

For the love of the game

BY RICK VANDERLINDE
Staff Writer

Dazzling sunlight dances off the ice as a rag-tag group of skinny players chases a skittering puck along the remarkably smooth surface of the frozen pond. When they score, it's not into a net, but between a pair of boots set up as goalposts at either end.

It's pond hockey as it has been for generations — played by kids and kids at heart for hours on end for the love of the game.

There are no coaches or parents shouting out instructions here, no quarrels over ice time. Everybody plays. Or so they should.

But not every kid in York Region has the chance to lace them up on well-maintained skinny rinks like Richmond Hill's Mill Pond and Toogood Pond in Markham.

Pete Kendall used to play pickup hockey on the Mill Pond when he was a kid, long before the town flooded and cleared the ice.

"We played until our feet were frozen and our fingers were falling off," he says, gazing at the glassy frozen surface. "It was for the love of the game."

Kendall was back at the Mill Pond on a warm winter Tuesday afternoon for a game of pickup with his wife Diane and his daughters Heather, 9, and Katie, 11.

"It's great. Every town should have one," Kendall says, as he leaves the "change hut" near the edge of the pond.

And parents need not worry about risky ice conditions. Like Toogood Pond, ice conditions at the Mill Pond are posted, warning skaters when to stay away. But you won't find a similar outdoor ice surface in Newmarket or Aurora.

Shinny players there have been forced on to less ideal — and riskier — ponds such as the McKenzie Marsh on St. John's Sideroad and Rogers Reservoir north of Newmarket.

Aurora's recreation department attempted to emulate the Mill Pond experience this year by maintaining a natural pond just east of the recreation complex on Wellington Street.

But the experiment crumbled when a tractor used to clear the frozen surface plunged through thin ice last month.

"We don't know what happened," town employee Gary Greidanas says. "The ice was 14 inches thick in other areas, I guess it was just a bad spot."

The town employee driving the tractor wasn't hurt, but the incident put a quick end to what could have been the best hockey pond around.

In past years, Aurora's recreation department flooded soft-ball diamonds in Town Park and at Confederation Park. But Greidanas says this year the weather hasn't co-operated, leaving little time to create a good ice surface.

"We need about six to eight inches of snow on the ground in December to create a good base. We just didn't get that this year," he says. "Without that base, it's pretty much useless."

Meanwhile, skaters have been clearing snow from natural ponds, such as one in the Case Woodlot on Henderson Drive near Bathurst Street.

"We don't really recommend that," Greidanas says. "We don't maintain them, so people do it at their own risk."

Newmarket's recreation department also abandoned any plans to create skinny pads this year by flooding a ball diamond in the Fairgrounds park.

"The season is so short it just doesn't pay to do it," parks employee Bob Burgess says. "It's the same thing with backyard rinks, you don't see many of them around either."

Burgess says it's even difficult to keep a solid surface at the Lions outdoor rink, which has ice-making equipment.

"You get a mild day with some sun and it's difficult to keep the ice in," he says.

Still, Burgess remembers the hours he spent on ponds as a kid, honing his stick-handling skills. And he'd like to offer a good outdoor rink for today's generation of pond hockey players.

"I certainly would like to do something next year," Burgess says.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

The young and the young at heart enjoy a game of pond hockey at the Mount Joy Community Centre in Markham. Not all communities are lucky enough to have a quality outdoor ice surface this year.

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