

Hockey team creating a buzz in South Tahoe



This is the inaugural season for Lake Tahoe Blue in South Lake Tahoe. Photos/Jessie Marchesseau

By Jessie Marchesseau

I know very little about hockey other than players wear ice skates and try to hit a little black puck into the net with sticks that resemble oversized golf clubs. However, after attending the Lake Tahoe Blue game against the Long Beach Bombers last weekend, I realized something else about hockey: you don't have to know anything about it to enjoy watching it.

The fast-paced game had players and pucks flying from one end of the rink to the other at speeds far greater than one would see at a football or basketball game. Blue players were racing back and forth and showed no reservations about ending up on

the ice, slammed into the wall, at the bottom of a dog pile, or in an old-fashioned fistfight. The game was anything but boring.

Based on the South Shore, this is the Blue's first season in Lake Tahoe. Part of the Western States Hockey League, the Blue is a Junior A team. But don't let the term "junior" fool you. The players are all between the ages of 18 and 20. Most are hoping to earn college hockey scholarships or be scouted into higher level leagues, maybe even the NHL.



Lake Tahoe Blue captain Kyle Blondin looks on as a fight breaks out with the Long Beach Bombers last weekend.

This is not just a local or California league either. The WSHL is made up of 24 teams spread across the Western United States, and players come from all over the world to play. In fact, nearly half of the Blue, including the coach, are from outside the U.S. Several reign from Canada, others from Sweden, Hong Kong, Latvia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

All have moved to South Lake to live, for now anyway, and play hockey.

Head coach Zoran Bendicak is originally from the former Czechoslovakia. He moved to the U.S. in 2000 to play in the International Hockey League and has been coaching players of all ages for more than a decade. He fell in love with Tahoe

many years ago on a vacation to Squaw Valley and calls the opportunity to live and coach hockey here “a dream come true.”

“I was waiting 10 years for this,” he told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Bendicak’s dream finally came to fruition when Van Oleson, one of the founders of Tahoe Sports Entertainment which runs the South Lake Tahoe Ice Arena, contacted Chris Collins, general manager of the Bay Area Seals Junior A hockey team, and Greg Jamison, former president and CEO of the San Jose Sharks. Together, the three worked out a plan to move the Seals to Lake Tahoe. In August the plan was finalized, and the Bay Area Seals became Lake Tahoe Blue.

Collins explained that the Seals’ rink closed in the Bay Area. The Seals had only been there for one season, and after watching the success of other small-town teams, Collins wanted to take his team somewhere smaller where they could really become an integral part of the community. When he was contacted by Oleson, everything fell into place.

“We want to represent South Lake Tahoe to the best of our ability, and it would be great to become part of the fabric of the community,” Jamison said.

Jamison and Bendicak are hoping the Blue will inspire more kids from the area to get involved in hockey, and they see it happening already. All of the Blue players spend time working with the children’s teams, and Bendicak has 10-year-olds asking him if he thinks they can make the team someday.

“Little kids really look up to them; it’s really nice,” he said.



Lake Tahoe Blue goalie Olivier Gervais has played this position since he was 10.

One of those players helping to inspire the younger generation and hoping to “create a community” for hockey in Lake Tahoe is starting goalie Olivier Gervais. Out with a fractured thumb for the first part of the season, Saturday’s bout against the Bombers was his first game back.

It is not hard to see why younger players look up to Gervais. Originally from Montreal, Gervais admits he likes to be different. On the ice, he sports a helmet he painted himself with images of Chewbacca, the Road Runner and Scooby Doo. The pink ribbon painted on the back is in honor of his grandmother who had breast cancer. He is also currently sporting a blond mohawk in support of breast cancer awareness month. He said he was going to shave his head, but thought it might be more interesting if he shaved both sides of it.

Gervais has been a goalie since he was 10 years old and jokingly says it’s because he doesn’t know how to skate.

“It’s a tough job, but it’s the best,” he said in a French-Canadian accent.

Lake Tahoe Blue does have one local player, Evan Brown who is a South Tahoe High grad, and a few from elsewhere in California, including Mark De Vaughn from Sacramento.

De Vaughn played in New York last season, but says he is glad

to be closer to home this year. Even though he has only been playing with his Blue teammates for a couple of months, De Vaughn said they're like family to him.

"I'm really glad that I'm on this team with this group of guys because I wouldn't want any other family to play with," he said.

At 20, this is De Vaughn's last year in the league, and he is focusing on getting a spot on a college team next year. Gervais, on the other hand, said he would like to go to college, but is hoping to earn a spot on a professional team, perhaps in Europe.

Regardless of where they end up next year, from the coaches to the owners to the players, they all have one goal in common: to take Lake Tahoe Blue to this year's national championships.

"The only way to achieve excellence is by reaching for greatness," Collins said.

While the championship game is still months away, Saturday's 7-5 win over Long Beach was a step in the right direction.

The Blue will play three more home games this weekend against the Southern Oregon Spartans. They have 12 home games left during this season which goes through March. Tickets are \$5 for children, \$10 for adults, and season passes are also available.