

## **Growth of Girls Hockey in Minnesota**

On Monday night in Toronto, Angela James and America's own Cammi Granato became the first women inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame.

With their induction, girls and women's hockey has truly reached a significant landmark.

While hockey is known as "Canada's Game," international benchmarks like these can undoubtedly be traced back to the State of Hockey.

### **Girls high school hockey is born**

In the early 1990s, girls were playing Ringette, which consists of a stick with no blade used to control a rubber ring on the ice. There are a lot of similarities to hockey, but the **league** never officially recognized the sport.

It didn't take long before the community got their wish: girls hockey. Minnesota became the first state in the country to officially sanction girls high school hockey, thanks to the Minnesota State High School League's blessing.

The first season was played in 1994, consisting of 24 participating programs.

Entering its 17th year, there are now 125 registered teams.

### **Ahead of their time**

During the league's infancy, the level of play and participation was still developing. But Superstars such as Roseville's Curtin sisters, Park Center's Krissy Wendell and Eagan's Natalie Darwitz stood out.

Former *Minneapolis Star Tribune* scribe and current media specialist at the Minnesota State High School League, John Millea, recalled how electric they were.

"It was packed," Millea said, referencing a regular-season non-conference matchup between Eagan and Park Center. "You would have thought it was the Boston Bruins and the Blackhawks playing."

And Wendell and Darwitz were untouchable.

"Their skills were so much better than anybody else's. They would just race up and down the ice," Millea said.

Wendell and Darwitz collected, set and broke numerous records throughout their high school careers, and ultimately during their tenures with the University of Minnesota and U.S. national teams. Darwitz and Wendell were also both two-time Olympic medalists.

But it wasn't just their speed and scoring that helped make the sport what it is today.

"Those two were the role models," Millea said. "People are still talking about them because they were not only great players, but great ambassadors. Those two really set the bar."

Darwitz, who is now an assistant coach at the University of Minnesota, still remains active in the Eagan community. She runs various hockey camps and even helped coach the varsity squad for a while.

Eagan High School Activities Director Sandra Setter can see Darwitz's presence is still being felt.

"Not only was she a great hockey player but she's a great person, too," Setter said. "She always takes time to talk to kids and fans and community members."

### **'Girls hockey has reached new levels'**

High school hockey has no doubt helped breed and develop girls youth hockey programs, giving girls a chance to experience the game and develop skills with other children their age.

This trickle-down effect continues to take shape and the talent pool seems as if it's growing by the day, meaning we most likely won't be seeing a Darwitz-esque performance anymore.

"I think we're probably not going to see days like that again because there's not that gap, and that says a lot about how far it has come," Millea said. "There are so many girls who can skate and play defense and move around the ice now. Back then, those two were just kind of freaks of nature."

"Girls hockey has reached new levels," Setter said, "and it continues to push itself. We haven't seen that end, yet."

The next couple years will be exciting to monitor its already stellar progress.

"With girls hockey in Minnesota, that's going to happen no matter what," Millea said.

So just how much more growth is in store for girls' hockey?

Get a sneak peak on Tues., Nov. 16 as the Wildcat girls varsity team travels to Shakopee for their first game of the season at 7 p.m. Eagan will host Park on November 20 at 7:15 p.m. for their first home contest.