

# Making Her Own Play

**Business major founds club hockey team, now a UNH-sanctioned sport**

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Julia Hird '16 has been playing ice hockey since she was 7 years old. When she started it was a way to do something that her twin sister, Caroline, was not. Let her have gymnastics, she said.

So, she started skating, and her dad, John Hird '84, started coaching, and a few years later, her twin and her older sister, Katherine (her sport is skiing), joined the youth league. Fast forward to college: Hird opted for UNH, despite the fact there wasn't a club

hockey team; Caroline went to Keene State where there was one. That winter of Hird's freshman year was the only time she hadn't belonged to a club since she'd started playing in grade school.

And then the Keene team was short a player, and Hird filled in.

"It made me realize how much I wanted to play," says Hird, an information systems and management major at the Peter Paul College. "I told Caroline 'I really miss this' and she said, 'So start a team.' A few days later, I was reaching out to people. The whole idea spread word-of-mouth."

About 20 young women expressed interest and by the following year, the N.H Cats team was up and running. Because they weren't a UNH-sanctioned club, they had to carpool to games and they couldn't use the Whittemore Center for practice.

In 2014, Hird and the team leaders put together a comprehensive proposal seeking official UNH club status, but it was turned down because only one club sport is accepted annually. So, they tried again this year, and on April 23, Campus Recreation approved the application.

"Being a sanctioned club sport strengthens the competition and helps get the sport recognized," Hird says. "And it's good for UNH because it helps attract girls who want to play hockey and helps those girls be more a part of the school."

"We're a really young team but the skill level is pretty good," Hird adds.

And the coaching is, too. Her father, Jeffrey Hird, had been the assistant and then head coach at York High School while she was there. In 2013, he recruited two other volunteers to work with the N.H. Cats, and the team hit the road.

They practiced once a week at Jackson Landing in Durham. Next season it will be two times a week, one at the Whitt if it's available. "We could play some games there now that we're recognized but there's limited ice time," Hird says. The team has played locally in Rochester.

That first year, the Cats played a 14-game season without belonging to a league. In 2014, they joined the Independent Women's Hockey League and the American Collegiate Hockey Association. An ACHA Division II team, they have also played UMass-Amherst, Rhode Island and Northeastern, all ACHA Division I teams.

Hird plays forward. In high school she played defense but the N.H. Cats had a lot of defenders and few forwards so she made the switch.

"I don't score a lot," Hird says. "I'm more of a play maker."

She is also president of the organization. Keeping the team on track has been a year-round effort for Hird. Tryouts are held during the summer. That means getting the word out and scheduling ice time. Throughout the school year, there are rinks to rent, refs to hire, games to schedule. In the fall, someone else will become club president and Hird will go on the executive board.

“I can’t express my gratitude to Julia enough for making this happen,” says Colleen Kelty, a human development and family studies major who graduated May 16. “When I was choosing colleges, whether or not I would be able to play hockey was a big factor... Becoming an official club sport means that I can leave a legacy here at UNH. I am extremely proud to be a founding member of this team.”

Says Hird, “The whole process has taught me the importance of being organized and delegating. I’ve learned you can make anything happen if you work hard enough. We went from nothing to having a team. I got to play hockey. I’ve loved every minute of it.”

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**CAMPUS LIFE**



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