

## Hockey Gear Gets Prettier

*South Portland moms start a company to give girls equipment that says they belong in the game*

By Ed Murphy  
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Bela Cloutier was jazzed about her decision to play hockey.

But the kindergartner lost some of that enthusiasm when she checked out the equipment that hockey players need. It wasn't so much the big, bulky uniforms or the heavy padding. It was more the bland colors.

"It just didn't look inviting. It wasn't saying, 'this is a girl's sport,'" said Bela's mother, Anna Cloutier,

who took her daughter on some of shopping trips for hockey gear. "Everything is literally made to look like it's for boys, so it doesn't give the feeling that (girls) should be playing this sport."

Cloutier talked it over with Justine Carlisle, a friend who lives across the street from her South Portland home, and they decided to do what good mothers do when faced with a situation like this: they started a business.

Earlier this month, BelaHockey geared up and the company's Web site ([belahockey.com](http://belahockey.com)) went live, offering polka-dotted sticks, pink-and-purple hockey socks and even a scarf to help players keep the hair out of their faces as they speed around the ice.

The two business partners enlisted Cammi Granato, who was captain of the U.S. women's hockey teams that won the gold medal at the 1998 Olympics in Nagano and the silver in 2002 in Salt Lake City. Granato is an equal partner in the company, along with Carlisle and Cloutier.

Carlisle said that despite the popularity of hockey among women and girls, it's an untapped market.

"There's never been a (hockey) line produced just for girls, even though this is a growing segment of the sport," she said.

BelaHockey designs the products and details the specifications, and has different suppliers and manufacturers produce the items. BelaHockey uses a Portland-based fulfillment firm to store gear, process orders and handle shipping, allowing Cloutier and Carlisle to work on market development, design and other aspects of the business.

The business is based in their South Portland homes, and they spend a lot of time running across the street to each other's houses, said Carlisle.

Having a company make gender-specific equipment for girls and women is important in a number of ways, said Pamela Noakes, executive director of the National Association for Girls & Women in Sports.



Justine Carlisle, left, and Anna Cloutier started a new company, BelaHockey, to make hockey clothing and equipment in girl-pleasing colors and designs. Cloutier's daughter, 7-year-old Bela, rear, inspired the business when she wanted to play, but disliked the look of hockey gear.



Bela Cloutier, 7, of South Portland is among 58,000 girls and women playing hockey in the United States, according to figures from 2005-2006.

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"It gives girls the idea that the sport is for them if they see there is equipment and product that's developed for girls," said Noakes.

And just having equipment designed in a way that's fun and appealing means something, Noakes said.

"That's always more encouraging to girls, as well," she said. "It allows girls to see themselves in that activity."

According to BelaHockey, there were 58,000 participants in girls' and women's hockey in the United States in the 2005-2006 season, and 74,000 in Canada. Those figures have more than doubled in the past decade.

In addition to the growing popularity of women's and girls' hockey, BelaHockey has more opportunities to expand its product line, given how much equipment is involved in the sport, Carlisle said. The company isn't interested in breaking into the expensive products such as helmets and skates, she said, but can add some color to items such as hockey stick bags and performance undershirts.

Carlisle said the company's most popular product so far is the sticks, which feature colorful polka-dots and the company's logo, a girl's face inside a flower-like circle over crossed hockey sticks. Most of the products differentiate in design by having a more female style.

One product that has a functional change that's useful for girls is the Katie Kap. It is a headband/scarf that keeps a player's hair out of her eyes when tucked inside a hockey helmet. It was inspired by Granato's 10-year-old cousin, Katie, who had been frustrated with her hair getting in the way when she played. The only thing that worked, said Carlisle, was an accessory made by using a torn-off T-shirt sleeve as a sort of hood. BelaHockey took that prototype and made the Katie Kap, said Carlisle.

They also have plans to tweak the hockey stick bags and possibly design a hockey equipment bag that would be easier for women and girls to use, she said.

A few sales have been made in Maine, Carlisle said, but orders have also come from Minnesota, Wisconsin, New Jersey and Canada.

An equipment sales representative from Canada has offered to try to get BelaHockey's products into stores north of the border, a move the company is looking into.

Some women have sent e-mails asking BelaHockey to add products for grown-ups, and Carlisle said that's under consideration as well. Carlisle said equipment for other sports have become girl-friendly and it's time for hockey to catch up.

The two founders of the company aren't hockey players themselves, but Carlisle, in particular, is close to the sport.

The skating rink in her backyard is where her two sons and Bela, now 7, learned to skate. In fact, it was her oldest son's decision to join a team that led Bela to decide she, too, wanted to continue with the sport beyond the neighborhood pick-up games, Carlisle said.

She hopes BelaHockey will make it easier for other girls to do the same.

"It might be intimidating for girls to try it out because of the way the equipment is packaged," she said and that's where her company can help and might add to the game's popularity among younger players.

"To see these girls at 5 and 6 years of age to be trying this sport is so great," she said.

