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SPORTS & LEISURE

Keeping Olympic spirits alive

Paralympic athletes want recognition from public, media

BY JOHN CUDMORE
Staff Writer

They are Canada's forgotten Olympic team.

But their pursuit of Olympic gold is no less intense than that of the athletes who preceded them to Salt Lake City last month.

To members of the "other Team Canada", Paralympians such as Paul Rosen and Rob Legace, the encouraging words spoken by goaltender Martin Brodeur moments after Canada's victory in men's hockey were sweet.

Mr. Brodeur urged the sledge hockey team to complete Canada's hockey triple crown by securing gold at the eighth Paralympic Winter Games.

Mr. Brodeur's interview might have been the only forewarning most Canadians had to the games for physically disabled athletes, which start tonight with opening ceremonies in Salt Lake City.

CBC plans to televise 10 hours of same-day coverage during the event, which will attract more than 1,000 athletes from 36 countries. Closing ceremonies are March 16.

Sports of the Paralympics include biathlon, alpine and cross-country skiing. Canada's 27-member team, which is aiming to better its 15-medal haul in 1998 at Nagano, includes 15 sledge hockey players.

In sledge hockey, players propel themselves across the ice seated on a lightweight, metal U-shaped seat with two blades as runners.

"Basically, it's people with a family member with a (physical disability) who know about this and that's

it," said Mr. Legace, an Aurora resident and defenceman for the defending world champion Canadian sledge hockey team.

"We just don't get any coverage unless it's a charity spot or in the back pages of the newspaper. But we take this seriously and train hard."

For Mr. Legace, 35, who has spina bifida, these are his third Paralympics.

He was a member of the squad that captured bronze in Lillehammer in 1994 and won silver at the Nagano Games four years ago. He persuaded Mr. Rosen to try out for the national team.

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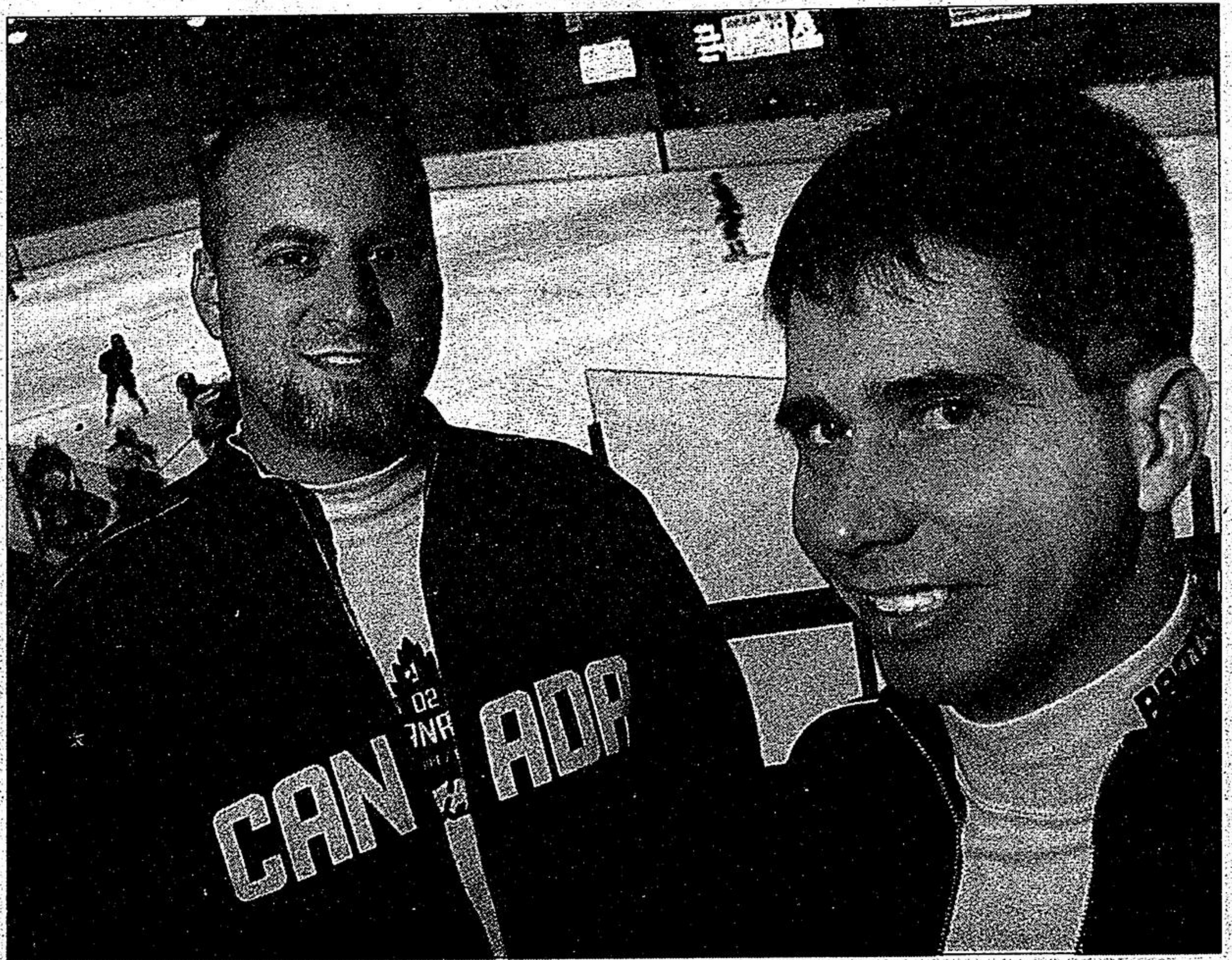
'There's not one guy on this team who envisioned he would be playing here.'

The 41-year-old Mr. Rosen has been told he's the oldest rookie in the history of the Paralympics.

He is considered the future in net for Canada, poised to take over from 12-year veteran Pierre Pichette, 47, of Montreal.

"I feel like a 10-year-old kid and I'm having the greatest time of my life. I'm getting the chance to compete for the greatest country in the world and with 14 of the greatest athletes in the world," said the Thornhill resident, who lost his right leg below the knee in 1999 and has quickly become something of a spokesperson for physically disabled athletes.

"We're forgotten. There's no



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Members of Canada's Paralympic sledge hockey team, Paul Rosen (left) and Rob Legace, compete this week.

question about that," said Mr. Rosen, who has written letters to Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman, urging recognition for the accomplishments of physically disabled athletes.

"I just hope when we're done the country gets behind us. All we want is to be treated equally. Nothing special, just equally.

"People don't like to hear it, but anyone is only an accident away from trying out for this team.

There's not one guy on this team who envisioned he would be playing here."

Mr. Rosen was a promising 15-year-old forward with the Thornhill Thunderbirds midgets when he broke his leg in 14 places during a game in Barrie.

He also ripped apart just about everything there is to rip apart in a knee. In 1997, Mr. Rosen underwent knee replacement surgery but fought a steady line of infections for

two years before his leg was amputated.

"For a while, I thought of June 9, 1999 as the worst day of my life," recalled Mr. Rosen, noting he went for a long walk on his crutches the very next day.

"But it turned out to be the best day of my life. For one thing, my (three) kids have learned so much by coming out and seeing the guys I

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