



Pittsburgh Emperors Expand Special Hockey to Steel City

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By Greg Bates - Special to USAHockey.org

WPSHA received a \$2,000 grant from The USA Hockey Foundation to help pay for equipment and ice time



John Stevenson and his wife, Tracey, had two children playing last year for the Steel City Icebergs in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

When that special needs hockey organization on the north side of the city got too large — there were about 35 to 40 skaters — and ice time started to shrink for the players, the Stevensons felt there was a need for a team in the South Hills of Pittsburgh.

So in February of this year, the Stevensons formed the Western Pennsylvania Special Hockey Association (WPSHA) and named its team the Pittsburgh Emperors.

"Me and my wife thought it was something that we wanted to go ahead and put together ourselves," said John Stevenson, the association's president.

The WPSHA caters to boys and girls who have developmental delays, including autism, traumatic brain injuries, Down syndrome and Mitochondrial disease.

"Just seeing it in my daughter's face, it has done a world of good for her," said Emperors coach and coaching director Gary Verwer, whose 16-year-old daughter, Sierra, is playing on the team. "Her brother played hockey, and she just adores her brother and followed all the games. When she learned that she had the opportunity to play hockey, I couldn't hear the end of it. There was no way I was going to say no to her."

To get the organization up and running, the WPSHA received a \$2,000 grant from The USA Hockey Foundation to help pay for equipment and ice time. That money has gone a long way in the first few months of the Emperors' existence.

"It really helps right now, just trying to get things off the ground and trying to put everything together," Stevenson said. "We're starting to get all our paperwork squared away, so that's [funding] we don't have to worry about right now."

The Emperors started with eight to nine kids who moved over from the Steel City Icebergs, including the Stevensons' two kids, Tobias and Machaiah, and Verwer's daughter. The kids with experience playing hockey already owned equipment, but since the team added a number of players and was up to 17 kids in mid-September, new equipment was a necessity.

The Emperors have been receiving equipment donations from other youth organizations around the area, and that's been a big help. The WPSHA's goal is to provide the players with all the equipment so the families don't have to worry about any expenses.

"Some of them being able to open up brand new equipment or putting new skates on makes a big deal to these kids," Verwer said.

The Emperors have grown by about one or two players per month since the team's inception. Advertising has all been by word of mouth.

Stevenson likes the organization's pace of progress thus far, as does Verwer.

"Personally, I like the fact that it's starting out slow, but I do anticipate a big turnout in a year or two," Verwer said.

Practice is Under Way

The Emperors had their inaugural practice Aug. 16 and they skate every Saturday at the Bladerunners Ice Complex in Bethel Park, Pennsylvania.

Both the kids and the coaches are enjoying themselves.

"It's a lot of fun, quite an experience for me," said Verwer, who has two assistant coaches. "I've never coached before, other than assisted my son's bantam team when he was younger for a couple of years."

Verwer is running a standard practice on one end of the ice for the kids who have the ability to skate. For those who are new to the sport, the coaches work with them on basics such as skating with the aid of a chair.

In an early-season practice, one of Verwer's assistant coaches was helping a player who had a tough time getting around on the ice.

"He basically let him fall down and get back up and try it again. [The coach] told me every time he fell, he laughed and giggled and tried to get back up," Verwer said. "When you see that, and the hearts of these kids, it brings tears to your eyes. It's very satisfying."

There has been a great deal of community support for the WPSHA. Youth groups and high school students from around the Pittsburgh area have expressed interest in on-ice volunteering to help the kids.

The Emperors' plan this season is to play games against other special needs hockey teams from around the region, including in Pennsylvania and Ohio. The Emperors are also considering the Special Hockey International tournament in March 2015 in the Canadian capital city of Ottawa.

"I know there's no one on our team unwilling to travel," Verwer said.

Stevenson would also like to run a summer program in 2015 to extend the season and give the kids more opportunities to play hockey, but he wants to manage growth carefully.

"I don't want to grow too fast; I want to grow nice and slow," Stevenson said. "I don't want to get too big too fast and not be able to support everything that I want to support — that's my biggest thing."

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