

On BOARD for safety

Supervised parks may be responsible for low accident level among York Region skateboarders

BY JOAN RANSBERRY
Staff Writer

A growing number of skateboard accidents has many communities concerned as the freestyle sport becomes more and more popular.

It seems, however, York Region youth are way ahead of the game when it comes to safety and other communities are looking to adopt whatever steps are being taken to keep boarders from getting hurt.

It's not only cool to wear helmets and pads while skateboarding in York Region, the gear appears to be keeping children safe.

Skateboarding is a multi-million-dollar industry where kids drop more than \$50 for a boarder T-shirt and at least \$100 to \$150 for moderate skateboard shoes or a board at trendy specialty shops.

With about one million children and teenagers in Canada skateboarding, the sport is more than a passing trend.

And while thousands of young people in York Region have taken to the free-spirit recreational activity, skateboarding casualties are not turning up in local hospital emergency rooms.

"We rarely see kids injured skateboarding," Markham-Stouffville Hospital chief of emergency medicine Dr. David Austin said.

Dr. Austin pays attention to the causes of common injuries.

"We still see a lot of kids from skiing accidents and also from snowboarding injuries. In the summer, kids still fall off their bikes. But, we just don't get the skateboarders," Dr. Austin said.

Dr. Austin attributes the low accident rate associated with skateboarding to the fact many kids skateboard at municipally run parks where there's supervision

and helmets are mandatory.

"That's my gut feeling. I don't have the (formal) data to back it up, but that's what I'm thinking," Dr. Austin said.

Dr. Gary Joubert of London, ON is one physician interested in how skateboarding is handled in York Region due to a high number of skateboard injuries showing up at Children's Hospital of Western Ontario.

Dr. Joubert and a colleague recently carried out a study in the London area involving five skateboard parks.

What they found is none of the London and area skateboard parks had supervision. Results showed in four of the parks, only 10 per cent of boarders wore helmets.

While one of the parks had a mandatory helmet rule, there was only a 17-per-cent compliance rate, Dr. Joubert reported.

Why?

London boarders complained safety equipment was too expensive and made them look like a "geek."

HATS OFF TO YORK REGION

They also insisted equipment, including helmets, knee and elbow pads and wrist guards, get in the way of performing tricks, Dr. Joubert said.

"My hat goes off to York Region for having supervised skateboard parks," Dr. Joubert said.

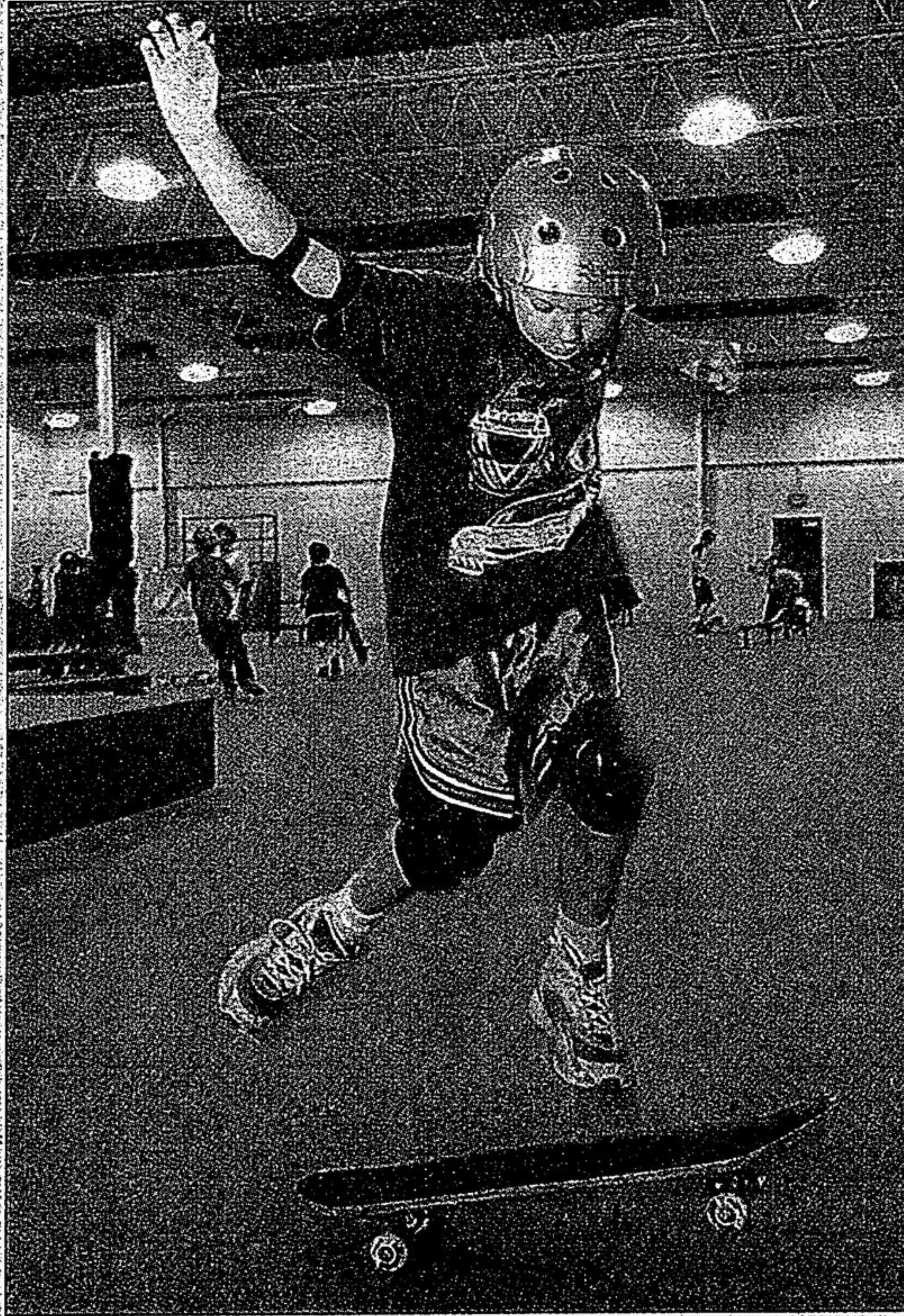
"It's fabulous. At a time when budget cuts in leisure services are common, it's great to hear that the municipalities in York Region are wise enough to keep the supervision in the skateboard parks. If the injuries are not showing up, the key factor is likely the supervision at the parks."

Skateboarding injuries can be dangerous, Dr. Joubert stressed.

"A broken bone will heal," he said. "But, we've had significant head injuries and, unfortunately, some kids have required neurological intervention."

Skateboarding is similar to bike riding, Dr. Austin said.

In Canada, close to 2,000 children are hospitalized and 30 are killed each year from bike accidents. Four in five of these deaths



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Luke Jones, 7, of Newmarket shows his stuff on a skateboard with the appropriate safety gear at the Newmarket Youth and Recreation Centre and Sk8 Park on Charles Street in Newmarket.

are due to head injuries.

The vast majority of serious bike accidents involve children who are not wearing helmets, Dr. Austin stressed.

"With skateboarding, there is a potential for serious head injury. That's why the helmet is needed."

And that message comes out loud and clear at many local parks.

"Got wheels. Get a helmet" is the message from the Town of Newmarket. The helmet is a "must

wear" at Newmarket's indoor skateboard park on Charles Street, Pat McIntosh, programmer with the town's parks, recreation and culture department, stressed.

"We also strongly recommend that the children wear elbow and knee pads and wrist guards," Mrs. McIntosh said.

Skateboarding is becoming increasingly popular, Mrs. McIntosh said. When practised safely, including the use of protec-

tive equipment, skateboarding is a fun, healthy sport, she said.

A well supervised facility, complete with rules — especially those covering head gear — plays a role in keeping the serious injury rate down, Mrs. McIntosh suggested.

"I think our skateboard park helps keep the kids safe," she said.

To improve skateboarding safety, a growing number of communities provide supervised skateboard parks with professionally designed bowls and ramps or other designated areas located away from motor vehicles and pedestrian traffic. Two such parks are presently under construction in York Region.

A \$200,000 outdoor skateboard park is slated to be ready for use in Georgina in August, while construction of a similar facility is under way at McCowan Road and Bullock Drive in Markham.

"It's a first for Markham," said Lori Wells, manager of programs for the town's recreation and culture services department. Once opened, Markham's outdoor skateboard park will be "a real show-piece," Ms Wells said.

Attracting kids from all over Ontario, Whitchurch-Stouffville's Over the Edge Skatepark has been a going concern for five years. Not only is it mandatory to wear a helmet at the outdoor facility, protective elbow and knee gear also must be worn.

Tom Graham, director of Whitchurch-Stouffville's leisure services, oversees Over the Edge. Mr. Graham is especially proud of the staff. Not only does the town staff enforce the rules, staff members know how to respond in the event of an accident.

"Our staff is trained in first aid," Mr. Graham said. "We've had a few scrapes and bruises. We had a wrist injury. We're on top of things."

As time passes, more and more kids abandon the streets when they discover the best place to skateboard is at a specially designed facility.

"More and more kids are coming in from the streets to use the parks," Doug Pilkey, manager of the skateboard park in Vaughan, said. "Skateboarding has caught on and the park is the place to be."

It's the people
that make the
difference.



Patrick Cheng
Service Counsellor

Patrick and his family have called Markham home for many years. Prior to being an administrator at a local church, Patrick was an underwriter and held supervisory positions in the insurance industry. Patrick has a caring and compassionate heart, and an ability to make sure all the details are looked after. His Chinese language skills and knowledge of cultural traditions have made him a highly respected service counsellor.

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