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Junior Varsity Team Member #87 Joel Plattner

photos provided by David Plattner

The Ice Men Cometh

By Steve Hunt

DETROIT, HOME TO THE DALLAS STARS' FIERCEST RIVAL, the Red Wings, is known as "Hockeytown, USA." Here in Frisco, with the recent arrival of both the Stars' team headquarters and the two-time defending national champion Texas Tornado, our bustling community may soon be known as "Hockeytown, Texas."

When professional hockey flourishes, interest at the youth level also sees considerable growth. This has happened with the Frisco Ice Hockey Association (FIHA) (www.friscoicehockey.org), founded in 2001 to help further develop local high school hockey. If their continuing growth is any indication, the organization's first four years are a success.

Currently, the FIHA plays in the Southwestern Bell Corporation (SBC) High School Hockey League and fields three teams: varsity for players from ninth through 12th grades, junior varsity for eighth grade and up and a developmental squad for sixth through eighth graders.

Each team has a no-pass, no-play policy where if participants fail to maintain a favorable grade point average, they don't

play. This rule has been in place since the FIHA's inception. Just last year, the SBC League made this same rule mandatory for all teams.



Junior Varsity Team Member #10 Zach Liebo

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Frisco resident Julie Bullis knows a bit about the FIHA. She is the current president and is also one of its

founders. Ms. Bullis also remembers the organization's humble beginnings. "That first year, we were hoping to have enough participants to play and also to be able to make it affordable," Ms. Bullis said. "With the help of our great community partners and the local businesses who supported us, we have been able to experience tremendous growth and add more teams."

What does she see for the future? "We hope the growth continues," she said. "We have done a great job in trying to provide a place for everyone to skate. This gets harder to do as we add more teams, but we continue to get great support from the community, which makes it a lot easier. This is a real grassroots program and we hope to keep it that way."

Because of how new ice hockey is at the high school level, it is not officially recognized as a varsity sport by the Texas University Interscholastic League. But this does not keep the FIHA from getting support from local high schools. "The schools have been great," said Ms. Bullis. "They allow us to put up posters and to make announcements about when the games are. This is great because it

makes the players feel part of the athletic program like other school-sponsored sports.”

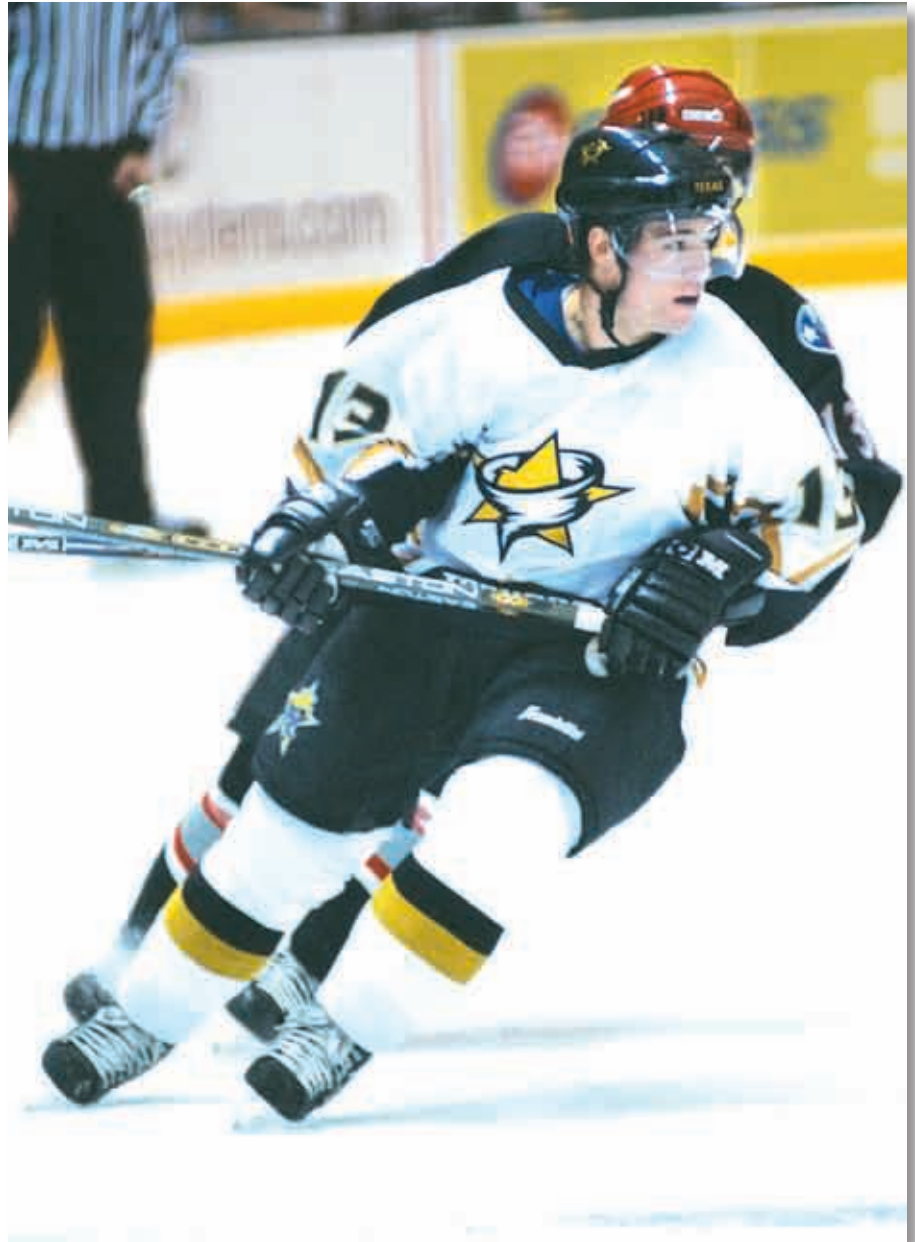
FIHA has also received support from other local sources. “We received great support from the city of Frisco and from the Dallas Stars from the start,” Ms. Bullis said. “Part of the city’s agreement with the Stars included concessions for ice usage by youth teams. Our equipment has come from the Stars and they have charged us reduced rates.”

I am not just here to coach, I am also here to develop them into well-rounded individuals to help them with their plans after hockey.

However, this is not your average league. The FIHA wants its players not only to become better players, but also to become well-rounded individuals. It requires all participants to perform community service. “We do the Adopt-A-Street program four times per year,” said Ms. Bullis. “Any time the city of Frisco needs volunteers, they call us first.”

As for team structure, each has a head coach, an assistant coach, and a team manager. The responsibilities of the first two are mainly on-ice, but it could be the team manager who is the unsung hero. “Communication is the number one thing,” said David Plattner, team manager for the junior varsity team. Mr. Plattner’s son, Joel, plays on the team. “I do everything from collecting report cards, making sure all the parents have paid for the season, distributing schedules for practices and games and making sure the coaches have up-to-date rosters for each game.”

This might sound like hard work, but it is a labor of love for Mr. Plattner. “I love being around my son playing,” he said. “I like being around the kids. They treat me like a coach, even though I’m not. This program is great because it gives the kids a chance to do something that is a school activity. It’s great for them to have an opportunity to play on a team affiliated



Former Texas Tornado forward Luke Flicek

photo from Frisco STYLE archives

with the Frisco school district.”

For many, the league is a family affair. Ms. Bullis’ husband, John, is the head coach of the varsity squad, thanks to having two hockey-playing sons. “I didn’t play hockey in college,” John Bullis said. “I grew up skating and playing neighborhood games. My oldest son, who is now 27, went through youth hockey, as did my 19-year-old son. Even though I work in sales, I have always had the coaching bug.”

Mr. Bullis’ coaching approach is simple. “I know I am not just here to coach them as players,” he said. “I am also here to develop them into well-rounded individuals and to help them with their

plans after hockey.”

With Frisco continuing to grow and with the opening of additional high schools in the coming years, the future of high school hockey is a bright one. Youth hockey is taking off in Frisco and it is only a matter of time before the Texas Tornado may begin to utilize the FIHA as a recruiting resource. It may not be long before the Tornado has homegrown talent skating for them and we will have the Frisco Ice Hockey Association, in part, to thank for that.

Steve Hunt is a freelance writer living in Frisco.