

'Tis the season for back yard rinks

BY JOHN CUDMORE
Staff Writer

Forget size. Thickness and staying power are what really matter when it comes to enjoying a back yard rink.

Thickness of ice and the ability to withstand warming trends are the make-or-break factors for a successful back yard adventure during winter months.

If you're thinking snow, a sprinkle of water and a snapping cold night are all it takes to create a winter wonderland in the back 40, well, think again.

These days that adds up to only a small part of the equation.

The reality is fluctuating and unpredictable weather patterns have changed the face of back yard rink-building in this climate.

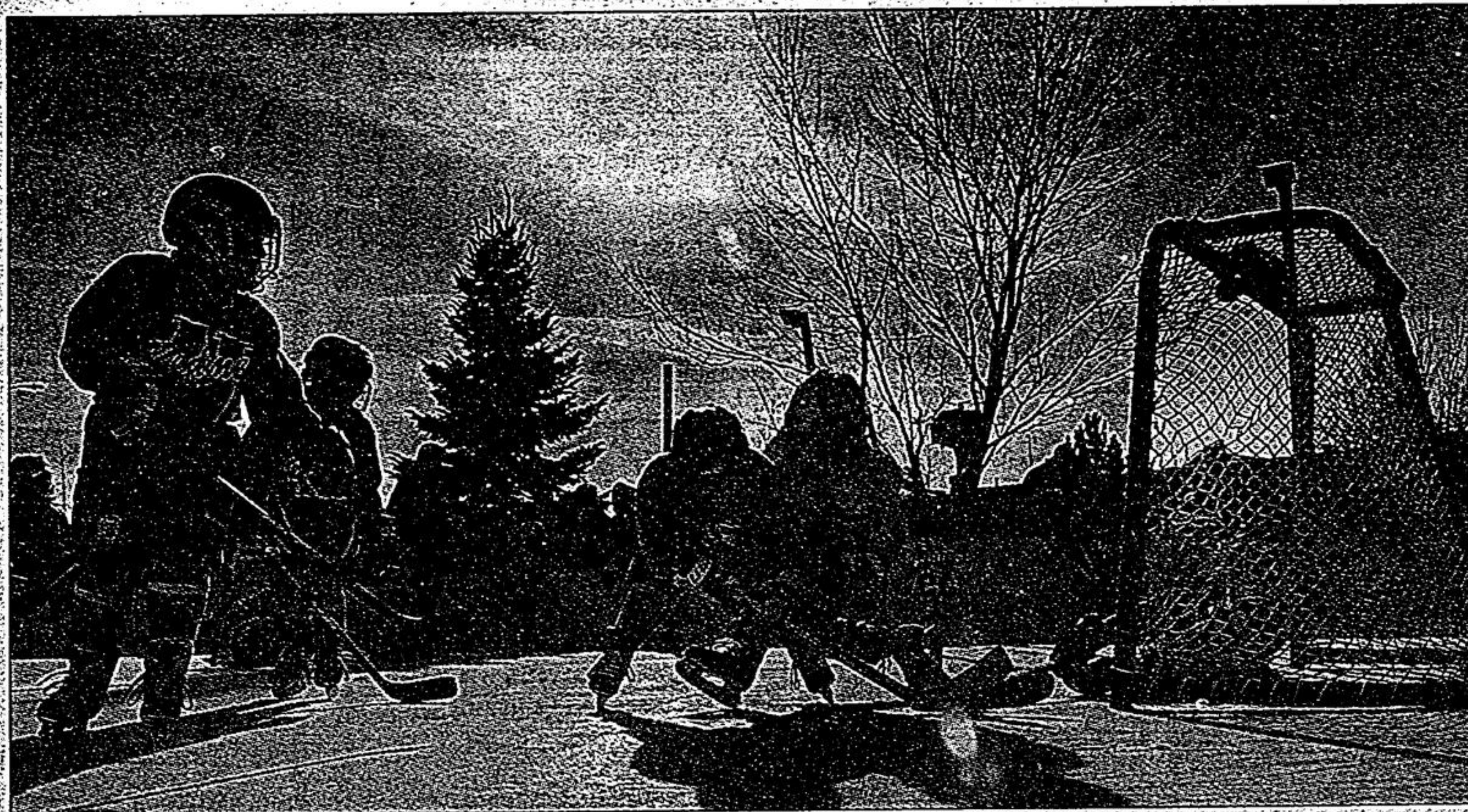
Heck, if you want, it is possible to hire a rink builder. They'll even maintain and groom it regularly. But the do-it-yourselfer, may derive satisfaction from building his own Wayne Gretzky training centre and maintaining it with tools designed specifically for the job.

Who would dream a back yard rink could actually replace an organized minor hockey league?

But for the tyke division in the Newmarket Minor Hockey Association a couple of years ago, Gary and Winn Rothons' yard became the home rink for a weekend.

Tournaments bump minor hockey divisions every January in Newmarket, resulting in children being off the ice for an extended period.

To the rescue rode the Rothons



FILE PHOTO

and their 60-by-80-foot rink.

"The kids had a ball," Mr. Rothon said, recalling each team played three games, including one under the lights and munched post-game cookies and sipped hot chocolate.

"They couldn't wait to come back. Kids don't get to skate outside a lot these days," he said.

"It has been a riot watching kids coming and going over the years. It's worth it."

After 14 winters, Mr. Rothon hasn't quite got the rink-making procedure down to a science. But he's getting closer.

He will be ready when ice-making conditions arrive. He has been working since mid-November preparing the ground work.

In essence, the structure is a boarded pond, which once filled with water, merely awaits freezing temperatures.

"We start getting nervous because we've done it in (lousy) weather," said Mr. Rothon, whose rink serves three children ranging in age from seven to 17, in addition to their teammates from minor hockey teams and neighbourhood chums.

"You're actually building a little pond. It's the easiest way I've built rinks in -10 degree temperatures

and it's not much fun."

Properly sealed and boarded, the final ingredient is 20,000 gallons of water. Mr. Rothon knows that figure almost to the drop since he spent nearly \$1,000 for delivery of drinking water one year when cold weather arrived before he was ready.

Schell Lumber in Stouffville does a booming business in rink supplies at this time of year.

"It's amazing how many how many people we get coming in and from how far they come," said owner Ron Schell, whose building centre attracts customers from across Durham and York regions. "I

guess other building centres don't promote it."

The Stouffville resident teams with CFTO's Lance Brown in a back yard rink contest initiated by the sports broadcaster. One family is selected each year and the team builds a rink in their yard.

"We've been doing that for three years now. It's a community thing," Mr. Schell said.

In his own back yard, it's been a dozen winters for rinks.

"The way I see it, and not to knock minor hockey, but if four kids are outside playing in the back yard for three hours, how many times are they going to touch the puck as opposed to in a game at the arena?"

Mr. Schell takes two days to construct his rink. Starting from scratch, he figures it would cost from \$800 to \$1,000 with most of the cost for lumber and plastic liner.

However, lumber is re-useable (remember to use screws rather than nails, he advises) and plastic liner can be purchased in 100-foot sheets at varying lengths. At 40x100 feet, it is possible to get two seasons out of a \$200 roll, depending on the size of the rink.

His message? "The No. 1 secret is to make sure the ground is level."

For those fuss-budgets worried about how a back yard rink will affect their lawn next summer, what's the worst that could happen? A greener lawn, perhaps?

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