

High school hockey grows

C.R. program has come a long way, but even more growth desired

By Nathan Ford, The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS — Reality is starting to set in for Nick Shanklin.

The Linn-Mar senior's hockey career likely will be over when the Cedar Rapids RoughRiders high school team's season ends Feb. 21.

At one time, there were questions about whether or not he'd be able to make it this far.

"When we were growing up, the question was, can we make one team?" said Shanklin, who plans on attending the University of Iowa but is unsure if he will try out for the club hockey team. "Will we have enough for two teams? Will we have just one team? Do we have enough kids? Do we have a goalie? What's going on here?"

Ten seniors graduated from last year's team that qualified for the state tournament with a 12-13-1-2 record in Coach Brandon DeWolf's first season.

Cedar Rapids, which has cycled through multiple coaches the last few years, has the smallest roster in the Midwest High School Hockey League with 26 players, just three of whom are seniors. They come from 13 high schools, the most of nine Iowa teams in the league.

There is plenty of hope for the future of the high school team, which is not affiliated with the USHL team other than sharing the same name and rink. DeWolf, a Cedar Rapids native who played high school hockey in Waterloo, has coached youth teams in Cedar Rapids and has seen the numbers they are generating.

"The tough part is, when the rink first



Jim Shanklin photos

Linn-Mar senior Nick Shanklin battles a player from the Dubuque Devils during a game this season. Shanklin is one of just three seniors on this year's high school RoughRiders team.

opened up (in 2000) you had a wide variety of ages that are just picking up the game for the first time," DeWolf said. "Right now what we're seeing is the kids that started when they were 3, 4 years old, we're starting to see them get to the older ages. The talent, honestly, is improving compared to what it was previously."

"Now," Shanklin said, "they're making three, four teams per level and they have five, six goalies, so it's good to see it grow."

This year's team is at the bottom of the Midwest High School Hockey League's East Division with a 2-19-1-0 record. But most of this team will return next year.

One of them will be Prairie junior Tysen Vandraska, who leads the team with 13 goals



High school RoughRiders Coach Brandon DeWolf goes over some strategy with his players.

and six assists. His mother, Shelley Vandraska, is the team president and believes Cedar Rapids

hockey is growing despite obstacles.

"Unfortunately, because of the cost, I don't

think it grows as much as it possibly could if it wasn't quite as expensive," she said.