



SCORING BIG

02.02.17

Emily Matthews

ATHENS MITE LEAGUE PLAYERS ARE NOT AFRAID TO TAKE A TUMBLE ON ICE

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A majority of the travel teams at a tournament in Easton had a strategy — put the best players they had on the ice and dominate the scoreboard.

Athens Mite league player Tanner Altop didn't care about the hefty competition ahead of him because coach put him in as a goalie — his favorite position.

The Athens Mite league has had its fair share of losses and is known as the little guy of Ohio hockey. But not many players in the league cared about the wins, because the ice was another place to be with friends. They all got ice time, passed the puck and, with some finesse, they scored a goal.

During the third game of the tournament in Columbus and with some help from his teammates, Tanner ended up with 44 saves that game. Even though the team still ended up losing to the Cleveland Barons by seven goals, it was the best game of his hockey career.

Tanner doesn't have a particular strategy or method to playing hockey — he's 8 years old.

The Athens Youth Hockey Association recruited him at age 4 and soon strapped a pair of hand-me-down skates on him. There are always opportunities for hockey equipment and ice time for children who wander into Bird Arena.

"If you're a first-time skater, there's gear for you here," Phil Oberlin, coach for the Mites (8 and under) and Mini-Mites (6 and under) leagues, said. "It's about getting them out on the ice, inciting passion and having fun."

The league

Mini-Mite: 6 and under

The 100 members of the Athens Youth Hockey Association (between ages 4-18) skate and plummet on the same sheet of ice as the Bobcats.

Mites: 8 and under

"Youth hockey has been around forever," Oberlin said. "The rink is on the heart of campus."

Squirt: 10 and under

The Athens hockey culture is strong despite not having many players. Unlike in Columbus and Cleveland that have handfulls of ice rinks, southeast Ohio doesn't have another rink for about 95 miles. Some youth players travel from West Virginia to play in a league.

PeeWee: 12 and under

Bantam: 14 and under

The Mite division, which consists of 12 players, only has one team in Athens. All divisions are coed. The Cleveland Barons, the team the Mites played at the Easton Tournament the weekend of Jan. 14, had nine teams for one age group, so about 90 players.

Athens High School: junior varsity and varsity

The 54-year-old association credits its ability to compete with other cities to its recruiting tactics, said Oberlin, who is also the head coach of Ohio Hockey Division II. The focus on keeping enrollment high is a constant struggle by letting people know hockey is an affordable option in Athens.

Gearing up

Before each game and practice at Bird Arena, a dozen bins are set outside the locker rooms — pads, socks, practice jerseys, skates, helmets and hockey sticks, to name a few.

Ice fee:

(http://athenshockey.com/Public/Documents/Any-You-Registration-Fee-Form-Fillable-17_19jul16.pdf) \$130-\$1,300 depending on age. If parents choose to buy hockey equipment, it can cost an additional \$300-\$500. The cost will include:

- Helmet
- Shoulder pads
- Elbow pads
- Hockey pants
- Gloves
- Shin pads
- Skates
- Mouthguard
- Practice jerseys
- Jock
- Hockey stick
- Hockey socks
- Hockey bag

“Hockey can get pretty expensive, especially with more than one kid,” Brandy Altop said. She signs up both her children on the association’s website, and both her children to use.

Hockey culture can be intimidating — the lingo, the gear and travel costs are daunting. After adding the total costs of equipment and the fees to play, most parents are out the door looking for the community center’s basketball sign-up sheet instead, Brandy said.

“What’s so great about the division leagues and the learn-to-play hockey programs is parents may only have to pay for the club fee and borrow the gear that people donate after their kid has grown out of it,” Oberlin said.

Jack Amos, 8, borrows plenty of equipment from the association. He signs out a candy apple red helmet for all to see.

“People know it’s me,” he said.

Learning to play

Oberlin grew up involved in the Athens Youth Hockey Association and graduated from Athens High School playing varsity hockey. He played Division I hockey for OU from 2006-10. He found himself back at the association volunteering for two leagues and learn-to-play hockey programs in addition to coaching at OU.

As Oberlin gives back to the association, he tries to make volunteering as painless as possible for parents — something fun to do with their children.

Randy Williams, father and coach to players Addyson, 7, and Jaron, 11, never played hockey in his youth. Now, it will be two years of coaching for him, and he has some skating skills to prove it.

“For two years on the ice, I’d say I’m doing pretty good,” he said, laughing.

Oberlin said it’s funny to see parents shuffling on the ice at first, making sure they don’t wipe out. They help direct players by skating with them or moving the team on and off the ice between plays.

“We have a joke it’s like herding cats,” Oberlin said.

Jack likes having his dad help out during the games, but he likes skating — and falling — with his friends on the ice even more.

“I fell 1,000 times on the ice, but then I learned to love it,” Jack said.



The Athens Mite and Mini-Mite hockey teams play in Bird Arena on Jan. 21, 2017.

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Meet The Players



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Hayden Yorn, 7, poses for a portrait in Bird Arena on Jan. 30.



A revival

The Mite Midwinter House League, a learn-to-play program designed for players to scrimmage each other, had been nixed about 20 years ago due to low enrollment and money, but it was reinstated in December 2016. Oberlin believes it will be another tool for players of varying skills to learn to love hockey and to join a division.

When players, such as Zoe and Tanner, signed up for Mini-Mite and Mite, league fees included the Mite Midwinter House League, which has 30 players.

The 30 children enrolled are varying in skill levels. Some had been in the division leagues and others have just learned to skate.

The Mite Midwinter House League was reinstated because of the partial use of a \$9,600 grant from the Columbus Blue Jackets Foundation. Over the past 16 years, the foundation has donated \$64,000 to the association. This year, the association used the money for each player in the league to have two jerseys — one Athens Hockey jersey and the other with the Columbus Blue Jackets logo.

“The Blue Jackets Foundation is committed to supporting the development of youth and amateur hockey and removing barriers to play our great sport,” Kathryn Dobbs, executive director of the Columbus Blue Jackets Foundation, said in an email. “(Athens Youth Hockey Association) has been a longtime grant partner of ours because they are equally committed to advancing our mission and growing the game in southeast Ohio.”

Athens Youth Hockey Association



A hockey family

The day after the tournament in Easton, Tanner was at hockey practice with his friends playing freeze tag and sliding on the ice. The only win they had at the tournament wasn't forgotten, but it wasn't overtly glorified.

The players love scoring goals, but to them, the goals do not equate to winning.

“I like defense because I get to smash people,” Jack said. “I’m pretty strong.”

Most times at Bird Arena, players are ready in their gear, pounding on the glass to win the attention of the Zamboni driver. He honks at them. A clever player rallies a chant of, “Let us out,” because the players were eagerly awaiting their scrimmage. It's 9 a.m. on a Saturday — most of the OU campus is

dead.

Crowded at the door, skaters funnel onto the ice aimlessly circling each other. It's what the professionals do except with more falling down.

No matter the travel time in the car, or how tired players may be for practice, their burdens are forgotten when they go on the ice, Brandy said. To her, it's worth it to involve her children in hockey. She participated in the Athens Youth Hockey Association and loved it. She wanted to give her children the same experience.

"It's funny how our numbers are going up because people my age who were in the program are now having kids and introducing their kids to hockey," Oberlin said. "It's a pretty neat cycle."

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