



BUFFALO *BILLS*

Staging A USA Hockey National Championship Event Can Be A Huge Shot In The Arm For A Host And The Local Economy

BY HARRY THOMPSON

It's mid-morning on Championship Sunday and Bob Schell is already daydreaming about the huge steak he plans to toss on his grill in a couple of hours.

After a week of eating doughnuts, pizza and anything else he could consume on the run, Schell is ready for some real food, served on a real plate and eaten with real utensils.

His food fantasy is quickly interrupted by the squawking of the radio that has been attached to his hip for the better part of the week.

"Bob, we need ..." is followed by one form of urgent request or another, and the reality of hosting a USA Hockey National Championship tournament snaps back into focus.

Over the course of five days, the Northtown Center, a four-sheet municipally-owned facility in Amherst, N.Y., has been the center of the youth hockey universe. Or more accurately, it was one of seven centers of the youth hockey universe as USA Hockey National Championships were simultaneously taking place in Marlborough, Mass.;

Ashburn, Va.; Wayne, N.J.; Frisco, Texas; Lansing, Mich.; and Green Bay, Wis.

But Amherst is hosting 48 Tier I teams, which brings with it not only some of the most talented youth hockey players from around the country, but also a small army of Junior, college and professional scouts in town to check out the stars of tomorrow under one roof.

The four mini-tournaments – each featuring 12 teams – begin early in the week as teams trickle in from as far away as Alaska, California, Texas and Florida to get acclimated to their surroundings before the puck drops on Wednesday morning.

"Kids remember Nationals for various reasons away from what happens on the ice," Schell says. "There's only one team at the end of the day that wins. We wanted to make sure they all win and leave with fond memories of being here."

As any Tier I parent knows, these memories don't come cheap. There are airfares, rental cars, hotel rooms, three square meals a day, assorted energy drinks and vitamin bars, not to mention other activities to help occupy the players' atten-

tion in between games. And all of that sets local cash registers ringing throughout the week.

Youth sports are certainly big business, and chambers of commerce from coast to coast are constantly battling to lure events, large and small, to their hometowns.

"It is a competitive market," says Pete Harvey, director of sports development for the Buffalo Niagara Sports Commission. "There are a lot of events that we'll bid on where we have better facilities, better air-lift and whatever, but another community can buy the event. You don't see that with USA Hockey. The process they use sets everybody on an even scale."

That ordeal takes place more than 18 months before the first puck drops as interested hosts go through a detailed application process in which USA Hockey's Youth Council looks at a variety of variables, including quality of the host facility, the volunteer base and support from the local community.

And the Buffalo area, which has been hit hard by the recent recession, is one of the leaders at hosting events. USA



"[NATIONALS ARE] A LOT OF WORK," SCHELL SAYS, "BUT AS LONG AS YOU ARE WORKING WITH PEOPLE YOU CAN TRUST IT'S NOT THAT DIFFICULT."

—BOB SCHELL, USA HOCKEY NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP HOST

Hockey has awarded Amherst Youth Hockey the opportunity to host a National Championship every year since 2006. This is the first time they've been able to bring in all four Tier I tournaments.

It's a team effort that sets Amherst on a short list to host an event of this magnitude, and every year they figure out how they can do it just a little bit better.

"[Nationals are] a lot of work," Schell says, "but as long as you are working with people you can trust it's not that difficult. It's not rocket science. It's a hockey tournament."

Visit Buffalo Niagara estimated this year that players and their families took up 6,000 hotel room nights, and the tournament had an economic impact of nearly \$2.2 million.

"Anything with positive economic impact in this town is really good," says Schell, who was named Buffalo's Ambassador of the Year in 2011.

"Buffalo is not what it used to be. We used to be a city of 650,000 or 700,000 people. We lost half the population. We're on the rebound, and hockey is a large part of that."

The economic impact can be felt in a number of ways. There are the obvious benefits, such as money spent on room nights, rental cars and restaurants, but the impact ripples through the local economy in the form of an increased need for goods and services.

"It's not just what are people spending to get here and what are they spending in the restaurants," says Harvey, whose group uses a formula to figure out the direct and indirect impact on the local economy. "There are more people working because there are more people here in town.

"Every business, especially within a five-mile radius, is really feeling this. It's huge."

It's also a huge moneymaker for the

Amherst Youth Hockey Association. Schell estimates that by the time the final figures are tabulated the event will pull in between \$50,000 and \$60,000 for the organization.

"It's a nice little fund-raiser, but it's an awful lot of work to make that money," says Norm Spiegel, chairman of the National Championship tournament committee.

"The profits go back into the youth program, whether it's to buy more ice or reducing fees or whatever you want to use it for. We've never had any issues as to where that money is used. It's always been for good."

The fruits of Amherst's labors can be found tucked in the back corner of the Northtown Center. It is a set of high-tech durable boards that are used for the association's cross-ice hockey program.

While the expense of such an investment, approximately \$20,000, could potentially be out of reach for many associations, thanks to the profit made by hosting Nationals, Amherst made

the purchase as part of its overall commitment to the American Development Model.

"This is why we get 165 people out here to volunteer their time to raise money for the organization so we can do something like that, which is the right thing to do," says Schell.

"We want to put back into the facility and the organization to create better youth hockey in Amherst. You can see it, and we have more people in the organization now than we ever had."

And that's why Schell's phone is already ringing from dedicated youth hockey parents and local business leaders wondering when youth Nationals will be back again.

"People take time off work and mark the dates of the USA Hockey Nationals on their calendar," Schell says.

"You want to give your volunteers some time off to enjoy the spring with their families, but there are a whole lot of people who, if we had the opportunity to do this every year, would be standing in line to volunteer." ★



Teams from across the country have made themselves right at home in the Buffalo area as Amherst Youth Hockey has hosted a USA Hockey National Championship event every year since 2006.