

Amateur teams doing well

Hockey growing in popularity in Iowa

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DES MOINES (IDPA)- Like a glacier inching its way towards Iowa from the hinterlands, the sport of ice hockey is slowly but surely catching on in the Hawkeye state from our neighbors to the North—from the youth to the professional ranks.

The last time Iowa had a pro hockey franchise was in 1974. The Des Moines Capitals of the International Hockey League disbanded then, due to economic woes.

But things look a little better in the amateur ranks. Iowa currently has four teams in the Southern Division of the U.S. Hockey League, in Dubuque, Des Moines, Waterloo and

Sioux City. The Northern Division consists of Green Bay, Wisconsin, and Bloomington, Austin and St. Paul in Minnesota.

Ivan Prediger, coach and general manager of the first-year Des Moines team, said the teams from Iowa are doing "reasonably well."

"The teams in Iowa are drawing better than the teams in the Northern Division, because those clubs have so many other teams and schools to compete against for fans," said the 40-year-old Prediger.

The Des Moines Buccaneers are currently leading the league in attendance, averaging more than 2,000 persons per game.

The eight teams, which have

a 48-game season, consist of players 20 years of age and younger. The players are not paid, and college amateur rules apply.

"We have players from all over the United States. They come from Minnesota, North Dakota, New York, Wyoming, Iowa, Missouri and other states," said Prediger, who was known as "Ivan The Terrible" during his ten years of play in the International League.

Prediger said that currently a lot of the players are still in high school, or else they are helped to find jobs.

"The goal for most of these boys is to get a college scholarship," he said.

At the high school level, ice hockey is not a sponsored sport

by the Iowa High School Athletic Association, according to David Harty, assistant executive secretary of the IHSAA.

"We will sponsor programs that will attract membership," he said. "We usually need 75 high schools to show interest, but that has never happened. We have had some inquiry, but it has not gained momentum like it has in Minnesota."

Minnesota has 149 sponsored high school ice hockey teams.

Harty said there are four main reasons why high school hockey has not caught on in Iowa as it has in other states: There are very few indoor rinks, there is a lack of practice time and coaching, there have not been enough schools interested and the expense is too

great.

Nonetheless, there are currently nine high schools throughout the state that have club teams, which are not sponsored by the school. There are teams from Urbandale, Valley (West Des Moines), Dowling and Hoover-Roosevelt (both of Des Moines), Ames, Mason City, Waterloo, Columbus (Waterloo) and Sioux City. Waterloo is the defending state champion.

As for the near future, Harty does not see great prospects for high school hockey in Iowa.

"With the combination of a lack of facilities and coaches, and the high expense involved, there just has not been enough interest," he said.

The problem with the youth

programs throughout the state is that they have always suffered from a lack of facilities.

According to Robert Punslan of the Des Moines Ice Arena, there are 320 participants in their youth programs, from the ages of four to 17. But, he also said, there is little opportunity for growth.

"Our program is at the same level as it was five years ago," he said. "We can only accommodate so many kids."

Punslan said that in addition to the Des Moines programs, there are also youth leagues in Waterloo and Sioux City, and Dubuque is embarking on a program. Mason City also has a program, although it has no indoor facilities.