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Lace 'em up, girls

By Randy Billings (published: December 20, 2007)

Hockey moms launch hockey apparel line



Bela Cloutier, left, of South Portland, wears BelaHockey gear along with Allie Granato, Olympian Cammi Granato, Katie Granato and Mandi Granato.

SOUTH PORTLAND – Some local moms are hoping to make the game of ice hockey more attractive to girls and they're doing it by launching a line of hockey apparel designed especially for women.

Justine Carlisle and Anna Cloutier last week launched

Courtesy BelaHockey

BelaHockey.com, an online store where young women can order polka-dot hockey sticks along with pink and purple accessories like socks, undershirts and headbands.

"The response has been amazing," Carlisle said. "There are so many girls, including women, who feel like this is the first time a company has paid attention to them."

The idea grew out of a neighborhood passion for hockey.

It started in 2005, when Carlisle's husband, Peter, built an ice rink behind the couple's Adelbert Street home. It was there Bela Cloutier, 6, learned to ice skate and play hockey with the boys in the neighborhood.

A year later, when the boys decided to join a Falmouth youth hockey program, Cloutier wanted to play, too. However, when it came time to get all of the necessary equipment, there was a stunning lack of apparel geared toward girls.

"I wanted something different," Bela Cloutier said. "I don't like the boys' stuff."

While Anna Cloutier supported her daughter's decision to play hockey, she still wanted her little girl to remain exactly that – a little girl.

"It's a way of giving girls confidence," Cloutier said. "It shows them they can play a sport that is predominantly male and still be a girl."

The decisive moment to create a whole line of girls hockey apparel came on Jan 1. Within a month, the two moms had formed a corporation and a month later they had their designs. "It's just been a whirlwind," Carlisle said.

The fledgling apparel company even has star power in its corner. Two-time Olympic gold medalist Cammi Granato jumped at the chance to become a partner in the Web-based business when approached with the idea.

"She was so excited when she saw what we were doing," said Carlisle, whose husband works for a sports marketing firm. "She thought it was so right on."

Carlisle said it's natural that Granato be a partner in the company, since she is credited with bringing women's ice hockey to the mainstream.

Not only does Granato bring name recognition and a Rolodex of professional hockey and girls hockey league contacts, but the Olympian is intimately involved with the company's designs and brainstorming regularly with the South Portland moms via conference calls from her Vancouver home.

"She is not just the sports figure in the company; she's in there with us 100 percent," Cloutier said. "She believed in the product from the start. Right away she thought it was a great fit."

Little more than an idea spurred by frustration one year ago, BelaHockey.com is now up and running, and the company's timing couldn't have been better. Not only is it Christmas time, but girls hockey is exploding in popularity throughout the country. Much of that growth is among girls who are 10 and under.

Next year, the Maine Principals' Association will sanction girls ice hockey as a varsity sport, according to Don Cashman, president of the Maine Girls Ice Hockey Association. Cashman expects there will be 15 high school girls teams sanctioned next year, with as many as 25 teams in the next five years. He said the organization is also increasing efforts to organize more youth hockey programs below the high school level.

With the Internet, BelaHockey can reach women hockey players all over the world, and apparently word is spreading.

While the company originally geared itself toward girls playing entry-level hockey, Cloutier said BelaHockey has proved popular for women playing in adult leagues across the country, too. She said the company has sold polka-dot sticks, which are customized with players' names and uniform numbers, in adult sizes.

Cloutier said their line of long-sleeve shirts and "Katie caps" are also proving popular with hockey moms, who want to look the part while watching from the stands. The company is looking at expanding its product line to include hockey bags with compartments for toiletries and fashionable hockey shorts.

"We don't want the girls to feel like the outsider," Cloutier said. "It's important for (Bela) to feel like she can play hockey without feeling like she's knocking on a door she shouldn't."

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