

Dubuque, C.R. programs to help each other grow

By Jim Leitner

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Separately, Dubuque and Cedar Rapids would have been caught in a numbers games by the Iowa High

YOUTH HOCKEY

School Hockey League next winter.

Together, they hope a short-term merger can help each other blossom. Dubuque probably would have dropped out of the league, because dwindling numbers made it impossible to put varsity and junior varsity teams on the ice. Cedar Rapids, still in its infancy as a hockey community, hoped to enter the league as a junior varsity-only affiliate.

"Dubuque is kind of down, numbers-wise, and Cedar Rapids is on the way up, so, hopefully, they can help each other out for a while," said Greg Cigrand, the Dubuque-based commissioner of the league. "Both of them have pretty good numbers at the Pee Wee level, so give them two or three years, and they'll be able to have their own identities again."

"I'm really happy, from a league point of view. Our goal is to promote hockey and keep it going, and I think this will be a good deal for both communities."

Participation in the Dubuque Youth Hockey Association fell when the now-defunct Fighting Saints began struggling in the United States Hockey League during the mid- to late-1990s. Devils team manager Mark Steuck said he expected only 16 returning players, not nearly enough in a league that requires teams to have varsity and JV teams.

The wildly successful Dubuque Thunder Birds of the Minnesota Junior Hockey League have helped revive the youth program. That leaves Dubuque officials optimistic about the Devils' long-term future in the IHSHL.

"The next couple of years

were going to be pretty tough for us," Steuck said of the high school program. "This will help keep us going. If we would have dropped out (of the IHSHL), it might have been hard to get back in."

The Cedar Rapids Ice Arena opened in January 2000, in the midst of the Roughriders' inaugural season in the USHL. With year-round ice availability and clinics, the youth program has taken off, and local officials seem eager to take the next logical step — joining the IHSHL. Clay Wiemerslage of Cedar Rapids played for the ThunderBirds the past two seasons.

Cedar Rapids expects to have 16 to 18 high school-aged players next season. Most will be underclassmen and more suited for junior varsity competition. For all practical purposes, Dubuque will field the varsity team and Cedar Rapids the JV, but skill level might dictate switches by some players.

"We're extremely excited, and the kids are, too, because now they know they will have an opportunity to play high school hockey," said Becky Calacci, who has helped organize the Cedar Rapids high school team. "This gives us a chance to get involved in the league without being varsity, because we're probably not there yet, skill-wise."

"Without Dubuque, we wouldn't be able to do this. And without us, Dubuque wouldn't be in the league. There are still some details to work out, but I think it's going to be good for both of us."

Dubuque and Cedar Rapids most likely will host eight home games each next season.