

ABOUT SPORTS

Hockey families sacrifice big to support players

By MIKE DEMPSEY
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Parents of winter sports athletes went over the checklist of sports equipment for their kids before the leaves turned colors.

There were volleyball kneepads to be purchased and wrestlers needed well-fit shoes and headgear. Members of the swim team might have wanted a slicker suit that might take a 10th of a second off their time. And I am certain various disagreements took place at the mall in October between dad and daughter, or mom and son, over the expense of basketball shoes.

The sticker shock of athletic equipment can be overwhelming for some parents. Sometimes we parents decide it is easier to overspend and allow our teenage son or daughter to upgrade on what we planned to pay. It might be easier to adjust our finances than deal with a sulking 16-year-old who's disappointed the gear they are wearing isn't advertised on ESPN.

It was similar for me two years ago when after pleading, begging and threats that without them he might not play well, I bought my son football gloves without looking at the price tag. After I questioned if the price that was rung up was accurate, the clerk attempted to ease my pain in my wallet by boasting, "The gloves should last the whole season." Should last? I was hoping for a lifetime warranty!

Spending a Saturday night at the Ames ISU Ice Arena put the cost of youth sports in perspective.

As of Mike Mostrom's son Aaron is the starting goalie for the Little Cyclones junior varsity team. If you're on the football team, all the protective equipment is loaned to the athlete for that year. The player owner needs to supply cleats and a mouth guard.

Hockey is quite a bit different. From sticks, helmets and

pads, it is the responsibility of the player or the parent. Just as a football player needs cleats or the hooper needs good basketball shoes, a hockey player must also find comfortable skates. Skates for a high school kid make expensive basketball shoes look like chump change. Mike Mostrom recently bought an early Christmas present for Aaron: a new chest protector for \$160.

The most severe difference between hockey and most other youth sports is the cost. The fees for a high school hockey player this year are \$1,400. That covers renting the ice for practice and games, as well as the charter bus that carries the team on road trips.

"This year the fee also included two pairs of hockey socks," Jo Mostrom said as she laughed. As a goalie, her son doesn't wear the same uniform socks as the rest of the team.

Hockey families get socks, but the fees do not cover the hotels and food costs for the players when they are at a visiting arena.

Although AIS athletes are often late arriving home from a road game, they do sleep in their own beds.

That is not always the case with hockey. For example, the weekend of Jan. 28, the Little Cyclones play Friday and Saturday night in Omaha, and then are back on the ice an hour away in Lincoln for an 8 a.m. game.

That is a busy weekend for a student and parents. Hockey coordinator Gary Hunziker says that generally at least one parent is chapering in the seats for the road contests.

Des Moines has two teams, the Capitals and the Oak Leafs, but with a limited number of rinks in the area, the motto for the team should be "have stick, will travel." The Ames squad will visit Davenport, Dubuque, Waterloo and Cedar Rapids, as well as Omaha and Lincoln, Neb., and Kansas City, Mo. Kansas City will host the State Tournament for varsity the

first weekend in March.

"Expenses for each player for hotels and food is about \$35 to \$50 per road game," said Russ Moore, Little Cyclone head coach. "We're on the road for 15 games this season," he added.

The hockey team could have a combined roster of 40 between the junior varsity and varsity. Unfortunately they are 13 shy of that number due to some skaters who, despite playing six or more years in the youth hockey program, decided to hang up their skates. Was it a financial or a time commitment? It's different with each family and player, but in most cases probably a little of both. The skater decides he wants to focus more on another sport, and the parents look at the easier budget and don't object too much.

Ben Habbe's son, Robbie, is a freshman on the high school team, following his brother Burton, who was a senior captain last year for the Little Cyclones. Ben Habbe believes that the financial commitment costs some skaters, but it is the time commitment required of the hockey player and parents that cause many good athletes to quit. "If you have a bunch of kids in the family, hockey can be difficult."

The Habbes travel from Ankeny each weeknight for practice and that commitment from the parents of these skaters isn't unusual.

Seven different high schools are represented on the Little Cyclone hockey team, including Gilbert, South Hamilton and Fort Dodge. The parents don't complain about the travel or for the most part the cost. The parents' biggest complaint? The yearnings of how good this team could be if various skaters played throughout their high school career.

There are still many reasons to be optimistic for Little Cyclone hockey.

After blasting Kansas City on Saturday night and then losing an overtime heartbreaker



Top: Members of the Ames High School Little Cyclones stand on the ice for the singing of the national anthem before their game against the Jr. Outlaws of Kansas City.

Left: Thomas Maddock, a junior at Desoto High School of the Jr. Outlaws, tries to sneak around Ames' Michael Seibold, senior from Roland State, to score on the Little Cyclones.

PHOTOS BY CHARLIE HULL

to Waterloo Sunday morning, the Ames team has seven wins against only three losses. Moore believes there are a few reasons for the early success, including playing better team hockey.

"Our third line is really producing this year," Moore said. Last year, he couldn't always rely on that line, and his first two lines were worn out by the third period.

Moore is also impressed with his captains, Kevin Woodward, Alex Kuuttilla and Mike Seibold.

"They have led the team and told the younger players to jump on my back," Moore said. Goaltender Tom Elston has played outstandingly, keeping Ames in every game.

The next chance to catch the Little Cyclones at home is Saturday night, Dec. 18, against

the Des Moines Capitals. The junior varsity game starts at 6:45 p.m. with the varsity squad following at 8:30 p.m.

Mike Dempsey is an Ames resident and the father of three children who participate in local sports programs.