

**Saturday February 28, 2009**

## **Hockey has a hold on I.F.**

The sport features a small but very dedicated following.

By ZACH KYLE

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Inside the frigid rink at Tautphaus Park, the outmanned Bonneville-Hillcrest team retreated down the ice to defend against the Sun Valley Suns power play.

With a man advantage, Sun Valley moved the puck to a forward who, with a clear line at the goal, reared his stick back to unleash some fury. That's when defenseman Jake Belnap installed a full-body check on the attacker, sending both players sliding across the ice in one direction as the puck drifted lazily the other.

Hockey players are a little crazy.

Take Belnap, for example. The Hillcrest junior was the hammering fullback and linebacker of the state champion Hillcrest football team. He was in line to be the starting forward on the state-bound basketball team. But for Belnap, nothing compares to hockey.

"It's a lot of heart, a lot of passion," Belnap said after his team opened the annual state tournament with a 4-1 win over Sun Valley. "It's a different kind of athlete that goes out and sacrifices his body. You see a lot of pros missing teeth. Hockey players are pretty tough, theoretically at least. I'm trying to step up, trying to do that."

Plenty of those crazy hockey people live in Idaho Falls. Starting with the 8- to 10-year-old Mites on up to the high school Midgets, more than 350 kids play in the youth leagues. The teams, figure skating clubs and other interests keep the rink in constant use from 5:30 a.m. when the doors open until 10:30 p.m. Then, the 100-player adult league takes over until the rink closes well after midnight.

These are all factions of the Idaho Falls underground hockey movement. These are the kids who spend their early mornings on chilly, hard ice at Tautphaus and their weekends on chilly, hard ice in other towns. And the people standing on wooden bleachers pounding on the plexiglass? Whether wearing colors of Idaho Falls, Skyline or the Bonneville-Hillcrest joint team, they are members of the same hockey battalion.

"These kids have been raised with it from the age of four, and their parents have been dragged along to wherever they go," Idaho Falls coach Robert Johnson said. "It's a close-knit group of people."

Idaho Falls senior Austin Hugus picked up the hockey bug in Augusta, S.C., as a fifth-grader. There, he played in the cavernous rink that housed the minor-league Augusta Lynx, but he said he prefers the small-time feel of the Tautphaus rink.

"The atmosphere is a lot better here," Hugus said. "The fans are right there on the boards, yelling and screaming. You can feel the energy off the crowd. You know you are coming to freeze. You just have to love it."

Hockey sinks its hooks in its players in a way that only bodily harm seems analogous.

"It's infectious," Johnson said.

"You get the bug," Hugus said.

"It gets in your blood," Belnap said.

So Hugus was doubly struck when a physical before football season revealed what doctors thought was a heart murmur. Several months later, doctors discovered an aortic heart aneurysm and a leaky heart valve. Hugus' condition was stabilized by open-heart surgery. Doctors told him his football career was done. No big deal. But hearing his days playing hockey were over was harder to swallow.

"I miss hockey more," Hugus said. "I played football to get ready for hockey. I don't know what I'm going to do now. Take up a non-contact sport or something."

Still, Hugus joins the parents and friends at Tautphaus Park, removing numb fingers from pockets to bang on the scuffed plexiglass to spur on his mates. He cannot play, but hockey still lives in him like a fever, just as it does in Idaho Falls.

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## **I.F. opens state with a victory**

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Jared Latham scored two goals and assisted on another as Idaho Falls opened the state high school hockey tournament with a 4-1 win over Boise on Friday at Tautphaus Park.

Boise took a 1-0 lead early in the second period when Keegan Dutra scored on an assist from Shane Koch.

I.F. tied it 10 minutes later on a power-play goal from Matt Thomas, assisted by Zeke Cole.

Latham made it 2-1 three minutes later, assisted by freshman Chase Johnson.

Travis Hackett scored at 8:40 of the third, assisted by Latham and Josh Moon, to make it 3-1, and Latham finished off the scoring with a short-handed goal with 40 seconds left. Hackett picked up the assist.

Austin Mooso stopped 16 shots for Idaho Falls, which plays Meridian at 11:10 a.m. today and Skyline at 8:50 p.m.

Bonneville/Hillcrest 4,

Sun Valley 1

Chris Clark scored two goals and assisted on another as Bonneville/Hillcrest skated past Sun Valley.

Mogan Pike put Sun Valley ahead at 6:43 of the first, but Josh Forbush, assisted by Dylan Sherrick, tied the game at 4:51. Clark added a goal minutes later to make it 2-1.

Devin Crighton put Bonneville/Hillcrest up 3-1 with an assist from Clark, who then finished off the scoring with 6:51 left.

Cody Flores made 31 saves for Bonneville/Hillcrest, which will face Mountain View at 9:20 a.m. today and Salmon at 3:20 p.m.

Salmon 5, Mtn. View 1

Salmon kicked off the state tournament with a lopsided win over Mtn. View.

Goalie Shawn Sabo made 30 saves for Salmon, and Grant Adams scored two goals. Levi Aldous scored a goal and dished out two assists. Luke Nicks had a goal and an assist. Travis Korner scored, and Garrett Stahl and Zack Hull each had an assist.

"Salmon came out and played real well," Salmon assistant coach Dave Sabo said. "We Were aggressive, and it showed in the score."

Salmon plays Sun Valley at 7:30 a.m. today and at 3:20 p.m. against

Bonneville/Hillcrest.

Meridian 10, Skyline 0

Tournament favorite Meridian took 50 shots to Skyline's four and cruised to an easy win.

Devon Harris and Clark Gayner each scored two goals for Meridian. Greg Chapman finished with four assists

Skyline play at 1 p.m. today against Boise and at 8:50 p.m. against Idaho Falls.