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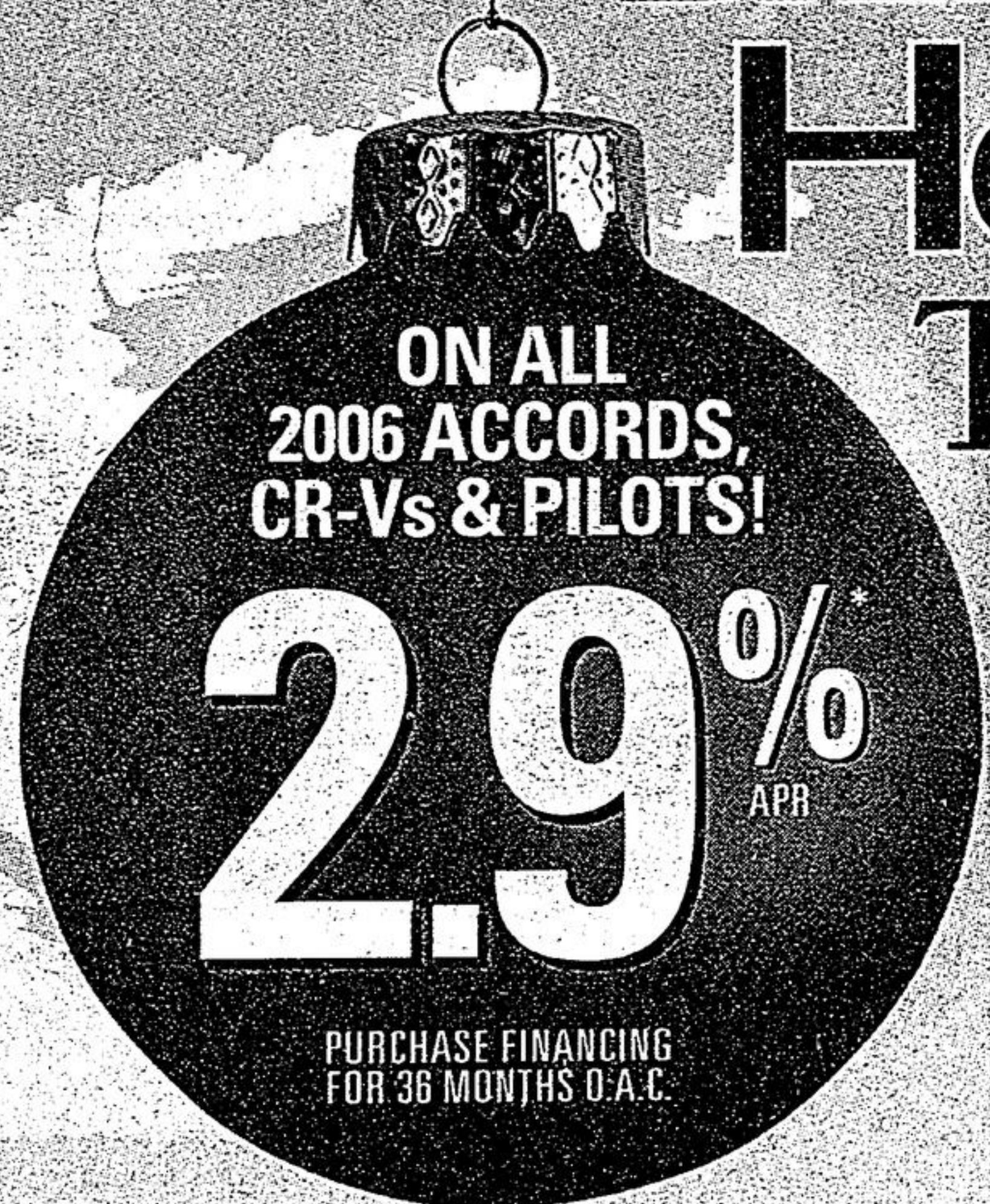
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Facilities better than tax break: sports groups

BY MIKE HAYAKAWA
Staff Writer

Paying parents so their children can play is a nice thought, but minor sports organizations wonder how much good the Conservatives' promised tax credit will actually do.

Under the proposal, parents would be able to submit tax receipts for up to \$500 for each child under 16 for any organized physical activity, including hockey, soccer, martial arts or dance. Parents would be eligible to receive 16 per cent back, roughly \$80.

"This policy shows that a Conservative government is truly serious about the physical health and well being of children," said Bob Callow, Oak Ridges-Markham Conservative candidate.

Organized sports groups in York Region don't object to the idea, but they remain skeptical.

"At the outset any program that encourages increased participation in healthful physical activity and recognizes the social and health value of sport is a good thing," said Ron Weese, Aurora Youth Soccer Club president.

"But I am doubtful the proposed initiative will cause increased participation because of the true monetary value to the parent. It does though, send a positive message to parents that participation is beneficial."

With registration fees of \$90 to \$180 per season, Mr. Weese said the organization already has programs to help underprivileged families that can't afford the full fee.

The program is funded through corporate sponsorships, he said.

Charles Giliberto, Stouffville Markham Girls Hockey Association vice-president, feels the proposal has some merit, especially in helping low-income families offset the \$300 to \$350 fees.

"If such a policy allows more kids to play sports then it's a good thing. It's an attention grabber."

"But how serious is (the proposal)? If they do it, would most middle-income people see any benefits?" he asked.

Jocelyne de La Fontaine, past vice-president of sponsorship for the Markham District Baseball Association, speculated the proposal is a typical campaign promise.

Most of it amounts to hot air, she said. "I'm not impressed. If they ever implement this program, my boys will probably be married with children of their own."

Some sport groups believe government money would be better spent building new facilities and purchasing equipment.

"In soccer, the single most important factor restricting the growth of the sport and therefore restricting participation is the lack of adequate facilities," said Mr. Weese.

With registration fees in the Markham District Baseball Association varying from \$115 to \$175 for house league and \$350 to \$600 for rep, de La Fontaine feels an \$80 rebate would be a drop in the bucket.

"It wouldn't even be enough for the purchase of a decent baseball glove," she said. "Why not invest in new facilities or even give rebates for new equipment."