

Snowsnakes race in the sun

at Woodland Centre

Warm days add challenge to traditional native contest

Snakes hissed through the snow at Woodland Cultural Centre on Sunday.

Long, wooden snowsnakes were hurled by competitors in a winter sport as old as the North American native culture itself.

"It's good exercise running up and down the track. It's a lot of fun, even when you're not winning," said George Silverheels, who travelled from the Cattaraugus Reserve in New York.

Though most outdoor events depend on good weather, Sunday's spring-like conditions did nothing to help tournament organizers or competitors.

It was the first time the contest has been held since 1987. Previous events have been cancelled because of warm weather.

The snowsnake game is played by throwing finely polished sticks, or snakes, into a gutter carved into a long mound of snow. The sticks race along the track with a hissing sound, and have been known to go a half-mile or more.

The winner is the person whose snowsnake slides farthest.

But the snow track wending its way around the Woodland Centre on Mohawk Street began to melt in the sun. As a result, snowsnakes did not run as well as usual. At least, not for some.

"It's all the same. You've just got to adjust. That's part of the fun. The challenge is to see if you can find the right mixture," said Edgar Lay.

He was a shiner, a person whose job it is to polish the snowsnake and find the right combination of secret lubricant and stick weight to match the snow conditions.

As his teammates sorted through a rack of about 50 snakes looking for the most suitable, Mr. Lay explained that the type of snow is the biggest factor in how far the snakes travel.

"If it's wet or fresh, it really drops 'em back, unless someone has a good shine. It should be even today. Everybody is going to suffer," he said.

Trial and error

Asked what types of lubricants work well, Mr. Lay smiled. "You've got to learn for yourself. Nobody tells you anything in this sport. It's all trial and error."

About 44 competitors in the men's divisions and another 25 in the youth division took part in the tournament, the first in four years.

In the men's mudcat on Saturday, where three-foot snakes are used, the winner was the Indian Hill team from Cattaraugus, N.Y.

In the youth school category winners were Cyril Henry (Grades K-3); Andy Green, (Grades 4-6); Tim Green (Grades 7-8); and Leroy Henry (Grades 9-10).

In the full length snake category on Sunday, the Porter Team from Six Nations won the first class division.