

Soccer club given the boot at Novopharm

As the Whitchurch-Stouffville Soccer Club's field of dreams was set to undergo a transformation to a warehouse and manufacturing plant, club officials faced a crunch they feared for years.

A decision by Novopharm Ltd. to double the size of its existing west end Stouffville plant represented the end to the soccer club's micro-soccer mini-fields.

While the fields were home to the club as far back as the 1970s when McNeil Pharmaceutical set the precedent by generously leasing the unused land to the soccer folks for a dollar a year, club officials knew the day would come when the free ride would inevitably come to an end.

"It was just a matter of time," said WSSC president Victor Szabo after suggesting the writing had been on the wall ever since a recreational needs study commissioned by the town in 1997.

The study confirmed the rapid rate of growth of the local club while noting how Whitchurch-Stouffville was one of the few municipalities in the province without publicly provided fields. All fields currently used by the club are either privately owned or are the property of school boards.

"The study pointed to the vulnerability of the Novopharm fields," Szabo said.

The bottom line is that the fields housing the 300 player-strong micro-soccer program are gone for good, with the possibility

that other fields will also be temporarily shut down during construction and perhaps permanently.

Parking on the spacious Novopharm lots will also disappear, posing yet another huge problem for parents of players. There is limited parking available at the Imperial Centre which houses the town offices.

Provision has been made by Novopharm to allow the club temporary use of property located to the east of the plant for the micro-soccer program.

"We've been scrambling out there to line the fields so we can fit in as many fields as possible."

SWAMPY LAND

But the solution is less than ideal.

"It's not what we'd like. The land is swampy and this has been a wet summer. But hopefully it will get us through the season."

As for next season, everything is uncertain, Szabo said.

He said the club has considered playing on weekends to maximize their remaining facilities but this possibility could drive away players.

"Some coaches say they can only get half their teams out on weekdays during the summer. It would be even worse on weekends."

He says if it comes down to playing on weekends the club would have to do it.



Bruce Stapley

"But I'd guarantee the club would diminish."

Szabo fears the crunch will mean an end to practice sessions.

"If it comes down to that I'd rather turn away kids. Practices are just as important as games. It's at the practices where you learn your skills."

While some club officials would place the blame squarely on the town's shoulders for not being forthcoming with the same type of facilities that have been routinely made available to softball and hockey interests through the years, Szabo prefers to play the diplomat.

"I'm not saying we're without blame. Things could have been done better on both sides. I don't want to start a war with the town."

The bottom line, he insists, is that the clubs needs are real, but it doesn't serve any positive purpose to point fingers.

"We are where we are today. Let's look at it and move forward."

But he admits to the diminish-

ing patience of club officials as they wait year after year for the town to come up with a solution.

"Obviously there's a lot of frustration. Alfons Rubbens (charter WSSC president) presented the need for two fields in Ballantrae 15 years ago."

Plans have long been in the works to build two fields as part of an overall facilities enhancement project at Ballantrae's recreational park. But club officials have expressed disappointment that a parking lot took precedence over soccer fields in phase one of the project, with the fields to be completed at a later date. But Szabo suggests that will take time.

"It takes two years to put in a soccer field."

He also hints at what may be a lessening of faith in the political process.

"The mayor says his doors are open but I don't know how to affect the decision making process. We're trying to present our case as accountably as we can."

To that end Rubbens and his long-time soccer sidekick Martin Johannessen, another long time club official, are holding talks with town officials in an effort to come up with a solution. Szabo prefers not to comment on where the talks may be going for fear of jeopardizing a possible solution.

"I don't want to say anything at this time. There's nothing concrete yet."

SPORTS DIGEST

Squirts downed in semi-finals

The Stouffville Birkett-Hassard Ins., Econ Ins., Irwin Industries, Morrison Hershfield Ltd., Kytech Machine Works squirt boys advanced to the semi-finals in a recent fastball tournament in Cobourg before suffering a 6-4 loss to Newmarket II.

After winning its opening game against Newmarket 1 9-0, Stouffville received strong pitching performances from Jordan Underwood and Graham Wilson to edge Cobourg 5-4.

Fueled by home runs from Sam O'Farrel and Jesse Miller, Stouffville then routed Clarington 9-2 and advanced to the semi-finals.

Other team members contributing to club's success included: Keith Hughes, Brandon Jupp, Damien Kudelski, Mathew Martiniello, Jesse Miller, Kyle Miller, Ryne Parsons, Nicholas Stratas, Wes Wittenbols and Lenny Wood.

Hockey school has openings

The Spirit of Stouffville junior A hockey club has openings in its inaugural youth hockey school at the rec centre from Aug. 28 to Sept. 1.

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