."

AT FIRST, the candid locker-room conversation embarrassed Denny. "I'd turn red and sit with my head down, staring at my skates," she recalls. "But, I don't blush as much anymore. I've grown immune to the way guys talk and to some of the locker-room goings on. Some players still get halfway through a sentence and say, 'Hey, there's a girl in here.'"

Competing with males comes naturally to her, Denny says. "I've been doing it all my life. I used to play sandlot baseball and football with my brother and his friends. When they went out for Little League or high school football, I left out. But, I've always felt closer to guys."

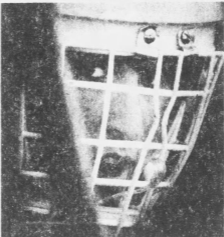
Denny, who has lettered in girls' softball and golf at Charles City High School, credits her brother, Mike, 20, with giving her the courage to pursue her sports interests.

"Mike often goes to out-of-town games with me. He checks the locker room to make sure everybody's decent before I walk in."

Will she try out for a men's team in college? "I don't think so," Denny says. "I might if I felt it was as good as they are and if there weren't any women's teams around."

"It was easy for me to break into the Mason City league because not many guys were interested. If I'd lived in a bigger city with more competition, I might not have made it."

Her future goals: "I'd like to study law or business. But mainly, I'd like to compete in hockey again someday. If they ever formed a women's professional hockey league in this country, I'd play. Why shouldn't I spend my life doing what I love most?"



Pat Denny, of Charles City is Iowa's only girl playing high school hockey. The 5-foot 5-inch senior prefers being "one of the guys." She plays for nearby Mason City.