High aspirations for Tahoe hockey players

By Jessie Marchesseau

Hockey isn’t about slamming people into walls, starting fights or broken teeth. It’s not even about scoring goals, blocking the puck or being able to move around on a 3mm wide slice of metal. For South Lake Tahoe’s junior hockey players, the sport is really about hard work, dedication, teamwork and friendship.

“It’s a commitment, and it makes you feel connected when you’re with other kids that do the same thing,” said 14-year-old Katie Sonntag, who met her best friend Leah Marino at hockey practice.

Tucker Cannon, center, maneuvers around defenders. Photo/Provided

Being part of a team is one of Sonntag’s favorite things about the sport. As a hockey player, she spends a lot of time training, and consequently a lot of time with her teammates.

The season goes from August to April, and sometimes includes post-season tournaments and summer camps, making it a year-round activity for many of the players. Tahoe teams have practice twice per week, consisting mainly of passing drills,

skating practice, conditioning and shooting. But players don’t necessarily stop there.

Tucker Cannon, 12, has been playing for five years and is a center for the Tahoe Grizzlies. In addition to twice-weekly practices and weekend games, he gets on the ice for some skate time two more days per week. Marino, 13, plays defense for the Grizzlies. She has been on the team since she was 6 and spends extra time off the ice working on her stick handling and shooting skills, plus doing basic core and leg workouts.

Sonntag has transitioned from the Grizzlies to playing center for the San Jose Junior Sharks girls’ team. As a member of this team, she has practice and/or games six days per week and still puts in workout time outside the rink. She practices in Tahoe during the week, then travels to either San Jose or another game location every weekend.

Without many nearby hockey communities, players and their families generally travel to the Bay Area or even farther for weekend games and tournaments. This requires a big commitment on the part of parents as well.

“The logistics can be challenging,” said Pete Sonntag, Katie’s father, “but I wouldn’t do anything but support them to the fullest extent possible.”

Even with so much time and energy dedicated to hockey, these players still find time to participate in other organized sports. Sonntag is on a track and field team, Marino plays soccer, and Cannon plays baseball and soccer but says hockey is the hardest.

“It’s one of those sports that makes them better athletes for every other sport,” Tyler Cannon, Tucker’s father, told *Lake Tahoe News*. He describes it as requiring the hand-eye coordination of baseball and the foot speed of soccer.

Katie Sonntag, who is about to score, wants to be on the U.S. hockey team one day. Photo/Provided

But athleticism isn't the only aspect of playing hockey that carries over into other parts of their lives. All three players agree hockey has taught them even more important lessons such as the benefits of hard work and dedication, and it has also instilled a sense of self-confidence.

"The more confidence you have in yourself, the better you play," Marino told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It's the same in the world, too."

As they move forward, these players are all looking forward to new experiences in hockey. Cannon had the opportunity to play AAA elite hockey with the Bay Area Blazers in the spring post-season which took him to tournaments as far away as Chicago, the heart of hockey country. Marino has been invited to try out for the San Jose Junior Sharks girls' team. And Sonntag is considering the idea of a hockey prep school.

While Cannon seems content to just see where hockey takes him, the girls, on the other hand, have lined out some pretty specific hockey goals. Both have set their sights on the Olympics, along with stints playing Division I college hockey and on the U.S. Women's National team. Not even in high school yet, they are already talking about what college teams they want to play for and the benefits of attending hockey prep

schools for a better chance of getting recruited.

All of this may seem like a lot for the kids and their families, but Pete Sonntag said it is all worth it to see his daughter doing something she loves so much and living out her dreams.

He has already made a significant commitment to his daughter’s hockey aspirations and said he will continue to support her as much as possible. “If she has a dream she wants to pursue,” he said, “I can’t think of something better for a kid to go after.”