

# Making the Grade

NorCal's high school scene growing in size, popularity

By Brian McDonough

With hockey's popularity on the rise in Northern California, it's no surprise that the high school game is starting to forge a serious, competitive identity.

What started nearly a decade ago with four teams, the HP/Sharks Ice High School Hockey League has blossomed into 13 programs – seven at the varsity level and six JV.

"It's a logical place for these kids to continue their hockey careers," said **Mike Yost**, coach of Bellarmine High School, a prestigious all-boys prep school that boasts one varsity and two JV teams. "Since the league is supported and partially sponsored by Hewlett Packard and the (San Jose) Sharks, it's economical and competitive."

In addition to Bellarmine, Valley Christian and Arch Bishop Mitty also compete in the league, along with 10 other mixed high school teams.

With all games played at the Sharks Ice facility in San Jose, the cost to play in the league this season is \$645 a player. That includes 18 games and 20 practices, plus playoffs.

While much of the league is comprised of players who can't devote the time or have the resources to play on a travel team, it's slowly but surely starting to attract a number of high-end travel and tier players in the area.

Playing for school pride is one of the league's best selling points. "After playing travel or tier hockey in some-



*Bellarmino is one of 13 high school programs skating in Northern California.*

what obscurity, they're now playing for their school and being recognized for their talent and ability like other athletes in their schools," said Yost. "It's allowed some players to really extend their social sphere at school and really be part of it in a way they didn't experience before."

And if there's any question about the league's intensity, the rivalry between Bellarmine and Valley Christian says it all. With the Rivalry Cup on the line, which Valley Christian won last year, along with the league championship, the schools play to a zealous, over-capacity crowd of 800 at the Sharks Ice facility's North Rink.

"It's really generated a lot of excitement," said Yost.

The league also has some trusted hockey names behind it in ex-NHLer **Tom Pederson** and **Ken Yackel, Jr.**, a former All-American at the University of Minnesota. The two coach the league's Redwood City varsity and JV teams.

"They bring big-time credibility," said Yost. "The

players on our team look up to these guys knowing how much they know the game and how much they're in it for the players. The league is for the players, not the coaches, and Tom and Ken embody that spirit 100 percent."

With that in mind, the schools also make it a point to accommodate the players who have other hockey commitments, whether it's travel or roller.

"We're flexible to allow both, because travel and practice can sometimes conflict," said Yost. "Our players at Bellarmine aren't penalized for playing travel or other sports. We work with them so they can do as much as they can."

"In fact, some of our players are in travel, the high school league and roller hockey," added Yost, noting Bellarmine's four inline hockey teams that have been in existence for close to 10 years. "Both the roller and ice programs support each other and encourage the students to play in both."

Yost eventually wants to

see the program evolve into a sanctioned high school league. His thought is to form a league around one of the existing high school leagues, such as the West Catholic Athletic League that Bellarmine, Valley Christian and Arch Bishop Mitty already play in for all other sports. That plan, he estimates, is five years away.

Further down the road, Yost would like to duplicate the high school models in the more traditional hockey regions of Minnesota and New England.

"That's where Tom and Ken come in," said Yost. "Both played at high school programs in Minnesota and they know how this should be set up so we don't have to re-invent the wheel."

"We want to make it an official winter sport playing the same seasonal boundaries as high school basketball."

Yost also welcomes competition from the south.

"We'd love to establish a home-and-home series with an all-high school SoCal team next season," he said. 🌟