

Blades a success on ice, but struggle to put fans in the seats

On the ice, the Oakville Blades have been tremendously successful for the past five seasons.

During that span, they've gone 188-43-7-1 during the regular season, a winning percentage of .787. They've won four division titles and two league championships, been a league finalist another year and made two trips to the RBC Royal Bank Cup national championship tournament.

But how many people really care?

Not enough, it seems.

Last year, on the way to their second Ontario Junior Hockey League title in three years, the Blades ranked ninth out of the league's 15 teams in attendance. According to league figures, an average of only 133 fans attended Blades' home games.

Part of that was attributed to the venue. Joshua's Creek Arenas isn't exactly known for its spectacular sightlines, as anyone who has sat in the upper stands would attest to.

The Blades hoped their support would improve this year, moving into the beautiful new Sixteen Mile Sports Complex with an Olympic-sized ice surface and bowl seating that would accommodate 1,500 spectators.

But while attendance has nearly doubled (262 fans per game), the Blades still rank ninth in the league in that department. To put those numbers into perspective, the Kingston Voyageurs — despite playing in a city that also has an Ontario Hockey League team — draw 784 fans per game, while Newmarket and Huntsville also attract more than 500 spectators per contest.



JON KUIPERIJ

"We were hoping this year to have an average of 400 people a game, being in a new venue that is easy to drive to," says Blades general manager, president and part-owner Carlo Coccimiglio. "In the playoffs, we wanted to get 800 to 1,500 a game if we make a good run at it. That's what was in our budget."

Not that the Blades are the only team in Halton that is struggling at the gate.

The West Division-leading Burlington Cougars (28-5-1 so far this year) are drawing even worse, attracting just 127 people per game. The Georgetown Raiders, a perennial powerhouse in the West and the Blades' biggest rival, are averaging 288 fans per game. And the Milton IceHawks, who have won just five times this year, are drawing 112 fans per contest.

It certainly appears Mississauga and Brampton, two cities known for not supporting their OHL teams, aren't the only southern Ontario communities that don't have a passion for junior hockey.

"People told me before that it's

a (Toronto Maple Leafs) market. Saturday night, where are you going to go? You're going to go watch the Leafs play before you watch junior A tier two or the OHL," Coccimiglio says.

"I think people today are so busy with their lives. Take an athlete today who is on the road for seven days (a week). He might have one day off as a young kid. What does he want to do on a Sunday? Sit at home and relax, play some video games..."

"Society today is such a fast pace. People are busy, and their first priority is to watch a professional team."

Fan support not vital for all

Attendance isn't a big deal for some junior A teams. Burlington Cougars owner Ron Sedlbauer admits it isn't even a priority for his squad, which moved from the city-owned Central Arena a couple years ago into the private Wave Twin Rinks facility — a rink that is even less spectator-friendly than Joshua's Creek Arenas.

The Cougars made the move in order to have better workout facilities for their players (Wave Twin Rinks has a workout centre upstairs) as well as to have increased and cheaper access to ice time.

"We're paying a price with our attendance," says Sedlbauer. "This is all about the (players). Let's think about what they get out of it first before we worry about less than desirable watching arrangements."

The Cougars also keep their expenses down by not paying their coaches and executives as well as having as many local players as possible, cutting down on billeting costs.

It often hurts the team from a competitive standpoint, but Sedlbauer is comfortable with that.

"There are teams that are trying to win this league and the Dudley

Best Buy CORRECTION NOTICE

To our valued customers: We apologize for any inconvenience caused by an error in our flyer dated: December 17 - December 24
Product: Samsung Focus Smartphone (free with purchase of Samsung QX410 Laptop) On page 6 of the December 17 flyer, please note that this offer is valid ONLY if the customer signs up on a new in-store activation with a minimum \$50/month voice and data plan for 36 months. Please see a Product Specialist in-store for more details. SKU: 10156348/ 10157425



EMPTY FEELING: The Oakville Blades have twice won the league title and gone to the national Jr. A championship in the last four years but despite their success and entertaining games against rivals such as Georgetown, above, the seats at their new arena remain empty.

Hewitt Cup (Central Canadian championship) and the whole thing," Sedlbauer says. "We're trying to field a competitive team and develop kids. We've got a reputation for that."

The Blades, and several other teams in the league, run their organization differently. They pay their coaches and acquire players from out of town, all with the goal of winning.

It makes attendance crucial, even for a non-profit organization.

"At 300 (people a game), we're not going to break even," Coccimiglio says. "We don't break even if we don't make a few rounds of the playoffs."

And it's clear that simply winning, as the Blades have done regularly for the past five years, isn't enough.

"We have to give people value for their dollar. The on-ice product has been very good... but it's not about that. We have to make an event for people and young players

to come out and enjoy it," Coccimiglio says. "It's not just about the hockey program. You have to give entertainment."

Coccimiglio is optimistic that Blades' attendance will soon begin improving. The team has recently made greater efforts to be more involved with the community, holding fundraising events for charity, and having closer relationships with the Minor Oaks Hockey Association and Oakville Hornets Girls Hockey Association.

"We're starting to turn the tide," Coccimiglio says. "We're doing the best we can as an organization. We want to maintain a reputation across North America as an organization that cares about our players and develops our players to get to the next level. Would we like to have people come out and support the events? Yes, we would."

"It's good hockey, but at the end of the day, we can't walk them in. They've got to come in on their own."

Hill named to badminton staff for Canada Winter Games

Oakville's Melissa Hill has been selected as the assistant coach for the Ontario badminton team which will compete at the Canada Winter Games in Halifax in February.

Hill is a graduate of Iroquois Ridge High School and graduated from McMaster University with a Bachelor of Engineering Physics in 2005. She is currently completing her doctorate at the University of

Toronto in the Department of Medical Biophysics and is part of a large research group that focuses on the early detection of breast cancer.

Hill is a level three certified badminton coach and has been an OUA all star for 10 consecutive years and was an OUA MVP in 2005-06. As a junior player she was ranked third in Canada in under-19 girls singles.

WALMART CORRECTION NOTICE

16-Pack AA Duracell Batteries with bonus 4 AA batteries at \$5.97 is unavailable. We offer the 16-Pack AA Duracell Batteries at \$4.78

We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

WALMART CORRECTION NOTICE

Gift Pack Oranges (#9450089), advertised as 14-lb should be 10-lb.

We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

WALMART CORRECTION NOTICE

KitchenAid Ultra Chrome Stand Mixer (#1534018) may not be available in all stores.

We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

WALMART CORRECTION NOTICE

Microsoft Office Software Home and Student 2007 (#550777/85) should be Microsoft Home & Student 2010.



We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.

WALMART CORRECTION NOTICE

6-in-1 Train Table (#706138) is incorrect. It should be 3-in-1 Train Table.

We apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.