

New owner of Blackhawks loves C.B.



Staff photo/Cindy Christensen - Blackhawks head coach Mike Wolff, left, stands with the team's new owner, John Jerkovich, on Thursday at the Mid-America Center.

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On the eve of his franchise's first indoor football championship in 2009, then-owner Jake Hiffernan openly spoke about the financial stresses of keeping the Iowa Blackhawks afloat.

Making ends meet in the American Professional Football League certainly wasn't easy.

"We always find a way to make it work," Hiffernan said. "We're here to stay."

And then they weren't.

At the time, Hiffernan believed what he was saying. But despite his best effort, the commitment necessary to keep the Iowa franchise going was too much for him.

He put the Blackhawks up for sale following their title-game victory over six-time league champion Kansas. There were no buyers.

One year and another APFL championship later, he tried again to no avail.

The fate of the Council Bluffs team was uncertain. Hiffernan emailed his coaching staff stating that if he couldn't sell the Iowa franchise, it would have to fold.

At best, the APFL champs seemed likely to move to another city. At worst, they would be no more.

Then John Jerkovich entered the picture. And, once again, the Blackhawks are here to stay.

The president of Heartland Properties in Council Bluffs is an avid sports fan. He loves football, basketball and boxing, and he once owned five percent of the Omaha Lancers hockey franchise when it was in C.B.

When contacted about possibly investing in the Blackhawks, Jerkovich became hooked.

"Once I became familiarized with what the coaches, ex-owner and players were doing for the love of the game, I was touched by all of the people putting all of this work in," he said. "That's why I got involved. It was about the love of the game. It wasn't about money."

Jerkovich said he'll be the same way as the franchise's new owner. He was impressed by Hiffernan's commitment to the team he started more than a decade ago with only a credit card. The two have spoken nearly every week since Jerkovich purchased the Blackhawks, he said.

"I was really touched about the ownership," Jerkovich said. "It wasn't about turning this thing into a real profit deal. It was about keeping it in Council Bluffs and keeping it going."

"Jake had given up a lot of his life, with his work and his family, for the love of the game and was ready to step down. So I decided to step up."

Iowa coach Mike Wolff said, from the team's perspective, everything has worked out.

"The best thing about it is John being a Council Bluffs guy," Wolff said. "His heart is in the right place, and he wanted to keep the team (here) locally. Him stepping in and doing what he did, our players and coaches are grateful for it."

While his investment in the franchise is fairly substantial, Jerkovich said he didn't buy the Blackhawks to bring in money. If the team turns a profit, he'd like to give more to the players and coaching staff. The rest he said he'd give away.

"I don't want to lose money. But to be honest, if I made money I'd donate it to charity," he said.

Jerkovich gives generously to charities. He sees the Blackhawks as another way to give back to the community.

"This is not about money," he said. "We hope we make enough money to keep us going. It's all about the players, the community and the Mid-America Center. It's all about Council Bluffs."

"I love this community, and I'll give back to this community."

The question remains whether the Bluffs community will give back to the Blackhawks.

"I want to get the community behind this team," Jerkovich said. "I want this city to embrace this team. So far, the response has been incredible."

Iowa opened its season last Friday with a 57-50 loss to Sioux City in front of nearly 3,900 fans at the Tyson Event Center. Jerkovich hopes at least as many show up Sunday at the Mid-America Center as the Blackhawks face Kansas City in their home opener at 4:05 p.m.

Saying he's "not Jerry Jones," the new Iowa owner is letting his staff handle the day-to-day operations of the team. Jerkovich brought in former NFL tight end Russ Francis as a partner, Mark Trively is the team's marketing director and Tony Doremus remains in charge of game operations. He said his role is that of "financier."

"John's really the reason for the season though," Francis said.

Wolff said Jerkovich has already gone "above and beyond" to do small things for the players on his team. The new owner has pledged to make it a priority to increase pay for the Blackhawks while providing perks throughout the season.

"Our guys are very appreciative of that," Wolff said.

Jerkovich said the players deserve it. They make very little for each game. And this past week, two players cashed their game checks then gave the money to an out-of-town teammate to help pay for his gas to get to practices and games. Jerkovich was touched by that.

"I'm really proud to be a part of it," he said.

Wolff admitted that he was concerned for a while that there would be no 2011 season and, perhaps, no team at all. After a few weeks under Jerkovich, he's been able to comfortably go back to coaching while worrying about a third APFL title and not the Blackhawk future.

"John's not going to buy the team then pull it up and move to another city," he said. "John's not going to buy the

team then fold it because he's got interests elsewhere. John's interests are here in Council Bluffs, and that's a great thing for us.

"The best case scenario is we want to bring that third championship home and three-peat. And we're going to do it for John."

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