



Palisades junior Stephanie Bardell.



Central Bucks East senior Jae Bendig.



Central Bucks East senior Aly Golia.

## At the drop of a puck

### Lady Patriots triumph in male-dominated sport

*David Campbell*

Aly Golia doesn't look like an ice hockey goalie.

She's slender.

But her reflexes, flexibility and eagerness to learn the often daunting position have made her an extremely valuable member of Al Bendig's U19-High School Lady Patriots Ice Hockey team.

"I can see myself progressing," said Golia, in her first year of organized ice hockey. "And I'd love to play in college."

The Central Bucks East senior also plays varsity soccer for the Patriots, but it is on the ice hockey "floor" where she gets to explore her passion.

"She put on the pads for the first time in April," said Paul Bardell, who founded the Lady Patriots Ice Hockey program back in 2002. "She's doing an outstanding job for that team, keeping them in every game and never letting it down."

Through two games in the Lady Patriots' young season, Golia had turned away 27 out of 35 shots.

On Bardell's Lady Patriots' U16 team, goalie Skyler Priest had rescued 135 out of a possible 149 shots, for a 90.6 save percentage.

"Players from any level are welcome here," said Bardell before a recent practice at Warwick Ice. "I think that's the biggest difference between the Lady Patriots and other organizations."

Bardell's Lady Patriots field three teams. In addition to the U19 and U16 squads, there is a women's team, for various ages. Each team is comprised of between 15 to 20 girls. The non-league slate got under way in September; league play began in October. The season usually wraps up in early spring.

"The interest was there," said Bardell, when asked for a reason for the Lady Patriots' beginnings. "I wanted to accommodate the girls in the area."

The Lady Patriots area has grown in recent years to include South Jersey and Harrisburg, all for a shot to drop the puck.

Unlike Golia, who picked up the game from watching her brother play, a number of Bardell's Lady Patriots have been playing ice hockey for years, including one of his U16 team's centerpieces: 13-year-old Kelsey Koelzer.

Through 11 games, Koelzer had registered 28 points on 16 goals and 12 assists. Vicki

Sweet was a hair behind Koelzer, with 26 points (12 and 14).

"She's a big, strong player," said Bardell of Koelzer, who is ranked in the top 10 percent nationally in her age class. "She's been playing hockey since she was 4. She's got natural athletic skills."

Although Koelzer may be in a class of her own when it comes time to lace up her skates, the Lady Patriots, in general, are a successful bunch. The U19 team won the 2008 Atlantic District title and earned a ticket to the 2008 National Championship. The Lady Patriots, through their high school varsity girls' squad, are fielding a team in the InterCounty Scholastic Hockey League, as well.

For players such as Stephanie Bardell, the Lady Patriots provide something many organizations do not: camaraderie.

"We've never had cliques here," said Bardell, a junior at Palisades, who suited up for the Pirates' spring team – the only girl to do so – earlier this year. "We're all like one big family."

Before moving to Pennsylvania, Bardell was a figure skater in Indiana, but, like Golia, was introduced to



The Lady Patriots, ages 18-55, beat the Flames, 4-3, earlier this season. Mothers and daughters played alongside each other with granddaughters, husbands and boyfriends watching from the stands.

the sport by her brother. She's been playing with the Lady Patriots since their start, six years ago. It takes Bardell upwards of an hour to make the drive down to Warwick from Upper Bucks County for ice time, and the love of the game.

"I don't want them to always win," said Paul Bardell. "I don't want them to always lose. I want them to understand that there are two sides to every coin. Hockey teaches teamwork, loyalty, wins and losses. The more fun you have, the better you do; the better you do, the more fun you have."

The Lady Patriots made a brief appearance on the MTV show MADE in August. The show centered on 16-year-old Courtney, a cheerleader at New Jersey's Springfield High School, who wanted to shed her "girlie-girl" image and be made

into an ice hockey player.

Surrounded by MTV cameras, the Lady Patriots played Courtney's ice hockey team and players such as Golia and Stephanie Bardell saw themselves briefly when the episode aired earlier this year.

For Golia, it was a chance to show her doubters what she could do.

"Guys don't believe I'm playing, especially goalie," said Golia, who is basing her graduation project on the psychology of a goaltender.

But if Golia cares what the guys think, it doesn't show.

"Hockey is like what happens in life," said Paul Bardell. "Things don't always go your way, but you can always make it work."

**Photographs by  
Wendy Badman**