

Fair Board OKs hockey deal

The Lincoln Stars to begin 54-game season in October

BY STEVE SIPP

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A three-man ownership team and the State Fair Board finalized an agreement Friday morning that paves the way for a United States Hockey League franchise in Lincoln.

The agreement — approved by the State Fair Board with a 5-0 vote — allows the ownership group to complete \$3 million in renovations to the Coliseum at State Fair Park, with capacity seating expected to reach 4,000-plus. The agreement also finalizes terms of a 35-year lease, with the state retaining

ownership of the remodeled building.

"It's official: Hockey is coming to Lincoln," state Sen. Stan Schellpeper of Stanton, president of the State Fair Board, said during a joint press conference at the Coliseum to announce the USHL's 12th franchise, which will be named the Lincoln Stars.

The Stars — whose official colors are blue, black and gold — will begin a 54-game schedule in October. The full schedule will be announced in May.

The team has a temporary phone number — (402) 438-5555 — for information and/or ticket requests.

A coach and general manager will be named within the next two months, team officials said.

The USHL — which has a thriving franchise in Omaha — will have its player draft on May 14. The amateur league — classified as Junior A — is essentially composed of players trying to earn scholarships to Division I collegiate programs. Last season, 88 league players earned spots on Division I rosters, said USHL Commissioner Gino Gasparini of Grand Forks, N.D.

Gasparini said he is confident of the success of his league's new

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member. He likes Lincoln's size, business base and the fact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln is near State Fair Park. Plus, the Omaha Lancers — who have played before 161 straight sellout crowds of 6,124 at Ak-Sar-Ben Coliseum — have generated enthusiasm for the sport in Nebraska, Gasparini said.

"You either love hockey or you hate it — you're never middle-of-the-road as a hockey fan," Gasparini said.

The Stars' ownership team of Dr. Kent Reckewey and Dr. Tom Tegt of Lincoln and Irv Dana III, a certified public accountant from Omaha, hope fans embrace hockey in Lincoln.

"We thought Lincoln needed more activities — particularly sports activities — and more entertainment in the winter," Tegt said. "And we thought Lincoln needed more sports activity for kids during the winter."

The ownership group plans to open the arena for public skating and rental use when the team is not using the rink for games or practice. Lincoln currently is without an ice rink.

Reckewey — who lettered for the Nebraska basketball team from 1973-75 — said he hopes such groups as youth hockey leagues and the intramural program at UNL use the Coliseum ice.

"Whatever kind of fun you can have on ice, we hope to have it there," Reckewey said.

The Stars will play in a facility that has been used primarily for indoor soccer, horse shows and rodeos. Renovation will begin right after the April 11-13 UNL rodeo, according to Ken West, an architect with the Omaha firm Dana Larson

Roubal and Associates. Irv Dana III's father founded the firm.

West said preliminary plans include seating that varies from box seats to bleachers; four small locker rooms and one larger locker room for the Stars; public skate-rental facilities; a pro shop; and improved lighting.

He said work on the project will temporarily stop during the Nebraska State Fair, from Aug. 23 to Sept. 2.

State Fair Park General Manager John Skold said the agreement between the State Fair Board and the ownership team should be a boon for the fairgrounds. Terms of the deal call for State Fair Park to receive a guaranteed \$100,000 from the franchise during its first year and a minimum of \$50,000 annually, or a percentage of the franchise's gross annual receipts — whichever total is higher — in subsequent years.

The franchise amounts to a headache for groups such as the Arabian Horse Association and the UNL rodeo club, which will have to look for alternative sites for their events after this year.

"But I think hockey is a higher-value use for the facility," Skold said. "I know some people (who had shows in the Coliseum) are disappointed, but we hope to take care of that with a new facility sometime down the road."

Skold referred to the possibility of building a new arena at State Fair Park within five years.

Skold said the activities in the Coliseum during the Nebraska State Fair will proceed as scheduled because renovation will be mostly complete by then. But the July 27 Aug. 4 Lancaster County Fair will have its rodeo and horse shows at other fairground sites.