



From left, Hannah Stewart, Elaina Velky and Afton Denister, all from Niagara Falls, and Jillian Koop from Lewiston-Porter hope for a league.

Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News

Goal of a high school girls hockey league in sight

Decision awaited on team from Niagara County

By Caitlin Murray

NIAGARA CORRESPONDENT

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If there's one sport Western New York loves, it's hockey. And after three years of pushing, high school girls may finally be able to get in on the action.

Efforts to bring girls hockey to high schools throughout the Erie Niagara region are inching closer to the goal line. But now it's all eyes on Niagara County, where districts could combine to create the fourth of five required teams for a varsity league — a boost that should nudge remaining districts to say yes for the 2010-11 season.

“If they could commit to a team in Niagara, that would be huge,” said parent Isabell Posner, who has lobbied unsuccessfully to get girls hockey in Amherst for years. “That would push the districts on the fence—and these are districts that could put a team on the ice tomorrow.”

The only team representing Niagara County could include students from Niagara Falls, Lewiston-Porter and Niagara Wheatfield, with the three districts sharing costs. That would ensure enough players to fill a team.

So far, Williamsville, Kenmore-Tonawanda and the Monsignor Martin Athletic Association of private high schools are in. The girls in Niagara say it's only fair that their districts give it a shot, too.

"A lot of the colleges take Canadian girls as players who can come over and take our scholarships," said Elaina Velky, a Niagara Falls High School sophomore. "They have varsity teams over there, and we don't. This league would give us a good chance to get scholarships and get some good exposure."

Next year would be too late for Lewiston-Porter senior Britney Regis, but a boys hockey team was started at her school this year, so the girls shouldn't be passed over again, she said.

"I've been playing hockey since I was 6, and there's never been a girls team I could try for at school," she said. "The guys got a team, and the girls still have nothing. There are all these varsity leagues all over the state, and we're in this little pocket that still has nothing."

Around 900 girls, 18 and under, are registered to play hockey on recreation teams in Western New York. Nichols is the only area school that sponsors a girls hockey team. Other districts being asked to join are Amherst and Sweet Home together, Clarence, Hamburg and Frontier together, Lancaster, Orchard Park and West Seneca.

Of course, given the economy, it's not the best time to be asking for a new budget item.

Niagara Falls may need to cut \$3.3 million to \$6.4 million for next year. Lewiston-Porter needs to cut \$1.8 million. It's about a \$1 million cut in Niagara Wheatfield.

"We don't want to minimize opportunities for kids, but at the same time, we're clawing for every dollar," said Lewiston-Porter Superintendent Christopher Roser. Officials in Niagara Falls and Niagara Wheatfield raise similar concerns.

Costs split three ways should mean each district would pay about \$10,000 for coach stipends, league fees, practice ice time, uniforms and transportation. Players often use some of their own equipment.

School districts are working on 2010-11 budgets, with final approval due in April, when the fate of a girls hockey league will be decided. Information on the proposed league is available online at Girls4varsityicehockey.com.

niagaranews@buffnews.com