

## ICE HOCKEY



DANIELLE P. RICHARDS/STAFF PHOTOGRPAHER  
Erika Muller (left) helps her brother Roger with his hockey equipment. The siblings play on the same line for an adult recreational league team.

# SIBLINGS FORM A UNIQUE LINE

## Mullers pair up on ice

By DANNY CAFARO

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A bruise here, a scrape there. The proud, distinctive badges of competitive ice hockey.

A puffy lip, a bloody nose, a broken fingernail.

Wait, a broken fingernail?

Well, that likelihood increases when the target of the check is a 5-foot-8 woman with long, blond hair.

"They aim because you're a girl and they don't want you to play," says Erika Muller, who plays right wing for the New Jersey Rockets of Hockey North America, an adult recreational league.

"They smell perfume and aim. They say, 'If you're going to be out here, you're going to get hit as much as anybody.' I end up getting hit more."

Muller, 26, of Rutherford is one of two women in the 24-team league. Karen Wisniewski of Bound Brook is the other.

"There are not many of us [women]," says Muller, who plays on the third line with her brother, Roger, a center and team captain. "I'm one of the crazy ones."

The siblings also played on the same line for the Northeast team in the Masters Division of the Garden State Games. Samantha Chapin of the Southwest team was the lone female counterpart.

"The motivation I have is trying to keep up with my sister whose 10 years younger," says Roger Muller, 36, of Woodcliff Lake. "She's getting popular in the league because she's a good player. Nobody feels sorry for her. They go after her and check her."

Erika's teammates treat her with equal respect. Other than dressing in a separate locker room, she is perceived no differently.

"If people can disregard the fact that she has long hair like [former Ranger] Ron Duguay, they would see that she not only holds her own, she does well," says Rockets defenseman Darren Amerkanian, the former ice hockey coach at Bergen Catholic. "She proves that no matter who you are, if you're devoted enough, you can play hockey."

On the ice, her statistics speak for themselves.

Through seven games, she had more goals (four) than her brother (two) but fewer assists (11 to his 13).

Not bad for someone who recalled only skating for a brief stint as a ner-

vous, little girl attempting figure eights on a pond.

That is, until she and her brother learned of Hockey North America at a Devils home game last season.

Before long, the self-proclaimed hockey fanatics took an eight-week group lesson that focused on skating and stick handling.

"Last summer we couldn't even stand up on the ice real well, but this summer we've worked our way up," says Roger, who played intramural floor hockey at Ramapo College before joining the intermediate summer ice hockey league which plays its games at Sport-O-Rama in Monsey, N.Y.

The equipment was the biggest adjustment for Erika, who was already adept at wielding a hockey stick.

"I still feel like Robo Cop with all the padding," says Erika, a Northern Valley at Old Tappan graduate who earned All-State honors in field hockey as a senior. "It's hard to learn to skate when you have that on."

But she has become proficient enough to compete for the Rockets and the Ironbound Bandits, a women's traveling team from Newark.

Like the Rockets, the Bandits have a six-month fall season. Since the Rockets play weeknights and the Bandits play weekends, the schedules do not conflict.

In a year and three months, she has played in approximately 90 ice hockey games.

"I basically play year-round," says Erika, who was a three-sport athlete — basketball, softball, and track — at Ramapo College.

In accordance with the natural laws of hockey, Erika has grown accustomed to stinging slap shots deflecting off various body parts.

"I have a lot of bruises," she says.

She also shrugs off the physical contact — "it's part of the game," as long as it's clean.

Which is not always the case.

"They actually give her cheap shots sometimes," says Rockets center Simon Milne of Glen Rock. "She takes them, too, and she's always ready to fight."

Anything to defend her honor and gender, she says.

"She's a good addition to the sport," Amerkanian says. "Hey, there are no bans against women."

Long blond hair and fingernails notwithstanding.



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The siblings