

Hockey Gear Designed with Girls in Mind

By Tammy Daniels - December 18, 2007

NORTH ADAMS - Hockey's practically a way of life in Maine so, not surprisingly, little Isabela "Bela" Cloutier was eager to take to the ice.

But when the kindergartner and her mom went shopping for equipment, they were disappointed with what they found.

"There was nothing but black - you know, boy's stuff," said Anna Carol Alvarez Cloutier, a 1988 graduate of Drury High School and a resident of South Portland, Maine. "She likes pink and purple."



Her neighbor, Justine Carlisle, had two boys in the co-ed program but understood the problem - girls might be playing hockey but they had to dress like boys. The two women decided to do something about it and came up with their own line of hockey equipment geared to girls.

"We pitched the idea to Cammi Granato, she was immediately onboard. She's been wanting to do this forever," said Cloutier about the woman who led the U.S. women's Olympic hockey team to a gold medal win in 1998.

The result is BelaHockey, a line of hockey gear and clothing with little girls in mind. The company offers long-sleeved T-shirts with the BelaHockey logo, colorful socks and hats, and personalized hockey sticks in blue-and-purple polka dots and pink-and-purple polka dots. It will be adding performance shirts, hockey stick bags, jerseys and other colorful custom equipment to its line.

The apparel isn't just about girls looking pretty, it's about letting them know that hockey is a sport for girls as well as boys, said Cloutier a North Adams native. (Cloutier is the sister of Osmin Alvarez, owner of iBerkshires' parent company, Boxcar Media.) "It's about building confidence in girls, letting them know it's a girl's sport, too."

That's important in Maine, where hockey is a popular and growing sport at all levels and outdoor rinks are common. Cloutier, who has another young daughter and son interested in playing, said there are two backyard rinks on her street alone.

"Growing up playing hockey, I was always one of the only girls, whether it was at home with my brothers or in the local youth league," said Granato in a press release. "I was comfortable on the ice but felt self-conscious in the lobby, where it was clear that I was a girl playing a boy's sport. By offering girls' hockey gear designed exclusively for them, we're reinforcing that hockey is their sport, too. We hope BelaHockey will motivate other girls to pick up a stick and try the great game of hockey."

And not just girls are interested. Since the www.BelaHockey.com came online a few weeks ago, the three founders have been inundated with calls and letters from women clamoring for their own designs.

"The women are all writing to us. We're branching off into many different things," said Cloutier.

"One of our great sellers are our hockey sticks but some girls aren't into pink and purple so we're going to add sportier colors. It's just been great and now the women are saying they want them, too."



Anna Cloutier

A lot of those women are moms who are starting to play for fitness, she said. "I didn't realize how many women's leagues there are when we started doing research. Nobody was tapping into that market when we started a year ago."

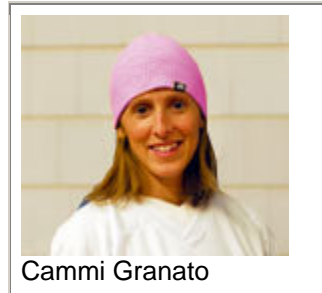
Over the past 15 years, girls' and women's hockey have enjoyed considerable growth with participation levels increasing to 58,000 in the United States and 74,000 in Canada for the 2005-06 seasons, according to USA Hockey. The figures have more than doubled in the past decade and many believe the Olympic success of both the U.S. and Canadian Olympic women's hockey teams are contributing factors, according to BelaHockey. Young girls (10 and under) in the United States were responsible for the largest increase, with more than 4,000 joining the sport since 2001.

Cloutier said it's intimidating for girls to try a new, predominately male sport, especially when the equipment looks as though it has been designed for boys. The moms, which includes Granato, are trying to package hockey in a more balanced and inviting way.

"Cammi's resume on the ice speaks for itself, but what has always impressed me most is her commitment to encourage more girls to get involved in hockey," said Janey Miller, vice president of Olympics for the Octagon agency and Granato's long-time agent. "She epitomizes BelaHockey - a girl playing amongst boys when it wasn't the thing to do - and together they will work to change mindsets and attract more girls to the sport."

Cloutier said she's seen a difference in the now 6-year-old Bela since she's taken up hockey - including playing ball outside at recess with the boys. She doesn't feel she can't play because she's a girl.

"She has such confidence but she still wants to look like a little girl. We just want to let [girls] know they're not an outsider when they're playing hockey."



Cammi Granato

Further information: www.BelaHockey.com.