

Under coach Blue Gomez's guidance, the Tri-City In-Line Hockey League is perhaps the hottest youth sport with more than 250 youngsters registered for the fall season.

## Self-proclaimed ministry hits the streets

by BRAD HOLLINGSWORTH  
The 'Ridge Staff

Blue Gomez is taking his self-proclaimed ministry to the streets. And he's using sticks and gloves to get his message across.

The Shadowridge resident is the commissioner for the Tri-City In-Line Hockey League, which has become the fastest growing youth sport in the country and he believes this is a vehicle to reach youngsters of all ages.

"I truly believe hockey is my ministry," said the 38-year-old Gomez.

"This is a new sport around here and I want to introduce the fundamentals and develop kids. These are going to be our future

leaders and all they have to believe in are fallen heroes and they don't know what to do.

"This sport has discipline that they can use later in life. I see where bad behaviors leave the parents and the kids stressed out. I want to change that and I want the kids to have fun.

"I've seen kids from broken homes with divorced parents who live two or three counties away come to a game on a Saturday, sit next to each other and cheer. That's what keeps me going."

The league, which started two years with 70 players, has expanded to 170 players on 18 teams and should have nearly 250 for the fall season, according

Gomez. The Tri-City league currently plays its games at the Boys and Girls Club of Vista, but is in the process of securing land to build its own facility.

Gomez has plenty to keep him busy with the increasing popularity of the sport. Doug Balog of the National Inline Hockey Association, which is headquartered in Miami, said there are 2.1 million participants in North America and Canada in 2,500 leagues. Balog, who works at the regional office in Newport Beach, said in that office's first six months 15,000 players and 155 league have been established.

While the sport has grown tremendously across the country,

it had spartan beginnings in Vista. Gomez saw four kids in his neighborhood playing around in the street, who were playing with a glow-in-the-dark puck. He bought nets and equipment for the group, who named themselves the Shadowridge Renegades and bounced around to local parks.

After receiving flak from park officials, Gomez made a few phone calls and the Tri-City League was born with a different attitude.

"We wanted to do something the other leagues weren't," Gomez said.

"Youth sports had become too stressful for kids and parents who

were living their sports' lives through their kids. I was really disappointed with Southern California sports because a lot of leagues were taking memberships and money from the kids and giving them nothing in return."

Gomez set up the league with three distinct teaching levels: instructional, developmental and competitive, to insure the proper foundation. He is so committed to fair play and rules that he shut down the league last year because some parents got out of control.

Gomez's no-nonsense attitude comes from his New York City roots. He grew up in Manhattan's Lower East Side and put on his

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Lightning goalie, Chris Ellis



Photos by J.T. LOVETTE

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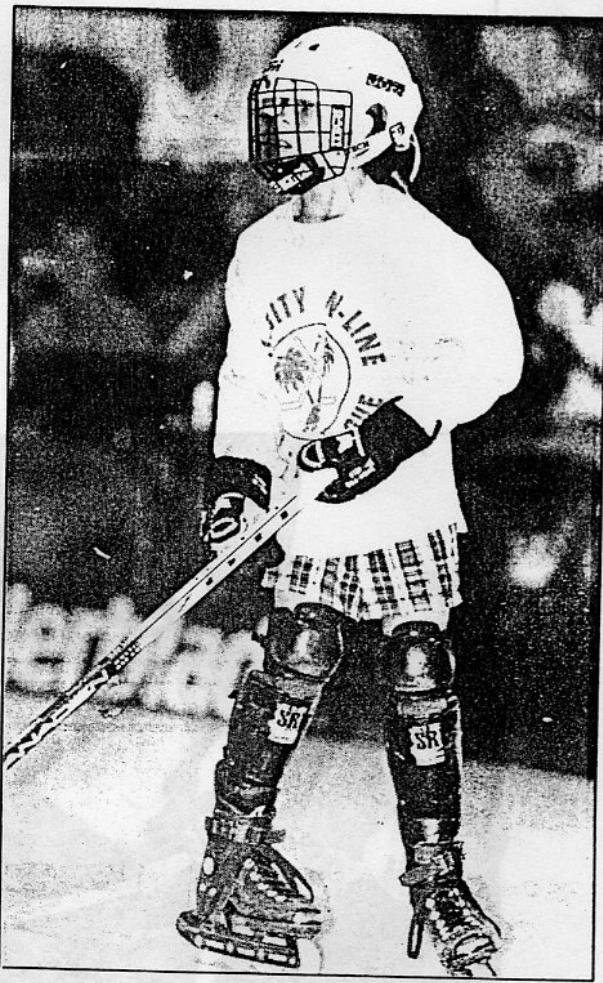
first pair of skates at age 4 and played in his first league as an 8-year-old.

Working his way through the Greater New York Hockey League, Metropolitan Junior Hockey Association and the New York Rangers Junior Teams, Gomez, who was a goaltender, left hockey in 1970 to pursue a career in consumer electronic sales.

That brought Gomez to California, where he now spends more time battling city officials than does instructing youngsters on the finer points of the game.

"I spend about 80 percent of my time doing this," Gomez said. "I have to work with the cities and politicians who seem to have their hands in certain sports and that is a method for them to get votes.

"I work best in controversy and it's just like a goaltender because you have to be very unorthodox and things just seem to come out right."



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