

FGCU offers appealing alternative

Students take advantage of chance to play hockey

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After spending the holiday break in the Cleveland area, FGCU hockey player Ryan Kovesdy got off the plane, drove to practice and thought: "I really have the life."

Cleveland may rock but having a university room/condo a few yards from the beach, going to practice in shorts and flip-flops and playing for one of the best club hockey teams in the country are nice benefits for Kovesdy and his fellow native Northerner teammates.

"People told me about FGCU, how it was a diamond in the rough," Kovesdy said. "Hockey in Florida? No way, I thought."

"I needed a change. I thought, 'God this is a grand slam.'"

Or a hat trick.

Players from Canada, the Midwest and the Northeast not only have to pay tuition but additional fees to play club hockey at FGCU.

However, their desire to continue in a sport they love is a nice complement to those long hours of studying.

"Nine of 10 people who see our



TERRY ALLEN WILLIAMS/THE NEWS-PRESS

FGCU forward Jake Coyle tries to break away from a Mizzou defender during a FGCU club hockey game back in November.

media guide, it's like giving away gold," said Matt Maida, a former player who is the team's president and chief recruiter. "This is great for players who have not gotten NCAA Division I scholarships or drafted in the OHL (Ontario Hockey League). Players who are looking into going into the NHL or playing pro hockey, we tell them this isn't for them. It has happened, but that's not really part of our plan."

Mike Sellitto, a former FGCU club hockey player, is playing for Connecticut in the American

Hockey League, and there are other FGCU players who have pro aspirations.

However, ice time to hone skills is limited. Besides games, most weeks include just two, 90-minute practice sessions.

"That's part of the structure, it's not meant to be the NCAA," Maida said. "It helps students have a balanced life between hockey and the university experience. It doesn't take over their lives. They can go out with a girlfriend or friends they meet at school."

When Maida first started recruiting players, he was asked, "How good is the hockey?" Over time, he can say FGCU and the American College Hockey Association have gotten better.

"The ACHA is turning out to be a good option for players who aren't getting scholarships to Boston College or Michigan State," forward Mike Lendino said.

Maida educates players about keeping their costs down. The state provides an exemption program for Canadian students — the Florida-Canadian Linkage Institute — that covers the out-of-state portion of their tuition fees. That can save them \$12,000 a year in tuition at Florida public universities. Other FGCU players take advantage of out-of-state tuition waivers while some stay here year-round, then declare themselves Florida residents.

"The ACHA is not authorized to give scholarships or financial aid," Maida said. "But the FGCU foundation gives \$450 million in scholarships. We can lead kids to water, but they've gotta drink."

Players certainly are reaping the benefits and telling others.

"My friends always ask me about FGCU," Hogan said. "I tell them it's a good time and it's good to have a beach in your backyard."