

Kentucky is a warm state known for its warmer sports. Hidden away at Eastern, however, are about a dozen athletes who make up the icy, beating heart of athletics at our university: ECU Hockey.

Many students may not know that such a team even exists, but those players and fans who have been lucky enough to experience it firsthand know that a trip to the ice rink should not be missed.

Currently, Hockey at Eastern is a club sport, meaning it's not primarily funded by the university.

"It's ACHA, American Collegiate Hockey Association, so it is a college-sanctioned sport, it's just not recognized by the school as anything more than a club sport," said Jake Suslowitz, 20, a fire protection administration major from New Philadelphia, Oh. who serves as an alternate captain and right wing for the team. "There's a lot of things that would go into making us NCAA and recognized by the school and all that stuff, but the actual league we're in is a college league and we play other big schools and stuff, so it's still pretty cool."

The Colonels just finished their last home set last weekend against Memphis, losing both games by one to two points.

Losing isn't unfamiliar territory for our Colonels.

"We haven't won one yet (laughs)," said Jason Gambrell, 23, a math teaching major from Elizabethtown who serves as team captain and plays defense. "We've had some tough games against really good teams and it's also been a matter of numbers this semester. We've only got 11, 12 skaters so basically just two lines. That's it. And we've also got a very young team. At least half the players are freshmen."

Suslowitz added that location is as another disadvantage.

"Obviously, Kentucky's not a big hockey state at all," Suslowitz said. "The kids that are coming to play for us are not coming to school to play hockey. They're coming for their education first and then find out about the team."

A smaller pool of players inevitably means a fitter group as well, according to Suslowitz.

"We do a lot more conditioning than any of the other teams in the NCHA just because we have such a small team and we have to keep up our stamina," Suslowitz said. "We practice two times a week. Do a lot of running, pushups, stairs, stuff like that. We get on ice for an hour and work on drills and systems. Outside of that, we have gym hours that we have to complete and we also do library hours. Trying to keep our academics up. We're trying to get it headed in the right direction so hopefully we can hopefully someday have it recognized by the school."

With such frequent defeat and lowered expectations this season, what keeps these players suiting up every game night?

"I really have no idea (laughs). No, it's just a game I love," Gambrell said. "I suppose it's just something different. When you're out there, you can think about some things, but most of it is just reaction. I really enjoy that aspect."

For Suslowitz, who has been playing the game since the first grade, it's the entire encompassing experience.

"The love of the sport. Our teammates. Our fans," Suslowitz said. "I mean, we've been a losing team ever since I got here three years ago, and I've pretty much played on losing teams my whole life. I'm just happy to be playing here. This team this year has been the best group of guys I've ever skated with. I love being on the ice with them, and I love being around them outside the game as well. Our fans that come out every home game and support us, which that's one of the biggest things. We're still losing games and they're still coming out, being rowdy up there and I love it."

The fans are definitely an essential part of the experience. Each of Eastern's home games are filled with groups of reliable fans, ready to cheer or jeer at any moments notice.

"People around here don't often get the chance to see hockey, and a lot of people that come it seems are fire majors and they're usually from the North and Eastern states where they have hockey, and they come to Kentucky and that's mostly it for them," Suslowitz said. "It's almost become a sort of tradition, having all the fire guys with their helmets up there every game."

Gambrell said the lure of potential fights attracts many people to their games. However, the team is actively trying to curb their more aggressive tendencies.

"We definitely used to fight a lot two years ago, but we're really trying to get away from that some," Gambrell said. "Definitely not the physicality, but we're trying to get away from fighting because it's really not allowed. Normally if there's a fight the team will probably get about five minute major penalty and then the player's off the ice, won't be able to play the next game. We've especially not wanted to fight whatsoever this year because we can't afford to lose the players."

Ultimately, despite all the hardship, hard work and defeat, the game is still worth it to the players, the fans and Eastern.

"There's times when it gets frustrating, yeah, but we're there to have fun," Suslowitz said. "We love playing hockey. We get a chance to play collegiate hockey and a lot of people don't get that chance."

For more information, check out their website at www.colonelshockey.com or follow them on Twitter @ekuhockey. Preparations for the next season are set to begin right away, and any interested athletes are encouraged to contact the team.

Jason Gambrell, 23, a math teaching major from Elizabethtown. Team captain and plays defense

"We're a club sport."

"We do tryouts every year. Normally it's the first practice or two. Anyone's welcome to that and we go from there. We also do try and contact some people outside of campus trying to get them to come here to play for us. We're trying to sell the school and get them to come here."

"We practice twice a week, Monday and Wednesday nights."

"I started freshmen or sophomore year of high school. I had to drive up to Louisville to play. Here in Kentucky some high schools have entire teams with players that go to that school. Most though, they kind of take areas, so everyone from this area plays from this team, that team."

"I ended up playing travel hockey, going from state to state playing different tournaments."

"We lost Friday 3-2, 4-2, something like that. And we also lost Saturday 6-3."

Colonelshockey.com

"We still have our season going on, we still have three games left, playing Dayton, OH and West Virginia. Normally, we start practice right off in August once we get back to school and we normally start games late September, early October, somewhere in there. And then it's all through the fall and we finish up in February."

"There is a post-season for us. We're not going to be able to make it in this year, but they do regionals, semi-regionals and a nationals."

"I'd say probably the best way to put it is it's kind of similar to roller skating, not the ones at roller rink but inline. It's kind of similar to that, only once you get used to skating on ice, you actually have a lot more friction because those blades will actually dig into the ice and you can turn, stop, do a whole lot more than you could on rollerblades."

"My brother was playing indoor soccer growing up and at that place they had roller hockey. So I got into that and it eventually led to ice hockey. I tried to go back, about two summers ago, and I can't stand it now. I can't stop and I lose the puck and have to make a big huge circle to get back."

"We kind of actively recruit in off-season, talk to players about coming to the school, etc. They have showcases where you can watch players play, sometimes we'll get players contacting us with interest in our school."

"Recruiting and getting things set up for next season starts pretty much now. Working on our schedule and our budget."

"If anybody's played hockey before, they're more than welcome to come out and try out. This season we're kind of focused on finishing up, but they're more than welcome to try next year or even off-season we'll probably have some scrimmages and the alumni game coming up."

I've been playing right wing, a forward position. Alternate captain

"I've been playing since first grade, so probably about 15 years. Where I was, there was a rink in Canton about 30 minutes away, but hockey's really not too big around there either. I got started in Virginia."

"Just grew up playing street hockey with some kids in my neighborhood and it kind of took off from there. Started playing roller hockey and that wasn't cutting it so I moved on to ice hockey."

"It took a while, I did a lot of learn to play things when I was younger, it kind of just comes eventually. The hardest part is just learning how to skate first."

"We lost both our home games. That's been the whole season. Obviously, Kentucky's not a big hockey state at all. The kids that are coming to play for us are not coming to school to play hockey. They're coming for their education first and then find out about the team. We don't have a very big team at all. We've had a lot of people having to drop out of school for family issues, education and money issues, all that, a lot of injuries this year, so we've been playing with a really short team."

It's ACHA, American Collegiate Hockey Association, so it is a college-sanctioned sport, it's just not recognized by the school as anything more than a club sport. There's a lot of thing that would go into making us NCAA and recognized by the school and all that stuff, but the actual league we're in is a college league and we play other big schools and stuff, so it's pretty cool.

Usually you're going to have a team with 20 guys on it. And you're going to rotate in and out a lot, you get tired quick. We've been doing a lot of conditioning. We do a lot more conditioning than any of the other teams in the NCHA just because we have such a small team and we have to keep up our stamina.

We practice two times a week. We usually go up two hours before we get on the ice and do a dry land practice and conditioning. Do a lot of running, pushups, stairs, stuff like that. We get on ice for an hour

and work on drills and systems. Outside of that, we have gym hours that we have to complete and we also do library hours. Trying to keep our academics up. We're trying to get it headed in the right direction so hopefully we can hopefully someday have it recognized by the school."

If they can play hockey, come on out. We do have tryouts at the beginning of the season, they can come out to those and see the team. Most everyone makes it around here because we need the players, but we're hoping we eventually get to the point where we have to cut people so we can have a bigger team. During the season if there's some reason, financial or whatever, that they can't join the team yet, just get a hold of us and we can work something out.

I think it's because it's different and that draws people toward it. People around here don't often get the chance to see hockey, and a lot of people that come it seems are fire majors and they're usually from the North and Eastern states where they have hockey, and they come to Kentucky and that's mostly it for them.

A lot of the fire guys come out and support the fire guys on the team. It's almost become a sort of tradition, having all the fire guys with their helmets up there every game.

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It's usually for people who exhibit leadership on the ice and know the sport, not necessarily the best guys cause if it was, I wouldn't be captain. We're out there to set a good example and we'll be the ones to talk to the refs and call time outs if needed.

"I've been in a few (laughs). Even up in the NHL you get penalized for fighting but they try to avoid it more in college because kids can get hurt and stuff.