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POPULAR

Hockey may see the Fieldhouse soon

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The NAU D2 hockey team, better known as the **IceJacks**, practically sold out their game against ASU at the Jay Lively Activity Center on Jan. 28. The IceJacks gave the home crowd plenty to cheer about as they bested ASU 3-1 in a physical game on the ice. The IceJacks were impressive, but even more so was the atmosphere surrounding the game.

Fans packed Jay Lively to the brim to watch the IceJacks. Every hit against the boards was accompanied with a collective groan or cheer from the crowd. Every score was followed by a roar strong enough to rumble the innards of the activity center. Though the activity center pales in comparison to the J. Lawrence Walkup Skydome, it does not fail to deliver the same intensity and fan experience as the IceJacks' former home.

Now the IceJacks are hoping that the completion of a new home is on the horizon. For several years there have been plans to build an ice rink in the University Union Fieldhouse. Original concept designs were released prior to 2020, but the pandemic slowed any progress as the Fieldhouse was used as a COVID-19 testing facility. Now that the Fieldhouse has been opened back up for wider use, the hope is further progress can be made to bring the IceJacks to campus.

NAU hockey director and D2 head coach Kris Walsh said there is work being done to get boards and glass in the fieldhouse within the next three to four months. Though Walsh could not guarantee the facilities would be completed in time for next season, but expressed optimism that the project could be completed in time for the 2024 season.

An on-campus ice rink has been a dream for many students over the past few years. As mentioned before, unprecedented circumstances led to the project being delayed even further than it had already been. However, prior to that the rink was scheduled to be completed in 2018. At the time the reason for such a delay seemed to be due to a lack of funding from both the club team and the university. Former writer for **The Lumberjack Johnny Crane reported in 2020** the stalling of the project also led outside donors to shy away from contributing. Now funding does not appear to be an issue according to Walsh. Rather, one of the biggest issues keeping the project at bay is the installation of a chiller to keep the Fieldhouse cold enough for the rink.

The most recent plan included the addition of a low-temperature chiller to serve as the refrigeration equipment to create the ice within the Fieldhouse.

Crane also reported the North Plant next to the Fieldhouse was being retrofitted for this equipment. Including supply and return lines between the plant and the Fieldhouse would allow for proper temperatures in the building.

The reason for concern is the university has not shown any progress toward installing the chiller. This part of the project was stalled in 2020, and there has been no word on when exactly work will resume.

Thomas Eberly, the associate vice president of Campus Operations at NAU, has stated there are no specific dates as to the progression of the project.

“We are still in the planning stages for the Fieldhouse improvement project and are waiting on new information from an engineering study that should help to inform our path forward,” Eberly said.

Though there is reason to hope there will be progress in the near future.

Walsh did confirm there is work being done to get the equipment needed for the rink. There is also an ever-growing voice around campus that wants an ice rink closer to home. A **petition** was started recently to show support for the project. The petition currently has just under 2,000 signatures and gains more support every day. Walsh also stressed that it is now up to the students and community to push for the finalization of the project.

What may come of it

If NAU does indeed complete construction of an on-campus ice rink, the entire community would be thankful.

Jay Lively Activity Center, the current home of the IceJacks, is approximately three miles from campus. It is a 10-minute drive if the roads are clear of ice and snow, which during hockey season, can not always be promised. Club games are also at the mercy of the other youth and high school teams who share the rink. Those games and practices are usually earlier in the evening, meaning NAU games do not start at least until 8 p.m. on most weekends if not later. The late start times mean it is harder for students to attend games who do not own vehicles.

The same goes for players. The commute between campus and Jay Lively can be a struggle for those who do not have a vehicle or have to risk being late for practice and classes.

NAU play-by-play analyst Tony Bracha believes an on-campus rink could also provide a boost for the program.

“An on-campus rink that is more designed for crowds would be huge for the popularity of the team,” Bracha said.

The team is already popular amongst the crowd that regularly attends Jay Lively for youth and high school games, but reasons listed before limit the team's exposure on campus.

"The way that the program could progress [when the rink is completed] could be astronomical," Bracha said.

An ice rink on campus would eliminate the hassle, but also add more opportunities for campus recreation. Hockey would not be the only event at the Fieldhouse. A rink would allow for more on-campus activities such as skating lessons, intramurals, public ice skating, shuffleboard and so much more for those interested in hitting the ice.

When the project does come to fruition, one can only imagine the crowds that D2 and D3 hockey will draw. Jay Lively can fit around 300 people, but the Fieldhouse is expected to hold at least 1,500, if not more. The fans of NAU hockey have already shown how loud they can get at Jay Lively. Add to that a bigger crowd and a fresh ice rink in the Fieldhouse and NAU hockey may compete for the most popular sport in town.

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