

Blackhawks to host title game



Staff photo/Tony Boone - Iowa coach Mike Wolff, left, and owner/president Jake Hiffernan have been with the Blackhawks from the beginning. The team began in a recreational league after Hiffernan bought \$2,000 worth of equipment with a credit card 10 years ago.

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Give an average 24-year-old man a credit card with a \$2,000 limit today and within days he'd likely have a new iPod, Blu-ray player, Xbox and perhaps some clothes to impress the ladies.

Jake Hiffernan wasn't that guy.

Ten years ago, he took his new card to the sporting goods store and bought helmets and shoulder pads so he and some buddies could play football in an indoor recreational league in Lincoln, Neb.

After doing so, he contacted Mike Wolff, the son of his former midget league coach, and asked him to quarterback the team. The two met at a bar, where Wolff began drawing up plays on a napkin for the Council Bluffs Rams' inaugural season in the Nebraska Indoor Football League.

Ten years later, their team, now known as the Iowa Blackhawks, will be playing for a professional indoor championship at the Mid-America Center. Iowa hosts six-time champion Kansas for the American Professional Football League title Saturday at 6:05 p.m.

Hiffernan is Iowa's owner and president. Wolff is the team's head coach. Together, they've orchestrated their organization's growth from the very beginning. Saturday night's championship game is their magnum opus, their payoff for 10 years of dedication to the sport they love.

"It means a lot to me personally," Hiffernan said. "To host a championship game at the Mid-America Center has always been our ultimate goal. Now that we get that opportunity, it feels like we're almost there. We're almost to that point that we can say, 'We're legit now.'"

It's been a slow climb to the top for the Blackhawks. When they were the Rams, which Hiffernan named after the former Council Bluffs midget program, they played in the NIFL for four years.

They were indoors in Lincoln for the first two. For the last two, they played on an eight-man field outdoors in tiny Malcolm, Neb.

During its final year in the NIFL in 2003, the team changed its name to the River City Redemption. It won the league championship that year and, as a reward, was invited to play the APFL champion Kansas Coyotes indoors in Topeka, Kan. a game that forever changed the future of the organization.

"We played a great game against them that night," Wolff said. "We played so well, they invited us to join the league that night."

The Iowa Blackhawks, whose name and team colors Iowa fan Hiffernan patterned after his beloved Hawkeyes, made their APFL debut in 2004. The team paid its players for the first time, but it still had a lot of growing to do. Wolff said that season set the tone for the future success of the organization.

"I'll be honest with you, we really didn't know what we were doing or getting into. But we loved football," he said. "In our first game, we beat Missouri pretty good. That was our first, and only, win that year."

Iowa not only got beat, it had trouble being competitive. It finished the season with a 1-6 record. Wolff recalled riding home with Hiffernan from Missouri following the final game that year. They were already discussing their plan for improvement for 2005.

"It was pretty bad," Hiffernan said. "But once we got socked in the stomach and pushed around for a season, we knew exactly what we had to do to compete. The next season we didn't have much success against the Koyotes, but we made it all the way to the championship game only to have them kick a field goal as time expired to beat us."

The Blackhawks have remained competitive ever since, even advancing in the title game again in 2007.

This year, they made another big leap forward. By beating Kansas in a thriller at the MAC then routing the Koyotes on the road, they earned the right to host the league title game.

Saturday's contest will be the 100th in the history of the Blackhawk organization. Including its NIFL days, the team has won 68 of its first 99 games. More importantly, it has survived in a sport that sees teams begin then fold in nearly every season.

"It's not a lucrative business," Wolff said. "You have to have a love and a passion for it to survive."

He and Hiffernan have to. And they've surrounded themselves with assistant coaches Justin Kammrad, Brett Ryan, Ted Hennings, Dontae Allen and Dave Coberly who feel the same way. They've adopted indoor football into their lives that are already filled with their family obligations and full-time jobs. And they haven't thought twice about doing so.

"If you don't like this kind of thing, or even love it, there's no way you're going to be able to succeed or have any kind of longevity at all," Hiffernan said. "We've been in this things for 10 years. You'd think that would seem like a long time, but it went fast. We're ready for another 10 though."

Like most indoor teams, the Blackhawks are continually fighting a battle with the books. Providing insurance, equipment and officials for games while paying the players is a costly endeavor.

Iowa relies on sponsorship dollars and season ticket sales to make ends meet. Each year, it comes up short, yet Hiffernan never worries about the team's future.

"That's one of the other big stresses trying to make ends meet financially," he said. "From sponsorship dollars declining to season ticket sales declining, it's always a struggle. But we always find a way to make it work. We're here to stay."

Hiffernan hopes Saturday's championship game is the next step to making the Blackhawks a team that all of Council Bluffs can take pride in. Nearly 1,100 fans attend home games regularly, but there's room at the MAC for plenty more.

"We just can't get enough people in the city to actually come out and take a peak at this product," Hiffernan said. "They'll see that it's a pretty fun atmosphere to be in. We'll be able to gauge what kind of support and excitement the community has for this thing based on how many people we have come out and support this championship game. It's a huge step in that direction for us."