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Dunwoody reflects on decades of hockey in East Greenwich

By PATRICK BURKE Jan 13, 2018

EAST GREENWICH – East Greenwich has long held a place in the Rhode Island hockey world, and the culture remains strong as the sport has spread.

Current Avenger head ice hockey coach Don Dunwoody has seen the ups and downs, he was there for the beginning, had kids play the sport and he's coached the next generation. Dunwoody played under EG's first ice hockey coach, Carl Swanson, a retired former science teacher at East Greenwich, who coached at Coventry for years before starting EG's ice hockey program in 1972. Dunwoody graduated in 1977 and played in '75, '76 and '77.

"There were as many teams then as there are now, if not more," Dunwoody said of the state of RI hockey during the '70s. "In the '60s it was the Cranston and East Providence teams. In the '50s it was La Salle. Hockey has been strong in Rhode Island since the '40s and the '30s."

"In the '70s," Dunwoody explained. "When I played there was a rink over by BJ's on New London Turnpike. It was called Mid State Arena, and that rink is now a state of Rhode Island highway department sand and salt location, a Board of Public Works location. That rink had an East Greenwich and Coventry youth hockey program that put players into Coventry and East Greenwich and got kids playing hockey. It was great."

"If you're thinking that Burrillville and Woonsocket were in the past, but they're not," Dunwoody explained. "They were in the past, but they're not."

It costs money to build a rink and costs more to maintain it. If you don't have it, down, those kids had to venture out to find a rink for the sport.



From Aquidneck Island to Warwick to Woonsocket and Kingston there are youth programs. Warwick Junior Hockey to Southern Rhode Island Youth Hockey out of URI to the Woonsocket North Stars to the Northern Rhode Island Vikings to the Providence Capitals, Rhode Island Hitmen, Providence Junior Friars, or the Rhode Island Saints, which is the longest private program.

"Our players come from all of those programs," Dunwoody said. "They're going to find a league that has a good beginner program. The SRI Rams, the Vikings, and the Woonsocket North Stars programs have learn-to-skate programs and from there you get on a team."

From the intrastate traveling youth teams, players can move to the out-of-state traveling clubs like the Jr. Friars, Hit Men, Capitals, and the Saints which travel anywhere from Main to New Hampshire to Connecticut and New York.

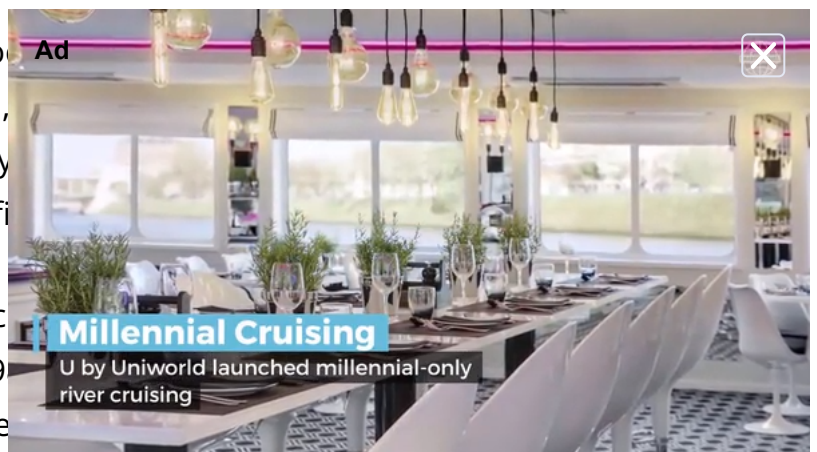
"URI has really assisted in hockey growing in South County," Dunwoody explained. "Chariho getting into a co-op with Narragansett is a good thing. The Westerly area – I believe – is one of the last that doesn't have hockey. Once you step over the line into Connecticut, they're playing hockey. Westerly is like the hole in the donut. Their closest rink is in Connecticut."

URI opened doors at the Bradford R. Boss Arena on the bottom of the main campus hill on September 15, 2002. The state of the art 2,500-capacity rink was the very first indoor facility in southern RI. URI's men's ice hockey club was founded in 1955, but they didn't consistently collect a team until 1975, and they've had a winning record since 1989.

The Providence Reds played in the Canadian-American Hockey League (CAHL) from 1926 to 1936 then in the American Hockey League (AHL) from 1936 to 1977. The Reds played at a location that is now a parking lot, at 1111 North Main Street, across from the North Burial Ground.

The RIIL had their first recorded boys ice hockey team in 1960. Charles, La Salle, East Providence, Cranston, and Johnston were in the Suburban Division play in the 1970s, EG was in the Suburban Division play in the 1980s. Bishop Hendricken, Hope and North Smithfield were in the Suburban Division play in the 1990s.

In 1975-76 the Avengers were Suburban A champions the following season. In fact, 1976-77 they had a record of 3-17. In 1979-80, the Avengers were Suburban A champions.



back-to-back Met B champions in 1981-82 and 1982-83. As recently as 2006-07, they went 10-4-3 and were the DI-A (non-state) champions

In the RIIL and the competitive world of hockey, public high schools compete with prep schools.

"I'll put it this way," Dunwoody explained. "If you go to Hendricken, there are 80 kids that try out for the team. There're only 20 kids on the team – where do the other 60 kids go? If they go to Hendricken they won't play, or they can be heroes in their home-town."

“The most recent kid who did that was John Ferguson,” Dunwoody said. “Who was the leading scorer in the state in Division II two years ago. He played for EG for two years. He was a great player; he just didn’t fit with Hendricken and came home.”

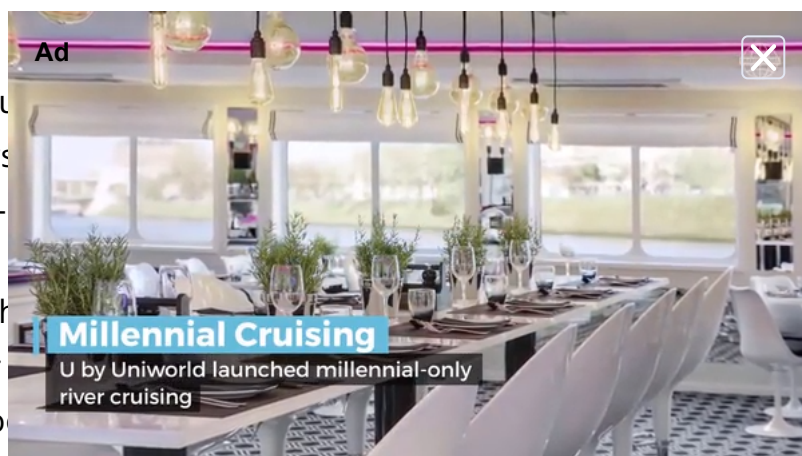
“We were semifinalists two years in a row,” Dunwoody said. “He was one of the reasons why we were so competitive. In his class, we had 10 seniors. Public schools don’t have an automatic flow of 80 kids trying out for the team every year – there’s high years and low years. We’re back where we’re supposed to be; there’s an influx of players in the system.”

EG's current roster is young with freshman and sophomores far exceeding upperclassmen. Freshman getting ice time and gaining experience is a good thing, but there are practical issues and some intimidation factor. Teams with jayvee squads can filter up, and the jayvee serves as a pool for the bottom of the varsity roster. If there's no jayvee than everyone gets a hack at varsity.

"Experience is everything," Dunwoody said. "It's hard when you weigh 125 pounds to beat a 200-pounder in the corner. You've got to know how to skate, and that's a priority, but if you have a senior that plays football and weighs 200 pounds going up against a 125-pound freshman – who is going to win that fight? It comes down to the physical nature of a physical game."

"When you're a freshman in high school," Du
three-year seniors, guys that are three years
year window – 11-and-12-year-olds, and 13-

"If you want to play hockey and you live in the north, you have to fight for it. If you live in the south, anybody. If we have 26 kids that try out for a team, you're going to fight for it. If you're good you'll fight for a jersey and if you're good you'll fight for a spot on the team."



our program.”

Dunwoody returned to the head coaching post after assisting for Sean Fahey and Len Kiernan before him. They ran the program from '95-'96 until last year. Fahey was the coach for five years, and Kiernan was the coach for 20 years before him. Dunwoody coached from 1990-1995 when EG was winning in the RIIIL's Met C Division.

In between, Dunwoody coached everything from Squirts (ages 9-10) to Midgets (18 and under), as well as East Greenwich's RI junior development league, which consists of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, for 12 years.

“I'm honored to be coaching the high school again,” Dunwoody said. “I'm humbled to be helping kids become better people as well as sportsmen and competitors. It's just a good environment, and I'm glad I've been given a second opportunity. It's humbling.”

