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Special Sections

Dick Johnsen puts research on ice



Before the Wells Sports Complex was erected in the early 1980s, much of the area hockey program was conducted on outdoor rinks, primarily the Water Tower rink by the Civic Center where these games were played. Workers cleared snow from the rink during the game and the boards were barely waist high on some skaters. (Daily Press file photo by Dennis Grall)

By Dennis Grall - dgrall@dailypress.net

ESCANABA — The history of Delta County hockey, from outdoor rinks without boards to the double rink at the Wells Sports Complex, has been researched by one of the men responsible for its growth.

Dick Johnsen has compiled a look into the sport, tracing it from the hallowed days of the men's league though the youth levels. He also provided a variety of photos, some from more than 50 years ago.

His research revealed there were two outdoor rinks as early as 1928, one next to St. Patrick's Catholic Church and one at the corner of 13th Avenue North and Sheridan Road. Dr. Kitchen, an import from Canada, built the north rink and Rev. Bergeron of St. Pat's helped develop the south rink.

Johnsen indicated the Escanaba Rangers and North Town Hawks are believed to have formed the first two teams for on-land ice rinks. The Kipling Indians and teams from Iron Mountain and Marquette also played in some of those early games.

Shortly before World War II a league was formed with teams from Gladstone, Menominee, Marinette, Ishpeming, Norway and Marquette joining the storied Escanaba Hawks.

The circuit ceased during the war, then reformed in 1945 with Bob Grabowski taking over the Hawks' helm. Jack Pratt, Carl Eastman, Rod



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Beauchamp, Ernie Belanger and Larry Pratt also worked in concert.

By this time several other ice rinks had appeared, but only a few had sideboards and nets. The first north town rink shifted to North 20th Street near St. Thomas Church and the Baptist Church, and games were played in the Exhibition Building at the U.P. State Fairgrounds.

Hockey received a major shot in the arm in 1949-50 through the appearance of the Marquette Sentinels. With the Marquette Palestra undergoing repairs and installation of artificial ice, the semi-pro Sentinels played their home games at the fairgrounds rink.

"This was a real treat for the Escanaba hockey enthusiasts whose only exposure to organized hockey was the previous games between the make-up teams in the local area," wrote Johnsen.

That helped prompt a group of local businessmen to field the Escanaba Hawks in the Northern Michigan-Wisconsin League with Eagle River, Calumet, Portage Lake and Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

However, a short ice surface at the Exhibition Building was a major hindrance. Johnsen recalled local fans returning from a game on the new and larger Marquette rink indicating they kept looking for ice fishing shanties.

The rink was eventually extended by 30 feet, but it was still 40 feet short of regulation. Despite the short-comings, games would attract 800 to 1,000 fans, which prompted Harnischfeger Corp. to build bleachers.

Unruly fans were a major problem for the league, with fans known to jump over the boards and join the fisticuffs on the ice. Another irate group of fans started to harass the visiting fans and once pushed down the portable dressing rooms at the local building.

Johnsen said "Sport" Moreau, an Escanaba tavern operator, became a local legend by sitting behind the net and heckling the opposing team's goalie. At one game the puck "flew" over the boards and struck Moreau in the head, requiring several stitches. He returned the next night, with a canary bird cage protecting his head.

A variety of standout players visited Escanaba in those days, with Johnsen indicating the fabled Bukovich brothers were the most notable. "Mike, Joe and Tony played with a passion and could always be counted on to do a few things that really set off the fireworks in the rink," he wrote.

The league also allowed teams to import eight players, and Escanaba jumped on that plan because there was a shortage of local talent. The goalie, Ben Artwich, would travel from Stambaugh for every game. Players also came from Moose Jaw, Ont. and Sault, Ont. and across the peninsula.

Mark Olson was hired as the Hawks playing coach and manager. The Michigan Tech graduate and icer brought many top players, including his brother Ted, Joe Ricci, Burt Pataja, Clarence Matt, Bob Higgins and Jim Ogle.

The Hawks made a quick impact, stunning the local hockey world in 1953-54 by winning the coveted Doc Gibson Trophy by beating vaunted Portage

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Lake Pioneers at Dee Stadium in Houghton.

A favorite in the league was referee Mel Bertrand, who braved the small rink and wrath of the fans. "Bertrand was noted for his courage of conviction and faced up to the likes of the Bukovichs and all of the others," said Johnsen.

Matt Pavolich was also hired by the league as a referee, which helped groom him for a lengthy stint in the National Hockey League.

The Hawks' brief run ended after the 1954-55 season because of financial problems in addition to a lack of local talent, travel and work commitments. The league also disbanded.

The Junior Hawks quickly filled the vacancy in Escanaba with Grabowski again running the program. Johnsen, Dave and Leon Mileski, Pat Coyne, Ed and Paul "Bud" Provo, Jake Bink, Harlan Pepin, Bob Rodman, Bill Buckland, Wayne Olson, Jim Bolm and Len "Boots" Boucher filled the roster.

The Junior Hawks played for three years, winning two league titles, against teams from Marquette, Rhinelander, Eagle River and Stambaugh.

But another road block quickly struck. The Exhibition Building was condemned in 1959, virtually ending organized hockey in Escanaba.

At the time, Johnsen indicated junior hockey, "was pretty much a do-it-yourself project" and lacked organization. Ricci and Olson tried to get the Escanaba Recreation Department involved in 1955, then it began to show some life from 1958-74 as Eastman and George Petaja became involved.

The old Junior High rink moved to the water tower location in the 1960s for recreational games, which eventually became the launching pad for an improved junior program that started to blossom in the mid-1970s.

By 1974, outdoor rinks also arose in Wells and Soo Hill, with Soo Hill installing the first boards around the ice surface. Dick and Tom Johnsen and Carl Mattson led that surge, with Willie LaMarche, Ed McCarthy, Ed Terres, Bill Flippen, Tim Runkle, Frank Sliva and Jake Ford providing major support.

Wells added boards the following year and men like Jim Aird, Hugh Ray, Roger Seguin, Ray Tapani, Joe Pinar, John Kroll, Ray Delvaux, Fred Arts, Jim Schwartz, Stan Paul, Chris Jensen, Larry Andreini and Wayne Madalinski jumping in to assist.

The Escanaba Area Junior Hockey Association organized in 1974 and Mike Zuidema became president. Dick Johnsen, Ralph Zenker, Sliva and Tom Hampton also served three-year terms in the early years.

The three rinks basically formed their own teams, but the EAJHA soon formulated a common draft system of players to get everyone working toward one goal, with local men serving as coaches.

Construction of the current Ruth Butler Building at the fairgrounds in the mid-70s also boosted the program's growth, and an all-time high of 415 players were registered. Escanaba's renaissance helped put them in with

Marquette and the Copper Country as the driving forces of the U.P. Amateur Hockey Association, Dick Johnsen wrote.

Spurred by the successes, the group tried to convince the city of Escanaba to install artificial ice at the Butler site. "The red tape was just too tough to cut," said Johnsen, indicating the group then turned to Wells Township for help.

A recreational grant was soon awarded by the state, with the guarantee of local matching funds, and an artificial ice plant was purchased in Warren. A group of 13 volunteers returned with the equipment to the current location of the Wells Sports Complex.

That didn't solve all of the problems however because a building was not available, forcing the artificial rink to set up outside. Although a vast improvement over natural ice, it was still subject to weather conditions.

That became obvious at a late spring tournament when it began to rain heavily and fans were forced to use golf umbrellas for protection. That didn't help the ice, however, with Johnsen noting that the normal 10-inch wide blue and red lines soon spread out to 20 inches.

After two years of similar problems, the group pursued another grant dependent on matching funds of \$100,000 to construct a building. Gary Butryn, then president/general manager of Mead Paper Co., headed a fund-raising committee that helped build the current facility.

"Most of the work, except for the actual erection of the building, was again accomplished by a swarm of volunteers and a lot of help from local industries," wrote Johnsen.

"With its completion, the dream of all the local skating community, hockey enthusiasts, figure skaters and people who just liked to ice skate came to fruition," wrote Johnsen. "Everything that had been dreamed of was accomplished."

The facility included locker rooms, protective Plexiglass and netting, trophy room and concession stand. A second ice surface was later added to the initial rink and improved seating, boards and ice-making equipment were added in 2006.

"While many people enjoy the comfort and conveniences of today's facility, none can feel the satisfaction of the people who first dreamed of this beautiful place, then worked and sweated to bring it to its completion," Johnsen wrote, noting more than 60 years of tradition has helped develop the history of Escanaba hockey.

"...it took the determination of a small group of individuals who had a vision many years ago," wrote Johnsen. "It took courage and effort by those who started it, and another great effort by those who keep it going."

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