

# Tahoe youth hockey team to compete for state title

By Ted Parkhill

The Tahoe Grizzlie Squirts are headed to the California State Hockey Championships.



Tahoe Grizzlies Ice Hockey club is creating quite the stir among Northern California's top teams. On March 19-20 the Northern California playoffs commenced with the top four teams of the regular season competing for the title of NorCal champion. The Tahoe Grizzlies Squirts (ages 9-10) did not disappoint, and proved to all who were in attendance that grit and perseverance can, and will, take down the elite youth hockey organizations of Northern California.

The young Grizzlies are a team with tremendous skill and cohesion, but more important, a group that has demonstrated over and over that determination and the ability to try harder when the chips are down is what makes champions, and this mantra would again serve the team well. With preliminary round wins over the Roseville Capital Thunder and the Santa Clara Blackhawks, the Grizzlies battled their way into the championship final to play the San Jose Jr. Sharks.

In the championship game the Grizzlies took the early lead on a goal by Lucas Demsar of South Lake Tahoe. But the Jr. Sharks quickly countered.

Forward Zach Dill of South Lake Tahoe scored late in the first period to put the Grizzlies up 2-1, but again the Jr. Sharks countered to tie the game 2-2.

With 4 seconds to go in the second period, forward Mickey

Sullivan of South Lake Tahoe broke away and beat the Jr. Shark's goaltender with a hard shot to the high corner sending the Grizzlies into the third period on top 3-2. That lead, however, would quickly fade as the Jr. Sharks not only tied the game, but went ahead 4-3.

The stellar play of the Grizzlies defense Max Mueller, Leah Marino, Nathan Moffat, and Axel Sorensen, and the amazing goaltending of Nick Ilvento, all of South Lake Tahoe, and the relentless back checking of Wesley Steinkopff of Tahoe City and Nick Cruz of Incline Village and Tucker Cannon and Jaxon Kennedy, also of South Lake Tahoe, held the Jr. Sharks to just a one goal lead through intense pressure low in the Grizzlies zone.

Down but not out, the Grizzlies coaching staff pulled the goaltender with 53 seconds left in the game, and placed an extra forward on the ice. This strategy flustered the Jr. Sharks, and pressure by Grizzlies' forward Cameron Johnson of South Lake Tahoe produced a critical turnover. Mickey Sullivan took advantage of the turnover, scooped up the loose puck, broke in on the Jr. Sharks goaltender to tie the game with 20 seconds left to force sudden death overtime.

The Grizzlies, now given a second chance at the title, were absolutely recharged. With 10:47 remaining in the first overtime, Tahoe won a critical face off in the Jr. Sharks zone, pressed the puck back to winger Kevin Lehmann of South Lake Tahoe who resisted the onslaught of two Sharks attackers. Lehmann then completed his pass to open defenseman Axel Sorensen. Sorensen, high in the zone, moved right, took two strides, and drilled a shot through several players beating the Jr. Sharks goaltender.

In the blink of an eye, the Grizzlies became the NorCal Champions and absolute pandemonium ensued as the players, fans, and coaches erupted into celebration. In doing so, the Grizzlies became the first ice hockey team in Tahoe's history

to win the North Division.

The championship win places the Grizzlies as the No. 1 ranked seed for the California State Championships to be in San Jose the weekend of April 8-10 where the Grizzlies will face the tough SoCal teams, No. 2 ranked Bakersfield Dragons, No. 3 ranked Valencia Express, and compete again against the No. 4 ranked San Jose Jr. Sharks.

The Grizzlies are coached by Head Coach Stephen Rooney and assistant coaches Jim Marino, Bailey Johnson and Scott Vogelgesang.

The Tahoe Grizzlies Pee Wees (ages 11-12) also competed in the NorCal playoffs over the past weekend. They tied their first game on Saturday 2-2 against the San Jose Jr. Shark Pee Wees. Later in the afternoon they lost to the Vacaville Jets. Getting into the final championship game was all up to the result in the Sunday morning game against the Fresno Falcons. Unfortunately, the Pee Wee Grizzlies lost 6-2 in a hard fought battle and their season was over.

*Ted Parkhill works for the South Tahoe Amateur Hockey Association.*