

MHSHL, year-end tournament gives Iowa high school hockey players an outlet

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Posted Mar 7, 2020 at 11:31 AM



The team flags fly throughout the stands. The air is cold, the music is loud and the pounding of the glass around the rink gives life to the biggest high school hockey event in the state of Iowa. For a sport that isn't sponsored by the state's athletic unions, this is the pinnacle.

Hockey has had a presence at the prep level for more than four decades in Iowa, but the demands to play the sport can sometimes be taxing. The Midwest High School Hockey League, which held its tournament in Ames this weekend, is a saving grace. It encourages participation.

Todd Scebold, the parent of a former Ames hockey player and current MHSHL president, said the league is an outlet for kids seeking a path in the sport. Most youth players have been involved since early childhood, and the MHSHL gives those players structure as they grow.

"One thing I appreciated and one of the reasons I stayed involved is there are kids that need an outlet of a sport to keep them motivated and out of trouble or off the streets," Scebold said. "They may not be a pro hockey player, but they need that structure and discipline to keep them on track. I saw that with some players we had on the high school team in Ames."

Ames is one of 14 squads in the MHSHL that come from three states — Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas — with the top eight teams at the end of the regular season qualifying for the year-end tournament. Cedar Rapids and Omaha kicked off quarterfinal action Friday afternoon with fans from both squads packing the concrete and metal bleachers.

Youth spectators clamored to save spots in the first row along the glass, pounding it with each furious hit or key save by the goalie. The slanted roof captures sound. Parents filed into the middle section of the bleachers with winter coats and stocking hats while team broadcasters set up atop the action for livestreams.

The players themselves get lost in the action and pace of the game.

“We’ve all known each other for as long as I can remember so a lot of us have been friends since we were kids,” Cedar Rapids alternate captain Hunter Williams said. “It really didn’t take much to bring us all together as a team. It was just kind of pushing effort and everything like that, just kind of getting it going to win games and continue the success we’ve had lately.”

Teams in the MSHSL are non-pure teams, which means each squad is comprised of members from different area high schools. The league runs 32 games, JV and varsity both, with 16 home games and 16 road games from early November through early March.

Unlike other state-sponsored sports like football and basketball, the travel demands are typically greater in hockey. Teams from Kansas City may spend a weekend in Mason City while Fremont (Neb.) goes to Waterloo for JV and varsity games.

“Having 14 teams in three states, it’s not easy for a high school kid to take up for the most part because of the travel,” Scebold said. “You’d play like a Saturday night game or a Sunday morning game and your weekend is pretty much taken up. We are seeing an interest in the sport.”

That travel, however, can be what some teams relish the most. Blending players from different high schools is made easier by the amount of time they spend with each other.

“This year, the last couple years, teams are getting better and better,” Cedar Rapids coach Tony Paoli said. “The level of play is getting better. From one to eight, anyone can beat anyone. It just creates a great atmosphere. It’s a blast to be here.

“The traveling piece I think is the most fun for us. It’s a family. We love our home games, but we really love to travel as well.”

The MSHSL, which began in 1976, has also made strides in its competitiveness, too. Each of the three states in the league is allowed to send a team to the national tournament — Waterloo and Omaha will represent in 2020 — while the skills of virtually every team has improved through the years. The credit, Paoli said, is due to the youth programs’ strength.

“One of the things is that we’ve got some great young coaches that are coming in from the coaches in Lincoln to Ames, Omaha, Dubuque,” he said. “We’ve just got great young coaches that are coming in and really turning their programs around step by step. It’s a process, but putting an emphasis on building young men and better players. It’s paying dividends.”

While other sports in the state give athletes and opportunity to realize dreams and learn more about the games in which they play, the MSHSL has tried to do the same.

“We have players that will advance out of this league, giving them opportunities to play at the junior level or college level,” Scebold said. “I’m not saying we’re a hotbed of talent for the NHL, but it gives kids an opportunity to continue their career.”