

Hockey Teams Cross High School Lines

Love of Sport Binds 39 on Omaha Clubs

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There is no room for high school rivalries when it comes to the hockey scene in Omaha.

After all, the two teams — the Junior Lancers and the Gladiators — consist of players from several different schools. But these 39 players all have one common thread that bonds them together, and that's love for the sport.

It might surprise people who think the only hockey played in Omaha takes place at Ak-Sar-Ben Coliseum in front of sellout crowds each weekend. But unlike the Omaha Lancers of the United States Hockey League, these two teams play in front of mostly friends and family.

"I think every player on both teams has the dream to play for the Lancers someday," Junior Lancers defenseman John Newell said, "but we know that not everybody gets that shot."

The Junior Lancers and the Gladiators are two of nine teams that compete in the Iowa High School Hockey League. Since hockey is not a varsity sport in Nebraska, the Iowa league presents the only opportunity for high-school age players from

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HIGH SCHOOL HOCKEY: The captains for the Omaha teams in the Iowa High School Hockey League are, from left, Eric Johnson, Omaha Gladiators; John Newell, Junior Lancers; Ryan Perell, Gladiators; and Kyle Korbel, Junior Lancers.

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Omaha to play in a competitive league.

That also means there is a lot of travel on the weekends. Other teams in the Iowa league are located in Des Moines, Sioux City, Mason City, Ames, Dubuque, Waterloo and St. Joseph, Mo.

"The travel can get to you after a while," Junior Lancers Coach Scott Pionk said. "But the kids who get into hockey here really love it and know that's something they have to put up with."

Pionk, who also is an assistant coach with the Omaha Lancers, has to really love what his Junior Lancers have accomplished this season. The team finished 24-0 in league play to capture the West Division of the Iowa league.

"We were 17-6-1 last year with a pretty young team, so I guess I'm not totally surprised by it," Pionk said. "We've won six games by one goal, so I guess we're lucky that we didn't stub our toe at least once."

The big line for the Junior Lancers consists of sophomore Tom Ogee from Millard South, sophomore Jed Örtmeyer from Omaha Central and sophomore Bob Pullum from Omaha Creighton Prep. Ogee has 20 goals and 30 assists, Örtmeyer has 19 goals and 23 assists and Pullum has 25 goals and 16 assists.

The team's two goalies are Omaha Westside senior Brian Nieman and Omaha Central senior Chad Stewart. Nieman has a 1.25 goals-against average, and Stewart is close behind with an average of 1.33.

The Gladiators, who finished with an 8-16 record, are led by defenseman Ryan Perell. The junior from Springfield Platteview has scored 41 points this season.

The team is coached by John DeCenzo, a Minnesota native who previously coached at St. Cloud State with Omaha Lancers Head Coach Mike Hastings.

"Mike and I talk quite a bit," DeCenzo said. "He likes to keep tabs on how the Omaha kids are doing."

Hastings said the quality of high school hockey on the local scene seems to be improving each year.

"I'm thoroughly impressed by what I've seen," he said. "I think there are some kids on those teams who have bright futures."

Whether that future is with the Lancers — one of the elite Junior "A" hockey teams in the nation — remains to be seen. Omaha's roster has been dominated in recent years by players from Alaska and Minnesota, where hockey is strong year-round.

"I know one of the objectives of the hockey program here in town is to put a player or two on the Lancers," Hastings said. "It's something that gets brought to our attention a lot around here."

Off the ice, there isn't such a major

difference. Defenseman Eric Johnson is one of eight players from the Gladiators who is enrolled at Millard North — the same high school attended by Omaha Lancers defenseman Chris Bogas and forwards Dean Mando and Ryan Zoller.

"We talk hockey quite a bit, but they don't really give me pointers," Johnson said. "Other than that, we just talk about what other guys in high school talk about."

Johnson said the success of the Lancers, who have sold out 143 straight games at Ak-Sar-Ben, has fueled interest in the sport.

"We've all been to the games," he said, "and I don't think there's any doubt that guys have gotten into hockey because of what they've seen out there."

While several Lancers will continue their hockey careers next season at NCAA Division I colleges, the seniors from the Iowa High school league face a more uncertain hockey future. Some might get a chance to play in junior leagues while others might play at the Division II or Division III collegiate level.

"It's hard to say what's next for a lot of these guys," Pionk said. "Hopefully, some will get tryouts with teams in the USHL. That would be the next step to try to land a college hockey scholarship."

What's next for the Junior Lancers and Gladiators this weekend is the Iowa league playoffs. The tournament begins Friday in Waterloo.

"I don't think any team from Omaha has ever won that playoff title," Pionk said. "We'd like to be the first to do it."

The Junior Lancers roster:

■ **Defense** — John Newell, sr., North; Jordan Lashmett, soph., Millard South; Jake Tesar, soph., Valley; Kyle Korbel, sr., Westside; Jeremiah Johnson, soph., Northwest; Jake Örtmeyer, jr., Central; Dan Gross, jr., Westside.

■ **Forwards** — Don Evans, sr., Creighton Prep; Dan Cowi, jr., Bellevue West; Nick Seldi, jr., North; Jed Örtmeyer, soph., Central; Joe Zyblut, jr., Bryan; Jason Swanson, sr., Millard South; Tom Ogee, soph., Millard South; Todd Davison, sr., Westside; Bob Pullum, soph., Creighton Prep; Eric Helton, jr., Creighton Prep; Tony Svedbura, sr., Central.

■ **Goalies** — Brian Nieman, sr., Westside; Chad Stewart, sr., Central.

The Gladiators roster:

■ **Defense** — Eric Johnson, sr., Millard North; Brandon Meigs, jr., Omaha Central; Jeff Wallace, sr., Burke; Ryan Perell, jr., Springfield Platteview; Scott Lowndes, sr., Millard South; Shawn Bass, soph., Council Bluffs Lewis Central.

■ **Forwards** — Jason Hooper, soph., Millard North; Cory Nelson, jr., Millard North; Randy Rath, jr., Millard North; Mike Kelly, soph., Omaha Central; Chad Hoberbier, sr., North; Scott Stephens, jr., Westside; Tim Schuman, jr., Millard North; Rob Schuman, jr., Burke; Eddie Hull, jr., Millard North; Mark Rice, jr., Millard North; Cory Consiglio, sr., Millard North.

■ **Goalies** — Mike Boenrieff, jr., Bryan; Bret Roth, jr., Millard North.