



Amherst/Sweet Home's Emily Keable (18) defends as Williamsville's Nell Meosky (16) brings the puck down the ice in a girls hockey game.

John Hickey / Buffalo News

## Youth hockey: Advocates hope showcase boosts girls hockey

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The Amherst High School Tigers mascot roamed the premises and nearly 500 spectators packed into the Olympic Rink at the former Amherst Pepsi Center to watch high school kids play hockey Thursday night.

OK, so high schoolers playing hockey at the four-rink facility during the winter is not an unusual event, but it was pretty evident this contest was different. The long flowing locks of hair unhidden by protective helmets indicated as much.

Technically, it wasn't even an official high school game — just a contest involving scholastic-aged girls who are students in the Williamsville, Amherst and Sweet Home school districts.

But that's the reason Thursday's showcase was more than a game. It was another opportunity to show school officials throughout Western New York that a scholastic girls hockey league could succeed in the area.

Williamsville defeated the Amherst/Sweet Home combined team in overtime, 3-2, in a contest that was part of the Western New York Girls Hockey Showcase organized by Girls 4 (cq) Varsity Hockey. The organization consists of hockey parents dedicated to seeing girls hockey become a school-sponsored sport in the future.

The group's goal is simple but somewhat daunting. It wants to see a league similar to the Western New York Varsity Hockey Federation established for girls — except on a smaller scale.

"It's going to help," Girls 4 Varsity Hockey parent advocate Helen Drew-Meosky said of the importance of the five showcase games. "One of the questions the districts have consistently

asked is, 'Do you have the interest? Do you have enough players? Do you have players with the ability? Do you have the support?' ... The answers are a resounding yes."

A committee of area athletic directors recently recommended adding the sport, with a minimum of five teams needed to start a varsity league.

Thus far three districts (the Monsignor Martin Association schools, Williamsville and Ken-Ton) have committed to adding girls programs so long as two more say "yes" in the future.

Others taking girls hockey into consideration include showcase participants Amherst/Sweet Home and Lancaster, as well as Frontier and Orchard Park.

While Girls 4 Varsity Hockey hopes to make it happen in time for next season, at this point it's uncertain if two more districts will say yes before school budgets are finalized in the spring.

"I can't comment on any other district," said Williamsville Schools Athletic Director Jim Rusin, who secured a \$5,000 grant to help Girls 4 Varsity Hockey fund the showcase games. "I don't know what's going to happen as far as girls varsity hockey goes. ... They're trying to make a determination in a very rough economic time. I know we are committed to fielding a girls varsity hockey team."

The advocates have to fight the perception that adding \$24,000 to cover the cost of a girls hockey team to a school budget in rough economic times is pricey.

Supporters argue that is a reasonable expense considering most large suburban school districts pass annual budgets near or in excess of \$50 million. To put it in perspective, Meosky said adding hockey to the Amherst budget in a combined-team scenario would amount to less than a one percent increase to the budget.

There are about 1,339 girls ages 7-and-up playing youth hockey in the Buffalo-Niagara area, according to New York State Amateur Hockey Association West Section President David Braunstein. There's a good chance that number will continue to rise in the future, considering only 436 of those girls are over the age of 14. Schools would have a feeder system in place. Buffalo Bisons 14-and-under coach Tom Iafallo said last November adding a scholastic league would be beneficial to the overall development of girls hockey in the area.

A possible financial scenario that could be agreeable to districts on the fence and parents? Splitting the season operating costs.

If that doesn't aid the cause, there are two more showcase games (Lancaster versus Williamsville at 6 p.m. Thursday and Ken-Ton versus Williamsville at 5:30 p.m. on Feb. 4). Meosky and others hope will convince school administrators to come aboard. She said last Thursday's atmosphere has been the norm at the first three showcase games, not the exception.

"It's a great game. The girls play it well," Meosky said. "It would be a tremendous asset to any school district."

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