

Girls Hockey Catches On Like Wildfire in Sussex The Avalanche, Sonics and regional midget team play huge roles

By Trudy Kelly Forsythe

SUSSEX – Female hockey is taking Sussex by storm. Ten years ago, a single girl played the entire season with the Sussex Minor Hockey League. Four years later, the Sussex Female Hockey Club started with 20 girls. Today, more than 20 play on minor hockey league teams and 70 plus play on the female club's four teams.

That's not all the female hockey being played in town either. There's also the Sussex Sonics at the high school and a competitive midget team made up of players in the province from Sussex to St. Stephen.

In fact, the midget team recently returned from Matane, Que., where the girls played in the Matane College tournament against CGEP collegiate teams from Quebec.

"They didn't win any games, but we were very competitive," said Jack Sadler, past president of the Sussex Female Hockey Club. "It was better hockey than the girls had ever played before. It was a great experience for them."

Of course, it hasn't been a bump-free skate for the young women.

A lack of other teams to play is a frequent problem and recruiting new players can be an ongoing challenge.

"We seem to have overcome that in Sussex, but lots of other associations are having problems," said Sadler.

Some people are just against girls playing hockey though it's possibly more to do with competing for ice time than it is a gender issue.

"We don't have enough rink time. Every team needs and wants more ice time, so any new team means less ice time."

Sadler added it takes a long time to get the idea girls can play hockey too. He credited the Canadian women's hockey team with helping to change that view. "The exposure of Canada's Olympic team certainly let it be known girls can play hockey."

The formation of the Sussex Female Hockey Club six years ago has certainly opened the door for many Sussex area girls to pick up hockey sticks.

"A lot of girls shy away because they don't want to play with boys," said Sadler. "They know they can play with the boys, but a lot don't want to."

Of the high school's 14 players this year, Sadler said, only two played with the boys.

In 1996

The roots of the Sussex Female Hockey Club began to grow in 1996 when Gordon Phillips, a past coach for the Sussex Regional High School hockey team and a current member of the high school's hockey committee, started the Girl's Avalanche Program under the umbrella of Sussex Minor Hockey. After the program's second year, it joined the River Valley Female Hockey Association and became known as the Sussex Female Hockey Club.

Around the same time, high school hockey was becoming popular once again. Thanks to minor hockey and the Avalanche program, Phillips said there were enough players and interest to form a girls

high school team, something the high school hadn't seen since the 1970s. A boys team formed the same year as well.

In its first two seasons, the high school girls team won the Provincial AA High School Hockey Championship. In 2002, they lost in a semifinal game. Last year was a rebuilding year for the team, but this year Phillips said the team is a contender for first place in its division. "They have the potential to go on to provincial play.

Like Sadler, Phillips believes the Canadian women's team and their silver medal performance at Nagano in 1998 is part of the reason female hockey is growing in popularity.

"It's my personal opinion that the Canadian women's Olympic program made a phenomenal difference in girls realizing they can play hockey too," he said.

He also gives credit to associations like Sussex Minor Hockey and the River Valley Female Hockey Association.

"They made the effort to promote the program," said Phillips.

"I'm really proud of what's happened."

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