

# Columbus faced future in decision to discontinue hockey program

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High school sports in Waterloo lost what has been a source of pride this week with Columbus High's decision to discontinue, at least temporarily, its highly successful hockey program.

It's a program that brought five state championships back to the metro area during 15 rewarding seasons, as well as starting a number of players toward college careers and teaching hundreds of others the value of sportsmanship and competition.

To be sure, it wasn't an easy decision. It was more of a surrender as those closest to the program reluctantly accepted the cold facts — there are no longer enough seasoned players available to put a team on the ice.

Columbus parents and players, principal Rev. Walter Brunkan and coach Mike Brown gathered last Sunday night to face the future. Looking at a maximum roster of 15 players, many without quality experience, the group voted not to continue.

"My recommendation was that there

weren't enough players to go on and they had to get on with it," says Brown, who took his players aside as the meeting wound down and encouraged them to keep pursuing the sport with the public school Warriors team.

"If we were borderline, everybody wanted to try it," Brown continues. "We weren't borderline."

The bottom line is the safety of the players, Brown explains.

"I don't want anybody to think this thing was abandoned because of any won-loss record," he says. "We just didn't want to send anybody out there on a regular basis who is not going to be able to compete physically and capably."

Both Brown and Long think the decision was the only possible one.

"I think we thought this thing through," says Brown, "but everybody realized the numbers just aren't there. I think we explored every avenue. It just wasn't going to happen."

"I think we explored all the alternatives, definitely," adds Long, in his first year as



Long



Brown

Columbus' A.D. "I think the hockey parents are the ones who made the decision and they are the ones with the most knowledge about the situation."

For the past few years, the Columbus program has managed to keep its balance despite slippery footing.

Back in 1975, Brian Dutkowski had 43 players try out for the first Sailor team. He came to expect around 35 each year and never dipped lower than 30.

That's twice the average of 15 players Brown has been working with. He says he's been fortunate that most of those were seasoned hockey players.

"This year, we would have had 14 or 15 kids on the roster," Brown explains. "We've gotten away with that the last two or three years, but all of those kids were able to go out and sustain the physical end of it. With the 15 we might have had this year, we just didn't have the confidence they would be able to go out and do that."

"There's always been a hole there in the numbers. We knew it was coming."

Meanwhile, the Warriors' team has also seen a decline. Where 50 players were once not uncommon, 35 to 40 is more the standard today, says Warriors president Randy Gericke.

Percentage-wise, the decline might be comparable, but the Warriors' base is much

larger to begin with.

There are two obvious factors that have pinned the numbers of younger players against the boards.

First, the foundation of that age group in the Junior Hawks program that feeds the two high school teams had slowly eroded.

"I think it relates directly back to the recession a number of years ago," Brown says. "It was just too expensive at the time for kids to learn or start to play hockey."

There was also an exodus of young parents from the metro area during the recession, forced to relocate in search of employment.

"Hockey numbers at that age group are just down," Brown concludes. "There just aren't the numbers there to support two teams."

It's no coincidence that the number of students at Columbus rose a decline that parallels that of the young players.

"Columbus enrollment reached an all-time

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low of 575 last year," says Long. "That's about half what it was when the program was started."

Hockey won't be forgotten around Columbus. It has long been a source of pride and was clearly the most successful program in Iowa, a model for others to follow.

Former athletic director John Foens helped get hockey established at Columbus and got the Sailor program sanctioned with the Iowa High School Athletic Association at a time when everyone else was playing club hockey.

According to Dutkowski, the first coach, a league was formed that included five Des Moines teams, two from Waterloo and Ames. Columbus won the first regular-season championship.

Then the Sailors almost missed the inaugural state tournament when a snowstorm made travel hazardous. The Warriors, in fact, stayed home.

"We took five vans through the storm and got there," Dutkowski recalls. "We ended up playing Ames in the championship game and we beat them."

That was the first of the five state titles Dutkowski's teams won in nine years. Mark Mahoney and Jim Smith each coached one year and Brown and Scott Murphy have been at the helm since.

Each coach has seen a measure of success, even as the numbers of players have declined.

Columbus was the Iowa High School Hockey League champion in 1987-88, the state tournament runner-up in 1987 and the regular-season champ and third-place tournament finisher this past winter.

But clearly, the glory days were in the early 1980s when high school hockey was a hot ticket at McElroy Auditorium.

"The most exciting part of the whole thing was when we played the Warriors," says Dutkowski. "For a stretch of three years, all the games were within one goal."

"We would get 4,000 people out there. At that time, we were always two evenly matched teams."

"The whole thing is really a shame," says Long. "There is so much tradition ... I feel very badly because of all the hard work that's happened in the past."

In some ways, it's ironic that two arch-rivals such as the Warriors and Sailors should now come together. Such a union might not have worked in the past, but times have changed.

"The best thing that happened to us was to host the state tournament together (last season)," says Brown. "We worked together very well and it came off very well."

So, when practice begins this fall, the holdovers from Columbus' program will report to Warriors coach Dave Swick.

"It's not like they haven't played with those kids before," says Brown. "Most of them came up through the Junior Hawks program together."

The Warriors, meanwhile, say they will welcome the Sailors into their fold.

"We've been talking with them most of the summer," says Gericke.

"We knew body-wise there was going to be a problem."

Gericke says a reciprocal agreement between the public schools and Columbus clears the way for athletes to play in the other system when their own no longer offers the sport.

Some details, meanwhile, remain to be worked out.

"I've got to get together with the Columbus A.D. and see what has to be done to keep them eligible to earn their letters and be honored as high school athletes," says Gericke. "We don't want them to lose anything like that."

Other adjustments will be made to include Columbus representation on the Warriors' board of directors and in the cheerleading corps.

The hope of the Iowa High School Hockey League is that Columbus' plight is an isolated situation.

"Everybody we talked to at our last meeting indicated their numbers are coming up," says IHSHL commissioner Gary Donaldson of Waterloo.

And even without the Sailors, the league will grow by one team this season.

Omaha will have two teams, instead of the one varsity league member it had last year and St. Joseph, Mo., has been accepted into the league.

Realignment of the two division in the IHSHL will be necessary with Columbus' exodus. Donaldson says the West Division will likely include the two Omaha teams, St. Joseph, Valley-Dowling and Sioux City.

The East will be made up of Waterloo, Ames, Dubuque, Mason City and Urbandale.

"I think they'll miss Columbus," says Brown. "It's been a very positive thing for all of us."

Hockey hasn't been buried at Columbus. It's just in a coma. The hope is that the day will come when the Sailors will be back on the ice, taking up where they left off.

"There's some money that was left there and new jerseys and stuff," says Brown. "That stuff will all be put away. I imagine every year the situation will be looked at. But I think it will be three or four years before it can be considered again, realistically."

Long says the money has been put away for a period of not more than five years. If Columbus hockey isn't back on the ice by then, it will be used elsewhere.

A resurgence of interest at the youth level is what lends hope.

"It depends on how many of these kids stick with it," says Brown, who is considering coaching a Junior Hawks team. "Last year, numbers in the Junior Hawk program were up considerably."

"There's a good nucleus there. We just have to let them grow up."

In the meantime, Brown will miss what has been an important part of his life for the past several years.

"It was very rewarding for me," he says. "I got an awful lot out of it. I just hope I get the chance to do it again."

A lot of people share the same hope.