

Lead in:

At major universities, college athletics often means scholarships, packed arenas, and national attention. But for some athletes, playing at a high level comes with a different reality, one that includes paying out of pocket just to stay on the ice.

((Nat sound of sticks, pucks, and boards))

At the University of Utah, club hockey players balance competition, school, and financial strain just to keep playing. Ellis Beacom takes us inside that world.

Beacom:

The sound of skates cutting across the ice... the crack of a puck off the boards... It feels like any other competitive college hockey environment. But for players in the University of Utah Club Hockey program... This experience comes at a cost.

Beacom:

Unlike NCAA athletes, club hockey players don't receive athletic scholarships. Instead, they pay out of pocket covering travel, equipment, league fees, and team dues. For many players, that total reaches three to five thousand dollars per year, on top of tuition, housing, and everyday expenses. And those costs start before the season even begins. From skates and pads to helmets, sticks, and protective gear, just getting on the ice can cost thousands... before travel or team expenses are even factored in.

Beacom:

At the NCAA level, athletes often have access to full facilities, travel support, and structured resources... while club players are responsible for building and maintaining much of that experience themselves.

Winkleman #1 :

"I mean, five thousand... Whatever it is for a season, it's just not cheap. It's definitely hard for a lot of guys to do."

((Nat sound / Tape / Pucks hitting ice))

Beacom:

For players like Winkleman, the cost is real but so is the passion. That love of the game is what keeps them coming back... even as the financial commitment continues to grow. And the cost isn't just financial. Players balance practices, travel, and games with full academic schedules and often, part-time jobs to help pay for it all.

Beacom:

That balance between cost and opportunity is what defines club hockey... giving players the chance to continue competing at a high level while also managing school, work, and the financial responsibility that comes with staying on the ice.

O'Shea #1:

"IT'S A GRIND. You're juggling school, hockey, and work at the same time. But if you love it, you make it work."

Beacom: Inside the locker room, that shared experience creates a tight-knit group... players leaning on each other through long seasons, late nights, and everything that comes with it. And that commitment isn't just financial. Practices, games, and travel can take up most of the week... leaving little time for anything else outside of school and hockey.

Beacom: And beyond the physical grind, there's a mental side to it... balancing school, hockey, and finances at the same time can wear on players over the course of a season. The constant push to manage all of it at once can be just as challenging as anything that happens on the ice.

"I've seen my grades drop during the season... and then as soon as hockey ends, they go right back up."

Winkleman #2:

"It's a long day. You've got class, you're in the library, maybe the gym... and then we're at the rink late at night, practicing until ten-thirty, eleven... and then you wake up and do it again... It's definitely hard for a lot of guys to do. I've seen people quit because of injuries. I've seen people

quit because of finances and injuries. Yeah, it really depends, but yeah, it's definitely, it's definitely a real thing. It's happened a lot in our program and all of the ACHA programs.”

Beacom:

Across the country, that's the norm. That schedule can take a toll... especially over the course of a full season. Most club hockey programs are funded directly by the players themselves, relying on dues, fundraising, and limited support from the university just to stay operational from season to season. For some teams, travel alone can reach tens of thousands of dollars over the course of a season, with players helping cover the difference through dues, fundraising, and out-of-pocket expenses just to make road trips possible.

Beacom:

Club hockey operates very differently from varsity athletics. While NCAA programs are funded through athletic departments, club teams rely heavily on player fees and limited university support. It's not a small operation. Hundreds of teams compete under organizations like the American Collegiate Hockey Association... giving players the opportunity to continue playing at the college level outside of the NCAA.

Winkleman #3:

“A lot of guys have to pay their own way... and five thousand dollars for a season, it's not cheap.”

Beacom:

At the club level, financial barriers can be just as real as competition... with some athletes forced to walk away not because of talent, but because they simply can't afford another season on top of the cost of college. A single piece of equipment like goalie pads or skates can cost hundreds of dollars on its own... adding to an already expensive season.

Beacom:

But for some players the cost doesn't tell the whole story. Because what players get out of the experience... is something they can't really replace.

Winkleman #4:

"You got beer league. But besides beer league, you know, playing competitive hockey, you know, in front of in front of some crowds and traveling, you know, across country, going to Florida, like we did last year for FGCU. And, you know, going to nationals like we did the year before, like those experiences are something you don't get in beer league and those men's leagues later on in life."

Beacom:

But those experiences come with a price. Expenses add up quickly: league dues, ice time, travel costs, equipment, and uniforms. With rosters of around 25 players, the cost is shared but still significant for each individual athlete.

Beacom:

For some players, that means relying on family support... while others take on extra jobs just to stay on the roster. And even then, the cost of equipment alone can be a barrier before a player ever steps on the ice.

Beacom:

And unlike NCAA athletes, club hockey players aren't eligible for athletic scholarships... meaning any financial support typically has to come from academics or need-based aid instead.

((Nat sound // Bench // Coach))

Beacom:

Despite the cost and the time players say the experience is worth it.

O'Shea #3: "Looking up at the scoreboard... and seeing not just for me, but for the whole team, how happy everybody was. We went 3-0 that weekend... and just seeing everyone come together... it felt so good to get that win."

Nick Fornelious, Head Coach:

"There's a lot to build on back-to-back years in the MWCHL playoffs didn't happen by accident. The guys executed all season to get to this stage and came up just short but there's no doubt about it this team is resilient so we plan on being back."

Winkleman #5 :

"I've been playing hockey since I was six years old... and these are kind of the last years I get to play competitively. So I'm gonna go all out and enjoy every second of it."

((Nat sound // Puck // Whistle))

Winkleman #6 :

"You get those wins... like when we beat Boulder and everyone's celebrating... you look around and just realize how much it means to everybody. That's when you remember why you're doing it. Those types of wins... like Boulder, Montana State... Those are the moments that make everything worth it."

Beacom:

But the financial barrier raises a bigger question: who actually gets to keep playing? It's a system often described as "pay-to-play"... where the opportunity to compete doesn't just depend on ability, but on whether players can afford to stay in the game. Because for some athletes, the cost of staying in the game can ultimately push them out. At this level, talent isn't always the deciding factor. For some athletes, the ability to afford another season can be just as important as performance on the ice.

O'Shea #3:

"Not everyone can afford it... and that's the tough part. Because a lot of guys want to be here, but it's just not always possible."

"You see the seniors every year... stepping off the ice for the last time, and it hits you — that's going to be you one day."

An inevitable part of any journey is the end... and for players in the University of Utah club hockey program, that reality is no different.

Beacom:

Still, for those who can make it work, club hockey offers something that goes beyond money: competition, community, and the chance to keep playing the sport they love. Even if it means paying the price to do it.

I'm Ellis Beacom reporting.