

Youth hockey program still expanding

By Jeff Tecklenburg
Assistant sports editor

Youth hockey has come a long way in Mason City.

The program grew roots only five years ago. That first season, 60 kids battled the cold and their own inexperience in playing on two rinks — one behind the Sears building and the other a small facility at 6th and N. Tyler.

But this winter, the Mason City Youth Hockey Association expects some 250 area youths ages 8-17 to compete in a program that is partially financed by the city and will wield a total budget of roughly \$7,900.

The program is governed by a 15-member board of directors, which was formed three years ago and incorporated as a non-profit group just a year ago.

Dolly Hanna has been the board secretary since the organization's inception. She got the job shortly after she and her husband Ron moved to town and "I opened my mouth. I said to them (YHA leaders), 'You guys need someone to write all this down so you don't have to stand around and argue about it.'"

"I really enjoy it, though," she continued. "It is a sport that provides a winter activity for every boy. They all get to play and that's written into the rules."

The local YHA "Founding Fathers" included Don Anderson, plus Keith Lindberg and Carl Mickelson. The latter two no longer reside in Mason City.

The Mason City Exchange Club was a key financial and moral backer in the early stages, and Pete Conroy was the one who made the land in back of Sears available for a rink.

Other persons very helpful in getting YHA off the ground were Parks Superintendent Dann May, Joe Lucido and Jack Knapp. And of the original group of adults who volunteered services as coaches, referees or both, Dr. Art McMahon, Ron Peterson and Ron Hanna are still active.

During the first year, the YHA program offered competition at three levels: 8-12, 13-15 and 16-17. But in order to provide fairer play and more teams for the increasing number of participants, the setup was changed to the following: 8-10 (Squirts), 11-12 (Pee Wee), 13-14 (Bantam) and 15-17 (Midgets).

High school program

In addition, the YHA backs a Mason City High School team. The American Hockey Association of the United States (AHAUS), of which the Ma-

son City YHA is a member, doesn't permit players older than age 17. So the local high school team was formed a year ago.

Since hockey is not a sanctioned sport in Iowa (15 per cent of Iowa High School Athletic Association members must field teams before a sport is sanctioned), the prep outfit had to get permission from Mason City High School to use the school's Mohawks nickname.

Last year, the Mohawks played in Division II of the Iowa High School Hockey League against teams from Ankeny, Ames, Des Moines Lincoln and Webster City.

Division I teams (usually classified as such because of readily available indoor ice) included Des Moines Roosevelt, Waterloo Columbus, Valley of West Des Moines, Sioux City, West Des Moines Dowling and Urbandale. A Division I state tournament was held, and one for Division II is planned for this year, according to Hanna. Mason City has a representative on the state prep hockey board.

"Considering it was our first year, the high school program was successful," Hanna said.

As for the other YHA program levels, Hanna said they have filled a genuine need for outdoor winter activities, especially "for boys who may not be able to play" in other high school varsity sports. "It fills the same need baseball does in the spring and summer," she said.

However, "We've had our hassles," she conceded. "Now we have a code of ethics. Sometimes some of the parents have to be reminded that their kids are just little boys."

Is hockey too rough for the bodies of young, fast-growing boys? "One thing we stress," Hanna said, "is non-violence. I know there aren't as many injuries (in hockey) as in football. In six years, I don't think we've had a major (handicapping) injury."

A common rap put on youth baseball programs by their critics has been over-competitiveness. "Some may argue this but those kids are just as competitive as anyone. Competition is natural, even among children... We try to keep it low-key, especially in the younger groups. This is why everybody plays," Hanna offered.

As a blanket policy, safety equipment is required at all times. At the Squirt level, a helmet, mouthpiece, shin pad and cup are required. The helmets and shin pads have been supplied by the YHA.

Face masks are required at the other levels



Dolly
Hanna

but probably will be a requirement soon at all ages. "The sooner that happens, the happier I'll be," Hanna said. Also required (at levels above Squirt) are shoulder and elbow pads. The YHA doesn't provide equipment for those other than the Squirts, except in unusual hardship cases.

To help ease the cost, an equipment exchange is held each year just prior to the season. Used articles can be swapped or purchased for lower-than-new prices.

During the past few seasons, the YHA has phased out use of the rink near Sears and built two full-size rinks next to the small one at 6th and N. Tyler. The second one, which cost \$3,500 plus the labor of the Parks and Recreation Department, was completed last year.

Space and time is a problem, especially when thaws sometimes make the surface unplayable toward the end of February.

When that happens, YHA leaders are sometimes forced to rent indoor ice arenas to complete league games. The most common choice has been Austin, Minn., where the YHA's best deal is \$40 per hour.

Must raise \$3,000

For the estimated \$7,000 1977-78 budget, \$4,000 will come from the Parks and Recreation Department. The remainder is to be raised by the YHA through three major means: a bake sale, which was held Oct. 29; a candy sale, which grossed \$3,000 a year ago and is set for Nov. 12 this year, and sponsors.

Sponsors are asked to contribute \$200 each. Last year, 18 businesses or organizations agreed to do so.

Some of the costs in running the hockey pro-

gram include jerseys for all levels (\$15 apiece, replaced every three years), postage, secretarial work and the like.

Then there are always miscellaneous costs stemming from a constant effort to improve facilities. For example, this year an old chicken-house was donated to the YHA. However, it must be moved, concrete footings must be poured and renovation completed. All that will consume nearly \$1,000.

Money is not the only big factor needed to keep the YHA programs running smoothly. Volunteers, lots of them, are vital. About 20-25 coaches/referees, plus 10-12 junior and senior high students (usually girls) for timekeeping and scorekeeping duties are needed.

A special Mite program was initiated last year. It is a non-competitive, learn-to-skate program for kids 8 and under.

Contrary to some critics' opinion, Hanna said the availability of the new multipurpose building, to be built at the North Iowa Fairgrounds, will not cause outdoor rinks to be abandoned.

"Having the indoor rinks will foster more outdoor rinks and more participants. It happened in Albert Lea. Another thing the multipurpose building will do is increase adult attendance," she said.

Currently, the YHA is trying to raise \$100,000 for hockey equipment for the new structure. The group hopes to get it all by the end of the year.

Not surprisingly, the YHA's goals are tied to use of the multipurpose facility. "We want to build a bigger and stronger Youth Hockey Association with more rinks. And we want to participate in more competition with other cities," she said. Right now, the season begins the first Sunday in January. After it is finished in February, "traveling" squads are selected for a few games against teams from other communities.

Although the YHA has been geared toward the male sector in its first few years, "One of our goals is to involve girls in the sport. For the past two years, there's been a girl from Charles City playing. She has the respect of every boy she's played against. Eventually, though, we hope to have separate programs," said Hanna.

Mason City YHA board officers are Mitch Morrison, president; Craig Johnson, vice president; Dolly Hanna, secretary, and Barb Hansen, treasurer.

Other board members are Lee Butler, Bob Dvorsky, Al Fitzgerald, Ron Hanna, Art McMahon, Darrell Nielsen, John Pete, Ron Peterson, Cindy Phelps and Ron Phelps.