



New Zealand: Puck drops on Kiwi hockey season

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Courtesy: NZIHL
Canadian born forward Jeff Bonazzo won the NZIHL's Most Valuable Player award last season with the West Auckland Admirals. This year, he coached New Zealand to victory at the IIHF Division III World Championships.

While the NHL is in the midst of the Stanley Cup Final and the rest of the hockey world is in off-season planning for next year, the New Zealand Ice Hockey League (NZIHL) season is just getting started.

Because the seasons are reversed in the southern hemisphere, so both the New Zealanders and Australians play during what is their fall and winter. On May 25, the puck dropped on the seven-week NZIHL season.

Meanwhile, New Zealand's national team has capped off a successful international season, winning the IIHF Division III World Championships held in Dundalk, Ireland, last month. The Kiwi squad, known as the Ice Blacks (in homage to the country's much more famous national rugby team called the All Blacks), went undefeated in the tournament.

How good is Kiwi hockey? While the caliber of play is below the standard of European and North American major junior or NCAA college hockey, it's better than you'd find in most countries with limited access to practicing and playing the sport. There are six rinks in the country, two in Auckland on the North Island and four on the South Island. New Zealand's hockey season, both at the youth and adult levels, is one of the shortest anywhere. That limits the chance for significant improvement.

"I believe we've got the skills, but we just don't get the opportunities to train or play as often as some of the other countries," national team defenseman Ryan Paskell said to the *New Zealand Herald* after the Ice Black's victory at the Division III Worlds.

Nevertheless, in a nation of about four million people, New Zealanders who try out hockey often get hooked on the sport for good. There are 1,589 registered players (by means of comparison, Spain has 263, Slovenia has 766 and Poland has 2,075).

Unlike some lower-tier countries, the Kiwis only use native or naturalized New Zealanders on their national hockey team this year. You won't find any ringers with dubious ties to the country on the Black Ice roster.

This year's Division III championship winning team was comprised entirely of New Zealand-born and trained players. One of the youngest senior national teams at any levels, there were just three players over age 23 and none older than 30.

Four-team circuit

Because the domestic players all hold non-hockey jobs and many have other on- and off-ice commitments, the NZIHL plays all of its games on the weekends. The circuit has four teams: the defending champion Southern Stampede of Queenstown, the Canterbury Red Devils of Christchurch, the Botany Swarm (formerly called the South Auckland Swarm) and the West Auckland Admirals. The Swarm won five of their six games last season before losing to the Stampede in the championship game.

The season schedule consists of a pair of preliminary regional games and four cross-over rounds. During the latter rounds, one team has a bye. Teams earn two points for a win and one for a tie during the two preliminary rounds and then four for a win and two for a tie during the main rounds. After the sixth game, the two clubs with the most total points play for the championship.

NZIHL teams can dress up to five foreign players per game. A foreign-born player who has spent more than one-third of his life living in New Zealand does not count against the limit.

Jeff Bonazzo, last season's NZIHL most valuable player, was born in Thunder Bay, Ontario, and played at the Midget and Juvenile AAA, Junior B and university level hockey. Named the head coach of the Ice Blacks national team last December, the 32-year-old has lived in Auckland since 2000.

"Over the course of my life, hockey has taken me to many countries around the world and I've competed on four different continents," Bonazzo wrote on the official Ice Blacks site. "On most of my teams, my role was to be a strong defensive center, playing against the top lines of the opposition and killing penalties as best as I could."

A primary-school teacher by profession, Bonazzo played last season in the NZIHL for the West Auckland Admirals and for the Whalers of the Auckland Premier League. At the Kiwi level of hockey, the checking center turns into an offensive force. In his five games with the Admirals last season, he scored five goals and added six assists for 11 points.

Bonazzo came to New Zealand to stay. But there a handful of foreign-trained players who come over for the hockey. The advantage of playing in New Zealand is that it won't interfere with his other hockey commitments. The player can stay in hockey shape during what would otherwise be the off-season and, because of the relaxed schedule, get a taste of life in the country.

"We always welcome overseas players to come here and get some Kiwi experience," says NZIHL general manager Günther Birgel.

For instance, the Canterbury Red Devils featured several foreign players last season. Czech forward Lukas Kavka was the league's runner-up in scoring. Swedish goaltender Andreas Ericsson won team MVP honors. Among their teammates were Czech defenseman Tomas Prochazka and Swedish forward Ivar Höglund.

Related Links:

- [New Zealand Ice Hockey Federation](#)
- [Ice Blacks Official Site](#)
- [Southern Ice Hockey Association](#)
- [Auckland Ice Hockey Association](#)
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Strong camaraderie in Kiwi hockey

The vast majority of NZIHL rosters are comprised of native Kiwis. The heart of the IIHF Division III championship team plays either for the Swarm or the Stampede. Two Ice Black players came from the Admirals and four from the Red Devils.

Stampede forward Braden Lee was a force for the New Zealanders at the Division III World Championships. Nicknamed "Ned" for the Ned Braden character in the movie *Slap Shot*, Invercargill native Lee racked up seven goals and 11 points in the tourney. Another Stampede forward, Brett Speirs, had four goals and nine points.

Simon Glass, also of the Stampede, won team MVP honors at the tournament. One of New Zealand's most experienced international players, the 25-year-old captains the Ice Black. He had seven points during the NZIHL season last and eight at the Division III tournament. A construction site foreman by profession, Glass has represented New Zealand at various hockey levels since he was 13.

Meanwhile, Swarm defenseman Andy Hay and Canterbury goalie Gareth Livingstone won Best Defenseman and Best Goaltender honors respectively. Hay's brother, Josh, is also a member of both the Swarm and the Ice Blacks. Their Swarm teammate, defenseman Corey Down, led all players in the tournament with a plus-10 defensive rating.

The Kiwis' toughest game at the Division III Worlds was their opener against tournament host Ireland. The Ice Black trailed 2-1 after two periods before unanswered goals by Laurie Horo, Speirs and Lee lifted the team to a 4-2 victory. Next time out, New Zealand easily handled Luxembourg, 8-3, and then destroyed a Mongolian team playing in its first World Championships by a 10-1 score. The final game was a 7-0 whitewashing of South Africa and earned New Zealand a promotion to the Division II level next year.

The players of the NZIHL and Ice Black squads definitely know how to have a good time. They use hockey as a means to blow off steam and have fun. No one pretends there are recruiters from U.S. colleges or European pro teams coming to watch their games, much less any scouts for NHL teams.

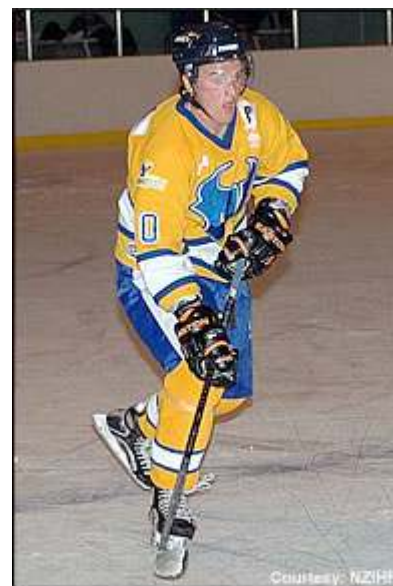
"That gap is just too big," Paskell said to the *New Zealand Herald*.

With no pressure on the players, except the pressure they put on themselves, there is tremendous camaraderie to go along with the competition. When the New Zealand national anthem played after the final game, the players put their arms around each other and sang in unison. After the gold medal ceremony at the Division III Worlds, the Ice Black players performed a haka (a Maori dance made famous internationally by the New Zealand national rugby team, the All Blacks).

Back in New Zealand, the post-game environment can get pretty raucous in its own right. A frat-party atmosphere prevails in the dressing room and local pubs after the game. Sometimes the party starts on the ice. Shortly after the official ceremonies took place when Stampede won the championship last year, several players re-created the final championship game scene from *Slap Shot* on the ice as they celebrated with the trophy.

But in between the time when the players arrive at the rink for the game and when the final buzzer sounds, the NZIHL and Black Ice are all business. Their games are physical and hotly contested. NZIHL players must finish their checks and play team-oriented hockey or else they won't play for very long. The results have carried over to international success for the young national team.

"This team can grow and I think in two years, we should be mixing it with the top teams in Division II," says Birgel.



Simon Glass, the captain both of the NZIHL champion Southern Stampede and the Ice Black, is one of New Zealand's most experienced international players.



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