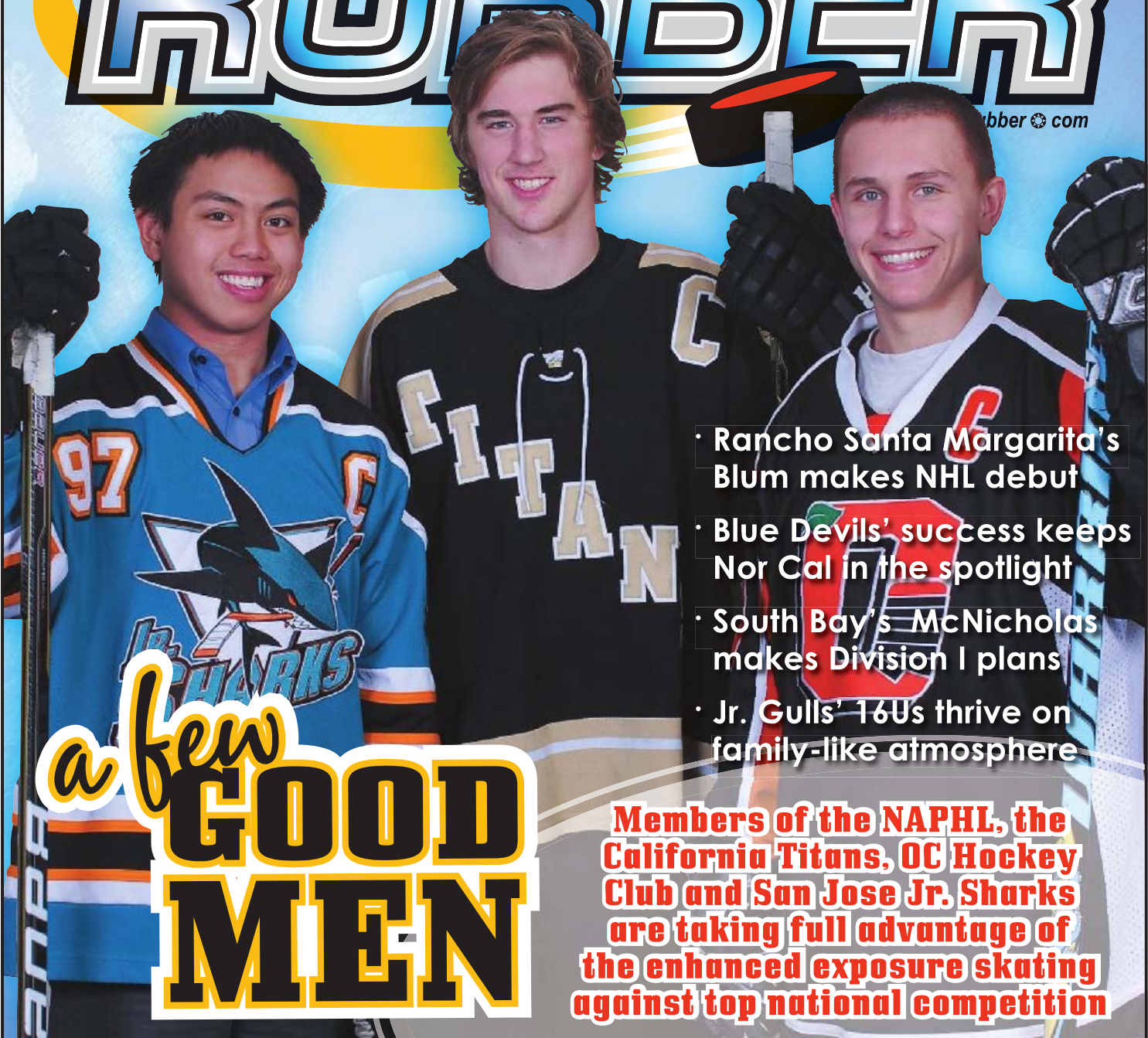


California

RUBBER

rubber.com



- Rancho Santa Margarita's Blum makes NHL debut
- Blue Devils' success keeps Nor Cal in the spotlight
- South Bay's McNicholas makes Division I plans
- Jr. Gulls' 16Us thrive on family-like atmosphere

a few **GOOD MEN**

Members of the NAPHL, the California Titans, OC Hockey Club and San Jose Jr. Sharks are taking full advantage of the enhanced exposure skating against top national competition



HockeyMonkey.com[®]

What You Need To Play™

CHECK OUT OUR FEATURED PRODUCTS INSIDE

Opportunity Knocks

The North American Prospects Hockey League is helping open more doors for up-and-coming California players

By Dave Werstine

Winning isn't everything. That might be a shocker to many out there, but for young hockey players to advance their careers on to the junior and college levels, especially those from California, they need the right amount of development, competition and exposure.

The North American Prospects Hockey League (NAPHL), which last month wrapped up a successful second season, has proven to be one of the best tools available to help high-level players reach the next level.

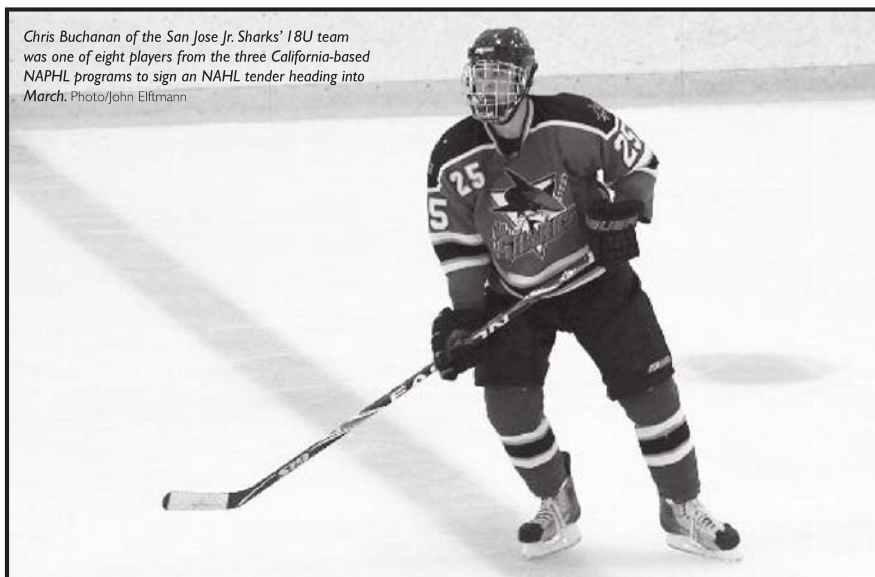
Operated by the North American Hockey League (NAHL) - the only USA Hockey-sanctioned Tier II Junior A league boasting 27 teams from across the country - the NAPHL's main objective is player promotion while providing an organized and competitive experience with an unrivaled scouting presence designed to maximize the exposure of all of its Midget AAA and Bantam AAA participants.

And, once again, California had a significant presence in the league this season, as the San Jose Jr. Sharks iced teams in the Midget Major (18U), Midget Minor (16U) and Bantam Major (14U) levels; the California Titans in the 18U and 16U divisions (the San Diego Jr. Gulls represented the Titans' 16s); and Orange County Hockey Club in the 18U bracket.

In the NAPHL, winning and losing is only part of the equation.

"Player promotion is the driving factor for all teams in this league, which is the way it should be at these levels," said **Scott Yorkison**, head coach of the Titans' 18U team. "For California kids, that's vital.

"There are still a lot of Cali kids and families who continue to buy into local coaches who are just interested in winning games and either state or regional championships. At the Midget Major and Midget Minor levels, it's more important for these kids to get good coaching and development and the competition and exposure the NAPHL



Chris Buchanan of the San Jose Jr. Sharks' 18U team was one of eight players from the three California-based NAPHL programs to sign an NAHL tender heading into March. Photo/John Elltmann

provides."

For the Titans, this year was a perfect example. After winning the league's regular-season and overall championship last year, the Titans' 18U team had seven players tendered by NAHL teams (a tender is a contract, of sorts, a player signs announcing his intention to play for that particular team).

This year, the 18s finished the regular season in the middle of the pack with an 11-14-0 record and still had a few kids tendered by teams with the potential for more.

"So even though our team record wasn't as good, we still provided a great service to our players by developing them, exposing them and continuing their careers," said Yorkison. "That's what the Titans are focused on."

The exposure the players receive through the NAPHL's high-profile recruiting events, which attract hundreds of college, junior and professional scouts, rates among the best in all of North America.

In its inaugural season of 2009-10, the NAPHL wasted little time establishing itself as one of the premier grounds for development and exposure as over 50 players tendered with NAHL clubs while others received offers from other junior leagues and scholarships to NCAA Division I schools.

This season, the NAPHL had over 40 players already tendered by NAHL teams

heading into March with that number certain to climb over the next couple of months.

Of those, eight are from Californian teams: defenseman **Chris Buchanan** (Jr. Sharks) by the Alaska Avalanche; goaltender **Ryan O'Shea** (Titans) by the Alexandria Blizzard; forward **Joe Ginley** (Titans) by the Corpus Christi IceRays; defenseman **Justin Woods** (Titans) by the Fairbanks Ice Dogs; forward **Alex Klintare** (Titans) by the Fresno Monsters; forwards



Ryan Atkinson (Jr. Sharks) and **Christopher Benoit** (Jr. Sharks) by the Owatonna Express; and forward **Ryan Zehnder** (Jr. Sharks) by the St. Louis Bandits.

"Scouting is key," said Jr. Sharks 18U head coach **Tony Zasowski**, whose team won its division's regular-season title with a 21-3-1 record.

"Every event we go to, every NAHL team is represented along with various NCAA, United States Hockey League and NHL scouts. Our kids spend a lot of money to play hockey and we need to

make sure we maximize their exposure every time we leave California.

"Playing in the NAPHL has increased our profile," Zasowski added. "The California teams have done well the last two seasons in the league, proving how competitive California hockey really is."

This season, the NAPHL, comprised this year of 38 Midget Major, Midget Minor and Bantam Major teams from 19 programs from across the country, showcased five regular-season events in Blaine, Minn. (September); San Jose (October); Foxboro and Walpole, Mass. (December); Troy, Mich. (January); and Darien, Ill. (January).

Its Championship Tournament Series was held last month in Troy and Ann Arbor, Mich., where the DC Capitals (18U), Pikes Peak Miners (16U) and Rocky Mountain RoughRiders (14U) were crowned champions in their respective divisions.

The season comes to an official end at May's Top Prospects Tournament, in which 80 of the NAPHL's top 18U players will compete for a title in conjunction with the NAHL Robertson Cup Championship Tournament, which this year will be held in Topeka, Kan.

For OC Hockey, which went 11-10-4 during the regular season, it marked its first year competing in the NAPHL and proved to be an outstanding and rewarding experience.

"We liked the idea of aligning ourselves with the NAPHL for the tremendous amount of exposure offered to our players here in Southern California," said **Jim Burcar**, owner of OC Hockey Club and its home, the Orange County Ice Palace. "Players need exposure to move on in this game, and it's exciting for them to be in front of NHL, junior and college scouts multiple times throughout the course of a season.

"I think in the years to come we'll see even more California players represented on NAHL rosters. This year alone, we have multiple players with offers to be tendered, and we're working with them to help them choose the right team and organization that'll best suit their abilities."

With so much success in the Midget divisions last year and a push from the junior leagues to identify up-and-coming players at an even earlier age, the NAPHL decided to add a Bantam division this year.

Unlike the Midgets, the Bantams played in just three events and the Championship Tournament Series, allowing them to not only showcase their skills in front of the hundreds of scouts but, of equal importance, work on their skill development.

"We think it's important to introduce 13- and 14-year-old players to elite hockey so they can compete at the highest level and get exposure to scouts early," said Zasowski, who saw the Jr. Sharks' Bantams go 5-5-0 during the regular season. "That way, they build the same familiarity with scouts players in the Midwest are able to."

Burcar liked the move as well.

"I think the plan for the Bantams coincides with what (USA Hockey's American Development Model) it trying to do from a high-performance club standpoint," he said. "It's a great idea to get the better kids playing against quality competition on a regular basis.

"Also, limiting the number of festivals at the Bantam level helps families from a financial standpoint." ❁