Dreaming the Dream or Living the Dream?

An Inquiry into the Status of Women’s Intercollegiate Club Ice Hockey

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This paper will provide some background information on club sports and a brief discussion on the status of American women’s collegiate hockey at the club and varsity level prior to 2003. A review of the current status of women’s club hockey with some references to varsity hockey shows the growth of the sport. The paper then concludes with some observations and future possibilities regarding women’s collegiate club hockey.

What are club sports?¹

In American university/college settings, institutionally approved sports are found in three categories: varsity, recreational/intramural, and club.² Club sports in this setting refers to an organization usually established and run by students as a way to participate in a sport or as an alternative to participating on a varsity team. Primarily for undergraduates, clubs may allow faculty, staff, alumnae, and graduate student involvement. In most cases, clubs have a probationary year until they are officially recognized and are eligible to request funds. The coaches are usually volunteers, either other students or a volunteer usually associated with the institution.³

Club sports usually fall under the administration of student activities/student life, recreation/activities, and, on occasion, through the auspices of the athletics department.⁴ Club sports have financial constraints because of limited budgets. Some institutions have club sports grouped together and each sport has to document their fundraising activities, community
activities, and membership dues along with their request for funding, usually barely covering travel costs. In other institutions, all clubs compete against each other for financial support. Over the past decades, many club sports gained enough participation and interest that championships and other competitive opportunities were organized. These activities were overseen by an organization specific to that sport and sometimes specific to the sport and club structure. Additionally, external development came with new levels of recognition, and competition came with a number of sports clubs increasing in number as well as gaining associations with National Governing Bodies.\(^5\) Title IX affected varsity teams and sport clubs by creating opportunities for women. Some administrators used sport clubs as a medium of transition to varsity status. It also allowed the reverse, where athletic administrators demoted varsity sports to club status. This happened to a number of men’s and women’s teams in the 1980s.\(^6\)

**Women’s Hockey**

Although women’s hockey has existed since the 1900s, participation in intercollegiate hockey at the varsity level for women in the US was limited in the mid-1960s. Competition for collegiate women was just beginning to be accepted by the women physical educators and infrastructure for competitive women’s sport had yet to be developed. When Title IX was introduced in 1972, there was opportunity to obtain financial support for program growth and eventually scholarships. Over the next three decades, growth was slow as varsity programs for women evolved and gradually opportunities for females to play hockey began to emerge.\(^7\) The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) assumed control over women’s collegiate athletics with the demise of the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women (AIAW) in 1982.\(^8\)
In the mid-1990s the numbers began to increase. USA Hockey recognized this shift and began to count female membership separately from males participating in their organization. The increase in teams in the NCAA began to affect collegiate level competition, and rising from the 1993 Final Report of the NCAA Gender-Equity Task Force, women’s ice hockey was included in the list as an emerging sport. The recommendations of the Task Force were approved at the 1994 NCAA National Convention. Women’s ice hockey continued to increase teams at the Division I (DI) and Division III (DIII) levels. During the 2000-2001 season the first NCAA Championships for DI women were held, followed two years later, by the first D III championships. Many of the teams at both levels had started at club status.

Women’s club hockey has been in existence for many decades, but contact for competition was often word-of-mouth, USA hockey memberships, or through personal connections/networking. This was of course pre-Internet times. As competitive women’s hockey began to emerge at the international level, and the usage of the Internet multiplied, various individuals worked to increase the visibility of the sport at many levels. One avenue of accessibility was the creation of Andrea Hunter’s Women’s Hockey page. The website contained links to college teams and leagues as well as some club level information. It was a unique resource that provided access to a variety of information on women’s hockey that had not been previously available.

Many club teams formed in the 1980s, but the real growth at the club level began in the mid-1990s. One of the challenges with researching club history, is much of the history is inconsistently documented. Some teams retain their history and provide an overview on their website, sometimes the student activities or recreation office retain the official paperwork, sometimes the history is passed down in an oral tradition and many times articles can be traced
through the college’s school newspaper. Typically in early development, teams often struggled to find players, coaches, and teams to compete against. Leagues could be formed seemingly overnight, and just as quickly fold. Tournaments would be pulled together in last minute rushes. The internet and mobile technology was in early stages so browsing the web was not a viable option. However, as established clubs began to strengthen and stabilize new clubs in “close” regional access provided competitive opportunities. New clubs continued to be recognized by their institution’s club criteria and in 2000, the American Collegiate Hockey Association (ACHA) which had been created for men’s collegiate hockey clubs in 1991, established a women’s division. The first national championship for women’s club hockey occurred the same year, 2000-2001, as the NCAA DI championships. In 2006, there was enough interest and clubs that the ACHA established a DII level for women.

Summary of Changes in Women’s Club hockey since 2000

The trend of women’s hockey teams starting at club level before transitioning to varsity status continues to be used by athletic departments. Using ACHA membership as a framework, between 2000 and 2012, there were 8 teams that were members of the ACHA for 1-3 years before going NCAA Varsity; of those teams, 3 are DI and 5 are DIII. In most cases the teams were established by a member of the athletic department and supported by the athletic department with funding not quite at the varsity level, but usually a little more than club. In reviewing the original ACHA teams in 2000 and 2012, ACHA DI has only five remaining teams of the original fifteen teams. Of the ten teams; three are defunct; five dropped to ACHA II, and the others are now NCAA DI teams. In 2011-12 there were twenty-two teams in the ACHA at the DI and 23 at DII levels.
In addition to an increase in teams in the ACHA, another change has been an increase in clubs and varsity teams coexisting in the same institution. Prior to 2003, there were three coexisting women’s clubs with varsity teams. While most of the clubs are at institutions with DI teams, there are a few at DIII. 

Approximately, 55 club teams were counted in 2003 and in 2012 are over 100. There are teams that are not members of ACHA, but are either playing independently or are playing in a league (a league comprised of members that were only colleges or a mix of teams, usually a combination of senior women’s and collegiate teams).

Internet searches retrieved three institutions which allowed 1-2 women to participate in a men’s club as well as one institution that club is officially co-ed. While the number is not high, this type of situation needs to be observed as a possible new pattern for women’s participation.

As women’s club participation becomes more formalized, the role of the conference/league (regional leagues) with ACHA should be examined for its organization and structure in supporting teams. The missions of each league may differ, from including recreational teams, college clubs, and other teams, to strictly college club teams. There seems to be a little more stability in the last six years. The strongest leagues seem to be the CCWHA (Central Collegiate Women’s Hockey Association) which was established in the 1990s and the DVCHC (Delaware Valley Collegiate Hockey Conference) which was established in 2002. There is a stronger and more visible relationship with USA Hockey and the ACHA. One of the results of this relationship is the first women’s team representing the USA at the World University Games in 2011.
Conclusion

For women who participate in American club hockey, having the option for highly competitive organized hockey or maintaining a club open to the academic community playing locally reflects the student interest and commitment to the sport. The variety of levels of support continues to vary depending on the budget and the structure of the club sports program. It is good to remember that opportunity for club hockey can be just as important in a woman’s collegiate experience as varsity experience.

As for varsity dreams, there are still 5 very established clubs that are still striving to move to varsity status. There are a number of teams who hope varsity opportunities become available in the future, but understand the need to grow their program and the budgetary challenges in today college experience. There are clubs who have no interest in pursuing varsity status. They are committed to supporting the mission of the club and its membership needs.

On the organizational level, the ACHA and USA Hockey and the various leagues that exist would help researchers, players, coaches, and others by providing some historical background on the development of the women’s program. The DVCHC website www.dvchockey.org provides an excellent model of highlighting the development of the game and the league’s evolution. There are a number of clubs that provide wonderful information on the history and evolution of their team including dates. This is important so all the members are aware of the history of the team.

There are many other aspects of club hockey that have yet to be explored and hopefully this will be the next part of my research.
ENDNOTES


3 Loretta Capra “Club Sports Coaching Dilemma: Roles of officers, coach and Faculty advisor. NIRSA Journal v.10 no. 3 (Spring 1996), 32-33. Depending on the “mission” of the club and level of participation, some clubs may have enough interest to support three groups such as A (highly competitive), B (moderately competitive) C (beginner/recreational/in-house group). The Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference (ECAC) hosted championship for the women’s teams in their conference starting in 1984. One of the earliest programs documented, Brown started their program in 1963. http://www.ecachockey.com/women/history/index 8.16.12 USA hockey had not committed a lot of time and energy on developing programs for women and girls. In the 1990s when membership was separated by sexes and age levels, it became apparent that females were contributing to an increase in membership at all levels. http://www.usahockey.com/usa_hockey/girls_women/girls_women/home_girls_women// (9.29.2004)


7 http://www.ecachockey.com/women/history/index


9 USA hockey had not committed a lot of time and energy on developing programs for women and girls. In the 1990s when membership was separated by sexes and age levels, it became apparent that females were contributing to an increase in membership at all levels. http://www.usahockey.com/usa_hockey/girls_women/girls_women/home_girls_women// accessed(9.29.2004) The site currently states “Since the 1992-93 season, when just over 10,000 girls or
women registered with USA Hockey, the sport has enjoyed great growth spurts. In 2010-11, the number of registered female players crossed the 65,500 mark.”


11 Although there are many other differences between divisions, the NCAA membership page states, “The NCAA is a member association composed mostly of higher education institutions. Each member school is able to choose a level of competition that best fits its mission. Competition is offered in Division I (the largest programs that provide the most athletically related financial aid for student-athletes), Division II (limited financial aid) and Division III (no athletically related financial aid).” NCAA, Membership, http://www.ncaa.org/wps/wcm/connect/public/ncaa/about+the+ncaa/membership+new accessed Sept 15, 2012.


13 Andria Hunter’s website contained a list of women’s club sports teams. The site is no longer updated, but serves as an important link to women’s hockey history. www.whockey.com Accessed 3.25.03; verified 8.16.12.


16 Division one varsity teams with club teams: Clarkson, Colgate, Connecticut, Cornell, Harvard, (The) Ohio State, Penn State; Robert Morris, St. Lawrence, University of Minnesota, University of Minnesota-Duluth, University of North Dakota, University of Wisconsin-Madison; University of Vermont. Division three varsity teams with club teams: Adrian, Norwich, State University of New York @Cortland, State University of New York @Oswego, University of Southern Maine; University of Wisconsin-Superior.

17 A qualification on the total team count, it is a rough count through perusing the internet. Cross checking teams through league and schedule notations was used to verify teams. The count is a rough estimate as not every team contact in this count responded to my email inquiry. There is also the possibility that teams that were missed due to accessibility issues.

18 (DVCHC).

19 Women’s Central hockey league (WCHL).
In a set of minutes from 2007 I was able to access, noted a USA hockey representative attending the meeting to offer support, but not interested in the politics within the organization. From the tone in the minutes, this was not the first USA hockey rep at the meetings.

*USA HOCKEY=World University Games biennial 2009 (China, Canada, Finland, Japan, Slovakia; & Great Britain) 2011 (Canada, Finland, Great Britain; Slovakia, Turkey, USA; http://www.fisu.net/en/FISU-Ice-Hockey-3540.html accessed 7.12.12